

From the Caspian to the Arabian Sea: Strategic Linkages in China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan

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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by China in 2013, signifies one of the most ambitious global development and investment strategies of the 21st century. The BRI fundamentally aims to improve regional connectivity via infrastructure development and augmented trade relations, revitalizing the historic Silk Road and promoting economic and cultural interactions among Asia, Europe, and Africa (Li et al., 2019; Vichare, 2024; Zhao, 2025). The initiative is an essential element of China's foreign policy and significantly contributes to its global influence (Jamali et al., 2023). A fundamental aspect of this initiative is the advancement of multilateral partnerships, designed to enhance trade connectivity, economic integration, and geopolitical collaboration (Larsen, 2021; Flint & Zhu, 2018).

The triangular relationship between China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan within the Belt and Road Initiative is particularly significant, presenting substantial opportunities for regional integration. Each of these nations holds a pivotal position in the Eurasian terrain, linking Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe (Awan, 2025). The collaboration among these three nations signifies a confluence of geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests that may transform regional dynamics. The BRI provides a framework for enhanced collaboration, motivated by common economic objectives, including infrastructure advancement, energy security, and trade facilitation. The collaboration between China and Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has illustrated the potential for enhanced regional connectivity, while Azerbaijan's role as a conduit between Europe and Asia amplifies the strategic significance of this trilateral partnership (Khokhar, 2024; *News.az.*, 2024).

China's involvement in this triangular alliance contributes its substantial economic strength, technological innovations, and infrastructural proficiency. Azerbaijan's abundant energy resources and strategic location as a crucial connector between Europe, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia enhance the BRI's significance (Ran, 2025). Pakistan, due to its access to the Arabian Sea and its pivotal involvement in CPEC, serves a crucial function in linking China to the wider Middle Eastern and African markets. The collaboration of these three nations presents an opportunity to tackle numerous challenges in the region, such as inadequate infrastructure, energy deficits, and restricted economic diversification (Zaib, 2023). Therefore, the dynamic development of the China-Pakistan-Azerbaijan alliance has the potential to pave the way for significant geopolitical and geoeconomic collaboration, which could have a significant impact on the overall BRI framework.

As these nations fortify their connections, the BRI offers a pathway for augmented regional integration, which is poised to revolutionize the economic framework of the area, enhance transportation infrastructures, and promote tighter geopolitical alignment. This cooperation's potential resides in both the tangible advantages of trade and infrastructure advancement, as well as the geopolitical stability it may foster in a region historically characterized by economic inequalities, political conflicts, and security issues (*Asia as the New Center of Geopolitics*, 2024; Parveen, 2023)

The incorporation of these three nations into the BRI framework may establish a basis for enhanced regional integration in Central Asia and South Asia, fostering a new epoch of connectivity throughout Eurasia.

This partnership, although promising, has encountered challenges such as political instability, security threats, and the intricacies of regional geopolitics. The effective execution of projects within this triangular relationship could exemplify a framework for analogous partnerships globally, potentially fostering new opportunities for growth and collaboration in the realm of international trade and development. Simonov (2025) asserts that the BRI's influence on regional stability and infrastructure development, via trilateral cooperation, offers a chance to redefine regional collaboration on a global level.

1. Strategic Importance of the Triangular Relationship

The strategic significance of the triangular relationship among China, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) resides in its potential to transform the economic, geopolitical, and energy landscapes of Eurasia. Every nation plays a vital role in improving connectivity, promoting economic growth, and ensuring geopolitical influence in this swiftly changing environment.

China's Strategic Goals

China, as the architect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has explicitly expressed its aspirations to enhance its global influence by promoting increased connectivity among Asia, Europe, and Africa (Hwang & Lee, 2024; Garlick, 2020; Lisinge, 2020). The Belt and Road Initiative is a pivotal element of China's foreign policy and an essential instrument for establishing its influence in significant regions, such as Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe (Simonov, 2025; McBride, 2023). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), functions as a strategic conduit linking China's western provinces to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, thereby granting China direct access to the Arabian Sea and, consequently, to markets in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe (Anwar & Atif, 2025; Calabrese, 2024; Hassan, 2020; Naz & Ali, 2018).

