

## EXAMINING THE CONNECTIVITY OF CPEC WITH AFGHANISTAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND STABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a pivotal component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is strategically positioned to enhance connectivity and foster economic development across South Asia. This study examines the potential extension of CPEC into Afghanistan, a region marked by decades of instability but also rich in untapped resources and strategic significance. The integration of Afghanistan into the CPEC framework could serve as a catalyst for regional cooperation, economic integration, and long-term stability. This research explores the multifaceted implications of such connectivity, focusing on its potential to transform Afghanistan's economic landscape, provide the country with critical infrastructure, and open new trade routes. Additionally, the study delves into the broader geopolitical ramifications, particularly how enhanced connectivity might influence the dynamics between regional powers such as China, Pakistan, India, and Iran. By fostering economic interdependence, CPEC's expansion into Afghanistan could contribute to reducing tensions and promoting peace in a historically volatile region. However, the challenges are significant, including security concerns, political instability, and the need for substantial investment and international cooperation. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of both the opportunities and obstacles presented by Afghanistan's potential inclusion in CPEC, offering insights into how this initiative could shape the future of regional integration and stability.

**Keywords:** CPEC Connectivity, Afghanistan Integration, Regional Stability, Economic Cooperation, Geopolitical Implications

### INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan, a landlocked country in Southern Central Asia, shares borders with Pakistan to the south and east, Iran to the west, and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China to the north and northeast. Historically, Afghanistan played a pivotal role in the Silk Road, an ancient trade network that linked Asia, Africa, and Europe, facilitating the exchange of goods, culture, and religion. The Silk Road was crucial to the economic and cultural development of ancient Chinese civilization. However, its importance waned with the discovery of sea routes. Today, China aims to revive the Silk Road to rejuvenate the regional economy, a vision that was formally announced in 2013 as part of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative (Masood et al., 2016).

Actually, OBOR is a comprehensive initiative for the growth of trade and industries in connection between Asia, Africa, and Europe. Nearly 4.4 billion People will be impacted by OBOR globally. Four to eight trillion dollars are being invested by China in the One Belt, One Road initiative. The purpose of this massive initiative is to economically link sixty-three (63) countries. The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the China-Indo-China Peninsular Economic Corridor (CIPEC), the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (B-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor), and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor are six of the economic corridors that make up the OBOR. All of

these corridors are crucial for the growth of China's economy as well as that of the entire region, but because of its geostrategic and economic significance, China places a greater emphasis on the CPEC project and views it as the core of the OBOR initiative (Huasheng, 2016).

It really is a strategy to connect South Asia, Africa, and Central Asia on a regional scale. CPEC would advance not just the economic interests of Pakistan, China, and Iran but also those of Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries, which are landlocked. China intends to connect CPEC with the central and western OBOR project routes via Afghanistan in order to achieve these objectives (Masood et al., 2016). There are several initiatives that link Afghanistan with CPEC. Among the most significant are the 265-kilometer Peshawar-Kabul motorway, the Peshawar-Kabul railroad, the Chaman-Spin Buldak railroad, the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor (KPEC), and the Gwadar-Termez motorway. To advance China, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other regional countries' economic interests, a railway connection will be built between Torkham and Jalalabad (Abrar, 2019). By eliminating 600 km of the current commercial route via Afghanistan, the Gwadar-Termez road will make it simple to get to the deep-sea port of Gwadar. Pakistan's burgeoning modern metropolis and deep-water port is called Gwadar (Dawn, 2015).

After CPEC is completed, it will be able to connect 3 billion people in the area, which would lead to prosperity in the form of economic growth. It will enable Afghanistan to establish profitable operations in the Indian Ocean and connect it to all neighboring states (Khan, 2019). Significant regional ramifications will result from CPEC's link with Afghanistan, including those related to regional trade openness, counterterrorism and extremism, regional connectivity, regional integration, cultural interaction, and so forth (Hali, 2017).

