

ENHANCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PAKISTAN WITH CPEC: RESOURCEFUL OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SECURITY THREATS TO A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC FUTURE

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Abstract

China Pakistan economic corridor which is the cornerstone of belt and Road Initiative that focuses on connecting china's Xinjiang province with Gwadar port in order to stabilize and consolidate economic progress and regional stability. Despite its strategic importance CPEC has been facing numerous challenges on internal and external friends. It could not keep its pace in Pakistan due to political instability corruption provincial differences that dented public trust upon the governments and rulers. On global level the regional tensions security concerns and strategic rivalries i.e. India Pakistan Iran and Afghanistan have also compromised the regional development. This study adopts qualitative descriptive and empirical methods to understand the strategic importance of CPEC and draw conclusions about the power imbalances and security concerns in it. Looking into the government documents, reports and inquisitions, the subjective and objective materials one thing has become clear that institutional weaknesses and your political tension are the major reasons behind the longevity consolidation of this project. Finding of this research reveal that the reforms in governance system intergovernmental corporation and balanced diplomacy are vital for the consolidation of CPEC.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Political Challenges, Security Challenges, Belt and Road Initiative, Governance, Regional Inequality, Balochistan, Indian Ocean Region.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, there has been the establishment of a regional and international geopolitical environment that has influenced geostrategic and geo-economic alliances. Such relationships among the nations are state-oriented and national security-oriented. The reshaping of policies has enabled countries to pursue their own interests since they are unable to protect them using their own capabilities. According to interests, China introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which became stronger by connecting Gwadar Port in Pakistan with Kashgar in Xinjiang, China, with the use of a 3,000-kilometre road transport, rail transport, energy pipeline, and optical broadband network (Akram et al., 2025). It seeks to address Pakistan's fundamental and immediate needs, including the overall energy shortage, the development of basic infrastructure, the development of economic zones and Gwadar, and the opportunity to attract Chinese and foreign investment and to strengthen trade relations in South and Central Asia. However, to achieve the long-term sustainability and success of this project, it is facing domestic and foreign challenges that are crippling its clear objectives and revenue potential.

CPEC is affected by ongoing difficulties stemming from political, administrative, and even institutional inefficiencies. Political uncertainty, policy inconsistency, lack of leadership, administrative problems with various ministries, and corruption have undermined investment confidence as well as created policy inconsistency. (Hafeez et al., 2020) (Samad, 2025) (Hashmi et al., 2025). The inequality between the provinces has raised questions within the ruling class about whether only Punjab is being given preference in the CPEC category. This is increasing feelings of injustice in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Bashir et al., 2023). The situation of civilian-military imbalance has

remained a significant issue. In addition, the special security division (SSD) has not only enhanced the protection of Chinese workers but also increased military influence in economic matters, thereby reducing the authority of the civilian government (Wolf, 2019a)(Rahim, 2023). Also, the court interventions and environmental laws have contributed to the slowness (Sarmad & Choudhary, 2019)(Rahman et al., 2020). These domestic problems indicate a system of governance that is tense because of the deficiency of institutional capacity, the absence of transparency, and the unequal representation of the regions.

CPEC is driven in a geopolitical environment that is characterized by stiff rivalry. India is opposed to the transit of the corridor through Gilgit-Baltistan, believing that it is a sovereignty violation and a continuation of China's extension of the strategy of strategic encirclement policy (F. Hussain et al., 2021)(Saini, 2021). The United States, without officially opposing the project, considers it to be part of China trying to gain power in the Indian Ocean and increase financial reliance of Pakistan (Mishra, 2025). This has been subject to persistent security threats to the employees of CPEC as well as its infrastructure, especially in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Akhtar et al., 2025). In the meantime, the rivalry of Iran, the progress of Chabahar Port, and continuous instability in Afghanistan make the next development of the external environment of Pakistan even more complicated (Zafar, 2025). Such dynamics indicate that CPEC has turned out to be an economic initiative as well as a strategic zone of contention in which cooperation and rivalry are in a delicate balance.

This qualitative, interpretive study analyzes government papers, policy documents, academic literature, and substantiated media statements thematically and in terms of their content. Data triangulation was conducted by examining official papers and secondary literature to assess the validity and contextual accuracy of the data. This paper is based on the Neo-Realist theoretical framework and explains CPEC as an example of states advancing national interests within the framework of systemic limitations (Pashakhanlou, 2016)(Morgenthau, 2014). The alliance between Pakistan and China is an outcome of its attempt to counter regional insecurity and economic vulnerability, whereas the involvement of China can be viewed as its attempt to achieve its energy security and geopolitical reach to the Indian Ocean Region (Baruah et al., 2023). Another aspect of Theory is that both domestic weakness and external demands are not independent, but rather complementary layers of weakness in weak states.

