

Internal and External Security Challenges to China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan: An Analysis

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Abstract: *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a mega economic initiative between China and Pakistan not only strengthens bilateral economic ties but it also adds further strength to the already existing strategic partnership between both the regional allies. Despite CPEC's potential to transform the region, it also faces significant internal and external security challenges, in the context of Pakistan, which could impede its progress. This paper investigates into the primary internal security concerns such as: Resurgence of terrorism, unrest in Baluchistan, sectarianism and political and economic woes of Pakistan. This paper also examines external security challenges to CPEC including: China-Pakistan's geopolitical rift with India, China-US Strategic competition and Afghanistan's volatile security. The paper recommends the need of a holistic and multi-dimensional strategy to tackle the analyzed security challenges to safeguard CPEC's success as a driver of economic development for both the partner states.*

Keywords: Geopolitical Rift, Strategic Competition, Exploitation, Separatism, Terrorism

Introduction

China and Pakistan has a strong historic bilateral relationship marked by early diplomatic recognition, long-term trade ties and further strengthened by the ground-breaking China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a major project meant at firming economic bonds and improving connectivity between China and Pakistan. It is an important component and a pilot project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and involves an investment of over \$62 billion (Haider, 2023). CPEC includes several infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and energy pipelines to lift trade and economic development. It promises extensive economic dividends not only for the two countries but also for the entire region. Serving as a connectivity bridge, it will provide China access to the Middle East and Africa and as a key part of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative; it aims to revive the ancient Silk Route (Kennedy & Parker, 2015). Furthermore, Gwadar, a main boundary of the Silk Road Economic Belt, is central to CPEC providing China a strategic shortcut for energy imports and access to the Indian Ocean. Located near the Strait of Hormuz, it offers a significantly shorter route for oil transport than the Malacca Strait and strengthens China and Pakistan's strategic presence in the Arabian Sea, raising regional concerns, particularly from India. Gwadar may also serve as a vital hub for Middle Eastern and Central Asian oil and gas, with infrastructure linking it to China's Xinjiang region significantly reducing transport distances (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015).

The idea of joining Gwadar and China initiated with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf in 2006, later growing into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, recommended by Chinese leaders Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang (Kennedy & Parker, 2015). Hence, CPEC, a critical part of China's OBOR initiative, aims to generate a major land and sea gateway, strengthen strategic ties, and boost trade, providing economic recovery and long-term benefits for both nations (Hali, Shukui, & Iqbal, 2014). Although the project presents a win-win opportunity for Pakistan and China, its success depends on significant challenges including corruption, political instability, weak infrastructure, terrorism, militancy, and the impulsive circumstances in Baluchistan, together with the pressure to meet timelines due to extensive Chinese investments (Siddiqui, 2019). Besides these internal challenges, Pakistan's external security challenges in the context of CPEC are regional geopolitical competition, balancing US-China rivalry, instability in Afghanistan posing significant hurdles for the multi-billion-dollar CPEC project (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). The paper is divided in the following main sections: 1) Internal Security Challenges to CPEC, 2) External Security Challenges to CPEC, 3) Recommendations and 4) Conclusion.

1. Internal Security Challenges to CPEC

The internal security challenges facing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are very important to understanding the wider impacts of this important development project. Although CPEC to address most of Pakistan's economic woes, it also faces major security challenges that could delay the project's execution. These concerns are closely connected to the resurgence of terrorism, economic instability and political unrest in Pakistan. Additionally, the intersection of insurgency, terrorism, and local resistance poses serious threats to the security of CPEC initiatives highlighting the requirement for effective governance and significant community engagement to address the core causes of unrest. Examining and understanding these internal security challenges is vital for devising policies to reduce security risks and create a more secure and conducive environment for the execution of CPEC. Some of the major internal security challenges; from Pakistan's perspective, like the resurgence of terrorism, unrest in Baluchistan, sectarianism, political instability and economic woes of Pakistan are discussed as under.

