

Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)**The Security-Development Nexus of China and Tajikistan: Implications for Pakistan****Mehvish Amir**

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Abstract: This paper aims to explore the operationalization of “security-development nexus” with reference to the Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia, with particular focus on Republic of Tajikistan, and assesses the strategic, economic and security dimension of this linkage for Pakistan. The principle of “developmental peace” (fazhan xing heping) is a tenet of Beijing’s theory that infrastructure-driven economic modernisation could be the key to averting political instability and tackling non-traditional security threats. With remodelling of its economy, severe restraints on the fiscal budget and growing security challenges on its 1,357 km border with Afghanistan, Beijing has resorted to a hybrid approach of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure financing and specific bilateral and multilateral military operations. The escalation of the China-Tajikistan security-development nexus is a pivotal moment for strategic reconfiguration and opportunity for Pakistan. This study analyses how Beijing’s footprint in Tajikistan impacts Pakistan’s ambitions as a Eurasian trade hub, its security coordination within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), and its overarching foreign policy in an increasingly multipolar regional order.

Introduction

The political geography of Central Asia changed drastically after the departure of NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the evolution of Eurasian geopolitics were shaken. Lying at the intersection of East, South, and Central Asia, the region is again a theatre of geopolitical rivalry and regional realignment. The Republic of Tajikistan is in a unique position of sensitivity among the Central Asian republics, being bordered by Afghanistan in the historic region of Wakhan on the southern side, having its economic prowess constrained by significant fragilities, and serving as a bridge between China’s sweeping most western province of Xinjiang and the wider part of the region.

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has stepped up its involvement in Central Asia beyond just economic diplomacy to an integrated security-development framework, in response to these regional vulnerabilities (Ahmad, Liaqat, & Mustafa, 2026). Strategically, Russian security guarantees, offered in the framework of Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), have always been the core of

Tajikistan's defence umbrella, but China has increasingly been building its own security presence to ensure the safety of its economic investments via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and to prevent transnational spread of extremist ideology into its own Xinjiang region.

Research Problem and Significance

There is a lot of scholarly literature that discusses China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China's bilateral relationships with individual Central Asia countries, but little scholarly work focuses on a cross-regional synthesis of China's Central Asian strategy, and what the direct implications are for South Asia, in particular, Pakistan.

Pakistan's strategic approach is becoming more geocentric, as it tries to play on the geoeconomics card by connecting through South Asia-Central Asia-Middle East routes. But the country's ability to serve as the major transit point for Central Asian trade will crucially hinge on the stability of Tajikistan, and the Afghan frontier as a whole. The key research question of this paper is: how does the 'security-development nexus' between China and Tajikistan shape the security and economic integration of Central Asia and what are some of the opportunities and challenges arising from this enhanced cooperation for Pakistan's national security, trade aspirations and foreign policy perspectives?

Methodology

The study is done by using a qualitative analytical approach based on three methods: empirical case study analysis, document analysis of official bilateral agreements and multilateral declarations, and comparative foreign policy analysis. The research is organized around the theoretical lens of the Security-Development Nexus, which is assessed from the point of view of Chinese developmental peace.

Analytical Framework

Theoretical Framework: The Security-Development Nexus in Chinese Foreign Policy

The security-development nexus has been conceptualized and operationalized in the foreign policy of China.

Evolution of the Security-Development Nexus in International Relations

The idea of a 'security-development nexus' developed in the late-1990s and early 2000s in the Western academic and policy world in recognition of the fact that economic underdevelopment and violence and conflict reinforce one another (Nagai, 2020). The traditional liberal notions of the nexus were twofold: security is a necessary condition for economic growth, and sustainable peace needs liberal democratic government, human rights and free-market reforms.

In contrast, Chinese theory has a different take on this association. Termed "developmental peace" (fazhan xing heping), Beijing's framework reverses or reorders certain elements of the liberal sequence (Abb & Yuan, 2025).

Development as the Fundamental Root: Chinese foreign policy assumes that poverty, lack of infrastructure and economic backwardness are the underlying roots of sociopolitical instability, violent extremism and separatism.

