

## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE GEO-STRATEGIC AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF CPEC IN SOUTH ASIA

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### ABSTRACT

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has significant geo-strategic and economic implications for South Asia. This critical analysis explores how CPEC is reshaping regional dynamics by enhancing trade connectivity and energy security while also intensifying strategic rivalries, particularly with India. While CPEC offers economic growth opportunities, especially for Pakistan, it also presents challenges such as debt dependency, uneven development, and potential regional instability. The study underscores the importance of managing these complexities to maximize CPEC's benefits and minimize risks for South Asia's future stability and prosperity.

**Keywords:** CPEC, South Asia, geo-strategic implications, economic impact, regional stability.

### INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has emerged as a transformative project with significant implications for South Asia. Envisioned as a vast network of highways, railways, and energy projects, CPEC aims to bolster connectivity between China and Pakistan, while extending its strategic influence across South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. As a pivotal geo-strategic initiative, CPEC not only promises substantial economic benefits for Pakistan but also has the potential to redefine regional trade routes, economic alliances, and geopolitical dynamics (Malik, 2012).

This study critically examines the geo-strategic and geo-economic consequences of CPEC, highlighting its impact on regional power structures. The strategic value of CPEC lies in its provision of direct access to the Arabian Sea for China, thereby decreasing its reliance on traditional maritime routes through the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca. This shift enhances China's strategic posture, with far-reaching implications for regional security and power balances.

From a geo-economic perspective, CPEC is expected to catalyze economic growth through infrastructure development, energy projects, and enhanced trade routes. The corridor is poised to open new economic opportunities, attract foreign investment, and drive industrialization within Pakistan and the broader region. However, these economic prospects are not without challenges, including concerns over debt sustainability, economic disparities, and local resistance.

The enduring Sino-Pak relationship, exemplified by CPEC, is a significant factor in shaping regional and global politics. While some, like India, perceive this alliance as a threat to their strategic interests, others may seek to emulate its success. The long-standing rivalry between Pakistan and India, coupled with India's regional ambitions, has reinforced the strong strategic partnership between China and Pakistan. CPEC, as a flagship project, not only seeks to modernize Pakistan's infrastructure and economy but also aims to enhance bilateral trade, foster peaceful coexistence, and promote regional economic growth and cooperation. Pakistan's National

Security Policy (NSP) of December 2021, which prioritizes economic security, underscores the shifting focus from geo-strategic to geo-economic interests, with CPEC recognized as a "game changer" for South Asia (Jaleel et al., 2019).

### **The Geo-strategic and Economic Importance of Pakistan's Location**

Pakistan's strategic location holds immense geopolitical importance, particularly in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is central to China's broader strategic ambitions. This importance is evident through several key dimensions:

#### **Access to the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf:**

Pakistan's geographic positioning provides China with crucial access to the Arabian Sea via the Gwadar Port, located in southwestern Balochistan. This direct route to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf is vital for multiple reasons. Firstly, it enhances China's energy security by providing a shorter, more secure pathway for transporting oil from the Middle East to its western provinces, bypassing the longer and geopolitically tense route through the Strait of Malacca (Saad, 2018). Secondly, Gwadar Port's development under CPEC significantly boosts trade efficiency, enabling a faster and more cost-effective route for Chinese goods bound for Middle Eastern, African, and European markets, thereby extending China's economic reach and connectivity as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

#### **Strategic Depth and Military Logistics:**

Pakistan's location offers China strategic depth, especially within the framework of its rivalry with India and its interests in the Indian Ocean. The infrastructural developments under CPEC facilitate closer military cooperation between China and Pakistan, allowing China to project military power more effectively in the region. The potential use of Gwadar Port for logistical support enhances the Chinese navy's operational capabilities in the Indian Ocean (Umbreen & Rameesha, 2016). Additionally, Pakistan's alliance with China serves as a counterbalance to India's regional dominance, enabling China to maintain a significant strategic foothold in South Asia amidst its competition with India.

#### **Regional Influence and Economic Integration:**

Pakistan's strategic location is crucial to China's broader geopolitical objectives of regional influence and economic integration. Through CPEC, China seeks to integrate the economies of Central and South Asia, creating a comprehensive network of trade routes, energy pipelines, and communication links. Pakistan acts as a central bridge in this vision, connecting China with the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond. The heavy investment in Pakistan's infrastructure and economy by China not only strengthens their bilateral ties but also enhances China's political influence in Islamabad, which extends to regional politics. This influence is particularly evident in Pakistan's alignment with China on key issues concerning India, Afghanistan, and regional security dynamics.