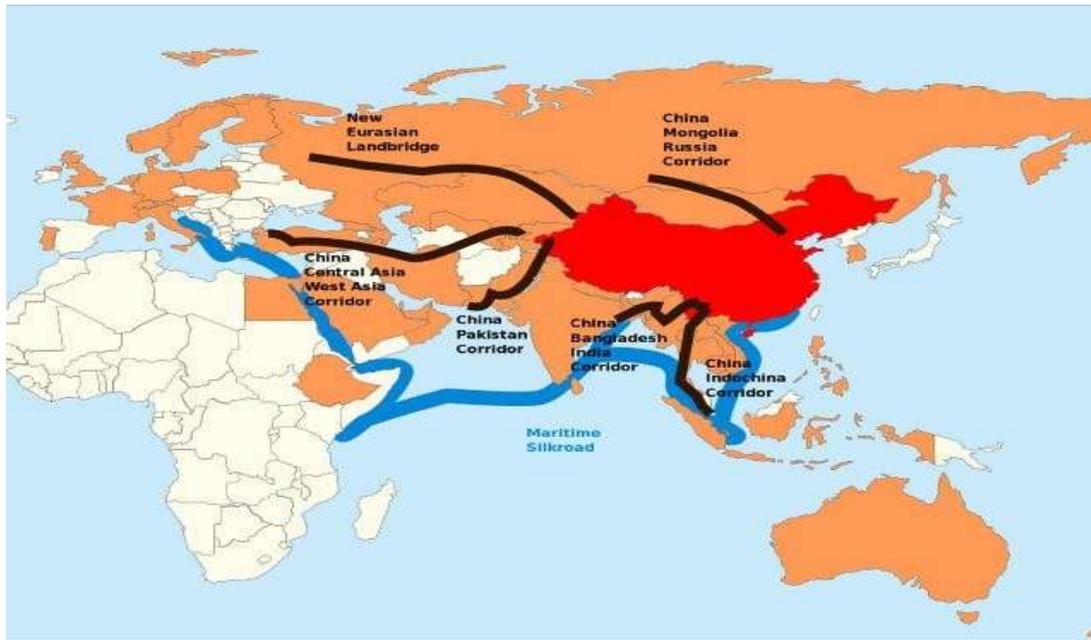
This research contributes to the discussion on the political economy of the BRI Initiative by examining how internal weaknesses, external rivalries, and security threats could prevent CPEC's transformative promise from being realized.

The Concept of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also called One Belt One Road (OBOR), represents China's high-level planning for opening up and economic diplomacy in the new era. It is China's response to the global conflict over peace and development (H. Liu et al., 2024). BRI consists of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)(Yujia, 2023). In just one and a half years since President Xi Jinping proposed the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" initiatives in 2013 (Mau & Seuren, 2023), the "Belt and Road" initiative has rapidly transformed from ideas, concepts, and preliminary ideas into plans and projects. The SREB focuses on establishing infrastructure in the Asia-Europe-Africa region (Muhammad et al., 2023), while the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road aims to enhance seaports and marine navigation systems (M. Ali, 2025). As of December 2024, 149 countries had BRI agreements. Governments or organisations sign an MoU with China to "join" the BRI, and five countries are pending to sign an MoU(Nedopil Wang, 2025), two-thirds of the world's population, around 4.4 billion people (Martadinata et al., 2024), and 40% of global GDP (Sacks, 2021).

China has lent the world more than 1 trillion dollars in loans in the BRI, the largest project in human history, making it the world's largest creditors (Shea et al., 2025) (H. U. Khan, 2025). BRI aims to further integrate the region by investing substantially in the development of highways, railways, seaports, energy pipelines, telecommunications infrastructure, and industrial parks. (Freyman, 2022). OBOR calls for raising infrastructural deficiencies and economic connectivity so that trading relations, financial ties, and exchange of cultural commodities between the participating states can be accelerated (Babatunde, 2020). BRI also proactively establishes special economic zones for participating countries to promote industrialization and employment (Panibratov & Rysakova, 2022)(Zreik, 2025). Map 1 shows the BRI includes six major economic corridors that seek to improve global connection (Sheng et al., 2021). Every corridor is tailored to the needs of a particular region, but all serve the grand purpose of the BRI, which is to connect the world's economies (Chajdas, 2024)

Map: 1



Source: BRI and Six Corridors (MyStudies.com, 2024)

Pakistan's Role in the BRI Initiative

Pakistan's geographic location and history with China make it a valuable ally in this effort (H. D. Butt, 2023). Pakistan holds a strategic location in the execution of the BRI and the evolution of the CPEC (H. Hussain et al., 2023). It is one of the pivots of the BRI, as it signifies a major junction connecting China and the Arabian Sea (Yujia, 2023)(Jasmin et al., 2025). The participation of Pakistan is grounded in the strategic partnership with China, and it implies using CPEC to drive the economy and development of infrastructure (Jamali et al., 2023)(H. D. Butt, 2023). Pakistan provides an important trade and transit corridor for Chinese goods to promote regional trade and cooperation (Yaseen et al., 2017). CPEC emphasises Gwadar Port in southwestern Balochistan, a gateway to the Arabian Sea which could boost regional commerce and cooperation (N. A. Khan, 2018). Pakistan has promised to improve its infrastructure, including developing roads, railroads, and pipelines to connect Gwadar with Kashgar, Xinjiang (A. Ali & Rizwan, 2024).

Overview of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Corridors can be considered compacted concentrations of infrastructure connecting two or more counties within a region (Whebell, 1969). Typically, these corridors fall into three categories: highways, railway connections, and short sea or inland transport links (Balbaa, 2022). The concept can also encompass ICT infrastructure, such as electrical lines, cables, and pipelines, to expand its scope. Corridors are connections involving at least one of three main transport modes (road, rail, or inland waterways) and facilitate both passenger and freight movement. (Priemus & Zonneveld, 2003)(Rodrigue, 2020). Economic corridors refer to trade arrangements or agreements on how two or more countries or regions will open their economies to facilitate the easy flow of products and services across their borders (Kunaka & Carruthers, 2014). Fundamentally, the reason for creating economic corridors is that governments secure and develop economic integration and philosophy, in addition to fostering trans-regional market access (Amna, 2024).

Historically, Pakistan has been a strategically important state, but in the last decade, it has adopted economic diplomacy and economic cooperation as its primary regional paradigm. This shift is evident in ideas such as the CPEC (M. S. Khan, 2024). These measures of the absence of idealism indicate that the political and economic futures of China and Pakistan share similar interests through the CPEC initiative (Sigit & Twigvanya, 2024). The transformation, which involves facilitating economic trade and relations through connectivity, aims to enhance the stability and prosperity of Pakistan and China. This cooperation cannot be complete without the inclusion of CPEC as its focal part (Haider, 2023) (Ismail et al., 2023).