State-Led Infrastructure Provision: There is less emphasis on the need for immediate and short-term institutional and governance reforms, with an increased focus on state-led investments in hard infrastructure such as roads, energy provisions, industrial estates etc. being considered the quickest means to create jobs, improve living standards and as radar against radicalization (Yin, 2018).

Security as an Enabler and Guarantor: Security enforcement does not aim for political democratization but rather to create an orderly setting for economic statecraft and construction of infrastructure.

Table. 1: The table has been created by the author using available secondary sources of information.

Dimension	Western Liberal Model	Chinese Developmental Peace Model
Primary Driver	Governance Reform, Human Rights, Liberalization	Hard Infrastructure, Capital Investment, Industrialization
Causality Sequence	Good Governance → Security → Development	State Stability → Economic Development → Sustainable Security
Role of the State	Regulatory, Decentralized, Market-Driven	Centralized, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), Development Bank Financing
Security Mechanism	Peacebuilding, Security Sector Reform (SSR)	Border Security, Counter-Terrorism Intelligence, Critical Infrastructure Protection

Xinjiang and the “Securing the West” Strategy

How the security-development nexus is positioned in Central Asia by China is directly linked to China's domestic security concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The historical context of Beijing's “Go West” (Xibu Da Kaifa) policy is to help narrow the economic gap between developed coastal provinces and less developed west border regions (Yao, 2008).

The stability in Central Asia, especially Tajik stability, is seen by Beijing as a necessary front line of defence for Xinjiang. Historically, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM, or Turkistan Islamic Party or TIP) has found refuge in turbulent border regions on the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border. Hence, Chinese grand strategy is based on a simultaneous method: strengthening the development of Tajikistan's economy to end conditions that encourage extremism and simultaneously constructing security infrastructure along the border of Tajikistan, physically blocking transborder threats from entering Xinjiang (Bawa & Sheokand, 2023).

The Security-Development Nexus in Action: China-Tajikistan Bilateral Dynamics

The Security-Development Nexus has been incorporated into the Chinese foreign policy to pursue its goals of infrastructure development and regional connectivity.

Tajikistan’s Structural Vulnerabilities

Tajikistan is the least stable and economically the weakest Central Asian country. Highly mountainous (over 90% of its territory is covered by mountain ranges), the country faces permanent geographical and economic constraints:

Economic Vulnerability: Historically, external remittances (mainly from Tajik migrant workers in Russia) have been a significant part of Tajik annual GDP, between 45% and 48% (Ortiz-Ospina, 2026). Until now, its domestic industrial base is also underdeveloped, and the state has to rely on foreign capital for large infrastructural and hydro-energy projects.

The Afghan Border Imperative: Tajikistan has an Afghan border of 1,357 km which contains difficult terrain in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) (Hedlund, 2023). The porous nature of this border makes Tajikistan vulnerable to illicit narcotics trafficking, weapons smuggling, and infiltration by violent non-state actors such as Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and Jamaat Ansarullah (a group composed largely of anti-Dushanbe Tajik militants based in northern Afghanistan).

Internal Security Dynamics in GBAO: Periodic tensions occur in the remote region of GBAO which continues to be a recurring administrative challenge for the central government due to the local sociopolitical and internal security dynamics in this region.

The Economic Pillar: Investment, Debt, and Infrastructure:

In Tajikistan, China is the biggest creditor, as well as its biggest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

under the Belt and Road scheme. In a number of economic sectors, important capital investments have been made systematically by Chinese state-owned enterprises and development financial institutions.