1.1 Resurgence of Terrorism

Terrorism remains a significant threat in Pakistan, with groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) targeting both state interests and foreign nationals (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). The revival of militant activity after the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan has raised concerns about escalating cross-border terrorism impacting CPEC projects. Recent attacks on Chinese nationals emphasize the critical need for stronger security measures to safeguard foreign workers involved in infrastructure development. For instance, Chinese nationals targeted by terrorist and insurgent groups, with notable incidents including the March 26 attack on engineers in Shangla, the 2021 Dasu bus attack that killed nine Chinese engineers and the 2022 attack on Karachi University's Confucius Institute (Ahmad, 2024). These attacks have disrupted CPEC projects and prompted China to reassess its involvement and security of Chinese engaged in Pakistan in CPEC related projects. CPEC envisions the linkage of Gwadar in Pakistan's Baluchistan to Kashgar in Xinjiang and due to the volatile security situation in Baluchistan, China is highly concerned about the security of the entire corridor, particularly Gwadar. Despite numerous military operations across Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan regions, terrorist networks still exist both within and outside the country's borders posing significant security risks. Some analysts point towards the involvement of foreign intelligence agencies to fuel terrorism in Pakistan for their own interests. According to a study, American CIA, Israeli Mossad, and Indian Intelligence agencies have reportedly supported militant groups and sub-nationalists in various provinces, fueling subversive activities and using terrorism to disrupt the Pak-China efforts to develop CPEC (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). However, China's investment in CPEC has upgraded Pakistan's economy by generating jobs and improving

infrastructure but security risks and China's dissatisfaction with Pakistan's protection of Chinese nationals could lead to reduced investment, worsening Pakistan's economic instability and debt crisis (Ahmad, 2024). The recent resurgence of terrorism in Pakistan's ex FATA and the adjacent southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is also viewed by the local communities in the context of broader international efforts to create maximum hurdles in the way of successful implementation of CPEC. The global China-US rivalry and the sudden Taliban take over in Afghanistan provide framework to understand the new wave of terrorist resurgence in the tribal areas of Pakistan and their adjacent districts.

1.2 Unrest in Baluchistan

Baluchistan is strategically located and territorially the largest province of Pakistan endowed with natural resources like gas and minerals. Since Pakistan's independence and the merger of the Baloch areas with the state of Pakistan, this area has remained troubled and the center-province political relations have not been smooth. This political unrest has had different negative implications including strengthening of feelings of exclusion, deprivation among the Baloch ethnic group of the province. The Baloch along with Pashtuns are the two major ethnic groups of the province. The Baloch population is less integrated with the state in comparison to the Pashtuns residing in the province. Consequently, the historical political unrest in the province have provided ground for different militant organizations in the province active mainly in the Baloch areas having aspirations ranging from separatism, secessionism to greater Baluchistan. In this context, different narratives revolve around CPEC in the case of Baluchistan. The government projects CPEC as a game changer for the underdeveloped and impoverished province. Whereas, the opposing voices in the local population reject the claim of government and regard the project as an extension of the ongoing historic structural exploitation of the province to the disadvantage of the local Baloch populace. This local narrative has strengthened the appeal of the insurgents active in the province with the aim to create hurdles for the execution of CPEC so that the project fails. This discussion provides a framework to understand attacks on CPEC infrastructure and on those workers, including Chinese engineers, active in building and executing the CPEC infrastructure.

As discussed, the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan is a complicated and broad conflict fueled by past grievances, demands for separatism, and concerns over the exploitation of local resources, especially with the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The Baloch people living in a resource-rich but underdeveloped province feel excluded from the benefits of their natural resources. Baluchistan; territorially the biggest province in Pakistan, is the least developed and contributes the least to the national economy, with terrorism, ethnic conflicts and violence slowing down its progress and development (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). The Baloch insurgency is a major challenge to the stability of CPEC. Chinese nationals and interests in Pakistan are mainly targeted by Baloch separatist groups, particularly the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which opposes CPEC, claiming that China exploits local resources without benefiting the local population (Ahmad, 2024).

The broad nature of the unrest in Baluchistan and the existing negative local narratives regarding CPEC cannot be and should not be ignored as it would have important implications for both the success and failure of the project. The Pakistani government needs to initiate a broad-based political process to allay the genuine concerns of the local Baloch population regarding CPEC. This will not only be helpful in supporting the successful execution of CPEC but it will also be important for countering the anti-CPEC narratives propagated by separatist and militant organizations active in the area.