China's all-weather strategic partner is Pakistan (R. M. Khan, 2011). China considers the CPEC a flagship project of the "Belt and Road" plan (H. D. Butt, 2023). Premier Li Keqiang suggested the CPEC during his first visit to Pakistan in May 2013 (Kousar et al., 2018). This construction project is the result of the joint development plans between China and Pakistan. Compared to the above plans of Pakistan, the CPEC is more ambitious, extending beyond Pakistan's borders and holding regional and international significance. If completed, the CPEC will form a comprehensive network of trade, industry, energy, and transportation, extending from Kashgar, Xinjiang, China, in the north, to Gwadar Port, Pakistan, in the south, with a total length of approximately 3,000 km, as shown in Map 2. It will unite

responses may be defined based on the definitions of the research. Such studies tend to be a subjective research as opposed to the objectivity of quantitative research.

This research is founded on the comprehensive review of literature and policy documents on the CPEC, as well as on the media coverage of the topic. The research combines the data available on different sources to come up with a detailed overview of the political and security Internal and external threats to CPEC projects (Shen, 2018). This paper reviews academic literature, government reports, and news to offer a more insightful perspective regarding the operation of the CPEC and the effect they have on the stability and development of the region. Our keywords included information concerning CPEC, the BRI, security and political threats, provincial disparities, terrorism, administration concerns, and relationships between China and Pakistan. We analyze writing trends and topics through thematic and content analysis, and this study explores causes and effects. The paper has also examined the measures and plans that the governments of China and Pakistan are implementing to mitigate these risks and ensure the timely completion of the CPEC projects as planned. The initial plan of the work is to provide an extensive literature review of CPEC and CPEC-related issues. We shall review policy reports, scholarly journals, think tank reports, and government reports to develop an in-depth understanding of what knowledgeable individuals in the field know about the topic in question. The study also discusses various policy changes that could help mitigate these problems and make CPEC a success (Ullah Khan et al., 2020)

Internally, significant CPEC construction challenges

Political stability enhances the endurance of the government, thereby maintaining peace and security while ensuring systemic equilibrium (Ake, 1975). All over the World, governments face challenges in governance, service delivery, and stability (De Vries, 2013). Governments are tackling fiscal constraints amid a changing economy, social divisions, cybersecurity advancements, and global catastrophes such as climate change and pandemics. Pakistan faces numerous obstacles to its long-term economic aspirations (Hafeez et al., 2020). Administrative disputes, institutional challenges, and internal threats mainly contribute to the delays in CPEC. In which, along with the hindrance to the state's development, there is also a possibility of deterioration in bilateral relations.

Political Dynamics and Governance Risks Impacting CPEC Progress

Risk is often defined as uncertainty, hazard, or threat, and more broadly as deviations of outcomes from established goals, with perceptions shaped by the experiences and contexts of the actors involved. Construction risk typologies usually include financial, economic, commercial, natural, logistical, construction, and technical categories, organized within internal, external, and project-specific groups (Istiak & Serletis, 2020); (Hilorme et al., 2019); (Siraj & Fayek, 2019). For foreign investors, significant exposures include political and governmental risks, as well as both short-term and long-term natural risks. International projects also face public relations, cultural, financial, and natural risks (Alam et al., 2019); (Chang et al., 2018); (Razzaq et al., 2018); (Siraj & Fayek, 2019). Political risk arises when political actions, events, or often unexpected regulatory changes threaten the stability and profitability of investments (Brink, 2017). Due to host-country social, legal, cultural, religious, and institutional particularities, these risks are inherently complex and difficult to measure, but they must be considered in international construction (Ake, 1975); (Rajput et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, the historical political instability affects the ongoing implementation of policies and the execution of projects (Memon et al., 2011); (Younis et al., 2021). Inaugurated in 2013 under the PML-N, CPEC was initially delayed until April 2015 through the protests against the allegations of electoral misconduct, and since its inception, the federal allocations have been challenged by different parties, not to mention the central government and provinces, which claim they are given preference over Punjab (E. Hussain, 2019b). The issue of governance was manifested through the judicial matters, such as a court case concerning the Lahore Orange Line (M. Nawaz et al., 2019). . Additionally, the change of leadership and re-evaluation of the CPEC structure to minimize the fiscal exposure, the cancellation of the 1,320 MW Rahim Yar Khan plant because of the surplus capacity and sustainability questions, and the criticism of the costs of the Multan-Sukkur motorway created some ambiguity under the PTI administration (2018-2023). The claim supports concerns that the 2019 IMF program constrained CPEC projects (Z. S. Ahmed, 2024). It has been reported that the government is procrastinating to pursue other CPEC projects after the 2024 elections. The corruption scandals of the former leadership were further aggravated, which led to reduced trust in the Chinese investor and regulators, therefore, the lack of interest in long-term cooperation (Samad, 2025). Political instability, government fragmentation, and financial risks are a combination of factors that affect the implementation of CPEC in Pakistan's complex, polarized politics.

CPEC and Provincial Disparities, Allocation Contention, and Socio-Political Backlash

The government services are supported by economic, social, and infrastructural conditions, which are deemed significant contributors to political effectiveness (Li & Haynes, 2011) (Jamal, 2016). However, the development of a province is assessed by looking at its education, health, and government services in Pakistan (S. U. Khan et al., 2025)(I. A. Rana et al., 2017). CPEC investment reveals concerns among provinces over the distribution of projects. As in Punjab, Balochistan, and KP, people feel deprived of resource and distribution decisions, which highlights disparities between the federal government and these provinces (Bashir et al., 2023).

The lack of transparency in decision-making and a confused project allocation are the causes of this social and political backlash. Perceptions of equity and accessibility are associated with an opinion of how opaque the process of selection and the sequence of initiatives (M. Hussain & Hussain, 1993). The response to these issues is that legislative discussions and provincial assemblies have been urging the implementation of a holistic approach to development that involves tackling underdeveloped regions (A. Nawaz et al., 2021), in particular, the western side of CPEC, which indicates a preference outliers approach (M. J. Butt, 2021). Distribution conflicts have arisen due to political maneuvering and street mobilization (Hameed, 2018) (Adeny & Boni, 2024).