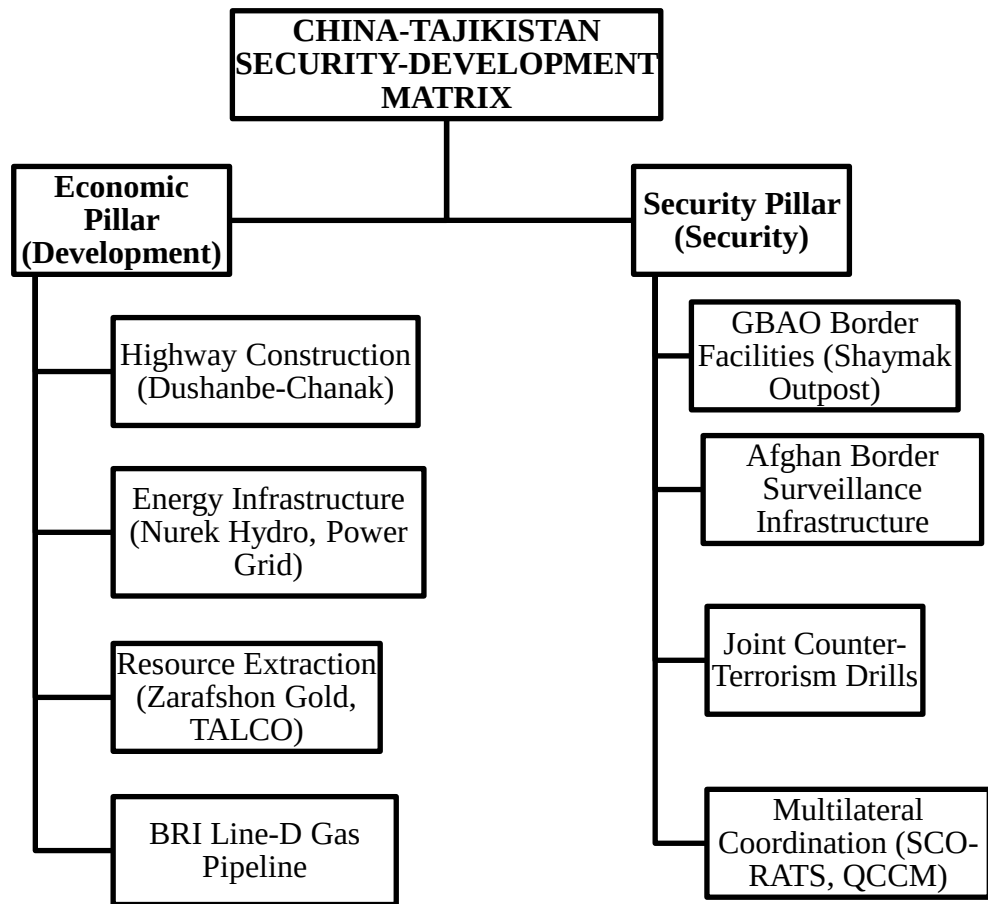


Figure. 1: This figure is developed by author using different sources.

Transport Interconnectivity: The rehabilitations of Dushanbe-Chanak Road, and the building of the railway line Vahdat-Yavan, bridge the mountain passes and connected the northern and southern parts of Tajikistan, overcoming its geographical fragmentation. Furthermore, the expansion of the road network connecting Dushanbe to the Kulma Pass border crossing 4,363 meters above sea level) directly links Tajikistan's domestic transportation system to China's Xinjiang province (Bifolchi, 2023).

Energy Infrastructure and Natural Resources: Chinese funding was instrumental in the development of thermal power plant in Dushanbe, and the modernization of the internal electric grid, which helped to facilitate electrical power in winter. In return, Chinese corporations hold major concessions in Tajikistan's mining sector, including majority ownership in the Zarafshon gold mining venture, and participate in modernizing the Tajik Aluminium Company (TALCO) (Villalobos, et al., 2024).

Strategic Pipelines: Line D of the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline, will run through Tajik area, directly connecting Dushanbe with Beijing's energy pipelines.

However, this strong economic imprint has led to high asymmetric fiscal dependencies. China is the largest creditor for Tajikistan with more than around 30% of the country's external debt (Muratalieva, 2024). Due to its limited ability to fulfil these obligations the Dushanbe has incurred debt equity conversions and long-term exchange of mining concessions, which has created tremendous debates on fiscal sustainability and national sovereignty.

The Security Pillar: Outposts, Border Defence, and Intelligence Sharing

In the last ten years, security cooperation between China and Tajikistan have shifted from passive

diplomatic coordination to active military assistance and presence:

Border Outposts in Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO): China has funded and built dozens of Border Guards' posts along the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, intelligence and satellite images analysis report shows that there is a dedicated Chinese security facility near Shaymak in the Murghab district of GBAO located near the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of Afghan territory separating Tajikistan from Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan (Shih, 2019).