Through this triangular relationship, China aims to achieve various strategic objectives. Primarily, economic security is a critical issue, as China seeks to diversify its trade routes and diminish reliance on conventional shipping lanes that traverse the Strait of Malacca (Setiawan & Padilla, 2025; Ali, 2023; Zhang, 2011). Secondly, energy security is pivotal in China's involvement with Azerbaijan. A prominent energy producer, Azerbaijan provides China with access to the natural gas and oil resources of the Caspian Sea region, essential for meeting China's increasing energy requirements (Ran, 2025). China's investment in infrastructure development, including pipelines and trade corridors, enhances its economic connections and secures essential resources for industrial expansion.

Pakistan's Geopolitical and Economic Significance

Pakistan's strategic location renders it an essential ally in this triangular relationship. Pakistan, as the host nation for CPEC, functions as the essential conduit between China and South Asia, while also linking Central Asia and Europe through Azerbaijan. Through CPEC,

Pakistan secures Chinese investments in infrastructure while striving to enhance its economy by augmenting energy capacity, fostering industrial development, and promoting overall economic growth (Khan et al., 2024; Farooq et al., 2022; Akhtar et al., 2021). The establishment of Gwadar Port as a global trade center is pivotal to Pakistan's ambitions of becoming a significant participant in international trade. The port's strategic position at the intersection of vital maritime routes will markedly decrease shipping time and expenses for Chinese goods, facilitating expedited access to global markets (Ilyas et al., 2024; Zhao & Munadi, 2023).

In addition to trade, Pakistan aims to bolster its energy security. The infrastructure initiatives under CPEC aim to enhance the nation's power generation capacity, mitigate electricity shortages, and decrease reliance on conventional energy sources (Ahmed & Rao, 2024). Moreover, Pakistan derives advantages from the geopolitical significance associated with its role as a strategic partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative. As a crucial corridor, CPEC positions Pakistan at the nexus of an expanding geopolitical and economic framework, potentially influencing the future power dynamics of the region.

Azerbaijan's Role in Regional Connectivity

Azerbaijan, strategically located at the intersection of Europe and Asia, holds a crucial position within the broader context of the BRI. Azerbaijan is a pivotal participant in the Trans-Caspian trade routes, essential for the transportation of goods and energy from Central Asia to South Asia and Europe. Azerbaijan, endowed with abundant natural resources, especially oil and natural gas, has historically been a prominent energy producer and exporter, particularly to European markets (Hafner et al., 2023). As the global energy market experiences transitions towards diversification and novel supply sources, Azerbaijan's significance as an energy hub has increased.

Moreover, Azerbaijan is increasingly playing a significant role in the BRI by linking the energy-rich Central Asian countries to the markets of South Asia and Europe through Pakistan (Awan, 2025). This energy corridor, linking Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves to global markets, strengthens the strategic alignment between Azerbaijan, China, and Pakistan, offering energy security and reducing transportation costs. Azerbaijan's involvement in these connectivity projects provides China and Pakistan with access to the energy resources essential for their economic and industrial growth, while Azerbaijan benefits from investments in infrastructure and enhanced regional connectivity.

The nation's involvement in the BRI is also politically strategic. Azerbaijan's position as a mediator between China and Europe provides it with geopolitical leverage, allowing it to enhance its relationships with both Eastern and Western nations. The nation's expanding involvement in the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), referred to as the Middle Corridor, emphasizes its significance as a trade and transport nexus connecting Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (Rentschler et al., 2025). This position is expected to augment Azerbaijan's influence in global trade networks and strengthen its status as a pivotal energy and transport conduit in Eurasia.

Synergy and Future Prospects

The convergence of China's vast economic and infrastructural capabilities, Pakistan's strategic positioning and burgeoning economic significance, and Azerbaijan's energy assets and transport connectivity offers a promising synergy for the three nations. Through the BRI, these nations are poised to gain not only from augmented trade and investment but also from increased geopolitical stability and collaboration. The economic advantages resulting from enhanced transportation networks, encompassing roads, railways, ports, and energy pipelines, are expected to produce significant returns through augmented trade, improved energy security, and elevated regional collaboration (Setiawan & Padilla, 2025).

The efficacy of this triangular relationship hinges on surmounting obstacles, including political instability, regional security threats, and the necessity for synchronized policies and governance frameworks. The evolving global power dynamics will render the China-Pakistan-Azerbaijan trilateral relationship pivotal in determining the future of Eurasian economic and geopolitical integration. By tackling common issues like infrastructure deficiencies, energy requirements, and security threats, these countries can realize the complete potential of the BRI and promote regional prosperity (Azizi, 2024).