The provincial fairness and equity emphasized by the stakeholders of Balochistan and KP are slower (or reduced) initiatives due to apprehension of exclusion (Afzaal, 2020). In Gwadar, a breakdown of expectations, services, and displacement linked to port projects, intensified demands in the Balochistan legislature to have provincial control over the operations of the port (Anwar et al., 2022); (Hassan, 2025). Therefore, Provincial officials stated that the province had almost received 13 percent of CPEC projects but only received two percent, and this argument has enhanced the rhetoric of the opposition (Zuberi, 2016) (Samad, 2025). It is due to this reason that this corridor is referred to as the China-Punjab Economic Corridor (Feng & Ali, 2023). The pace, cohesiveness, and sustainability of CPEC development are affected by distribution, transparency, and involvement disputes. A socio-political response threatens national unity and long-term support for CPEC. These have caused political protest, mistrust, and implementation delays; otherwise, they may cause separatism.

CPEC and Military Dominance Effects

Democratic governance only survives where elected civilian authorities have uncontested control over the armed forces (Kohn, 1997). Without civilian control, democracy cannot exist (Zaborowski, 2016). Complete civilian control means five areas in which elected authorities have full decision-making power, including public policy, recruitment, internal security, internal-external defence, and control of military organisations (Croissant et al., 2013). And that is why Civilian governments in Pakistan have failed to exercise full authority in all these areas, which has led to Pakistan facing economic development and security challenges (Wolf, 2016). As a result, Pakistan was ruled by military forces for 36 years from 1947 to 2025 because the military considers itself the sole guardian of Pakistan's integrity, sovereignty, and statehood. However, in Pakistan, recurring episodes of military dominance and ongoing influence from security agencies have limited this ideal, reducing electoral competition, political freedoms, and horizontal accountability (Din & Usman, 2024). CPEC, which is expected to boost Pakistan's economy and strategic position, has not improved civilian administration (Wolf, 2016). Instead, security concerns around the corridor and inconsistent federal management have led to increased military decision-making and implementation, which weakens civilian control (Wolf, 2019a).

The civilian leadership and oversight of CPEC are increasingly being overshadowed by security-driven decisions aimed at protecting Chinese people and resources (Wolf, 2016). This has shifted military influence over directly accountable ministries and provincial divisions, bypassing the usual democratic accountability mechanisms (Rahim, 2023). Establishing parallel security organizations and a security component during implementation was essential to protecting CPEC projects. In CPEC, special troops in Baluchistan and Sindh provided overall security for Chinese laborers and businesses, creating the foundation for security-first decision-making (Wolf, 2019b). In a securitized structure, the Special Security Division (SSD), formed in 2015 and operational since 2016 (Surahio et al., 2023), was responsible for securing projects and personnel in the corridors, resolving civilian agency authority disputes, and adapting the provincial response to the rules of engagement. Without a strong, empowered civilian coordinator, implementation at critical locations, inter-agency conflicts, and fiscal limitations hampered timely measures, led to inadequate strategy coordination, and complicated implementation efforts.

Instead of strengthening democratic control through effective civilian institutions (Javaid et al., 2023), security needs increased, the military's formal and informal operations expanded, reducing civilian ministries and provinces' influence in development position, sequence, and implementation. The "doctrine of necessity," the belief that unusual security requirements necessitate unusual military functions, beyond internal and external defense, the military's influence was seen in economic matters, and institutions were created for this (Wolf, 2019a) (Javaid et al., 2023). The security architecture and management of CPEC have given the military decision-making power, which has hurt transparency, accountability, and provincial participation.

Corruption, Accountability Deficiencies, and Tendering Irregularities in CPEC

Corruption has also become a widespread concern on major construction projects in both developing and developed countries, which shows the negative image of the state in the global world (J. Liu et al., 2017), and destroys citizens' trust (Alatas, 2015). The analysis of the CPEC-related study reveals governance issues marked by a lack of transparency at the outset, inadequate control, and dubious behaviour (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2024). Although the total amount of Chinese commitment is estimated at US\$62 billion, which is equivalent to an amount that equals the annual budget of Pakistan, according to the Minister of Finance and Revenue Muhammad Aurangzeb (Pakistan, 2025), such big decisions about CPEC are usually made by ad-hoc authorities and not by Parliament, making it difficult to scrutinize them regularly (Group, 2023). The procurement problems acquired political value due to a senator of the

PTI party who had made an allegation of corruption of 137 billion on Sukkur-Multan (M-5) road project. The Senate required detailed information about the deal, and the Chinese contractor publicly refuted corruption in the tune of RS 70 billion (Feng & Ali, 2023), which revealed the lack of verification, leading to conflicting narratives instead of timely solutions (Junaidi, 2018).