Bilateral Military Assistance: Beijing offers direct military technical assistance to Dushanbe such as light armoured vehicles, surveillance drones, communication systems and tactical equipment for border interdiction duties at high altitudes.

Joint Counter-Terrorism Operations: The Chinese and Tajik border forces carry out bilateral counter-terrorist exercises that include an emphasis on warfare in mountains, border interception and dealing with the hostage situation (Kucera, 2016).

Multilateral Synergy: SCO, RATS, and QCCM

China institutionalises its security presence in regional organisations as well as multilateral formats on bilateral basis:

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO): The SCO is the main regional forum for Beijing, Moscow and the Central Asian capitals to coordinate their actions against the “Three Evils” of “terrorism, separatism and extremism.” The SCO also has a structure for regional anti-terrorism cooperation, the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), which is located in Tashkent and is responsible for exchanging information and for publishing joint lists of banned extremist organizations (Aris, 2009).

The Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM): is a direct military engagement body, established in 2016 by the military leadership of the four states of China, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Afghanistan for the coordination of the counter terrorism and border control aspects between the shared mountain frontiers. The existence of QCCM's structure shows Beijing's interest about direct connection between border security of Central Asia and security frameworks of South Asia (Sarybayev, 2026).

Strategic Implications for Pakistan

The growing security-development nexus between China and Tajikistan directly impacts the geopolitical context, security apparatus, and economic regionalization agenda for Pakistan.

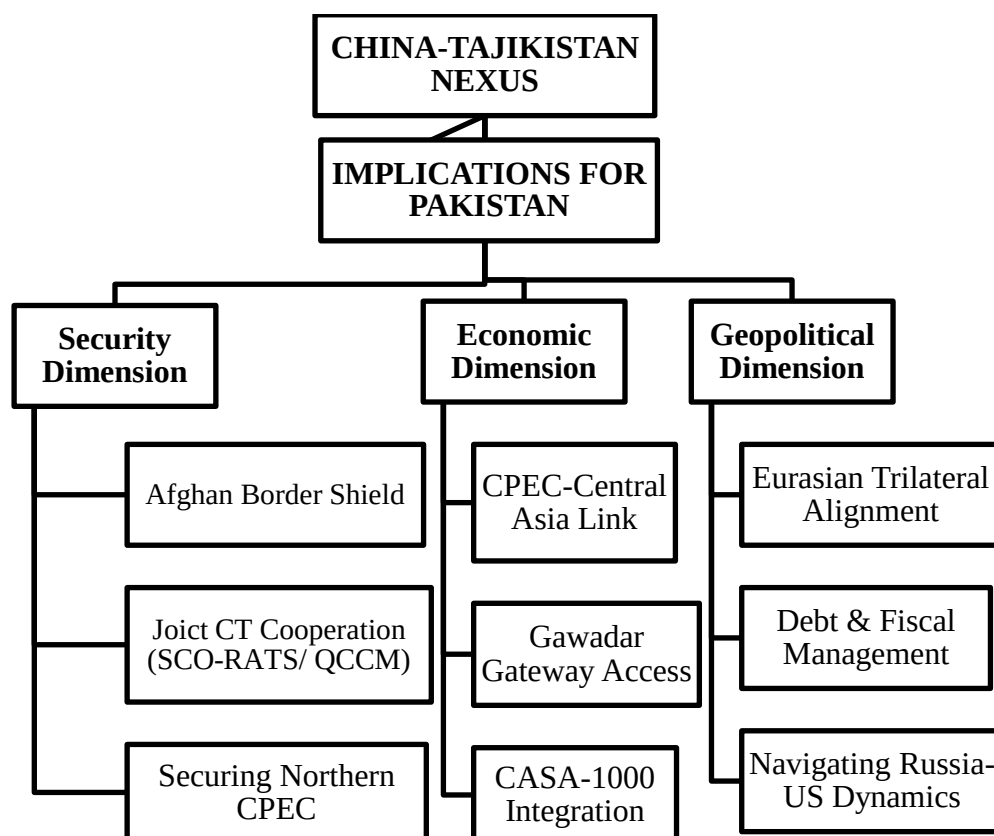


Figure. 2: This figure shows the implications of security-development nexus of China-Tajikistan on Pakistan, developed using the sources cited above.