**Stabilizing Western China:** CPEC's development holds significant implications for China's internal stability, especially in its western Xinjiang region. The economic opportunities arising from improved trade routes and connectivity with Pakistan are expected to stimulate economic growth in Xinjiang, thereby helping to stabilize the region. Moreover, the infrastructural development facilitated by CPEC is seen as a means to address security concerns in China's western provinces by using economic growth to promote stability and counteract separatist sentiments.

**Strengthening Bilateral Ties:** The geopolitical importance of Pakistan's location is further underscored by the strengthening of bilateral ties between China and Pakistan. These ties are reinforced through diplomatic support, with Pakistan consistently backing China on international issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and the South China Sea, and China reciprocating by supporting Pakistan's stance on Kashmir and its opposition to India. The economic interdependencies created by CPEC have deepened the bilateral relationship, embedding strategic and economic interests that go beyond political rhetoric, thereby solidifying the bond between the two nations.

#### **Geo-Strategic and Economic Consequences for the South Asia**

In the twenty-first century, the global focus has increasingly shifted from competition to collaboration, with a growing recognition of the

interdependence of interests. The forces of globalization and regionalism have intensified the interconnectedness of nations, particularly in terms of bilateral trade and regional economic activities. Economic integration within regions is now seen as a pathway to achieving broader global benefits. However, South Asia has lagged in this regard, with only 3-5% of its trade being regional, resulting in slower economic growth due to a lack of regional cohesion (But & But, 2015). China's strategy to assert itself as a dominant player in the global economy is heavily reliant on fostering regional cooperation and economic growth, especially within South Asia and Central Asia. Consequently, China is highly invested in advancing regional development and integration in key countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and India.

In the near future, both regional and extra-regional stakeholders stand to gain significantly from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a comprehensive land-sea initiative that is set to significantly alter the geopolitical and strategic landscape of Asia (Umbreen & Rameesha, 2016). The economic outlook for regional states could be drastically improved, with millions poised to benefit from CPEC's potential to enhance socio-cultural ties, boost trade, stimulate economic activity, and foster technical and financial collaborations.

**Economic Growth and Integration:** CPEC is a vital catalyst for economic growth and regional integration in South Asia. By enhancing infrastructure and connectivity, the corridor facilitates smoother trade and commerce not only between China and Pakistan but also among other South Asian countries. The development of advanced road and rail networks, along with the modernization of ports, reduces transportation costs and improves trade efficiency, thereby contributing to the overall economic growth of the region (Rajiv & Menon, 2019).

**Socio-Cultural Connectivity:** The projects under CPEC are anticipated to significantly improve socio-cultural connectivity across South Asia. As transportation and economic collaboration increase, opportunities for cultural exchanges and mutual understanding are likely to expand. Such connectivity can play a crucial role in easing historical tensions and fostering a more peaceful and cooperative regional environment.

**Trade Relations:** CPEC is expected to substantially enhance trade relations within South Asia. By providing a direct route between the Arabian Sea and China's Xinjiang province, it opens new trade corridors that neighboring countries can utilize. This surge in trade activities can help diversify the economies of South Asian nations, reducing their dependence on a limited number of traditional markets.

**Technical Collaboration:** The implementation of CPEC brings significant opportunities for technical collaboration between China and South Asian countries. The transfer of technology, expertise, and skills from China to Pakistan and other regional neighbors can drive innovation and bolster the technological capabilities of the region. This collaboration has the potential to accelerate industrial development and modernize various sectors, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and energy.

**Financial Opportunities:** The influx of Chinese investment through CPEC presents numerous financial opportunities for South Asian countries. Investments in infrastructure, energy, and industrial projects are expected to generate employment and stimulate economic activities. Additionally, the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) is likely to attract foreign investment, boost exports, and enhance the financial stability of the region (Stobdan, 2015).

### **Geopolitical and Strategic Landscape**

**Shift in Regional Power Dynamics:** CPEC is poised to shift the balance of power in South Asia. The strengthening of economic and strategic ties between China and Pakistan challenges India's traditional dominance in the region. This shift may lead to a reconfiguration of alliances, prompting other South Asian countries to seek closer ties with China as a counterbalance to regional influences.

**Regional Stability and Security:** The success of CPEC is closely linked to regional stability and security. By promoting economic interdependence and development, CPEC holds the potential to reduce conflicts and foster peace in South Asia. However, the project also faces significant security challenges, particularly in areas plagued by ongoing conflicts and militant activities. Addressing these security concerns is essential for ensuring the long-term success of CPEC (Altaf, 2018).

