IPS/INS/092/2026-92

Institute of Policy Studies
Islamabad

November 18, 2026

IPS INSIGHTS
Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

# Pakistan's SCO Chairmanship and the Afghan Question: Bridging Security and Connectivity

Dr Faisal Javaid[1]

## Summary

Afghanistan is the hardest test of Pakistan's SCO chairmanship. Since February 2026, Pakistan and the Taliban administration have been locked in their most sustained crossborder conflict since 2021, and the Torkham crossing has been closed to trade for most of the past year. Yet the corridors that Pakistan and the Central Asian states champion, the trans-Afghan railway, TAPI and CASA-1000, all run through Afghanistan.

This Insight argues that Pakistan can use the SCO to align its Afghan security concerns with those of Russia, China and Central Asia, in a way that keeps regional connectivity alive rather than sacrificing it to border securitization. The CSTO summit in Moscow on 11

November 2026, which adopted a Counterterrorism Strategy through 2030 and placed Afghanistan at the center of its border-security agenda, makes that alignment more achievable than at any time since 2021.

## The Problem: Securitization is Eroding Pakistan's own Corridors

Pakistan's grievance is real. UN monitors estimate that around 6,000 Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters are based in Afghanistan, and ACLED recorded more than 1,000[2] TTP attacks in 2025. Mediation by Qatar, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and, in Urumqi in April 2026, China has not produced a durable settlement. At the Margalla Dialogue on 10 November, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar again called terrorism from Afghan territory a serious security challenge, while backing a peaceful and economically integrated Afghanistan.[3] The response, however, carries a connectivity cost. With Torkham closed to commerce, World Bank data for June 2026 showed 48 percent of Afghan imports arriving through Central Asia and 46 percent through Iran. Afghanistan's exports to Central Asia rose from about USD 122 million in 2024 to USD 216 million in 2025, while the multimodal corridor launched in 2024 by Kazakhstan's KTZ Express and Pakistan's National Logistics Corporation works only when the border is

[1] Dr Faisal Javaid is Head of the Department of the International Relations and Mass Communication at FUUAST, Islamabad.
[2] Ashish Shukla, "The Changing Contours of Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations," Centre for Peace Studies, May 8, 2026, https://icpsnet.org/index.php/issuebrief/the-changing-contours-of-pakistan-afghanistan-relations
[3] Radio Pakistan, "Pakistan to Safeguard Its Legitimate Rights under IWT: Dar," November 10, 2026, http://radio.gov.pk/10-11-2026/pakistan-to-safeguard-legitimate-rights-under-iwt-dar

open. The trans-Afghan railway's feasibility study is due by the end of 2026, but analysts warn the line cannot be built while Kabul and Islamabad exchange strikes,[4] and TAPI, now near Herat, has no timetable for reaching Pakistan. The danger is that pressure on Kabul ends up proving that Central Asia can reach the sea without Pakistan.[5,6]

## Convergence and Divergence: Pakistan, Russia, Central Asia and China

Pakistan is not alone in its concern. At the CSTO–CIS–SCO security conference in Moscow on 16 October 2026, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned of Islamic State camps near Afghanistan's borders with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. China has called terrorism the core issue in Afghanistan–Pakistan relations.

The divergence lies in method. Russia recognized the Taliban government in July 2025, signed a military-technical agreement with Kabul in May 2026, and focuses on Islamic State–Khorasan rather than the TTP.[7] The Central Asian states are deepening trade and energy ties with Kabul. The eighth Moscow Format meeting on 5 October ended without a joint statement after the Afghan and Pakistani delegations failed to agree.[8] A purely bilateral, securitized approach therefore risks isolating Pakistan from the very states whose support it needs.

Central Asia's own engagement is instructive. The five Central Asian states held their first consultative dialogue with Afghanistan in Kabul in 2026 and now supply most of Afghanistan's imported electricity. Their interest is not in isolating Kabul but in a stable transit corridor to the south, which is precisely the interest Pakistan shares. A collective approach, framed around threats that Russia, China and Central Asia also face, has a better chance of producing pressure that Kabul cannot dismiss as a Pakistani grievance.