### **CONNECTIVITY OF CPEC WITH AFGHANISTAN**

Afghanistan occupies a strategically vital geographical position in the region. Historically, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan were key states along the ancient Silk Road, with Afghanistan playing a crucial role in linking the vast markets of South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, China,

and Europe. As the Silk Road is revitalized, Afghanistan is poised to once again become the "beating heart of Asia" due to its potential for economic connectivity. Afghanistan is eager to reclaim its historic status as a regional trade and commercial hub, a role it played during the era of the original Silk Road. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), fundamentally aimed at promoting economic and infrastructural development among its member states, presents an opportunity for Afghanistan to address its urgent needs, especially considering its long history of conflict since 1979. Afghanistan's active involvement in the BRI's construction and development projects is crucial not only for its own infrastructure development but also for that of the broader region (Cowan, 2018). The most effective way for Afghanistan to integrate into the BRI is through participation in CPEC, the initiative's flagship project. CPEC's connection to Afghanistan can be established through several key avenues, with the following being the most significant:

#### **Peshawar-Kabul Railway Track**

As part of CPEC's first phase, the Main Line 1 (ML-1) railway track will be constructed from Peshawar to Karachi. In the second phase, new railway lines will be developed nationwide to enhance trade and economic activities. A key component of this network is the Peshawar-Kabul railway line, which extends from Peshawar to Torkham on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, continues to Kabul, and finally reaches Mazar-e-Sharif. This railway line will link Central Asian republics to the Peshawar-Kabul network, significantly boosting regional economic activity (Abrar, 2019).

#### **Chaman-Spin Buldak Railway Track**

The Chaman-Spin Buldak railway line serves as a critical gateway between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In July 2010, Pakistan and Afghanistan signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to construct a 12-kilometer railway track between Chaman and Spin Buldak, located in Afghanistan's Kandahar province near the Chaman border. The Afghan government is committed to completing the remaining 80–100 miles of the railway between Kandahar and Spin Buldak. The Chaman-Spin Buldak railway route is expected to extend towards the Central Asian

republics, enhancing regional connectivity (Ahmad, 2016).

### **Gwadar-Termez Motorway**

The Gwadar-Termez Motorway is a crucial highway connecting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with Afghanistan. This route forms a vital link between Afghanistan's provinces and the CPEC's backbone at Gwadar. The motorway not only connects Gwadar, a deep-sea port, with Afghanistan but also extends to key energy-producing countries in the region, including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif highlighted the significance of this road, emphasizing its role in linking the Central Asian states—Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—with the Gwadar port. The motorway begins in Gwadar, proceeds through Chaman, and continues to Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, and finally to Termez and the Central Asian republics (Dawn, 2015).

### **Khyber Pass Economic Corridor**

The National Highway Authority (NHA) has developed a strategic plan to enhance transportation infrastructure, linking CPEC with Afghanistan through the Chaman and Torkham border crossings. A significant focus of this strategy is the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor, which includes the 281-kilometer Peshawar-Kabul motorway. This expressway, known as the Gateway to Central Asian States, is divided into three segments:

**Peshawar-Torkham Motorway (50 km):** This section starts near Hayatabad town and extends for 50 kilometers.

**Torkham-Jalalabad Motorway (76 km):** Currently under construction, this segment will facilitate trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

**Jalalabad-Kabul Motorway (155 km):** This final section connects Kabul, the Afghan capital, through the Laghman Valley. The corridor will include secondary and connecting expressways, such as bypasses, to support local markets. The 50-kilometer, 4-lane motorway between Torkham and Peshawar is expected to be completed by June 2024.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND STABILITY**

In the twenty-first century, competition gave way to collaboration and the interdependence of interests. Regional collaboration, shared development, and economic cooperation become more important as a result of globalization and regionalism. These changes have increased the world's interdependence in terms of bilateral trade and regional business. The region, as well as the entire world, is seen to benefit from the economic integration of the states in the area. There is a lack of regional integration in South Asia. Only 3–5% of all regional trade is classified as regional. It only makes about 1% of the area's GDP (gross domestic product). Due to a lack of regional trade, South Asian nations are less developed and experiencing poor economic growth. Any state's economic development depends on regional economic development. China's aim of dominating the global economy would remain a fantasy without regional cooperation and growth. China is therefore worried about regional growth and integration, particularly in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Umbreen & Rameesha, 2016).

