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From Hormuz Pressure to Continental Redundancy:

China's Landward Strategy across the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface

Iran's Alternative Corridors, Pakistan's Third-Country Transit Opening, and the Rebalancing of Eurasian Connectivity

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Key Judgments

- **China's emerging landward positioning is moving from corridor symbolism toward corridor operability.** The strategic value of a route no longer depends primarily on geographic proximity or historical prestige, but on whether it can be legally cleared, institutionally coordinated, commercially repeated, and activated under crisis pressure.
- **The Inner Eurasian Landward Interface is emerging as a functional strategic geography.** This interface links western China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, the Caspian corridor system, and the northern approaches to the Indian Ocean. It is not a formal region, but an analytical geography for understanding landward redundancy under maritime disruption.
- **Iran's alternative-corridor strategy creates demand for China-linked overland options.** Iran's reported ten-corridor adaptation does not replace the Persian Gulf or Strait of Hormuz; it preserves minimum viable flows through multiple lower-capacity routes. This increases the strategic relevance of China–Central Asia–Iran and China–Pakistan–Iran connectivity.
- **Pakistan's third-country transit opening gives China a southeastern option without requiring a direct China–Iran corridor.** By institutionalizing third-country goods transit toward Iran through Pakistani territory, Pakistan's 2026 order converts Karachi, Port Qasim, Gwadar, Gabd, and Taftan into a southeastern logistics switchboard.
- **Central Asia provides stability, Pakistan provides relative speed and port access, and Afghanistan provides optionality but weak operability.** The northern route is slower and more complex but relatively stable; the Pakistan route is more immediately usable for sea–land and road-based movement; the Afghanistan / Wakhan option remains strategically symbolic but operationally immature.
- **China's advantage lies in network positioning, not direct crisis entry.** China does not need to control every corridor or openly sponsor every route. Its advantage comes from preserving multiple landward options, increasing strategic choice, and preventing maritime chokepoint pressure from becoming continental paralysis.

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Policy Brief

Executive Summary

Maritime disruption around the Strait of Hormuz has accelerated a broader rebalancing of Eurasian connectivity. Iran's alternative-corridor adaptation, Pakistan's opening of third-country transit routes toward Iran, and the renewed relevance of Central Asian rail and Caspian routes all point to one structural shift: landward redundancy is becoming strategically more valuable.

This brief introduces the **Inner Eurasian Landward Interface** as an analytical geography linking western China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, the Caspian corridor system, and the northern approaches to the Indian Ocean. It is not a formal region, but a functional corridor-interaction zone for assessing overland logistics, operability, and strategic optionality under maritime disruption.

The central argument is that China's emerging westward landward posture should not be read as a search for one decisive corridor. It is better understood as a continental redundancy strategy. Iran creates the demand side through its alternative corridors; Pakistan provides a southeastern access layer; Central Asian rail and Caspian connectivity provide northern stabilization; and Afghanistan / Wakhan remains a strategic reserve rather than a current operational priority.

This system cannot replace Persian Gulf maritime trade or eliminate the importance of Hormuz. Its value lies in preserving minimum flows, supporting selective replenishment, reducing chokepoint dependence, and expanding China's role as a stabilizing network node across Eurasia.

Why This Matters

Conventional debate often treats corridors as binary: open or closed, activated or inactive, substitutable or not. That framing is too narrow. The key question is whether a China-linked, multi-route landward architecture is emerging that can absorb maritime disruption without relying on any single corridor.

This matters because Hormuz pressure is no longer only a shipping issue; it affects energy security, sanctions exposure, insurance, port access, cargo prioritization, and political bargaining. Overland routes do not need to replace maritime trade to matter. They only need to preserve enough flow to delay depletion, sustain key imports, and prevent crisis pressure from becoming systemic collapse.

For China, multiple usable routes improve strategic flexibility while allowing formal caution. For the wider region, the space linking western China, Central Asia, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Caspian, and the northern Indian Ocean is becoming a functional interface zone: not a single corridor, but a strategic switching space.

1. Defining the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface

This brief uses the term Inner Eurasian Landward Interface to describe the functional strategic-geographic zone linking western China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, the Caspian corridor system, and the northern approaches to the Indian Ocean.

It is not a formal administrative region. It is an analytical geography. Its purpose is to capture a reality that conventional regional labels do not handle well. “Central Asia” is too narrow because it excludes Iran and Pakistan. “Middle East” or “Near East” is too broad because it shifts attention toward the Arab world, the Levant, Turkey, and Gulf politics. “South Asia” includes Pakistan and Afghanistan but does not adequately capture Central Asian and Caspian connectivity.