## The Moscow CSTO Summit: A New Regional Security Signal

The CSTO Collective Security Council summit in Moscow on 11 November 2026, chaired by

President Vladimir Putin,[9] sharpened this regional consensus. The leaders adopted a final Declaration, a statement on coordinating counter-terrorism efforts, and the CSTO Counterterrorism Strategy through 2030, drafted at Russia's initiative. Pre-summit analysis indicated that the Strategy covers terrorist financing, online radicalization and threats spilling over from Afghanistan.[10]

The Declaration set out the members' common approach to regional security, expressed concern at foreign military infrastructure approaching their borders, and committed them to strengthening their crisis-response system. Russian officials have estimated that as many as 23,000 fighters from more than 20 armed groups operate in Afghanistan, which explains why border security dominated the agenda.[11,12]

Putin said the CSTO was closely monitoring Afghanistan, which remains a central focus

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[4] BRICS Transport, "The Trans-Afghan Project Takes On Concrete Shape," July 2026, https://bricstransport.com/content/2026/iyul-2026/the-trans-afghan-project-takes-on-concrete-shape-/

[5] Afghan Online Press, "Years Late, Just in Time? Turkmenistan's TAPI Gas Pipeline Nears Afghan City," November 10, 2026, https://www.aopnews.com/central-asia/years-late-just-in-time-turkmenistans-tapi-gas-pipeline-nears-afghan-city/

[6] Naila Mahsud, "Torkham Closure Puts Pressure on Kabul, but for How Long?" Arab News Pakistan, November 12, 2026, https://www.arabnews.pk/pakistan/has-pakistan-closed-its-own-leverage-3006808

[7] Eldaniz Gusseinov, "Russia's Dual Afghan Strategy and Pakistan's Shrinking Room for Maneuver," The Diplomat, June 2026, http://thediplomat.com/2026/06/russias-dual-afghan-strategy-and-pakistans-shrinking-room-for-maneuver/

[8] Amjad Bashir Siddiqi, "The Diplomatic Front," The News on Sunday, October 25, 2026, https://www.thenews.pk/tns/detail/1444650-the-diplomatic-front

[9] TASS, "Putin to Chair Collective Security Treaty Organization Summit in Moscow," November 11, 2026, https://tass.com/politics/2215827

[10] TASS, "CSTO Leaders Adopt Counterterrorism Strategy through 2030," November 11, 2026, https://tass.com/world/2216599

[11] Mansur Mirovalev, "Moscow Summit Tests Russia's Waning Grip on Former Soviet Allies," Al Jazeera, November 10, 2026, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/11/10/moscow-summit-tests-russias-waning-grip-on-former-soviet-allies

[12] Maciej Kolasa, "The Moscow CSTO Summit: Between New Challenges and Old Illusions," Defence24, November 11, 2026, https://defence24.com/geopolitics/the-moscow-csto-summit-between-new-challenges-and-old-illusions

for the security of its external borders. Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov called for joint action against cross-border threats[13] together with support for Afghanistan's economic recovery, the same pairing of security and connectivity this Insight advocates. From 1 January 2027, the CSTO chairmanship passes to Tajikistan under the motto "Collective Security: Strengthening Borders, Regional Stability, Shared Responsibility". President Emomali Rahmon, who backed the counter-terrorism statement, pledged that Tajikistan's chairmanship would focus on implementing adopted decisions and on the organization's readiness to respond quickly to emerging threats. Throughout 2027, Tajikistan, the member state most exposed along the Afghan frontier, will chair the CSTO while Pakistan chairs the SCO.[14]

For Pakistan, which is not a CSTO member, the summit matters in three ways. It confirms at leader level that the threat from Afghanistan is shared. The attendance of the SCO Secretary-General as a guest opens a channel between the CSTO and the SCO. And Japarov's call shows that even a security alliance sees border hardening alone as insufficient.

## Why the SCO Chairmanship is the Right Venue

The SCO brings Russia, China, Iran, India and the Central Asian states into one forum, and the chairmanship gives Pakistan procedural leverage. The SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group, dormant since 2021, is ripe for revival: Russia called for its resumption in June 2026,[15] and according to Russia's SCO representative it is co-chaired by the rotating chair's deputy foreign minister and an Afghan representative. For the next ten months, that chair is Pakistan, which also chaired the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in 2025– 26.[16] Support is broad: Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu has said most member states back reactivation, and SCO deputy foreign ministers discussed it in Moscow in April 2026. A working-level group would also let members engage on security and transit without settling the question of recognition, since only Russia recognizes the Taliban government and Afghanistan's SCO observer seat has been vacant since 2021.