Current Areas of Cooperation

The existing collaborative domains among China, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) underscore a synergistic alliance that promotes economic, energy, and infrastructure advancement throughout Eurasia. The primary areas of collaboration—economic cooperation, energy cooperation, and infrastructure development—embody the overarching regional integration and strategic interests of these three nations, each offering unique strengths to this expanding alliance.

Economic Cooperation

1. China-Azerbaijan Economic Links

China and Azerbaijan have established strong economic relations, largely due to Azerbaijan's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its strategic role as an energy and logistics nexus between Europe and Asia. An important element of this collaboration is the establishment of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), a rail and maritime corridor linking China to Europe through Central Asia and Azerbaijan. This route is anticipated to evolve into a significant trade artery, expediting the transportation of goods between China and Europe, thereby diminishing transit times relative to conventional routes (Mammadov, 2025).

China has made substantial investments in infrastructure initiatives throughout Azerbaijan, encompassing logistics hubs, railway systems, and port facilities. These investments are pivotal for improving transport connectivity between China and Europe, establishing Azerbaijan as a vital trade partner in the region. We argue, therefore, that Azerbaijan's involvement in the BRI enhances its economic outlook by enabling efficient transportation via the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, thereby broadening trade prospects for both China and Azerbaijan.

Furthermore, China's Belt and Road Investments in Azerbaijan have bolstered the nation's ambitions to diversify its economy beyond hydrocarbons, enhancing its position in regional trade and logistics. These infrastructure investments enhance trade and strengthen bilateral relations between China and Azerbaijan in areas such as technology, manufacturing, and tourism (Ran, 2025; Liu & Suk, 2021).

2. *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) remains the flagship project of the BRI, serving as a crucial connection between China's western territories and Pakistan's Gwadar Port. The US\$60 billion infrastructure initiative seeks to establish an extensive network of roads, railways, energy pipelines, and special economic zones, thereby substantially improving trade routes among China, Pakistan, and the broader Middle East and Africa. CPEC provides China with a direct trade route that circumvents the Malacca Strait, enhancing the efficiency and security of its trade pathways. This holds considerable ramifications for China's global economic strategy, establishing CPEC as a crucial component in its efforts to foster economic interdependence throughout the region (Setiawan & Padilla, 2025).

Pakistan stands to benefit significantly from CPEC, as it aims to resolve persistent challenges such as energy shortages, infrastructure deficiencies, and economic underdevelopment. The advancement of Gwadar Port is notably important, as it will furnish Pakistan with a deep-water port that is geographically nearer to essential Middle Eastern and African markets compared to other regional ports. The finalization of the CPEC infrastructure will enable Pakistan to capitalize on regional and global trade prospects, establishing it as a pivotal participant in regional trade networks (Waheed et al., 2025; Anwar & Atif, 2025). CPEC enhances bilateral relations between Pakistan and China, solidifying China's position as an essential partner in Pakistan's economic future.

3. *Pakistan-Azerbaijan Cooperation*

Although the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China-Azerbaijan economic relations have received considerable focus, bilateral collaboration between Pakistan and Azerbaijan is also growing, especially in the energy and trade domains. Azerbaijan's abundance of oil and natural gas positions it as a pivotal entity in the regional energy sector, with its energy exports to Pakistan increasingly regarded as essential for addressing Pakistan's escalating energy requirements. Azerbaijan is investigating avenues to export natural gas and oil via Pakistan, circumventing conventional shipping routes and providing a more secure and efficient method of energy transportation (AzeMedia, 2025).

Pakistan and Azerbaijan are collaborating to improve trade relations beyond the energy sector, encompassing agriculture, manufacturing, and high-tech industries. In recent years, trade volumes between the two countries have significantly increased, accompanied by enhanced discussions regarding trade facilitation and the improvement of logistical connections between Azerbaijan and Pakistan via the Trans-Caspian Corridor (Niftiyev, 2024). This expanding trade partnership corresponds with both nations' objectives to diversify their economic interactions and diminish reliance on conventional markets.

Energy Cooperation

1. Azerbaijan as an Energy Supplier to Pakistan

Azerbaijan's role as a significant energy provider is pivotal to its strategic alliance with Pakistan. The nation is a major producer of oil and natural gas, essential for Pakistan's increasing energy requirements. Joint ventures in energy production, including oil, gas, and power generation, exemplify significant collaboration between the two countries. Azerbaijan's extensive energy resources could assist Pakistan in mitigating its energy crisis, a significant barrier to economic development and industrial advancement.