The Inner Eurasian Landward Interface is therefore best understood as a **corridor interaction zone**. It contains several overlapping systems:

- China–Central Asia rail and road connectivity;
- Central Asia–Iran land routes through Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan-linked systems;
- Russia–Caspian–Iran maritime and multimodal routes;
- Pakistan–Iran southeastern land routes;
- China–Pakistan connectivity through CPEC-linked infrastructure;
- Afghanistan and Wakhan as potential but weakly operational reserve routes;
- Indian Ocean northern port approaches through Gwadar, Karachi, Port Qasim, and Chabahar.

The value of this interface lies not in geographic unity, but in strategic function. It allows continental actors to preserve optionality under maritime disruption.

2. From Corridor Geography to Corridor Operability

The main lesson of the current logistics rebalancing is that corridor operability matters more than corridor geography.

A corridor may look decisive on the map but remain weak in practice. Conversely, a longer or more indirect route may become strategically useful if it has legal clearance, stable border procedures, port access, customs infrastructure, security protection, commercial repetition, and political tolerance.

This distinction is especially important for Afghanistan and the Wakhan Corridor.

Wakhan offers powerful strategic symbolism: a narrow land connection between China and Afghanistan, with potential links toward Central Asia, Iran, and South Asia. But symbolic geography does not automatically produce operational logistics. A usable corridor requires road quality, border facilities, security guarantees, customs coordination, insurance acceptability, diplomatic trust, and repeatable commercial throughput.

By contrast, Pakistan’s southeastern system may be geographically indirect, but it now has something more valuable in a crisis: a formal third-country transit framework. Pakistan’s 2026 transit opening creates legally designated routes for goods moving toward Iran through Pakistani territory, giving the route institutional weight that Afghanistan-linked options currently lack.

Central Asia also has strong operability advantages. Its routes are slower and more complex, but they benefit from relatively more stable state structures, rail systems, border institutions, and existing China-linked transport activity. Earlier EPINOVA analysis assessed Russia–Iran northern capacity as a threshold-delaying sustainment network with meaningful but bounded capacity.

The result is a clear hierarchy: **operable redundancy beats symbolic directness.**

3. Iran’s Ten-Corridor Adaptation as a Demand Signal

Iran’s reported ten-corridor adaptation should not be read as evidence that Tehran can replace Hormuz. It should be read as evidence that Iran is trying to transform maritime pressure into a multi-domain logistics problem.

PB–42 argued that Iran’s alternative-corridor system is best understood as a threshold-delaying sustainment architecture rather than a surge-capacity replacement for Persian Gulf maritime trade. Alternative routes can preserve minimum flows of food, medicine, industrial inputs, selected exports, dual-use-relevant goods, and time-sensitive components, but they cannot reproduce the scale of Gulf-side maritime logistics.

For China, this matters because Iran’s demand for alternative corridors raises the value of China-linked overland access. Even if China does not directly build or control every route, the existence of Chinese logistics, rail, industrial, and trade connectivity across Central Asia and Pakistan makes China a relevant enabling actor.

Iran’s ten-corridor logic therefore creates a demand-side pull for China’s landward connectivity. It increases the value of routes that can connect Chinese goods, Central Asian transit, Pakistani ports, and Iranian border access.

This does not mean China is directly entering the conflict. It means the conflict increases the strategic utility of China’s existing and potential overland networks.

4. Pakistan’s Southeastern Layer: Port-Based Access and Third-Country Transit

Pakistan’s 2026 third-country transit opening is the most important southeastern development in the current corridor rebalancing.

The six designated routes link Karachi, Port Qasim, and Gwadar with Gabd and Taftan. Functionally, they convert Pakistan from a bilateral trading partner into a third-country transit platform for Iran-bound goods. PB–43 describes this as a 6+1+1+2 architecture: six designated land routes, one potential China–Pakistan rail / CPEC-linked enabling layer, one latent Iran–Pakistan energy layer, and two intermodal extensions through air–land and sea–land movement.

For China, this creates a strategically useful southeastern option. It does not require China to directly open a China–Iran land corridor. It does not require immediate activation of Wakhan. It does not require reliance on Afghanistan. Instead, China-linked goods can theoretically move through Pakistani ports and road systems toward Iran, subject to sanctions, documentation, insurance, banking, and political constraints.

The Pakistan route has three advantages. First, it connects to maritime intake points. Karachi, Port Qasim, and Gwadar can receive third-country cargo by sea. Second, it creates short and medium land exits toward Iran through Gabd and Taftan. Third, it gives Pakistan corridor-derived economic leverage and strategic relevance, making Islamabad a potential beneficiary of the shift from maritime chokepoint pressure to distributed landward logistics.