The chairmanship theme, "Turning Vision into Action: Connectivity, Innovation and Shared Prosperity", gives Pakistan a further mandate to place the trans-Afghan corridor at the center of the Islamabad summit. Dar himself linked SCO cooperation to TAPI and CASA1000 in July 2026.

## Policy Recommendations:

1. **Revive the SCO–Afghanistan Contact Group with two linked tracks:** Pakistan should propose reactivation at deputy foreign minister level, with a security track (a joint RATS threat assessment covering the TTP alongside Islamic State–Khorasan) and a connectivity track (the trans-Afghan railway, TAPI and CASA-1000), so that counterterrorism performance unlocks transit benefits for Kabul. Taking up an initiative Russia has already proposed would let Pakistan shape the group's agenda rather than react to it.

2. **Ring-fence Central Asian transit:** Sealed, scanned and bonded transit cargo to and from Central Asia should move through designated crossings under a secure customs regime such as TIR, even while bilateral pressure on Kabul continues. Distinguishing Central Asian transit from bilateral Afghan trade would protect Pakistan's reputation as a reliable gateway and the revenue that comes with it.

3. **Link the SCO and CSTO chairs in 2027:** Pakistan and Tajikistan should hold regular

[13] Khaama Press, "Putin and Kyrgyz President Warn of Afghanistan Security Threats," November 12, 2026, https://www.khaama.com/putin-kyrgyz-president-afghanistan-security-threats/

[14] Asia-Plus, "Emomali Rahmon: CSTO Strengthening Must Be Based on Mutual Trust," November 12, 2026, https://asiaplus.news/en/2026/11/12/emomali-rahmon-csto-strengthening-must-be-based-on-mutual-trust/

[15] Afghanistan International, "Russia Urges Resumption of SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group," June 11, 2026, https://www.afintl.com/en/202606111635

[16] Radio Pakistan, "44th SCO-RATS Council Meeting Held in Tashkent," April 3, 2026, https://www.radio.gov.pk/03-04-2026/44th-sco-rats-council-meeting-held-in-tashkent

consultations on Afghanistan, and RATS should exchange threat assessments with the bodies implementing the CSTO's 2030 Strategy.

4. **Work through Central Asian partners and existing processes:** Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have a commercial stake in Pakistani ports and credibility in Kabul. Kazakhstan has offered to finance a railway to Pakistani ports via Afghanistan, and Pakistan's ambassador in Ashgabat has recommitted Pakistan to TAPI. The Urumqi process and the Moscow Format should feed into the SCO track rather than compete with it.

5. **Secure a summit deliverable:** Pakistan should aim for an SCO leaders' statement in August 2027 endorsing the trans-Afghan corridor and committing members to joint action against all terrorist groups operating from Afghan territory.

6. **Recalibrate measures that push Kabul toward alternative routes:** Prolonged closure of trade crossings has shifted Afghan trade to Iran and Central Asia. Pakistan should review which pressure measures are reducing its own leverage and keep those that target militancy while easing those that mainly damage commerce.

## Risks and Limits

Several constraints stand out. The Taliban resisted terrorism language at the Moscow Format and may do so again. Russia's focus on Islamic State–Khorasan may limit its support for TTP-centered language. And within a consensus-based SCO, India could resist any Afghan initiative it sees as serving Pakistan's bilateral agenda. In addition, a major terrorist attack in Pakistan or renewed cross-border clashes could generate domestic pressure for a purely military response, making it politically difficult for the government to sustain cooperative engagement through the SCO.

## Conclusion

Pakistan's choice is not between security and connectivity. Its grievance over terrorism from Afghan soil is legitimate and, as the CSTO's Moscow summit has underlined, widely shared. The SCO chairmanship is a chance to turn a bilateral confrontation into a regional commitment, and to make the corridors through Afghanistan an incentive for Kabul rather than a casualty of the conflict. If Islamabad revives the Contact Group, protects Central Asian transit and secures a leaders' commitment in August 2027, it will show that Pakistan can be both a frontline state and a gateway.