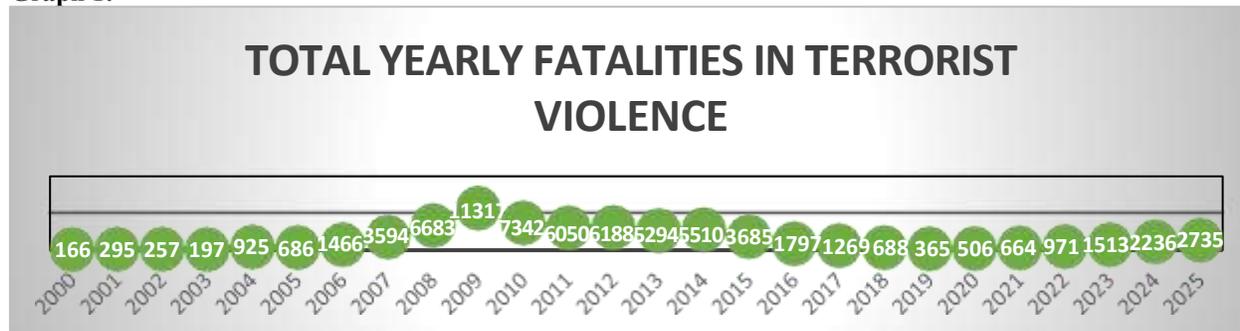
The CPEC Authority Ordinance (2019), Article 12, was a central point of contention precisely for these reasons. (Ministry of Planning, 2019), which, in turn, has been criticized as a setback to oversight efforts, as it promotes immunity and complicates efforts to curb corruption within the project. Recent references attribute overcharging, lengthy schedules, and poor cost-efficiency in the infrastructure and energy dealings to a lack of transparency, institutional shortcomings, non-competitive contracting, and politicized decisions (Z. Ali et al., 2018). The dynamic situation can be described by maintenance excavation at Gwadar, where ineffective contracting procedures and cost increases were accompanied by project freezes in 2017 and 2023, increasing the suspicion of integrity in the procedure and project performance risks. Corruption is a growing vice in Pakistan. It is one of the effects of the government's and enforcement agencies' laxity. The increased fiscal vulnerability, slow implementation, and weakened accountability are the consequences of corruption that are most problematic for CPEC efficiency and sustainability in the first place, and they make the purchasing process problematic, under altered accountability and corruption in decision-making.

CPEC and Regional Security Threats

Security as a political value lacks an independent meaning and is connected to individual or societal value systems (Brauch, 2010). According to Wolfers, Security requires the absence of threats, challenges, vulnerabilities, and risks, as well as subjective worries and perceptions of them (Wolfers, 2011). Objective security is achieved when individuals, social groups, the state, or regional and global international organisations successfully avoid, prevent, manage, and mitigate threats, challenges, vulnerabilities, and risks through effective, adapted, and implemented coping strategies. When discussing the Pakistan Mega project, security concerns have emerged as the most critical challenge to the CPEC, undermining its potential as a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative. An arc of militancy stretching from Xinjiang to Gwadar encompasses groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), ISIS, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), and the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) (Lauri Myllyvirata, 2020); (Syed, 2019); (M. Ahmed, 2018). Although many terrorist organizations in it do not consider China as their enemy, they deliberately attack Chinese citizens in order to target the CPEC project as a proxy against the Pakistani state (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Terrorism has devastated Pakistan's internal security, killing about 70000 people between March 2000 and September 2025 shows that Graph 1 (SATP, 2025). Beyond the human cost, these waves of violence have slowed socioeconomic progress and prevented foreign investment, with CPEC as a primary target. The ethno-separatist insurgency in Balochistan and the TTP's religious militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are the biggest obstacles for terrorist players.

Graph 1:

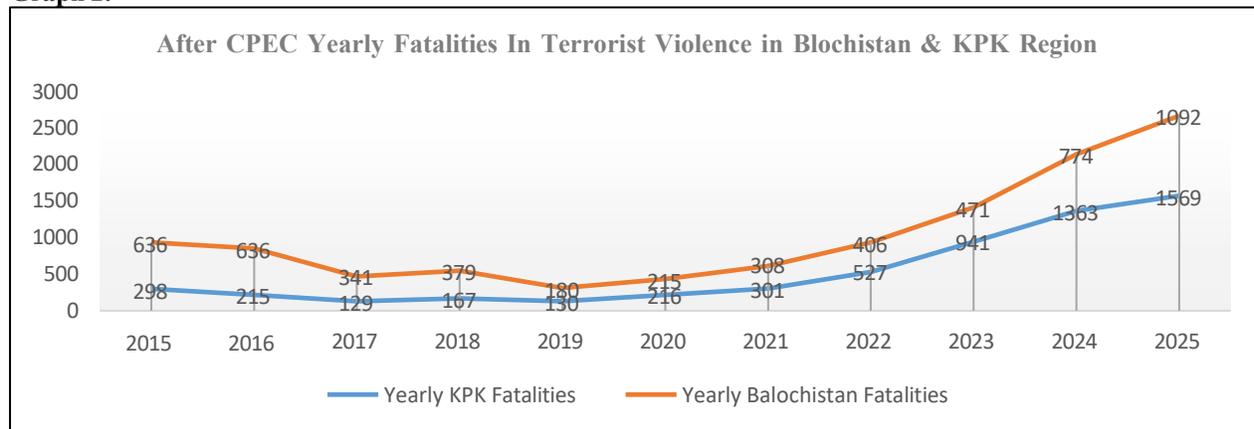


Source: Data compiled from South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) (SATP, 2025)

Despite extensive military efforts, both sides in Pakistan and the Afghan terrorist infrastructure persist (Akhtar et al., 2021). Afghan territory, Kunar and Nuristan, hosts terrorist groups that threaten the northern part of CPEC (Akhtar et al., 2025). Balochistan, where decades of political discrimination, resource exploitation, and demographic concerns have fueled a deadly separatist movement, sees insurgents from BLA, BRA, and BLF opposing CPEC as an externally imposed project forced upon Chinese businessmen and Pakistan's elite (A. Hanif, 2024). Multiple infrastructure attacks and targeted strikes have demonstrated their resistance. Major incidents include the 2018 Karachi Chinese Consulate attack, the 2019 Gwadar Pearl Continental Hotel attack, the 2021 Dasu bus bombing, the 2022 Karachi University suicide bombing, and the near-blast at Karachi Airport in October 2024. Between 2021 and 2024, at least 14 CPEC-related incidents resulted in 20 Chinese deaths and 34 injuries.