But the route also has constraints: Balochistan security, road capacity, customs procedures, border-processing limits, sanctions exposure, and dependence on Pakistani administrative implementation.

Its role is therefore not to replace Hormuz. Its role is to create a southeastern pressure-release valve.

5. The Northern Layer: Stability, Threshold Delay, and Caspian Connectivity

The northern layer includes Russia–Caspian–Iran maritime movement, Central Asian rail, Turkmenistan–Iran access, Kazakhstan-linked routes, and China–Central Asia rail connectivity.

Its value is different from Pakistan's. Pakistan provides relative speed and port-based intake. The northern layer provides stability and strategic depth.

PB–27 estimated Russia–Iran northern supply capacity as a constrained but viable three-channel system composed of Caspian maritime transport, Central Asian railway transit, and overland trucking. Its working range was assessed at roughly 10,000–15,000 tons per day under constrained conditions, sufficient for baseline industrial, dual-use, and selected military-relevant flows, but insufficient to replace Persian Gulf-scale maritime logistics.

This makes the northern layer a threshold-delay system. It slows depletion. It sustains continuity. It prevents abrupt collapse. But it does not generate wartime surge capacity.

For China, the northern layer is especially useful because it is more institutionally stable than Afghanistan-linked routes and less dependent on Pakistan's internal security environment. It also aligns with China's broader Central Asian engagement, rail connectivity, and westward continental strategy.

However, the northern layer is more complex and costly. It involves multiple states, rail gauge issues, transshipment delays, Caspian port limits, and border coordination. Its strength is resilience, not speed.

6. Afghanistan and Wakhan: Strategic Reserve, Not Current Priority

Afghanistan remains geographically important, but its operational value is currently limited.

The Wakhan Corridor is often treated as a potential strategic shortcut between China and Afghanistan, with possible implications for Central Asia, Pakistan, and Iran. But in the current crisis environment, it functions more as a strategic reserve than an operational priority.

There are several reasons. First, Afghanistan's security and governance environment remains uncertain. Second, border and customs systems are not mature enough to support high-frequency crisis logistics. Third, the route lacks the multimodal depth of Pakistan's sea–land system and the institutional stability of Central Asian rail routes. Fourth, China does not need to rely on Wakhan if alternative northern and southeastern routes are available.

This does not mean Afghanistan is irrelevant. It means Afghanistan is being temporarily downgraded in the hierarchy of usable corridors.

A more precise formulation is: Afghanistan has not disappeared from Eurasian logistics, but it has been operationally downgraded by the rise of more usable alternatives.

This distinction is important. Afghanistan may still matter in long-term continental connectivity. But under present conditions, its geographic potential is discounted by weak operability.

7. China’s Continental Redundancy Strategy

China’s emerging position across the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface is not a single-corridor strategy. It is better understood as a continental redundancy strategy: a layered system of partially overlapping routes that can be activated, combined, or politically preserved under different crisis conditions.

As shown in Table 1, China’s landward strategy across the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface consists of four functional layers. The northern and northeastern layers provide slower but more stable access through Central Asia and Iran; the southeastern layer adds speed and port-based intake through Pakistan; and the Wakhan / Afghanistan layer remains a strategic reserve with weak current operability. Figure 1 visualizes this layered geography as an analytical schematic, showing how China-linked routes interact with Iran’s alternative-corridor adaptation, Pakistan’s third-country transit opening, the Caspian corridor system, and the northern approaches to the Indian Ocean.

Table 1. China’s Continental Redundancy Architecture across the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface

Layer	Route Logic	Main Function	Strategic Value
Northern layer	China–Central Asia–Caspian–Iran	Slow but stable connectivity	Threshold delay and strategic depth
Northeastern Iran layer	China–Central Asia–Turkmenistan–Iran	Land continuity and border access	Regional redundancy
Southeastern layer	China–Pakistan–Iran	Sea–land and road-based access	Speed, port intake, third-country transit
Reserve layer	China–Wakhan–Afghanistan	Symbolic and potential directness	Long-term optionality, weak current operability

Source: Author’s analytical framework based on prior EPINOVA assessments of Russia–Iran northern supply capacity, Iran’s ten-corridor logistics adaptation, Pakistan’s 2026 third-country transit opening, and China’s risk-adjusted network position under Hormuz pressure.

