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Abstract: *This article offers a critical analysis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a ‘flagship’ project under the auspices of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – in terms of its bifurcated identity as an infrastructure-led development strategy as well as a geopolitical quinestre. Located at the intersection of regional connectivity and strategic recalibration, CPEC provides a useful case of how the materiality and modality of such mega-scale transnational infrastructure projects constrain national development pathways and impact upon regional power dynamics. Based on the theoretical perspectives of neorealist and soft power, this paper analyses the multi-dimensional dimensions of CPEC in terms of its economic, political, and security consequences for Pakistan and the greater South Asian region. Methodologically, the study is informed by a qualitative content analysis of secondary data, in particular policy papers from government sources, peer reviewed literature, and other reputable news sources. The results show that CPEC has made remarkable contributions to Pakistan’s energy infrastructure and transportation networks, while presenting serious challenges to issues of debt sustainability, environmental degradation, and regional disparity. Further, CPEC has increased regional geo-political rivalry, particularly vis-a-vis India, and geopolitically consolidated China only-Pakistan nexus leading to a rearrangement in the regional security architecture. The paper argues that the CPEC’s victory in the long-run depends on its offering of all-in-including, transparent and eco-friendly development and also to remain diplomatic balance against ever-contested geopolitical environment.*

Introduction

The BRI, also known as the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road Development Strategy, was proposed in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping to re-awaken the ancient Silk Road and to stimulate regional integration and world interconnectedness (Wikipedia, 2025). The BRI, as one of the most ambitious international infrastructure plans ever envisaged, aims to drive investment in roads, railway projects, ports, and energy infrastructure from Asia to Europe and to Africa and beyond, with an expected investment over US\$1trillion (Investopedia, 2018; Time, 2018). Although China presents BRI as a model for multilateral collaborative development and mutual prosperity, in the eyes of many observers, BRI is a strategic economic statecraft of building its power through geo-economics (Lindley, 2022; CFR, 2024).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a network of infrastructure projects, is one of several corridors under the ambit of BRI, which is commonly viewed as a flagship of the BRI, linking China's Xinjiang province to Gwadar Port in Pakistan, through energy, transportation and industrial infrastructure (Research Gate, 2025). Under CPEC, China has funded and built numerous power projects, road infrastructure, and special economic zones with promises to transform its economy by ending its long-standing energy crisis, and to spark industrial growth (Columbia University Centre on Global Energy Policy, 2018).

But beyond the prospective economic gains, CPEC has raised serious risks in three important areas: debt, environment and strategic ramification. Critics first highlight that repayment of BRI and flagship corridor debts may burden host countries with debt they cannot service, rendering them fiscally susceptible to China's economic leverage or even under its control, a practice the label "debt-trap diplomacy" conjures violating countries' sovereignties (Aid Data et al., 2023; Columbia University, 2018). Chinese creditors lent overwhelmingly in the form of sovereign guarantees, and the effect on Pakistan's debt is under dispute in the global debt renegotiations still unfolding (Time, 2023; Columbia University, 2018). On the one hand, environmental and social sustainability questions have been triggered, notably because CPEC's energy mix remains skewed towards dirty fossil fuels (mostly coal), leaving open the possibility of domestic pollution and green—house gas emissions (Columbia University, 2018; Scopus journal, 2025). Third, CPEC is considered geopolitically important that causes anxiety in regional capitals, such as New Delhi and Islamabad, concerns about loss of sovereignty, security vulnerabilities and changes in regional power equation (New Yorker, 2018; Research Gate, 2025).

In this article, we frame CPEC within the theoretical lenses of neorealism and soft power to reveal dualities embedded within its narratives—economic development versus strategic tool to gain influence in South Asia. We use qualitative empirical methods, including policy discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, and a thematic content analysis of secondary literature, to consider how China wields economic power and how Pakistan and its neighbours respond to the changing terrain. In analyzing the tension between CPEC's economic, strategic, and sustainability goals, this article makes a contribution to the scholarly discussions about China's deployment of infrastructure diplomacy under BRI, and also provides policymakers with ideas for how regional actors may be able to strike a balance between the potential of development opportunities and long-term economic, environmental and security costs. The findings also add to the continuing discourse on the interplay of sustainable infrastructure investment in developing countries in a state of geopolitical flux.