In the upcoming years, regional and extra-regional players will benefit from CPEC. The enormous land-sea project known as CPEC will significantly change Asia's geopolitical and strategic environment. The regional states' economic prospects might change as a result. Millions of people in the region are anticipated to have benefited from this corridor as a result of the project's potential to promote socio-cultural connectedness, trade connections, economic activity, technical collaboration, and generate new financial opportunities (But & But, 2015).

### **People-to-People Connectivity**

People-to-people connectivity is a core principle of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is essential for its successful implementation. This connectivity encompasses various forms of exchanges, including staff exchanges, media partnerships, youth and women's programs, cultural and educational exchanges, and volunteer services. To promote cultural sharing and human connections, the Chinese government launched a program under the BRI aimed at fostering peace and cross-cultural collaboration. These connections build interpersonal trust, which in turn

enhances cross-border trade and economic activities.

To further this goal, the Chinese government provides thousands of scholarships to students from BRI member countries, allowing them to study in China, share their cultures, and deepen intercultural understanding. Additionally, China promotes various initiatives such as cultural festivals, book fairs, and collaborations in science and technology to strengthen people-to-people ties (Safi, 2018).

### **Economic Implications on the Region**

**Boosting Trade Activities:** CPEC, as the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), holds tremendous potential for accelerating economic activity in the region. Trade liberalization and openness are key drivers of economic expansion and development, as evidenced by the progress of economically developed states that have embraced these principles. CPEC was specifically designed to enhance trade between China, Pakistan, and neighboring regions. This project facilitates trade among Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, offering significant economic opportunities for its member states (Rabbi & Ahsan, 2017).

A notable regional energy initiative, the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India) pipeline, underscores the economic interdependence between Central Asia and South Asia. Central Asian states, rich in energy resources, are drawn to South Asia, which faces energy shortages that hinder its industrial growth. Pakistan, for instance, has long sought access to Central Asia's vast markets. In 2018, a delegation from Central Asian nations visited Pakistan, where both sides exchanged ideas on enhancing trade relations (Altaf, 2018).

Historically, the ancient Silk Road facilitated a robust economic link between Central Asia and India, enabling the exchange of goods, people, and ideas. However, the abandonment of the Silk Road severed this connection. CPEC, through its link with Afghanistan, offers a renewed opportunity to reconnect India and the Central Asian republics via the Indian Ocean (Rajiv & Menon, 2019). By providing access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, CPEC is expected to significantly boost trade between India and Central Asia. Currently, trade between India and Central

Asia stands at USD 851.91 million, with Uzbekistan being India's largest trading partner in the region, followed by Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Stobdan, 2015).

Furthermore, Central Asian states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan possess vast hydroelectric energy resources but lack sufficient markets for export. CPEC offers a solution by enabling these countries to sell excess electricity to energy-deficient South Asian states. The TAPI pipeline, a major project signed in 2002 by Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, is also part of this broader economic integration. Spanning 1,800 kilometers, this pipeline will transport 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually, meeting 15% of Pakistan's total energy demand (Khetran, 2019).

**Enhancing Regional Connectivity:** Regional connectivity is crucial for economic growth, facilitating the flow of people, goods, services, and information within and across regions. Without strong regional ties, economic development becomes a challenging task. Recognizing this, China has launched the BRI, with CPEC as its centerpiece, to enhance regional connectivity. The BRI aims to improve global infrastructure, particularly in regions where China has elevated its engagement (Sheikh & Mehboob, 2020).