Note: The table presents an analytical architecture, not an official Chinese, Iranian, Pakistani, or Central Asian corridor classification. The layers should not be interpreted as equal in capacity, maturity, or political reliability. The northern and northeastern layers emphasize stability and threshold delay; the southeastern layer emphasizes port access and third-country transit; the reserve layer reflects long-term strategic optionality rather than current operational priority.

This layered structure shows why China’s advantage lies less in controlling a single corridor than in preserving multiple usable options.

The system does not require all routes to operate at full capacity. It only requires enough redundancy to prevent single-point failure. China does not need one perfect corridor; it needs several imperfect corridors that can preserve minimum connectivity, absorb disruption, and maintain strategic choice under different crisis conditions.

That logic fits China's broader preference for optionality, infrastructure layering, and indirect strategic positioning. It also explains why the current crisis has elevated the value of Central Asian rail, Caspian connectivity, Pakistan-based third-country transit, and even weakly operational reserve routes such as Wakhan. The strategic value lies not in any single route, but in the ability to combine multiple imperfect routes into a resilient continental interface.

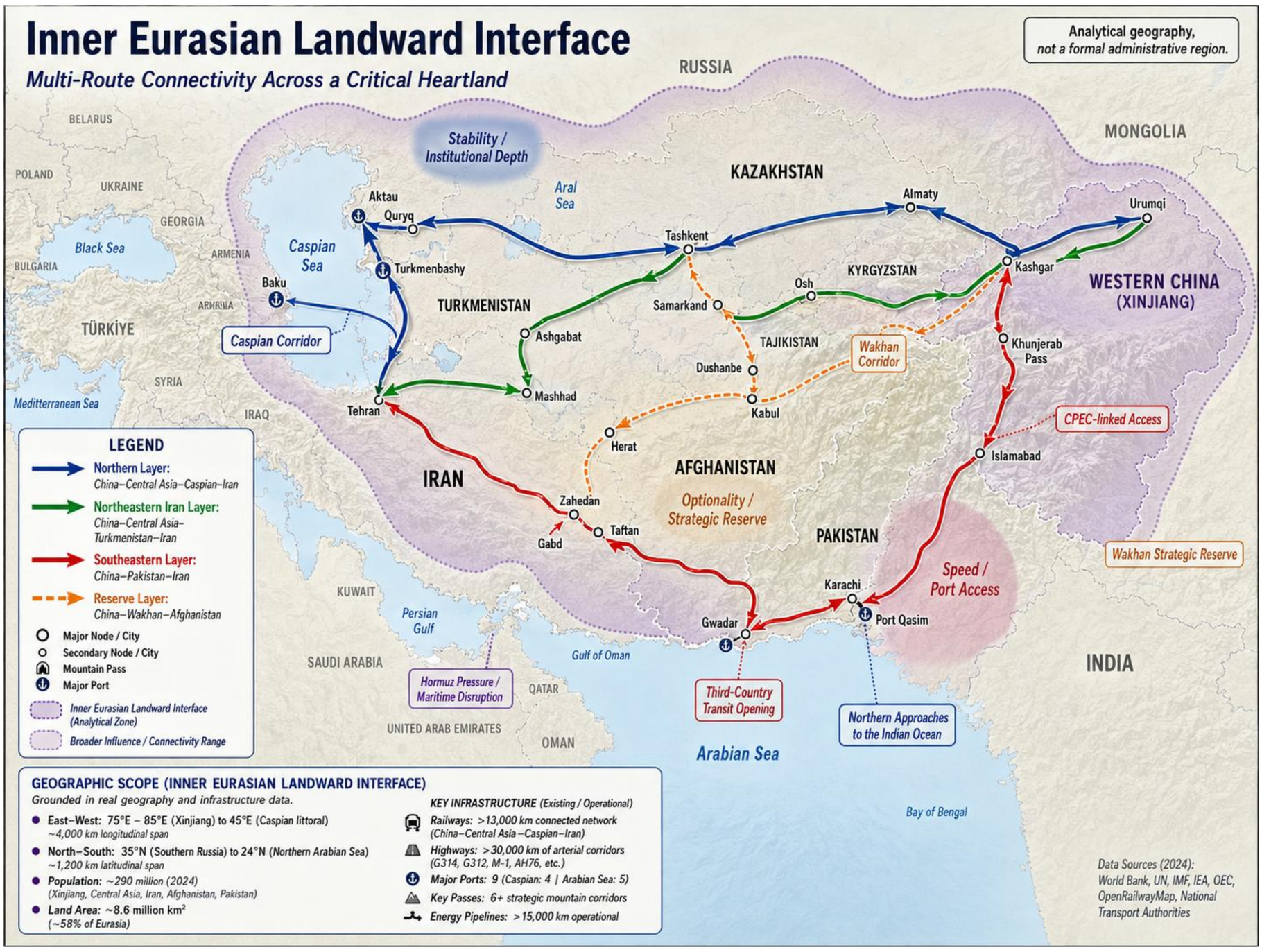

Figure 1. Inner Eurasian Landward Interface: China's Layered Continental Redundancy Network