Security Implications: Northern Flank Stabilization and Anti-Terrorism

Pakistan's main strategic goal is to stop cross border terrorism and cap the trans-border terror from Afghanistan on its western borders and northern flanks respectively. The various direct and indirect security advantages for Islamabad is manifested from the following factors by the presence of the Chinese security footprint in Tajikistan:

A. Containment of Transnational Violent Non-State Actors

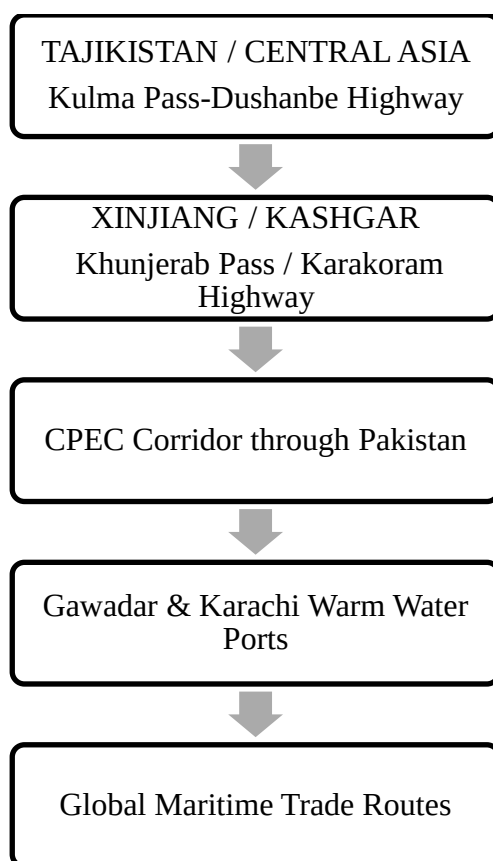
The groups active in northern Afghanistan, including ISKP, ETIM/TIP and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are a major security threat to both Islamabad and Beijing (Hamdard, 2026). China's surveillance, intelligence collection and strengthening of their borders with Tajikistan forms a shield along the northern Afghanistan border. This border security will bar the extremist groups from creating sanctuaries in this area which can pose a risk to the northern end points of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Gilgit-Baltistan.

B. Enhancing Quadrilateral Intelligence Synchronization

Platforms such as the QCCM and SCO-RATS enable Pakistan to receive synchronized intelligence on the movement of militants in the Pamir-Wakhan region. The integration of Chinese surveillance capabilities in GBAO enhances the real-time tracking of contraband, weapons, and foreign fighters operating in the tri-junction where Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan approximate each other.

Economic and Connectivity Implications: CPEC as the Gateway for Central Asia

Pakistan's geoeconomic pivot is based on making its deep-sea ports, Gwadar and Karachi, the gateway hubs for landlocked economies in Central Asia. The China-Tajikistan infrastructure network is a key component of this vision.



Flowchart: This flowchart depicts the interconnectivity among China-Tajikistan-Pakistan, made from the cited discussions.

A. Operationalizing North-South Transit Corridors

The republic of Tajikistan is the closest Central Asian Republic to Pakistan in geographical terms. The Karakoram Highway (KKH) route through Kashgar and the Kulma Pass shortens transport routes from Dushanbe to the Port of Gwadar to around 2100 km compared to the other maritime transport routes through Iranian ports (Chabahar/Bandar Abbas) and the Russian overland routes (Fazl-e-Haider, 2026). China's investment in upgrading the Tajik road system (including the Dushanbe-Kulma highway) directly addresses the bottlenecks on the Tajik end of this corridor. The physical infrastructure for high volume trans-border trade is completed with the complementary upgrades to the KKH under the CPEC.