CPEC has the potential to integrate the region's infrastructure, including ports, railways, highways, and oil and gas pipelines. The project is strategically important for China as it offers the shortest route for energy transit. Given its geographical significance, CPEC should be connected to the energy, trade, and infrastructure networks of Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and beyond. Sartaj Aziz, a former foreign policy adviser to Pakistan, highlighted Pakistan's strategic location at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe, positioning it to play a significant role in the region's economic development. Projections indicate that by 2050, Asia could account for 50% of the world's GDP, with Gwadar serving as a critical transshipment hub. CPEC is expected to transform the entire region economically (Khan, 2018).

The project is also likely to increase economic interdependence among regional states, promoting industrial development, agricultural growth, trade, and information exchange. As the shortest trade route connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, CPEC is poised to stimulate

economic activity and ensure regional growth and stability (Rabbi & Ahsan, 2017).

**Promoting Regional Integration:** Regional integration focuses on fostering interdependence, cooperation, communication, and infrastructure development among states to enhance economic growth. It involves reducing tariffs and other barriers to trade, which is vital for the economic development of the region. CPEC is positioned to play a key role in facilitating regional integration in Asia. By linking the markets of approximately 2 billion people across Pakistan, China, the Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, and Iran, CPEC will be instrumental in promoting regional peace and stability (Wang, 2017).

From a liberal perspective, economic and trade interdependence among states fosters peace and cooperation while reducing the likelihood of conflict. The Complex Interdependence Theory, proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, supports this notion, suggesting that states can promote integration based on mutual interests. In today's interconnected world, no state can thrive without formal ties to its neighbors. The globalization era has compelled governments to strengthen their economic relations and mutual dependencies. The BRI, viewed through the lens of complex interdependence, encourages collaboration and economic growth by intertwining the political and economic interests of multiple states (Jaleel, 2019).

### **Political Implications on the Region China's Strategic Gains in the Region:**

China strategically values Afghanistan's geographical position within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the new Silk Road. The BRI, launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is composed of two major components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. This initiative aims to economically connect over 65 countries by land, air, and sea, encompassing about one-third of the global population. Afghanistan, situated at a crucial crossroads, has the potential to serve as a key transit hub for movement between East Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and North Asia. As Afghanistan sits at the center of several regional megaprojects, including the BRI, its connection with CPEC offers China significant strategic

advantages, enabling it to extend its influence across Europe, Asia, and Africa (Asia, 2020).

**A New Era of Cordial Relationships in the Region:** Historically, Afghanistan and Pakistan have had a strained relationship, primarily due to Afghanistan's claim over Pashtun regions along the Durand Line, a contentious border between the two countries. Afghanistan was the first state to oppose Pakistan's admission to the United Nations, refusing to recognize the Durand Line as an international boundary. Additionally, Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of interfering in its domestic affairs, particularly by supporting the Afghan Taliban (Grare, 2006).

CPEC's connection with Afghanistan offers both nations a platform to transform their historically tense relations into a strong bilateral partnership. Improved relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan are vital not only for the two countries but also for the stability of the broader region (Khan, 2019).

Moreover, the relationship between India and Pakistan, the two most influential states in South Asia, has been a major source of regional instability. While India initially viewed CPEC as a method of containment, there is growing recognition of its potential importance to the regional economy. Both China and Pakistan have expressed interest in involving India in this significant project. CPEC is seen by Pakistan as a game-changer for regional economic development, prosperity, and conflict resolution, particularly regarding the Kashmir issue. India's participation in CPEC could provide access to Afghanistan's vast market, fostering socio-economic and political success in the region (Wagner, 2016).

