



No. 05/2026 Dated: 20 August 2026

Pakistan–Russia Freight Connectivity: Positioning Pakistan as a Southern Gateway to the Indian Ocean

By Dr. Faisal Javaid

Synopsis

Pakistan-Russia freight train connectivity has moved beyond rhetoric to a concrete organizational phase, with both nations making preparations for an actual test shipment. Pakistan value to Russia lies in the former's ability to act as a gateway to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the increasingly risky Black Sea and Strait of Hormuz routes. In these circumstances, Pakistan should pursue a multi-corridor Eurasian strategy, rather than relying on a single route.

Pakistan–Russia freight connectivity has entered a potentially significant operational phase. What began with bilateral railway cooperation in 2024 has gradually developed into a wider regional connectivity agenda involving Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asian states and Belarus, with Afghanistan potentially becoming part of the longer-term architecture. Yet the project also illustrates the difference between political commitment and operational connectivity. The first trial was scheduled for 15 March 2025 and subsequently pushed toward April. A second launch was scheduled for 22 June 2025, when Pakistan Railways planned to operate the first 16-wagon freight train. That launch was postponed after the escalation of the Iran–Israel conflict disrupted the regional transit environment and the Iran–Pakistan border crossing on which the proposed route depended.



The initiative nevertheless remained active. In December 2025, Pakistan and Russia agreed to continue test cargo shipments along the eastern route of the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The latest development is more consequential. On 11 August 2026, the Russian Ministry of Transport confirmed that Russian and Pakistani railway administrations had established the framework for a test cargo shipment and were working out the route, cargo types, tariff arrangements and delivery times. The date of the test shipment is to be [coordinated with](#) Pakistan and the transit countries.

Russian Ambassador Albert P. Khorev has similarly stated that Russia and Pakistan are preparing freight services connecting Moscow with Karachi and Faisalabad in both directions, while Belarusian participation is also being considered. The two sides are [finalizing the transportation contract](#) and identifying commercial companies interested in moving cargo along the route.

These statements should be understood as describing the same evolving freight connectivity initiative, rather than separate railway projects. The immediate policy challenge is therefore no longer whether Pakistan and Russia have political interest in the corridor, but whether they can make it commercially viable and resilient against disruptions along its transit route.

For Pakistan, the strategic opportunity extends beyond bilateral trade. The country's location on the Arabian Sea gives Russia a potential southern gateway to the Indian Ocean. At a time when the Black Sea has become increasingly exposed to geopolitical risks and the security of the Strait of Hormuz has become more uncertain, diversified access to the Indian Ocean carries growing strategic value. Pakistan should therefore pursue the Russia–Pakistan railway not as a single

corridor, but as part of a multi-route Eurasian connectivity strategy involving Iran, China, QTTA and, in the longer term, Afghanistan.

From Bilateral Railway Cooperation to Regional Connectivity

The current initiative has developed incrementally rather than emerging as a single new project. In June 2024, Pakistan and Russia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on railway cooperation at the 27th St Petersburg International Economic Forum. The agreement established a framework for cooperation in the railway sector and the development of future international cargo transportation.

The initiative subsequently acquired a wider regional dimension. Pakistan [formally joined](#) the proposed Belarus–Russia–Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–Indian Ocean Ports multimodal transport corridor in September 2024. The initiative itself had originated earlier: Uzbekistan began promoting the concept in 2022, while Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed an MoU in November 2023 to advance it. At a meeting in Termez in April 2024, Belarus joined the framework, while Afghanistan and Pakistan began procedures for participation. The accompanying roadmap envisaged cargo-flow analysis, digital documentation and customs facilitation.



These developments demonstrate that Pakistan–Russia connectivity is increasingly embedded within a broader Eurasian transport architecture. The strategic objective is not simply to move Pakistani goods to Russia or Russian goods to Pakistan, but to establish a network through which Central Asian and Eurasian economies can obtain more reliable access to the Indian Ocean.



The Two Postponed Launches and the Connectivity Problem

The chronology of the freight train is important for understanding the current stage of the project. The first trial was scheduled for [15 March 2025](#) and subsequently pushed toward April. The second launch was scheduled for 22 June 2025, with Pakistan Railways preparing the first 16- wagon freight train. The second attempt was [postponed](#) following the escalation of the Iran–Israel conflict and the disruption of the Iran–Pakistan border crossing.

The significance of these delays is not that Pakistan and Russia lacked political commitment. Rather, they revealed a structural weakness in Eurasian connectivity: a corridor crossing several sovereign territories is exposed to the political and security conditions of every transit state along its route. A commercially attractive route can therefore become unusable if one critical segment is disrupted.

This is precisely why the latest Russian announcement matters. The [Russian Ministry of Transport](#) has confirmed that the railway administrations have now established the framework for a test shipment and are working through the practical details of route selection, cargo, tariffs and delivery times.

The objective should now be to ensure that the 2026 test shipment moves beyond political signalling and produces measurable evidence about the corridor's actual cost, time, customs procedures, border handling and commercial viability.

Why Pakistan Matters to Russia

The strategic significance of Pakistan lies primarily in geography. Russia has traditionally depended on northern and western transport routes to reach international markets, but geopolitical developments have increased the value of alternative southern connections.