Moreover, Azerbaijan's position as a conduit to energy-abundant Central Asia renders it an essential participant in supplying alternative energy to Pakistan. Azerbaijan's pipelines have the potential to convey natural gas to Pakistan through Central Asia, thereby establishing a more dependable and secure supply chain for Pakistan's energy sector (Khan et al., 2024; Javed & Rashid, 2015). The convergence of energy interests is expected to intensify, particularly as Pakistan aims to diversify its energy sources and diminish reliance on conventional imports from the Middle East.

2. China's Diversified Energy Interests

China, facing escalating energy demand, has demonstrated a strong interest in bolstering its energy security by diversifying its sources, particularly through augmented dependence on Azerbaijan's energy resources. China's energy diversification strategy is essential for diminishing dependence on maritime routes for energy imports, especially via the congested Strait of Malacca. Azerbaijan's increasing energy exports to China, enabled by connectivity initiatives under the BRI, may offer China a more reliable and economical source of natural gas and oil (Zeynalli, 2024).

The China-Pakistan-Azerbaijan energy corridor offers substantial prospects for collaborative infrastructure initiatives, including pipelines and storage facilities, which could improve the efficiency of energy transportation throughout the region. The collaborative initiatives in energy would enhance trilateral cooperation among the nations and foster regional stability and economic advancement.

Infrastructure Development

1. Caspian-Indian Ocean Connectivity

A notable opportunity within the BRI is the establishment of an integrated land and maritime connectivity network connecting Azerbaijan to Pakistan via Central Asia. The Caspian-Indian Ocean Connectivity project, which enhances Azerbaijan's trade routes by connecting them to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, has the potential to serve as a crucial corridor for the transportation of goods from Europe to South Asia and Africa (Khobragade & Nim, 2022; Jamil, 2017). This ambitious initiative has the potential to diminish transportation expenses and duration for goods, benefiting not only China and Pakistan but also other regional economies engaged in trade via the corridor.

The Caspian-Indian Ocean Corridor will likely play an increasingly significant role in global trade networks, as it bypasses traditional routes and offers a more secure and efficient means of connecting Asia to Europe and Africa (Khobragade & Nim, 2022).

2. *Trans-Caspian Corridor*

The Trans-Caspian Corridor, extending from Azerbaijan across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia, is a pivotal element of the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor within the Belt and Road Initiative. This corridor offers a direct and efficient pathway for the transportation of goods among China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan, enhancing the exchange of trade and energy (Rentschler et al., 2025). The expansion of the Trans-Caspian route aims to improve connectivity among Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe, positioning it as a vital component of China's broader strategy to establish economic ties throughout Eurasia.

The BRI's infrastructure development in this region is expected to create new economic opportunities, improve transportation networks, and stimulate trade among the three countries, reinforcing their economic ties and paving the way for deeper collaboration in the future.

Future Prospects for Regional Integration

The growing cooperation between China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan presents significant opportunities for regional integration, driven by economic, energy, geopolitical, and cultural factors. This trilateral partnership, solidified under the umbrella of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is poised to transform the Eurasian landscape by enhancing trade networks, ensuring energy security, stabilizing the region geopolitically, and fostering deeper cultural and diplomatic ties. Below, we expand on the potential future prospects for integration in these areas, supported by logical arguments and contemporary research.

1. *Streamlining Trade Routes and Reducing Dependency on Maritime Routes*

One of the most significant outcomes of regional integration will be the enhanced trade networks linking China, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan. The integration of Azerbaijan's Middle Corridor (through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)) with CPEC could provide a more secure, faster, and cost-effective trade route from China to Europe and the Middle East. This would not only ease the flow of goods across key regions but also reduce dependency on traditional maritime trade routes like the Malacca Strait, which is vulnerable to piracy, geopolitical tensions, and natural disruptions.

Azerbaijan's strategic position as a transit hub between Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe is critical in this regard. With its growing infrastructure investments under the BRI, Azerbaijan is transforming into a logistics powerhouse that connects land and sea routes seamlessly. Therefore, we argue that the development of such land-based corridors facilitates faster cargo movement, reduces logistics costs, and avoids the congestion and geopolitical risks associated with maritime shipping routes. The Middle Corridor, through its rail, road, and sea components, provides an attractive alternative for China and Pakistan to access European markets, offering efficiency gains in trade and ensuring a more reliable supply chain.