Literature Review

The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed in 2013 are developing as a game-changer across the world, and it has significant implications for world's economy, politics and regional development. At the centre of this effort is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a showpiece of China's strategic aspiration to enhance its influence in South Asia even as it delivers to Pakistan much-sought after infrastructure. Drawing on relevant academic debates and empirical work on CPEC, this literature review discusses strategic basis and economic consequences of CPEC as well as the geopolitical implications; and neorealist and soft power approaches that provide an account of its trajectory.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) needs to be contextualized in the wider strategic calculus that drives the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China. Many analysts see CPEC as a bid to address China's so-called "Malacca Dilemma," shorthand for Beijing's worry about the vulnerability of its sea lines of communication through the Strait of Malacca to the control or blockading of foreign navies (Rolland, 2017; Wolf, 2019). Linking Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port, CPEC provides China a land-based route that circumvents potential chokepoints and enhances its energy security while bolstering its strategic freedom in maritime politics.

There are also domestic imperatives for China that CPEC fulfils. (P. 393) Thus, as Small (2015) argues, that developing Xinjiang's economy with international trade routes through Pakistan is intended to economically tether this restive Muslim dominated province to the Chinese economic clout and thereby help check the influence of separatist impulses. Furthermore, by enhancing connectivity and the energy-security infrastructure, CPEC provides China better access to Middle Eastern markets and deepens its

military and political association with Pakistan.

Pakistan sees it as a “game changer” and an economic saviour. It will help overcome long-standing energy shortages and will promote economic development and establish Pakistan as the new hub of trans-regional trade (Javaid & Jahangir, 2021). The corridor is also strategically employed by the Pakistani state to justify authority assertions and capture peripheral areas, notably Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that have been subject to developmental and political marginalization (Ali, 2019). Thus, the story of CPEC is as much about national advancement as it is about state-building and internal unity. The economic aspects of CPEC have been received with mixed feelings of excitement and scepticism. On the one hand, huge investments in roads, power and industrial zones have rejuvenated important sectors of Pakistan’s economy. Academics such as Hussain (2019) and Rana and Sial (2020) chronicle power supply improvements, motorway construction and improvements to Gwadar Port, all of which have improved connectivity and increased the country’s integration with regional and global trade. Javeed (2016) proposes that these developments could also serve to diversify Pakistan’s export base and to attract foreign investment, especially in logistics and manufacturing. Yet this optimism has been dampened by increasing apprehensions regarding financial viability and distributive implications of CPEC. Opponents claim that most of the infrastructure projects are funded by high-interest Chinese borrowings which may result in further escalation of Pakistan’s external debt burden in the long run (Ramay, 2020). This is especially alarming, considering Pakistan’s repeated balance of payments crisis situations and the reliance on IMF bailouts.

Furthermore, the financial gains of CPEC seem to be disproportionate. The tenders are given under non-competitive conditions (TNE) for Chinese companies, thus restraining local companies from participating, not allowing technology transfer or local knowledge transfer (Wolf, 2019). Further, the denial of opportunity for local labour and cottage-level industries makes the poor and unemployable a majority against the masses. Yousafzai et al. (2021) stress that in the absence of policies that ensure equitable sharing in Pakistan; CPEC can exacerbate regional disparities while breeding political resistance in underdeveloped provinces.

Security fears have always loomed large over the CPEC programme, especially as the corridor goes through politically unstable and war-torn areas. Baluchistan, in particular, has experienced attacks by separatist groups on Chinese engineers, security personnel, and project locations, which regard CPEC as an intrusive form of development that side-lines local concerns and depletes regional resources (Shah, 2021). Such incidents represent the tenuous nature of state control over the peripheries and a reminder that development is inextricably linked to local grievances and insurgent mobilization.

In reaction, the Pakistani state has established dedicated security battalions and formations (most notably, the SSD – c ed) which are responsible for the protection of CPEC-assets and personnel (Rakisits, 2020). But militarization has also sown resentment among the local populace, further deepening feelings of alienation and heavy-handed rule. This securitization of development inside Pakistan ripens its instability and calls the question of legitimacy to externally funded mega-projects.