After the Taliban returned to Kabul in 2021, religious militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has increased. The TTP united militant factions to attack governmental institutions and foreigners. The group targets Chinese workers by citing Beijing's Xinjiang policies, but its main goal is to damage Pakistan's bond with its biggest economic partner. This strategy was demonstrated by the 2021 Dasu bombing and the March 2024 KPK suicide strike on a Chinese engineer convoy that killed five Chinese. Graph 2 shows that After CPEC began in 2015, terrorist violence in Balochistan and KPK killed 129 to 1,569 people in KPK and 180 to 1,092 in Balochistan (SATP, 2025). Since 2022, insurgency and security issues in particular areas have increased, inflicting more deaths. Pakistan created the SSD, provincial SPUs, and Chinese employee mobility criteria to address these concerns, thereby, many attacks have been prevented (E. Hussain, 2019a). Therefore, these moves to protect development projects resonate with securitization Theory (Bonacker, 2019). Continued violence and terrorist activities reveal the weakness of state security institutions; security threats are considered the biggest challenge in the development of CPEC.

Graph 2:



Source: Data compiled from South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) (SATP, 2025)

Judicial and Environmental Governance Challenges in CPEC

Judicial Intervention has been around for decades, making legal decisions to better society (Youxing & Qureshi, 2020). Water, biodiversity, climate change, ocean acidification, and agriculture are interconnected environmental issues the world faces (Yadav & Gjerde, 2020). This study focuses on the transboundary environmental impacts of major CPEC infrastructure projects. It also discusses the development of ecological legislation and the judicial implications. The Pakistan Environmental Protection Act (1997) requires Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and Initial Environmental Examinations (IEE) for CPEC projects, but due to regulatory capacity constraints, clearance delays have occurred. In which Pakistani judicial intervention caused a delay in the project due to land acquisition issues, compensation concerns, and tender irregularities. (Sarmad & Choudhary, 2019)(N. U. Khan, 2023). For nearly a year, High-profile rulings on the Lahore-Karachi Motorway and the Orange Line Metro Train have delayed the construction verdicts(Ch et al., 2019). And so on, the Dera Ismail Khan-Zhob Motorway was postponed after a judicial review of unresolved ecological approvals (Kiani, 2018).

These energy production disputes, including the Sahiwal 1,320MW coal power plant, the Hub coal power plant, and the Thar Coal developments, involved litigation over air quality, water discharge, and CO₂ emissions (Lauri Myllyvirata, 2020) (Syed et al., 2019) that delayed project start-up by 8 to 12 months and increased project costs by 10 to 15%. Local opposition has also hampered the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including petitions by local fishermen to expand Gwadar Port and judicial scrutiny of the removal of more than 54,000 trees (World Wide Fund for Nature Pakistan (WWF-Pakistan), 2016)(Rahman et al., 2020). Large-scale development, industrialization, and coal-based energy projects have deforested, degraded, and destroyed habitats across Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan (Majeed et al., 2023). Industrial activities, including mining and transport, have led to higher levels of air and water pollution (Huang et al., 2010), and along with this, Balochistan and Sindh face water shortages from water-intensive coal plants (Baocheng et al., 2024). As Waste mismanagement, chemical runoff, and e-waste exacerbate environmental pressure. CPEC brings infrastructure development and connectivity, but it also causes produce ecological and social issues that threaten sustainability and exacerbate local matters.

CPEC and Debt Burden Dynamics

Pakistan has maintained a high degree of reliance on both domestic and international sources of financing, which has negatively impacted the country's economic growth (R. A. Hanif & Sultan, 2024)(M. A. Khan et al., 2025). Pakistan's debt reached \$250 billion, accounting for 78% of its GDP (Ahmar, 2025). In 2025-26, Pakistan owes \$25.9 billion to China, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., the IMF, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and others (Desk, 2025). The country has \$14.9 billion in foreign exchange reserves at the State Bank, which makes it hard for Pakistan to meet

its increasing debt obligations (Ahmar, 2025). Pakistan's external debt increased from US\$60.3 billion to US\$100.2 billion after the PML (N) government initiated the CPEC project (2013-2018) (Bank, 2025). The CPEC was the main reason for this. The CPEC has significantly expanded Pakistan's infrastructure and power capacity, but its financial terms have also increased the country's debt load (Sohail, 2022). If we talk about Pakistan's external debt, which reached USD 130.85 billion in 2023 (World Bank, 2024), and so on, China, as Pakistan's largest bilateral creditor, holds approximately USD 28.8-29 billion, which is 22% of this total as of 2024 (World Bank, 2024); (Khurram, 2024). External financial difficulties are rapidly growing liabilities that indicate concern, with Pakistan joining a 37-month, USD 7 billion IMF program in September of 2024 (Corsi, 2024); (IMF, 2024), raising the possibility of restructuring some Chinese debt. CPEC 14 energy generation projects, totaling 9,504 MW, are under financial strain, particularly in the power sector, due to sovereign capacity payment guarantees (Malik, 2025). The cost of major coal plants that use imported fuel has increased, leading to arrears to Chinese IPPs of PKR 423 billion (approximately USD 1.5 billion) by the middle of 2025 (S. Rana, 2025). An almost 1.225 trillion-rupee financing package in September 2025 was designed to address wider circular debt (Dawn, 2025), indicating that individual CPEC payments were still disputed. Finally, the economic development promised through the corridor is apparently not visible, but it is increasing the volume of debt instead of sustainable development (Scholar, 2025). The lack of a particular legislative framework dealing with the volume, complexity, and nature of critical infrastructure projects can be seen as one of the most significant problems of CPEC-related investments. One of the weaknesses is the slowness in industrialization since few of the nine planned Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have achieved substantial development, even with the creation of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) in 2023 (Bukhari et al., 2024). Lack of a robust industrial and export base also means that Pakistan is finding it difficult to earn the foreign exchange needed to pay the colossal debts incurred during the infrastructure phase of CPEC. Thus, the long-term viability of the project is based on urgent policy changes. Unless economic policies are reconsidered, CPEC will spark a loop of financial dependency instead of having the desired monetary gains.