2. *Cost Reduction and Efficiency Improvements in Trade*

Azerbaijan's development of the Trans-Caspian route further complements CPEC by reducing transportation costs and providing direct access to European markets for China and Pakistan. Currently, trade between China and Europe via maritime routes involves long and costly transit times. However, the Trans-Caspian Corridor, which traverses Azerbaijan, offers a land-based solution that shortens transport distances and circumvents obstacles like the Suez Canal congestion and Malacca Strait bottlenecks.

The latest development indicates that the expansion of the Trans-Caspian route will allow the participating countries to leverage economies of scale and substantially decrease shipping time (Palu & Hilmola, 2023). Furthermore, improving rail connectivity between Azerbaijan and China will allow for the efficient transportation of bulk goods, including consumer products, machinery, and energy supplies—items critical to China’s manufacturing sector and Pakistan’s energy needs.

Energy Security

1. Diversification of Energy Supplies

The prospect of a diversified energy supply network through Azerbaijan and Pakistan will help mitigate the vulnerabilities associated with China’s dependence on energy imports from the Middle East. The growing need for alternative energy sources has driven China to look for more secure and diversified routes. By establishing land-based energy corridors, China could decrease reliance on maritime oil shipments vulnerable to disruptions from geopolitical conflicts or piracy.

Azerbaijan’s established role as a reliable energy exporter to Europe can be leveraged to supply China with oil and natural gas, helping to reduce China’s reliance on Middle Eastern suppliers. The development of energy corridors between Azerbaijan, Pakistan, and China would facilitate greater access to energy markets in Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe, contributing to the energy security of all three nations (Moghani & Maleki, 2024; Saleem, 2018). This arrangement is expected to provide more stable, direct access to energy supplies while reducing costs for both China and Pakistan.

2. Energy Pipeline Networks

A key element of this energy cooperation is the extension of Azerbaijan’s existing pipeline networks to Pakistan, particularly the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. The potential extension of the BTC pipeline to Pakistan could significantly improve Pakistan’s energy security by reducing its dependency on imports from other distant suppliers, including those from the Gulf region (Makail, 2020; Guo et al., 2019). Such an energy corridor would not only provide Pakistan with more secure and cheaper energy but would also open up new opportunities for Azerbaijan to become a critical energy hub for both China and Pakistan.

Studies suggest that these pipelines could reduce transportation costs and enhance energy distribution efficiency, which would be particularly beneficial for Pakistan’s growing energy needs. By creating secure land-based pipelines, the countries involved can avoid the geopolitical risks of maritime routes, further solidifying their energy security (Afzal & Afzal, 2025; Shaikh et al., 2016).

Geopolitical Benefits

1. Strengthening Regional Stability

The integration of China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan through these infrastructure and energy projects is likely to play a pivotal role in regional stability. Increased economic cooperation will foster deeper interdependencies, making conflict less likely by aligning the strategic interests of these nations. Moreover, as China strengthens its influence in Central

Asia, South Asia, and the Caucasus, it could help reduce the geopolitical tensions often associated with other regional rivalries, particularly those involving India and Russia.

This interdependence can also act as a counterbalance to external powers that seek to assert influence in the region. Recent studies indicate that increased trade and cooperation among countries like China and Pakistan not only contribute to economic development but also promote regional peace by reducing potential sources of conflict (Simonov, 2025; Durrani, 2023).

2. *Improving China's Western Flank*

For China, improved relations with Azerbaijan and Pakistan offer an opportunity to secure its western flank, particularly in the Xinjiang region, which is a strategic and sensitive area for China. By improving trade routes and securing energy supplies through Azerbaijan and Pakistan, China can reduce its dependence on maritime shipping lanes, which are subject to international control and potential disruptions. These enhanced land-based trade corridors will also increase China's geopolitical leverage in Central Asia and beyond (Kladensky, 2024; Mammadov, 2024).