Outwardly, India’s opposition to CPEC continues to be a chronic geopolitical fault line. New Delhi has lodged its primary complaint about the corridor’s route through Gilgit-Baltistan, which it has variously claimed over the years as part of the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. Some scholars have maintained that this territorial sensitivity has raised the stakes for Sino-Indian relations, resulting in a regional security dilemma defined by escalation of armed deployment on the border and strategic competition (Pant, 2017; Joshi, 2019). CPEC has strategic implications for the broader strategic architecture of South Asia. The corridor cements China’s strategic architecture in the sea around the Arabian Peninsula, providing the country a direct link to the Middle East and Africa, avoiding the usual choke points, such as the Strait of Malacca. Iqbal (2020) -B further notes that this constitutes an increasing China’s maritime security while providing Pakistan with strategic leverage against India. Pakistan also hopes to emerge as a regional hub for connectivity and logistics under CPEC.

Yet, this growing Sino-Pak axis has caused concern among regional and world powers. India sees CPEC, like the United States and Japan, as a component of China’s grand plan of economic and military dominance, or what some analysts term “strategic containment” (Singh 2021). These fears have

prompted counter initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) to balance China's growing clout in the region.

Comparative viewpoints inform us that CPEC's geopolitical competition is not unprecedented. Similar strains have been visible in other BRI-participating countries including Sri Lanka, if less intense (in and around its Hambantota Port) and Myanmar, where anxiety over sovereignty and environmental degradation—as with the Myitsone Dam—has raised opposition to Chinese-funded projects (Grare, 2021). These parallels point to a repeated chapter of contestation whenever Chinese strategic infrastructure meets sensitive political terrain.

Environmental and social sustainability issues are emerging as important factors in assessment of CPEC. While the program represented a much-needed infrastructure boost, the environmental toll has been significant. Many of CPEC's early-phase energy projects are coal projects, resulting in higher levels of carbon and local pollutants, and contrary to Pakistan's international climate commitments (Shah, 2019). Notwithstanding China's self-claimed shift towards green BRI projects, the energy mix in Pakistan through CPEC is predominantly carbon-intensive.

No less urgent are concerns around displacement, land grabbing and minimal consultations with impacted communities. Yousafzai et al. (2021) report loss of income and insufficient compensation among people living in focal development areas including those in Baluchistan. Ali's (2019) work on the CPEC also describes how the top-down approach towards governance of the CPEC subordinates local rights and inclusivity to central government and Chinese interests.

The limited participatory instruments and low environmental standards may not only question the sustainability of CPEC projects, but also the potential long-run social acceptance. If the problems coming to light are not resolved this could undermine public backing and cause civil unrest - threatening the initiative as a whole.

From a neorealist perspective, CPEC is an example of strategic balancing. In Waltz's (1979) theory, states act according to relative power and insecurity, and CPEC serves China's grand strategy by hedging against external pressures by the United States in Indo-Pacific (Mearsheimer, 2001). By edging towards China, Pakistan intends to challenge Indian dominance and to maintain strategic balance in the region (Iqbal 2020).

Nye (2004) soft power theory is also useful to explain China's BRI, including CPEC. Through developmental investment and as a generous partner in the economic sphere, China attempts to win hearts and hands and, of course, greater diplomatic bargaining power. However, as critics, such as Sidaway and Woon (2019) argue, soft power is also contestable to the extent that local populations view such investments as new forms of (neo) colonialism or reveal them as opaque.

However, some gaps still persist in literature. First, research is scant that empirically examines the on-the-ground economic effects of CPEC at sub-provincial scales or the district level. Second, there is a need for greater interdisciplinary research to intertwine the environmental, social and technological pathways of infrastructure-led development. 3.4; lastly, the long-term evaluations of debt, trade volume, and regional connectivity implications are still rather rudimentary as CPEC projects are relatively new.

Research Objectives

1. To critically analyse the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the broader framework of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on its strategic, economic, and geopolitical significance.
2. To evaluate the socio-economic and environmental impacts of CPEC on Pakistan, with particular attention to regional disparities, debt sustainability, and stakeholder inclusivity.
3. To assess the regional security implications of CPEC, especially its influence on India-Pakistan-China relations, using neorealism and soft power as guiding theoretical frameworks.

Methodology

This research uses an in-depth case study approach to explore the geopolitical, economic and strategic aspects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Case study methodology enables an in-depth investigation of CPEC as a bounded yet dynamic

instance of international cooperation driven by global and regional specifics. The information was gathered from a detailed review of secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, government 'white papers', think-tank reports and quality news media.

The analytic framework is based on international relation theories, especially neorealism, and soft power. Neorealism provides a baseline for evaluating state behaviour, power balancing, and strategic interest, and soft power theory serves as an interpretation framework for the diplomatic and developmental narratives linked to CPEC. A thematic content analysis was performed to structure and digest the data in terms of different dimensions – strategic fit, economic consequences, regional security, and governance issues. This methodological framework allows for a critical examination of how CPEC works as an economic initiative and a geopolitical tool in South Asia.