External Factors Influencing CPEC

The concern of many security specialists is that CPEC might be applied with regional interests in mind. CPEC is exposed to high external risks associated with instability in Afghanistan, the mistrust between India and Pakistan, and the competing interests between the U.S. and Iran. These are some of the geopolitical reasons that make the implementation of the project a complex task. The intervention of international powers such as the U.S., China, India, and Russia also shapes the policy-making in Pakistan. Also, the China-Pakistan rift between India, the strategic rivalry between China and the U.S., and the state of security of Afghanistan present a significant threat to CPEC's success.

CPEC and U.S. Strategic Interests

The United States also considers the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as one of the associated factors of increasing Chinese dominance in South Asia, especially when it comes to the Gwadar port controlled by China (Latif & Zia, 2020)(Abb et al., 2024). Although the U.S does not completely oppose CPEC, it believes that China's growing influence and its entry into the Indian Ocean could undermine U.S hegemony (Lokman et al., 2022). The U.S fears that CPEC could create an imbalance in regional military power by allowing a strategic military presence in Gwadar, the biggest reason is that the Indian Ocean is considered an essential strategic location in global trade and military influence (Pande, 2021)(Mishra, 2025). That is why the U.S periodically tries to deepen its relations with the major powers of the South Asian region, which can be used as a countermeasure to control China's influence.

The US-China trade war has also affected the geopolitical landscape of CPEC. As of 2024, US-China trade amounted to about \$658.9 billion, and the trade deficit was \$295.5 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2025). In its broader efforts to curb the power of China, the U.S. has been increasingly pushing its efforts in enhancing alternative regional investments, especially in countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, as a means of curbing the influence of CPEC. The U.S has also raised its eyebrows due to the increasing Chinese debt to Pakistan and sees it as a threat to the sovereignty of Pakistan (Arsalan, 2025). Moreover, the U.S. has criticized the human rights conditions in Balochistan, where separatist rebellions have been a great security threat in the effective execution of CPEC. It is over these issues that the U.S. has demanded increased transparency and accountability in the Pakistan-China dealings with each other, especially concerning CPEC-related projects. The Trump administration wants military cooperation from Pakistan on Iran and Afghanistan. At the same time, the U.S is trying to strengthen relations with Pakistan to counter China's growing influence in South and Central Asia and to bolster its international standing (Tuychiyeva, 2025). China will never support Pakistan joining the US bloc. This is why U.S strategic interests are considered an external threat to CPEC.

CPEC and India's Concerns

India has also been resisting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which it considers a direct challenge to its sovereignty, security, and strategic interests in the region. The key reason why India is opposing it is the fact that the CPEC route crosses Gilgit-Baltistan, which India deems part of the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir (F. Hussain et al., 2021)(Saini, 2021). India claims that the CPEC that Pakistan is promoting for regional stability, connectivity and regional development is a violation of its sovereignty and international law (Kamran & Mahsood,

2021)(Pande, 2021). This issue is rooted in the unsolved Kashmir conflict and reflects Indian concerns about Pakistan's financial and geopolitical alignment with China. India views CPEC as the continuation of the Sino-Pakistani strategic alliance, which empowers Pakistan in the Kashmir issue and weakens India's regional position (ISSI, 2023).

India also sees CPEC as a component of China's grand strategic planning to augment its geopolitical and maritime control in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). New Delhi is observing strategic control of Gwadar port, which is situated along the key sea lines, as a possible military and naval base that can be used to surround India as part of its "String of Pearls" strategy (Latif & Zia, 2020)(Lokman et al., 2022). This has made India worry that CPEC can facilitate the projecting of power by China across the IOR, and therefore, the long-term security interest of India will be compromised through the maritime domain (Manhas et al., 2025). As a result, India has reacted by intensifying its alliances with other like-minded states and broadening its involvement in strategic partnerships like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to offset China's power (Ain et al., 2024). Moreover, India has sought the construction of the Chabahar Port in Iran as an alternative trade route to avoid using Pakistan and decrease the strategic value of Gwadar (Jan et al., 2024). This India fight is just one of the ways through which it is retaliating against CPEC, not by contradiction but by parallel development of infrastructure and other diplomatic efforts.

Besides the geopolitical and geographical interests, India has also been carrying out information campaigns and diplomatic isolation to weaken CPEC. India is doing a lot of propaganda, using disinformation tactics through mass media to portray the project in the global arena as a Chinese debt trap (Siddique, 2025)(Murtaza & Saud, 2025). India is lobbying the international community and media coverage in order to make CPEC a menace to the regional order (Jain, 2020)(K. M. Butt & Butt, 2015). In addition, India has also rejected Pakistan's invitation to Saudi Arabia and Iran to join CPEC, seeing it as an attempt by China to multilateralize the project and further isolate India (Jamali et al., 2023). Therefore, India's opposition to CPEC is multi-dimensional, allowing it to integrate the sovereignty, maritime security, anti-corridor policy, and information warfare to undermine the economic growth of Pakistan and the strategic growth of China in South Asia.

CPEC and Afghanistan involvement

Afghanistan's long-standing instability, rooted in decades of conflict since the Soviet invasion of 1979, continues to weaken regional stability and pose a direct threat to the CPEC (Tang et al., 2025). Pakistan is facing more security problems than ever after the withdrawal of US and NATO troops from the Afghan region. The Taliban came to power again, with the number of terrorist attacks increasing by almost 60 percent because of the revival of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the formation of new alliances between militant groups (Ashraf, 2025)(Kamal & Ihsanullah, 2024). The porous Pakistan-Afghanistan border, especially in Kunar and Nuristan, by using which CPEC infrastructure, and Chinese nationals are targeted by transnational terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) (Ibrar, 2017). The infiltration of Uighur militants from Xinjiang, working alongside the TTP, has worsened these threats, leading Pakistani officials to accuse India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) and Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) of supporting cross-border terrorism to hinder CPEC progress (Jalalzai, 2017)(Akhtar et al., 2025)(M. Hussain, 2017). . The case of the 2016 Quetta Police Training Centre attack and other comparable instances demonstrate that the lack of security in Afghanistan poses an immediate threat to the inner stability of the country and the security of CPEC (Kamran & Mahsood, 2021).