Cultural and Diplomatic Cooperation

1. *People-to-People Exchanges and Diplomatic Ties*

The deepening trilateral cooperation between China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan is expected to foster greater cultural exchange and diplomatic relations. Initiatives such as education exchanges, tourism programs, and people-to-people contact can deepen mutual understanding and help mitigate any cultural or political tensions between these countries. According to Usman (2025) and Novruz (2025), increasing people-to-people exchanges through academic programs and cultural diplomacy will strengthen the long-term sustainability of this trilateral partnership.

2. *Multilateral Cooperation through Forums like SCO*

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) serves as a key platform for enhancing cooperation among these countries, aligning their political and security interests. Through the SCO, China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan can discuss issues like regional security, economic cooperation, and counterterrorism efforts. Participation in multilateral forums will allow these countries to address shared challenges and enhance diplomatic relations in a way that supports their mutual interests (Azizi, 2024).

Challenges to Triangular Cooperation

While the cooperation between China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers immense potential for regional integration and economic growth, several significant challenges must be addressed for the initiative to succeed in the long term. These challenges encompass security issues, political and economic risks, and regional rivalries. Each of these presents potential roadblocks to the smooth and sustainable development of this triangular cooperation. Below is an expanded analysis of these challenges, along with supporting arguments and recent studies.

Security Issues

1. Ongoing Conflicts and Regional Instability

The security landscape in Central and South Asia remains fraught with instability, particularly in countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghanistan's ongoing internal conflicts, including the rise of the Taliban and other insurgent groups, pose a direct threat to the security of trade routes in the region. The Kabul government's collapse in 2021 and the subsequent Taliban takeover has left much of Afghanistan in a state of turmoil, creating challenges for land-based trade corridors such as those linking Pakistan, China, and Azerbaijan (*Global Conflict Tracker*, 2025).

Moreover, Pakistan's security apprehensions, especially concerning terrorism and extremism, persist as a significant challenge. Terrorist assaults on infrastructure projects associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have cast uncertainty on the safety and security of the Belt and Road Initiative's principal endeavors in the region (Hussain, 2025; Ziwen, 2024). The Balochistan insurgency and militant operations against Chinese nationals and infrastructure projects in Pakistan render security a critical issue. These issues may disrupt transportation corridors, delay infrastructure projects, and increase security costs for investors (Hussain, 2025).

2. Cross-Border Instability

Another key security issue is the potential for cross-border instability between countries in the region. For example, Pakistan's strained relations with India, particularly over the disputed Kashmir region, could lead to military tensions, affecting the regional security environment (Mohan, 2025). Therefore, we argue that any escalation in this rivalry could impact the safety and viability of the trade routes being developed under the BRI.

Political and Economic Risks

1. Political Instability and Governance Issues

The political climate in both Pakistan and Azerbaijan poses a significant challenge to regional integration. Pakistan's political landscape has long been characterized by instability, with frequent changes in government and ongoing political tensions between opposition parties and the ruling administration. This has sometimes led to policy shifts that disrupt long-term infrastructural projects and investment plans. Furthermore, political instability can lead to difficulties in coordination between the various stakeholders involved in regional projects, such as China, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan.

Similarly, Azerbaijan's political environment is influenced by its authoritarian government and its reliance on the energy sector. While the government has made significant strides in developing energy infrastructure and securing foreign investments, political constraints could hinder further expansion of these initiatives, particularly if there are concerns about economic diversification and governance transparency (Simonov, 2025). Moreover, economic fluctuations in both countries—due to factors such as the global price of oil and natural gas—could slow down the momentum for infrastructure development.

2. Economic Volatility and External Pressures

Both Pakistan and Azerbaijan face external economic pressures that could affect the long-term viability of the BRI projects. Pakistan's economy is highly vulnerable to external

shocks, such as fluctuations in global oil prices, changes in international trade policies, and the threat of currency devaluation (Usman, 2025). The country has also experienced significant debt burdens, which could impact its ability to fund infrastructure projects without relying on external loans, potentially undermining economic sustainability.

Similarly, Azerbaijan, which is heavily reliant on its oil and gas exports, faces risks associated with the volatility of global energy markets. A downturn in energy prices could reduce Azerbaijan's ability to finance regional infrastructure projects, especially those tied to energy transit and trade routes (Bifolchi, 2024). These economic vulnerabilities could hinder the expansion of the BRI infrastructure and trade connectivity in the region.