Caption: The figure maps the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface as a functional strategic-geographic zone linking western China, Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, the Caspian corridor system, and the northern Indian Ocean port approaches. It identifies four route layers: the northern China–Central Asia–Caspian–Iran layer, the northeastern China–Central Asia–Turkmenistan–Iran layer, the southeastern China–Pakistan–Iran layer, and the reserve China–Wakhan–Afghanistan layer.

Source: Author's reconstruction based on EPINOVA's Russia–Iran northern supply-capacity assessment, Iran ten-corridor logistics framework, Pakistan transit-order analysis, and China risk-adjusted network-node assessment. Geographic layout and route alignments are approximate and intended for analytical visualization.

Note: This map is an analytical schematic, not a formal administrative map or operational routing guide. Boundaries, routes, and designations are approximate and do not imply recognition of territorial claims or official corridor status. Route layers represent functional connectivity logic rather than confirmed continuous high-capacity freight operations. The Caspian and Central Asian layers should be read as threshold-delaying sustainment corridors, while the Pakistan layer reflects a legally enabled third-country transit platform whose actual throughput depends on port clearance, border processing, security, documentation, and sanctions exposure.

8. Strategic Implications

8.1 For China

China gains strategic flexibility. It can support stability, preserve trade options, and expand influence without directly entering the conflict. The more routes exist, the less China is exposed to any single chokepoint, partner, or corridor failure.

8.2 For Iran

Iran gains minimum-flow resilience. The alternative corridors cannot restore normal trade, but they can slow depletion, preserve essential imports, and complicate blockade enforcement.

8.3 For Pakistan

Pakistan gains corridor-derived economic and strategic leverage. Its ports, roads, and border exits become part of a wider Eurasian logistics system. This strengthens Pakistan’s bargaining position with Iran, China, Gulf actors, and potentially Central Asian states.

8.4 For Central Asia

Central Asian states gain transit importance. Their value increases as landward routes become more important under maritime disruption. However, they also face higher pressure, monitoring, and potential sanctions sensitivity.

8.5 For Afghanistan

Afghanistan risks marginalization. It remains geographically significant but operationally weak. If it cannot provide secure, repeatable, and institutionally reliable transit, it will remain a reserve option rather than a central corridor.

8.6 For the United States and Western policymakers

Monitoring must shift from ships to systems. A maritime blockade cannot be assessed only by vessels entering or leaving Iranian waters. Analysts must track rail flows, border crossings, Pakistani ports, Caspian shipping, customs records, air cargo, bonded transit, and intermodal rerouting.

9. Limitations

This brief has three limitations. First, the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface is an analytical geography, not a formal regional designation or evidence of political integration. Second, the route layers are schematic and unevenly evidenced. The northern, Caspian-facing, and Pakistan layers have stronger support, while the Wakhan / Afghanistan layer remains a weaker reserve option. Third, the brief does not claim that China controls all routes or that landward corridors can replace Hormuz-scale maritime trade. It argues only that overlapping land routes can provide redundancy, preserve minimum connectivity, and delay systemic pressure under maritime disruption.

Conclusion

The current corridor rebalancing does not show the death of maritime trade or the rise of a fully land-based Eurasian order. It shows something more limited but strategically important: the rise of continental redundancy.

China's position across the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface is best understood as a strategy of optionality. Beijing does not need to activate every corridor, dominate every route, or openly intervene in every crisis. Its advantage lies in preserving multiple pathways across Central Asia, Pakistan, Iran, the Caspian, and the northern Indian Ocean approaches.

Iran's alternative corridors, Pakistan's third-country transit opening, and Central Asian rail connectivity all reinforce the same structural trend. The future of Eurasian logistics will not be determined by one grand corridor. It will be shaped by the ability of states to combine imperfect routes into resilient systems.

The strategic lesson is clear. Under maritime pressure, the most valuable corridor is not necessarily the shortest route. It is the route that can still operate.

For China, the Inner Eurasian Landward Interface is becoming precisely that kind of space: not a single road to the west, but a layered continental interface for crisis redundancy, strategic patience, and long-term geopolitical optionality.