Both China and Pakistan are aware that peace and stability in Afghanistan are the determinants of CPEC success (S. Ali & Shabbir, 2023). The Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) that encompassed Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan tried to contribute to a major role in the development of the peace process in Afghanistan but this was not successful due to the death of the former Taliban leader, Mullah Mansoor (Choudhri et al., 2017). This has since seen Beijing expand its activities in the region, hosting Taliban envoys in Urumqi and promoting peace efforts through the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process to stabilize Afghanistan and secure CPEC investments (Branco, 2020). It is also reported that China and Pakistan have agreed to extend CPEC into Afghanistan to enhance integration and fight extremism by integrating their economies (Zafar, 2025). However, these have been slowed by persistent militancy, the lack of control over borders, and interference by aggressive foreign powers (Elmali, 2024). In the absence of effective cross-border collaboration and plausible counter-terrorism initiatives, Afghanistan's unrest is posing the most external danger to the CPEC north route and broader regional integration agendas.

CPEC and Iran's Strategic Rivalry:

The strategic rivalry with Iran is a major external challenge to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and it primarily centers on the rivalry between the Pakistan Gwadar Port and the Iran Chabahar Port. The development of Gwadar was perceived as a threat to Chabahar in 2016 by Iran, which was constructed with the help of India as per a trilateral agreement: India, Iran, and Afghanistan to bypass Pakistan, which was estimated to cost about US\$500 million (Jan et al., 2024)(K. M. Butt & Butt, 2015). No matter how competitive these competitions were, Iran was finally discovering the economic potential of CPEC, especially with the U.S. sanctions on Iran under the Iran nuclear deal, new prospects of co-operation with Pakistan opened before them (M. Hussain et al., 2024). According to the bilateral negotiations in 2016, the Iranian leaders have already expressed their willingness to join the CPEC and to

strengthen the connectivity, and they have even suggested connecting the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline with China, which could be discussed as the major convergence of the strategic and energy interests (S. Ali & Shabbir, 2023). The three main objectives of China in making Iran a part of the BRI are to enhance connectivity to the region, energy security, and the expansion of China's influence in the entire world (Karami, 2024). Nevertheless, this possible cooperation is vitiated by the balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia because Pakistan will struggle to build its relations with Tehran at the expense of its relations with Saudi Arabia (Zafar, 2025). Accordingly, as Gwadar and Chabahar are capable of becoming mutually complementary regional centers supporting economic interdependence, geopolitical competition and sectarianism still undermine the opportunities to collaborate and pose a threat to CPEC.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

In accordance with the findings of this study, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) currently exists under the severe stress of dual internal and external dynamics that are all detrimental preconditions of its successful implementation. The public strife, fragmented institutional framework, Administrative disputes, and maladministration in Pakistan have hampered the development of projects, and corruption, absence of transparency, and bureaucratic challenges have destroyed the trust of the people. Such inequality at the provincial level, particularly the disenchantment of Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, represents the pinnacle of inequality in benefit distribution and geographical displacement, which is further heightened by inter-provincial rivalry over industrial and budget decentralization. Litigation processes environmental law enforcement and the civil-military asymmetry, in which security agencies like SSD make the determination of civilians, exposing all administrative gaps and political enmity that hinder the transformation of CPEC's potential into tangible socioeconomic progress. External threats CPEC is facing geopolitical and security bottlenecks, such as conflicts over its path, using Gilgit Baltistan instability in Afghanistan, and threats of militant coalitions such as BLA and TTP, which remain a threat to its development. India is also retaliating against the CPEC by offering assistance to militant groups with parallel infrastructure projects and other diplomatic missions. It has been fostered by terrorism, cross-border militancy, and delinquent networks that have generated long-standing precariousness and cross-border power conflicts, specifically between the United States and China's trade war. The growing debt levels and the dependency of Chinese funding concern the fiscal viability and regulatory independence of Pakistan, but the success of the projects should be based on maintaining a balance between the economic upsurge, political sustainability, and regional alignment, as well as the liability to the institutions enabling the nation to transform CPEC into a consolidated roadmap of national and regional growth.

Recommendations and Suggestions

Everything is possible, and all of our dreams can come true as long as we are courageous enough to follow them.

- Establish a legal framework securing all CPEC agreements, budgets, and contracts for a full parliamentary term to ensure policy stability, prevent political riots, and strengthen investor confidence.
- Form a constitutionally mandated CPEC Council led by the prime minister to administer projects, confirm national concord, and implement fair provincial revenue sharing based on population, resources, and contributions.
- Establish specialized civilian supervisory bodies with representatives from the Interior Ministry, provincial police, and parliament to monitor all CPEC-related military and security measures.
- Pakistan and China should enact reforms for sustainable, eco-conscious CPEC infrastructure and establish a State Bank-controlled (Public-Private Partnership) PPP fund to attract global financing and trim debt.
- Pakistani officials should adopt an economic security diplomacy framework to redefine foreign policy as a financial tool instead of a defense focus.
- Pakistan should launch "CPEC Plus" alliances with regional states to share investments, ensure neutrality, enhance the strategic and security stability of CPEC, and minimize the problem of security of the country with its neighbors
- Increase the study's budget to improve civil communities by providing decent infrastructure.
- Establish a National Corridor Skill and Technology foundation with Chinese collaboration to train area workers, adapt expertise, and reduce dependence on foreign labor.
- Regional peace depends on constructive India-Pakistan relations; hence, Pakistan should diplomatically address India's CPEC concerns to ensure broader regional stability.
- Establish a Digital Security Integration Hub with AI-based threat information to manage the data between the SSD, the civilian intelligence, and the Chinese contractors.
- The government should not delay work on CPEC because it could give extremists and militants a chance to create obstacles in the seamless construction of this initiative.

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