Regional Rivalries

1. Geopolitical Tensions and Rivalries

The geopolitical rivalry between China and India presents a significant challenge to regional cooperation. India's opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), particularly over the issue of Kashmir, remains a major geopolitical concern. India views CPEC as a violation of its territorial sovereignty, given that the corridor passes through disputed regions in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. As a result, India has not only refrained from participating in the BRI but has also worked to counterbalance China's influence in the region through initiatives such as the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) with the United States, Japan, and Australia (De Estrada, 2023). This rivalry between China and India could create diplomatic friction and regional instability, potentially undermining efforts to integrate Pakistan and Azerbaijan into China's trade and infrastructure network.

2. Azerbaijan's Relations with Russia and Iran

The relations between Azerbaijan, Russia, and Iran are precarious. Azerbaijan aspires to establish itself as a transit hub for energy and goods between China and Europe; nevertheless, its historical and geopolitical affiliations with Russia and Iran may pose hurdles to its regional integration under the Belt and Road Initiative framework. Although a significant partner, Russia has been wary of China's growing influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus (Meena, 2025). Azerbaijan's intricate relations with Iran may pose challenges for China, which is engaged in competitive energy markets. Azerbaijan must equilibrate its relations with China and its neighboring countries to fully harness its energy potential. This geopolitical balancing endeavor will advance BRI regional integration and cooperation.

The triangular cooperation between China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan offers significant promise for enhancing regional integration, improving trade networks, and promoting economic growth. However, challenges such as security issues, political and economic risks, and regional rivalries pose serious obstacles to the effective implementation of this partnership. Addressing these challenges will require sustained efforts to improve security cooperation, manage political instability, and navigate regional geopolitical dynamics. Nevertheless, with careful management and strategic diplomacy, these obstacles can be overcome, paving the way for a more connected and prosperous Eurasian region.

Conclusion

The triangular relationship among China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan presents significant potential for advancing regional integration within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This partnership, by integrating the trade and energy networks of the three nations, offers a chance to stimulate economic growth, enhance regional connectivity, and fortify geopolitical alliances throughout Eurasia. The prospective advantages are extensive: improved trade routes, bolstered energy security, diversified supply chains, and heightened political stability are merely a few illustrations of what this trilateral collaboration could accomplish.

The actualization of these prospects hinges on the effective resolution of several critical challenges. The security threats in the wider region—particularly the ongoing instability in Afghanistan, the menace of terrorism in Pakistan, and the intricacies of regional conflicts—present considerable challenges. These security challenges may obstruct vital trade routes, postpone infrastructure initiatives, and dissuade investment in the region. The political instability in Pakistan and Azerbaijan exacerbates the situation, as governance challenges and fluctuations in political authority may jeopardize the sustained dedication to regional integration initiatives.

Moreover, economic volatility—intensified by variations in energy prices, global economic recessions, and increasing debt burdens—may hinder progress and impact the sustainability of infrastructure investments.

The geopolitical rivalries in the region must not be disregarded. The China-India rivalry, especially regarding Kashmir, is a delicate matter that may hinder the effective functioning of projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Azerbaijan's precarious equilibrium among China, Russia, and Iran may introduce complexities, as any discord among these nations could undermine regional stability and impede the integration process.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there exist grounds for optimism. The strategic significance of the Middle Corridor, the CPEC, and the Trans-Caspian route indicates that the advantages of collaboration will probably surpass the risks, provided that these challenges are mitigated through meticulous diplomacy, strong security cooperation, and continuous economic engagement. The establishment of these trade routes and energy corridors may present a more secure, efficient, and sustainable alternative to conventional maritime shipping routes, yielding mutual advantages for China, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan that surpass individual national interests.

The potential for cultural exchange and diplomatic collaboration between these nations should not be overlooked. As economic relations intensify, opportunities for interpersonal connections, educational collaborations, and diplomatic discussions are likely to increase, thereby enhancing the long-term viability of the partnership. Utilizing multilateral platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can enhance political and security alliances, offering a robust framework for tackling common issues and fostering collective advancement.

In conclusion, the triangular relationship among China, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan under the Belt and Road Initiative is set to become a fundamental element of regional integration. Although security, political, and economic challenges require meticulous management, the strategic potential of this partnership to enhance trade, infrastructure development, and geopolitical alignment throughout Eurasia is substantial. Through persistent dedication, flexible strategies, and efficient diplomatic initiatives, this collaboration can actualize the

overarching objectives of the BRI, improving the economic outlook of these three countries while fostering a more integrated and stable Eurasian region.

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