The Black Sea environment has become more vulnerable as a consequence of the Russia–Ukraine war and attacks affecting maritime and port infrastructure. At the same time, instability surrounding Iran and the Strait of Hormuz has highlighted the risks associated with another critical maritime chokepoint.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin has consequently [argued](#) that Russia should explore railway access to the Indian Ocean to reduce risks associated with the Bosphorus and Strait of Hormuz. His remarks are important because they place the Pakistan option within a wider Russian search for diversified southern connectivity.⁷



Pakistan's strategic advantage is its access to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean through Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar. The country therefore offers Russia and Central Asian states the possibility of combining Eurasian land connectivity with maritime access.

This does not mean Pakistan should present itself as a completely risk-free alternative. Rather, Pakistan's value lies in providing route diversification. In contemporary Eurasian geopolitics, resilience comes not from dependence on one supposedly safe corridor but from the availability of multiple routes.

Iran Is Important- but One Route Is Not Enough

Iran remains the most immediate transit option for Pakistan–Russia freight connectivity through the INSTC. The existing rail connection between Pakistan and Iran makes the route more feasible than some of the alternatives. Pakistan should therefore continue investing in the Taftan–Zahedan connection and the broader ML-3 railway corridor linking Pakistan with Iran.

But the 2025 postponement demonstrated the vulnerability of this route to geopolitical disruptions. Pakistan should not interpret this as a reason to disengage from Iran. Instead, it should treat it as an argument for route redundancy.

A resilient Pakistan–Russia connectivity strategy should therefore combine the Iran-based INSTC route with alternative connectivity through China and Central Asia, while keeping Afghanistan as a longer-term possibility.

Afghanistan: Strategic Potential Without Existing Railway Infrastructure

Afghanistan occupies a potentially important position in the emerging Eurasian connectivity map, but its role needs to be described realistically. There is currently no operational railway connecting Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan. The Trans-Afghan railway therefore remains a proposed future infrastructure project rather than an existing alternative to the INSTC.

Its eventual development could be transformative. It could connect Uzbekistan and other Central Asian economies to Pakistani seaports while providing Pakistan with another overland link to Eurasia.

However, infrastructure is only one part of the equation. Pakistan–Afghanistan relations remain deeply affected by security concerns, particularly the issue of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and cross-border militancy. Unless these concerns are addressed, the commercial reliability of any future Trans-Afghan corridor will remain uncertain.

Russia can potentially contribute diplomatically through the Moscow Format Consultations on Afghanistan. Pakistan should encourage Moscow to place greater emphasis on regional security and the responsibility of Afghanistan's de facto authorities to prevent their territory from being used for cross-border militant activity. Connectivity and security should be treated as mutually reinforcing rather than separate policy domains.

Toward a Multi-Corridor Strategy

Pakistan should resist the temptation to place all of its Eurasian connectivity ambitions on one route. The INSTC through Iran should remain the immediate priority because it has the most developed infrastructure. At the same time, Pakistan should explore a Russia–Central Asia–China–Pakistan connection, particularly by examining how Russian and Central Asian freight could interface with China's existing transport infrastructure and reach Pakistani ports.

The Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) also deserves greater strategic attention. Its participation framework involving Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan provides an existing institutional basis for Central Asian connectivity with Pakistan. Russia could explore ways of linking its wider Eurasian freight network with QTTA-related routes.





Afghanistan should remain a longer-term option rather than an immediate substitute. Its potential is substantial, but the required railway infrastructure must first be constructed and the security environment improved.

The strategic objective should therefore be multi-corridor connectivity rather than corridor competition.

Policy Recommendations

Pakistan's first priority should be to ensure that the 2026 test shipment actually takes place and produces detailed commercial evidence. The pilot should measure transit time, freight costs, customs procedures, border delays, insurance costs and cargo-handling requirements. The results should form the basis for a permanent Pakistan–Russia freight mechanism involving railway authorities, customs agencies, ports, logistics companies and exporters.

Pakistan should simultaneously modernize its rail connection with Iran, particularly the Taftan–Zahedan section and ML-3, while examining the feasibility of alternative connectivity through China. Islamabad should also explore the possibility of integrating Russian and Central Asian freight with QTTA-related routes.

The government should treat Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar as interconnected components of a broader Eurasian logistics strategy rather than as isolated ports. The ultimate objective should be to provide Eurasian landlocked economies with dependable access to the Indian Ocean.

Finally, Pakistan should support the Trans-Afghan railway as a long-term strategic project but should not base its immediate connectivity policy on infrastructure that does not yet exist. At the diplomatic level, Pakistan should encourage Russia to use the Moscow Format to address the security conditions necessary for future regional connectivity, particularly the TTP issue and cross-border militancy.

Conclusion

The Pakistan–Russia freight railway initiative has moved through political agreements, two postponed launch attempts and continued negotiations into a more practical phase of operational testing. The latest Russian Ministry of Transport statement indicates that the two sides are now working through the technical and commercial parameters required for a test shipment. The real strategic opportunity, however, is larger than a single freight train.



Pakistan can potentially become a southern gateway connecting Russia and Central Asia with the Indian Ocean. Achieving that objective requires neither dependence on Iran nor premature reliance on Afghanistan. It requires a network combining the INSTC, China-based connectivity, QTTA and, eventually, the Trans-Afghan railway.

The success of Pakistan's Eurasian connectivity strategy will ultimately depend not on how many MoUs are signed, but on whether the country can provide reliable, commercially competitive and geopolitically resilient access to the Indian Ocean.

Dr. Faisal Javaid is the Senior Vice President (SVP) of Consortium for Asia Pacific & Eurasian Studies (CAPES). He is also the Head of the Department of International Relations and Mass Communication at the Federal Urdu University of Arts, Science & Technology (FUUAST).