**Impact on Regional Policies:** CPEC has a profound influence on the foreign and economic policies of South Asian countries. In pursuit of the economic opportunities offered by CPEC, nations in the region may realign their policies to align more closely with the project's goals. This alignment could lead to greater regional cooperation on critical issues such as trade, infrastructure development, and counter-terrorism efforts.

### **Economic Consequences for the South Asia**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as a central component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is set to accelerate economic activity across the region in several significant ways:

#### **a) Regional Integration:**

Regional integration emphasizes cooperation, mutual dependence, communication, and infrastructure development among nations to boost economic prosperity. It involves eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers to enhance regional commerce, which is vital for economic growth and development. CPEC has the potential to introduce this level of regional integration in Asia, aiming to link markets in Pakistan, China, Central Asian republics, Afghanistan, and Iran, impacting nearly two billion people. This integration is crucial for sustaining regional peace (Jaleel, 2019). The CPEC initiative presents South Asian and Central Asian nations with an opportunity to benefit from enhanced regional trade, positioning Pakistan as an active participant in regional integration within South Asia.

The liberal perspective suggests that when trade and economic interests are intertwined, peace and cooperation among nations are fostered, reducing the likelihood of conflict. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's Complex Interdependence Theory proposes that states may promote integration based on the interdependency of their interests. In today's interconnected world, no nation can thrive in isolation, particularly without formal relations with neighboring countries, as no single country can satisfy all its needs independently. Globalization has driven governments to deepen economic ties and dependencies. The BRI can be viewed through the lens of the complex interdependence paradigm, which encourages cooperation and

interdependence among states (Wang, 2017). Essentially, "interdependence" refers to the economic and political connectivity between two or more states, fostering economic growth by reducing the potential for conflict and power struggles.

#### **b) Regional Connectivity:**

Regional connectivity pertains to the effectiveness and efficiency of a regional network in facilitating the movement of people, goods, services, and information. This connectivity is essential for a nation's economic growth and prosperity. China has initiated the BRI, including CPEC, to secure regional connectivity for economic advancement. The BRI, developed by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Development and Reform Commission, and Ministry of Commerce, aims to promote global connectivity and strengthen ties with neighboring countries (Khan, 2018).

CPEC, a cornerstone of the BRI, seeks to connect infrastructure initiatives across Central Asia, West Asia, South Asia, and beyond, addressing China's energy transit needs. This project is crucial for the region's economic development, as it lies at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and Europe. Pakistan, strategically located at this intersection, is expected to play a pivotal role in CPEC's economic impact (Sheikh & Mehboob, 2020). By 2050, Asia is projected to contribute 50% of the world's GDP, with Gwadar serving as a key transshipment hub. CPEC is poised to significantly reshape the region's economic landscape.

CPEC is expected to enhance interdependence among regional economies, driving industrial development, agricultural growth, trade, and information exchange. As the shortest trade route connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, CPEC will stimulate economic activity, ensuring the region's economic growth and prosperity.

#### **C. Enhancing Trade Activities:**

Trade liberalization and openness are critical for economic expansion and sustainable development. Economically advanced nations have embraced trade liberalization to foster growth. CPEC aims to enhance trade between China, Pakistan, Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Similarly, the TAPI regional energy project,

involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Turkmenistan, aims to strengthen energy connections between Central Asian and South Asian countries. Pakistan is working to create a favorable environment for commerce and increase its ties with Central Asian republics. In 2018, a delegation from Central Asian countries visited Pakistan to explore ways to enhance trade relationships (Rajiv & Menon, 2019).

Historically, Central Asian countries and India were economically connected along the Silk Road, facilitating the exchange of goods, people, and ideas. However, these regions became isolated from one another after the abandonment of the ancient Silk Road. The connectivity offered by CPEC, particularly through Afghanistan and the Indian Ocean, will help reconnect India and Central Asian republics (Stobdan, 2015).

CPEC is expected to boost trade between India and Central Asian republics by providing access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea (Rajiv & Menon, 2019). Currently, trade between India and Central Asian countries totals approximately USD 851.91 million. Uzbekistan is India's largest trading partner in Central Asia, with a total trade volume of USD 328.14 million. Trade between India and Turkmenistan stands at USD 66.27 million, followed by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at USD 32.60 million each.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan possess significant potential for hydroelectric energy production but lack markets to export this energy. Without these markets, they risk losing substantial revenue. CPEC, through Afghanistan, enables Central Asian states to sell surplus electricity to South Asian countries facing energy shortages. The massive TAPI pipeline project, connecting Central Asia and South Asia, was signed in 2002 by Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India. Covering 1,800 kilometers, this pipeline starts in Turkmenistan and passes through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, with an expected annual export of 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas to member countries (Altaf, 2018). The project's total cost was estimated at USD 7.6 billion in 2008, and it is anticipated to meet 15% of Pakistan's annual energy demand.