B. Energy Security and the CASA-1000 Project

The Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000) aims to export 1,300 megawatts of surplus summer hydropower from Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic to energy-deficient South Asian markets, with Pakistan scheduled to receive 1,000 megawatts (Zaheer Abbas, 2019). China's investments in modernizing Tajikistan's power generation capacity (such as hydro-refurbishments and grid stabilization) enhance the reliability of Tajikistan's energy generation, directly supporting the long-term feasibility of CASA-1000.

Geopolitical and Diplomatic Implications: Triangulation and Regional Balance

The security and economic synergies are certainly vital, but the strengthening of the China-Tajikistan nexus also poses strategic realities that need careful diplomacy by Pakistan.

A. Managing Asymmetric Dependencies and Fiscal Vulnerabilities

Both Pakistan and Tajikistan are key partner countries of BRI with large debt repayments to Chinese financial institutions. Pakistan can learn from the experience of Tajikistan in the fields of debt restructuring, resource concessions, and joint venture management. Fiscal coordination and transparent

project structuring continue to be crucial to ensure long-term debt sustainability and economic sovereignty from infrastructure investments.

B. Navigating Multipolar Regional Interests

China's increased footprint in Tajikistan comes at a time when existing Russian security structures (CSTO) and Indian, Iranian, and West powers' interests are at play in the region. For example, India has traditionally been operating from Farkhor Air Base and Ayni Air Base in Tajikistan (Kona, 2007). In fact, Pakistan will have to play its cards with caution, not to be perceived as part of the great-power rivalry in Central Asia as China's structural input in Tajikistan increases but simultaneously maximise the potential of strategic cooperation with Beijing and augment bilateral political relations with Dushanbe.

Strategic Recommendations for Pakistan

To capitalize on the opportunities generated by the China-Tajikistan security-development nexus while mitigating regional risks, Pakistan should consider the following strategic policies:

Formalize a China-Pakistan-Tajikistan Trilateral Framework

Islamabad should initiate the formation of a formal forum of the Three regional powers involving China, Pakistan and Tajikistan on issues of trade facilitation, border security and transport connectivity. This platform would represent an opportunity to coordinate directly with Dushanbe and Beijing and Islamabad for streamlined customs procedures, tariff management, and to establish transport corridors.

Accede to and Expand Regional Transit Trade Agreements

Pakistan should strive to bring Tajikistan to the level of a full-fledged partner in its participation in the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA), which currently involves Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. The expansion of the QTTA to Tajikistan will remove administrative and regulatory hassles while creating a harmonized system of trucking permits and reducing transit costs for the transport of goods between Gwadar and Dushanbe.

Modernize Border Management and Digital Customs at Khunjerab Pass

Islamabad will need to ensure the infrastructure of the Khunjerab Pass crossing is upgraded to accommodate the growing trade traffic between Central Asia, Xinjiang, and Pakistan. All-weather operational capacity, automated customs clearance systems and cold-chain storage facilities will ensure that the disruption of supply chain along KKH is prevented by bad weather conditions.

Deepen Intelligence Collaboration via SCO-RATS and QCCM

Through SCO-RATS, security organizations of Pakistan should increase sharing of real-time intelligence with their Tajik and Chinese counterpart. Collective action should focus on counter-messaging, monitoring militant financing networks and deterring cross-border movement of hostile non-state actors along the Afghan border.

Conclusion

The security-development nexus between China and Tajikistan represents an operationalization of Beijing's "developmental peace" strategy in Central Asia. Through large-scale BRI investment and carefully considered border security operations, China has built a stabilized northern corridor to safeguard its western frontier and protect its trans-Eurasian trade lines. This evolving political and economic landscape is a great strategic opportunity for Pakistan. An economically connected Tajikistan is not only a secure northern neighbor for Pakistan but also a direct gateway to Central Asian markets without having to pass through China and further strengthens CPEC as the main geoeconomic corridor between landlocked Eurasia and the Indian Ocean. Pakistan can ensure its place as an irreplaceable economic fulcrum for Central and South Asia by taking proactive steps in knitting its trade policies, border infrastructure and regional diplomatic efforts into this evolving architecture.

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