**Countering Terrorism:** Afghanistan has been plagued by war, terrorism, extremism, and conflicts for over four decades. The Soviet invasion in 1979, followed by a decade-long war, an 11-year civil war, and the ongoing American-led war on terrorism, have all devastated Afghanistan's economy, stability, and peace. Terrorism and extremism not only pose a significant threat to Afghanistan but also to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the broader region, particularly China. The success of the BRI is closely linked to the stability of Afghanistan. If terrorism and extremism are not contained, they could spread to Central Asian states, directly threatening China's regional economic interests.

China is heavily invested in energy projects in Central Asia, including the construction of two oil pipelines and four natural gas pipelines between China and Central Asia. Any instability caused by terrorism in Central Asia could undermine these projects and challenge China's vision of "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR). Furthermore, stable economic markets, which provide job opportunities, have been proven to be an effective strategy for combating extremism and terrorism (Huasheng, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with its flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), stands as a transformative force in the geopolitical and economic landscape of South Asia, Central Asia, and beyond. The BRI aims to revive the ancient Silk Road, reconnecting regions that have historically been crucial trade routes, with Afghanistan playing a pivotal role due to its strategic location. This research has explored the multifaceted implications of Afghanistan's integration into the BRI, particularly through its connection to CPEC, and the broader impact on regional connectivity, economic growth, and political dynamics. Afghanistan's geographical positioning at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe positions it as a critical player in the BRI. The country's involvement in CPEC offers significant opportunities to restore its historic role as a regional trade and commercial hub. By linking Afghanistan with major infrastructure projects like the Gwadar-Termez Motorway and the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor, CPEC not only facilitates Afghanistan's economic revival but also enhances its connectivity with neighboring countries. These infrastructure developments are poised to transform Afghanistan into a central transit route, boosting trade and economic activities across the region.

The economic implications of Afghanistan's integration into CPEC are profound. The project is expected to catalyze trade activities by opening up new markets and creating economic interdependencies between South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. The development of trade routes such as the Gwadar-Termez Motorway and the Peshawar-Kabul railway track will not only enhance regional trade

but also contribute to the economic stability of Afghanistan by providing access to the energy-rich Central Asian republics. Additionally, the CPEC project will enable Afghanistan to benefit from regional energy projects like TAPI, addressing its own energy needs while contributing to the broader regional energy security. Politically, CPEC has the potential to reshape regional dynamics by fostering cooperation and reducing tensions between neighboring states. The project provides a platform for improving Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, which have historically been strained due to border disputes and political disagreements. CPEC's connectivity offers an opportunity for these two countries to develop a stable bilateral relationship, which is crucial for regional peace and stability. Moreover, the integration of India into CPEC could further promote regional cooperation, potentially easing longstanding conflicts such as the Kashmir issue by creating economic interdependencies that discourage conflict.

The fight against terrorism and extremism is another critical aspect of Afghanistan's participation in CPEC. The country has endured decades of conflict, which has severely impacted its stability and economic development. By integrating Afghanistan into regional economic frameworks, CPEC can contribute to reducing the influence of extremist groups by creating economic opportunities and fostering development. China's vested interest in maintaining stability in Afghanistan, given its own regional economic projects, underscores the importance of countering terrorism for the success of the BRI.

Finally, the emphasis on people-to-people connectivity within the BRI framework highlights the importance of cultural exchange and mutual understanding in fostering long-term regional stability. Initiatives such as scholarships for students from BRI member countries, cultural festivals, and scientific collaborations are vital in building trust and cooperation among the diverse populations involved in the BRI. These efforts not only strengthen interpersonal relationships but also create a foundation for sustainable economic and political partnerships. Afghanistan's integration into the BRI through CPEC is poised to have far-reaching implications for regional connectivity, economic growth, and political stability. By enhancing infrastructure, promoting trade, and fostering cooperation, CPEC can help Afghanistan

reclaim its historic role as a regional hub while contributing to the broader goals of the BRI. The success of this integration will depend on continued collaboration among regional players, effective management of political tensions, and a sustained commitment to combating terrorism and extremism.

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