### **Emergence of Cooperative Relations in South Asia**

Historically, Pakistan and Afghanistan have had a strained relationship, with Afghanistan being the

first country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the UN, largely due to disputes over the Durand Line, which Afghanistan refuses to recognize as a legitimate border. This border issue, along with Pakistan's involvement in Afghan domestic affairs, has been a significant source of tension between the two nations (Khan, 2019). However, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) presents an opportunity for both countries to shift from this adversarial relationship to a more constructive partnership. By engaging in CPEC, both Pakistan and Afghanistan stand to benefit from enhanced bilateral ties, which are crucial for the stability and prosperity of the region (Grare, 2006).

The relationship between India and Pakistan, the two largest countries in South Asia, has also been a major factor contributing to regional instability. India, initially viewing CPEC as a strategic threat due to its ties with China, may soon come to see its economic significance for the entire region (Wagner, 2016). Both China and Pakistan have expressed a desire for India to join the CPEC initiative, recognizing that its participation could be a game-changer for regional economic development and conflict resolution. CPEC could potentially facilitate a resolution to the Kashmir conflict by creating economic interdependencies that make peace more desirable. Additionally, India's involvement would grant it access to Afghanistan's market, further boosting regional economic and political stability (Grare, 2006).

### **Enhancing People to People Connectivity**

A key aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and by extension CPEC, is fostering human connectivity, which is vital for the success of these projects. This involves a wide array of exchanges, such as staff exchanges, media collaborations, and cultural and educational interactions, aimed at building mutual trust and promoting peace. The Chinese government has proactively initiated numerous programs to facilitate cultural exchange under the BRI framework, including providing scholarships to students from BRI countries, promoting cultural festivals, and encouraging technological collaboration (Jaleel, 2019). These efforts not only enhance intercultural understanding but also play a critical role in soft diplomacy, helping China build a positive international image and strengthen ties with participating nations. By investing in these human

connections, China is laying the foundation for long-term global cooperation, economic growth, and the creation of a peaceful international environment conducive to sustained development (Safi, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a pivotal shift in regional dynamics with significant political repercussions. As a cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC has the potential to transform the political landscape of South Asia by fostering stronger cooperative ties and enhancing connectivity among nations. Historically, the relationships between Pakistan and its neighbors, particularly Afghanistan and India, have been marked by tension and conflict. CPEC provides a unique opportunity to alter these dynamics by offering a platform for diplomatic engagement and economic collaboration. For Afghanistan, CPEC can serve as a bridge to improved bilateral relations with Pakistan, paving the way for stability and mutual benefits in the region. By integrating Afghanistan into the economic framework of CPEC, the initiative holds the promise of mitigating historical disputes and fostering a more stable relationship (Grare, 2006).

Similarly, CPEC's impact on India-Pakistan relations is significant. While initially perceived as a strategic threat by India, the potential benefits of CPEC may lead to a re-evaluation of its stance. India's participation in CPEC could enhance regional economic development and provide access to new markets, including Afghanistan's. This involvement could offer a pathway to resolving longstanding issues such as the Kashmir conflict by creating economic interdependencies that incentivize peace and cooperation (Wagner, 2016). The integration of India into CPEC could thereby contribute to regional stability and prosperity.

Furthermore, CPEC's focus on people-to-people connectivity underscores its broader impact on cultural and diplomatic relations. By facilitating educational exchanges, cultural collaborations, and soft diplomacy, CPEC helps build mutual trust and understanding among nations. These efforts enhance regional harmony and foster a collaborative environment conducive to long-term economic and political stability (Jaleel, 2019; Safi,

2018). In essence, CPEC represents a transformative opportunity for South Asia to embrace cooperation, resolve conflicts, and advance towards a more integrated and prosperous future.

### **Recommendations**

#### **1. Strengthening Diplomatic Relations**

**a. Enhance Bilateral Engagements:** To fully capitalize on CPEC's potential, it is crucial for Pakistan and China to foster robust diplomatic relationships with neighboring countries. Enhanced bilateral engagements can help mitigate regional tensions and create a cooperative environment. Regular high-level dialogues, collaborative economic forums, and joint initiatives should be encouraged to build trust and address any geopolitical concerns. For instance, establishing a South Asian Regional Cooperation Forum under CPEC could facilitate dialogue on economic and security issues, fostering regional stability.