Findings

The analysis demonstrates three main findings about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that draw attention to the nuances of economic development, strategic diplomacy, and regional contestations.

Infrastructure and Economic Benefits:

CPEC: Whirlwind of change in Pakistan's infrastructure horizon there is a drastic change in Pakistan's horizon after CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) has made its presence felt. The construction of mega-highway and railway projects – including the increased capacity of the Karakoram Highway and the construction of the Lahore–Karachi Motorway – have reduced both travel time and logistical costs, while also increasing domestic trade (Javaid & Jahangir, 2021). The growth of the energy sector, especially in coal, hydro and solar power plants, has choked off electricity shortages in industrial hubs such as Lahore, Faisalabad and Karachi (Hussain, 2019). Moreover, the upgrading of Gwadar Port makes it a future transshipment hub in the region.

Even with these gains, the benefits are distributed unequally. Lagging, underdeveloped peripheries like Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, areas that are strategically crucial to the physical geography of CPEC, have seen little in the way of socioeconomic payback. Local communities have raised issues of land dispossession, resource extraction without local gains and lack of jobs (Ali, 2019; Yousafzai, et al., 2021). And the opacity around project selection and financing has only increased local scepticism.

Asymmetries of Partner Dynamics:

Operational aspects of CPEC have been predominantly handled by Chinese companies, who have also been given preferential bidding, tax breaks and freedom to operate (Wolf, 2019). This has restricted the participation of Pakistani firms and workers in both construction and supply chains. Numerous local manufacturers contend that they cannot compete with Chinese firms that are heavily subsidized (Ramay, 2020) leading to opportunities of scaling up and integration of the local economy being forgone.

In addition, the governance of CPEC has frequently marginalized important local stakeholders, especially in communities affected by environmental and social disruption due to projects. Such failures on the part of the central government in adequate consultations with provincial governments and local communities have created resistance, particularly in the port city of Gwadar, where residents have demonstrated against water scarcity, unemployment, and limitations on their use of the port (Ali 2019). These developments exacerbate fears that elites are driving decision-making and reliance on China is increasing, threatening overall economic sovereignty.

Regional Geopolitical Tensions:

CPEC's political geographic centrality in Gilgit-Baltistan has been fiercely criticized by India, who sees the initiative as encroaching its territorial sovereignty. This tilt has been central in India's foreign policy towards Pakistan and China, contributing to increased tensions along disputed borders and episodes of military crises, including the 2020 Galwan Valley standoff (Pant, 2017; Joshi, 2019).

In retaliation, India has redoubled its regional counter-moves, increasing its role in Iran's Chabahar Port and pursuing investments in north–south trade corridors. These measures are part of a broader Indo-Pacific approach that coincides with U.S. and Japanese interests in checking China's power. Western observers are coming to see CPEC, not merely as a development project, but as one of the key nodes in

the Chinese global trade routes and the strategy of regional domination by Beijing in the long term (Iqbal, 2020; Singh, 2021). The creeping securitization of construction in South Asia betrays the corridor's dual nature, held up on one hand as an economic opportunity and, on the other, as a strategic liability.

Discussion

The results contribute to a more extensive reading of CPEC as a mode of economic translational practice and geopolitical project situated within the logic of international struggle for power. By aligning CPEC with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it serves not only development objectives but is also a conscious re-calibration of where trade routes run and further leverages geostrategic advantage. From a neorealist perspective, as the state behaves in terms of relative power and survival, China's investment in CPEC is a strategic balancing act. It checks the country's exposure at the Malacca Strait, and provides an alternative entry point to the Indian Ocean through Pakistan, thus decreasing dependence on maritime routes vulnerable to US and ally naval geostrategic containment. (Mearsheimer, 2001; Rolland, 2017). Pakistan's deepening alignment and integration with China serves as a counterweight to Chinese regional influence while acting as a hedge in a world system increasingly defined by its polarization (Iqbal, 2020).