**b. Facilitate Multilateral Cooperation:** Pakistan and China should work to include other South Asian nations in CPEC's framework. Multilateral cooperation can broaden the benefits of the corridor and integrate more countries into the economic network. Engaging India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asian republics in joint projects and discussions related to CPEC can create a more inclusive economic environment and help align regional interests.

#### **2. Promoting Economic Inclusivity**

**a. Inclusive Development Projects:** CPEC development projects should be designed to benefit all stakeholders equitably. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and infrastructure projects must ensure that local communities, especially in less developed regions, have access to economic opportunities. This includes creating jobs, promoting local businesses, and improving access to services and infrastructure. For instance, targeted investments in rural areas can help bridge regional disparities and foster broader economic development.

**b. Support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):** To ensure that the benefits of CPEC extend beyond large-scale infrastructure, it is vital to support small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the region. SMEs play a crucial role in local

economies and can contribute to the overall economic growth driven by CPEC. Policies and programs that provide financial assistance, technical support, and market access for SMEs can help them integrate into the regional supply chain and benefit from increased economic activity.

### 3. Enhancing Regional Security and Stability

**a. Address Security Concerns:** The success of CPEC is contingent upon a stable and secure environment. Both Pakistan and China should work collaboratively to address security challenges, particularly in regions affected by conflict and militant activities. This involves enhancing intelligence sharing, improving border security, and supporting counter-terrorism initiatives. Regional security cooperation can also be strengthened by involving neighboring countries in security dialogues and joint operations to ensure a safe environment for CPEC operations.

**b. Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Developing effective conflict resolution mechanisms is essential for managing disputes related to CPEC. Establishing a regional conflict resolution body or arbitration panel can help address grievances and disputes amicably. This body should include representatives from participating countries and have the authority to mediate conflicts and propose solutions that respect the interests of all stakeholders.

### 4. Fostering People-to-People Connectivity

**a. Expand Cultural and Educational Exchanges:** The success of CPEC hinges on strong people-to-people ties. Expanding cultural, educational, and professional exchanges can enhance mutual understanding and cooperation. Programs that facilitate student exchanges, cultural festivals, and collaborative research projects can help build lasting relationships among countries. Offering scholarships and creating opportunities for students from CPEC countries to study in partner nations can promote cultural integration and mutual respect.

**b. Promote Tourism and Social Interactions:** Encouraging tourism along the CPEC routes can boost economic activity and foster cultural exchange. Developing tourism infrastructure and promoting cross-border tourism initiatives can help people from different regions interact and build positive relationships. Social interactions through

joint events, community projects, and cultural exchanges can strengthen interpersonal bonds and support regional harmony.

### 5. Leveraging Technological and Technical Collaboration

**a. Facilitate Technology Transfer:** CPEC should promote the transfer of technology and expertise between China and participating countries. Technical collaboration in fields such as infrastructure development, energy, and agriculture can drive innovation and improve regional capabilities. Establishing technology hubs and innovation centers along the corridor can support research and development and help local industries adopt advanced technologies.

**b. Invest in Skill Development:** To maximize the benefits of CPEC, investing in skill development programs is crucial. Training programs and vocational education initiatives should be implemented to enhance the skills of the workforce in participating countries. This will ensure that local populations can effectively engage in and benefit from the economic opportunities created by CPEC projects.

### 6. Ensuring Environmental Sustainability

**a. Implement Green Technologies:** CPEC projects should incorporate green technologies and practices to minimize environmental impact. Adopting sustainable construction methods, investing in renewable energy sources, and implementing waste management systems can help reduce the ecological footprint of CPEC infrastructure. Environmental impact assessments should be conducted for all major projects to ensure that they meet sustainability standards.

**b. Promote Environmental Awareness:** Raising awareness about environmental issues among local communities and stakeholders is essential for the long-term success of CPEC. Environmental education programs and community engagement initiatives can help promote sustainable practices and ensure that development projects align with environmental conservation goals.

### 7. Monitoring and Evaluation

**a. Establish Monitoring Mechanisms:** Regular monitoring and evaluation of CPEC projects are essential to assess their progress and impact. Developing a comprehensive monitoring

framework that includes performance indicators, stakeholder feedback, and impact assessments can help identify challenges and opportunities for improvement. Transparent reporting and accountability mechanisms should be in place to ensure that projects achieve their intended outcomes.

**b. Foster Stakeholder Engagement:** Engaging stakeholders, including local communities, businesses, and government agencies, in the planning and implementation of CPEC projects is crucial for their success. Stakeholder consultations and participatory approaches can help address concerns, gather insights, and ensure that projects meet the needs and expectations of all involved parties.

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