But the narrative being built around CPEC has very clear developmental challenges. Even as macro-level infrastructure improvements and inflow of foreign investments are touted by the Federal authorities, subnational discrepancies persist. Other neglected provinces of Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, while strategically located on CPEC's map, remain excluded from decision-making forums and receive few material benefits from the project. Protests and resistance movements in Gwadar from the everydayness of water shortage, lack of public services and economic marginalisation are an epitome of the disconnect between policy-talk and its lived practice (Ali, 2019; Shah, 2019). Such discontent endangers the social license of CPEC projects and challenges the inclusiveness of Pakistan's development model.

Second, from a soft power standpoint, when infrastructure projects are viewed as rights-violating or sovereignty-impinging, then China's construction of BRI—and therefore CPEC—as a global public good is weakened. Those projects that are powered forth with little local consultation, or with flimsy environmental and social safeguards, tend to produce cynicism rather than good will (Sidaway & Woon, 2019). Soft power, as Nye (2004) suggests: relying on attraction and not on coercion, China's mixed performance in host countries points out the deficiency of economic diplomacy being run without empowerment.

These details illustrate the messy nexus of strategic calculus, state sovereignty and developmental justice in transnational infrastructure projects like CPEC. Country-wise, for China and Pakistan, the success of the corridor in the long run will hinge not only on its economic returns but also on its popular acceptability, environmental impact and its conduct in an order that is becoming more and more contested. The results lend support to a wider understanding of CPEC, which seeks to see the initiative as an instrument of economic change, as a geopolitical response, rooted in the logic of global power rivalry. CPEC coincides with China's Belt and Road Initiative and speaks not just to developmental designs, but also to the strategic intent of re-drawing trade lines and strengthening geostrategic saliency. From the neorealist perspective, where states act according to their relative power and survival, Chinese investment in CPEC is a strategic hedge. It addresses the country's exposure at the Malacca Strait Central choke point and secures an alternative access to the Indian Ocean via Pakistan, thus lessening the reliance on naval communication lines vulnerable to U.S. and allied naval dominance (Mearsheimer, 2001; Rolland, 2017). For Pakistan a full scale embrace of China is an equation of anti-Indian regional primacy and also a hedging strategy in a polarized world (Iqbal 2020).

However, the developmental story sold with CPEC, has come under greater scrutiny. Although macro-level infrastructure expansion and foreign investment inflows are being highlighted by the federal leadership, subnational differences persist. Though Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan are the geostrategic heartland along CPEC's corridor, minimal integration into the CPEC planning regime and low socioeconomic gains persist for these marginalised provinces. Resistance struggles and civil protests in

Gwadar, prompted by water scarcity, lack of public services, and economic marginalisation, highlight the growing discrepancy between official discourse and life reality (Ali, 2019; Shah, 2019). This discontent endangers the social license of CPEC projects and challenges the all-inclusive character of Pakistan's growth model. Second, from a soft power standpoint, China's narrative of BRI—and by extension, CPEC—as a global public good is damaged when infrastructure investments are non-transparent, or viewed as infringing on sovereignty and self-determination. Those are projects done with minimal consultation with local people or where environmental and social safeguards are weak, and they create cynicism not goodwill (Sidaway & Woon, 2019). According to Nye (2004), soft power relies on attraction not coercion, and China's more mixed experience in host countries underscores the shortcomings of economic diplomacy without participatory governance.

These dynamics highlight the intricate interplay of strategic interests, state sovereignty and developmental justice dimensions in transnational infrastructure projects such as CPEC. For China and Pakistan, the prospects for the longevity of this corridor will be drawn by more than just economic dividends, but also by its ability to claim legitimacy among local populations, the damage it does or doesn't deliver to the environment, and how well it can function within a region that is becoming increasingly contested.

Conclusion

The CPEC represents definitely a strategic shift in South Asia, and in many ways, a bold economic pact. It has spurred significant infrastructure projects and regional connectivity for Pakistan, but it also extends China's strategic reach throughout the region. The transformative potential of the project also is mitigated by on-going worries over debt sustainability, environmental destruction, and unfair sharing of the benefits across provinces and stakeholders. The geopolitical dimensions of CPEC have further exacerbated regional tensions with India and catapulted Pakistan into the centre of regional and global games of power. At home, the opaque and exclusive process of decision-making has fuelled suspicion in historically neglected areas. As this analysis demonstrates, CPEC is not just a bilateral economic project, but a strategic instrument with long-term implications. Going forward, its success will hinge on its two partners developing inclusive growth, improving governance and managing the geopolitical tensions that it will undoubtedly produce. Including local interests and promoting transparency is also critical to ensuring the corridor provides long-term, sustainable development.

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