1.3 Sectarianism: A Contributing Factor to CPEC's Insecurity

Sectarianism in Pakistan has intensified since 1980s resulting in widening the divide between the Sunni and Shia population in different parts of the country. This issue affects those areas where both the communities form a considerable number of the population. The case of district Kurram in former

FATA and Gilgit Baltistan in the northern areas of Pakistan can be taken in this regard. Sectarian violence in such areas is a recurrent phenomenon with a pause and volatile intervals of peace in between. Contemporary clashes between Sunni and Shia groups in Kurram district have left around 150 dead in recent months causing about 300 families to escape to safer places like Hangu and Peshawar (Agence France-Presse, 2024). Sectarian tensions in district Kurram have worsened, with armed clashes between the Alizai and Bagan tribes leading to the destruction of shops, houses, and government property (Khan, 2024).

The Sectarian divisions and conflicts do not seem to be directly having security implications for CPEC. However, indirectly this divide adds to the volatility of security situation in Pakistan. Having conducive security environment is important for the execution and utilizing CPEC to its optimum. Therefore, the security challenges cannot be compartmentalized and completely delinked from each other. A writer, therefore, is of the view that Pakistan's widespread insecurity, militancy, and violence pose significant risks to the construction of the CPEC, the severity and nature of these threats vary across different regions (Sial, 2014).

1.4 Political Instability and Economic Woes of Pakistan

Political stability and the soundness of a state's economy are important prerequisites and preconditions to execute mega projects successfully and timely. In the context of Pakistan, the persistent political instability has created an environment of uncertainty not only for the local investors and businesses but also at macro level it is having repercussions for the execution of CPEC. Historically, Pakistan has experienced several transitions between democratic and military governments, with political instability remaining a persistent challenge. However, recently, there has been a period of continuous democracy for nearly 15 years. Political parties in Pakistan often change their stances on national issues which can lead to tensions between federal and provincial governments over minor matters. Factors contributing to these disparities include disagreements on route alignment, underdeveloped Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and a lack of provincial involvement in decision-making bodies and working groups. Political parties such as the Awami National Party (ANP) and Baloch nationalist political parties have expressed opposition to CPEC despite government assurances that the initiative would benefit all provinces (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015).

Similarly, economic concerns in Pakistan, particularly those connected to CPEC, present significant risks to the project's viability. Baluchistan, home to CPEC's Gwadar Port, is an obvious example. Despite its abundant natural resources, the province has long been overlooked, with most CPEC advantages flowing to neighboring regions. This gap has produced deep-seated anger among the local people, who feels excluded from the economic prospects that CPEC promises (IANS, 2024). Many residents see CPEC as a continuation of previous exploitation rather than an honest attempt of improving their community. For example, while tremendous investments are made in infrastructure and development projects, regional labor remains mostly ignored, with positions frequently going to persons from neighboring provinces or even Chinese nationals (Baloch, Zaman, & Achackzai, 2023). Furthermore, Baluchistan faces severe poverty, water scarcities, poor education with millions of children out of school, inadequate healthcare, high maternal death rates, and widespread hepatitis B and C which could lead to more radicalization and extremism in a society (Siddiqui, 2019).

In addition to these internal challenges, the external security challenges faced by CPEC, from Pakistan's perspective, are discussed in the following section.

2. External Security Challenges to CPEC

CPEC also faces some significant external security challenges, including China-Pakistan's geopolitical rift with India, China-US strategic competition, Afghanistan's volatile security. These challenges are discussed as under.

2.1 China-Pakistan's Geopolitical Rift with India

Since gaining independence, Pakistan and India have had a tense relationship. India has often been accused of trying to disrupt Pakistan's peace and progress. The Kashmir dispute remains the 'unfinished agenda' of the subcontinent's partition and fuels the rivalry between the two nations. Pakistan sees Kashmir as its 'jugular vein', while India claims it as an 'integral part'. The two states have fought three wars over this issue. Additionally, Indian authorities have consistently been reluctant to fully accept the partition of the subcontinent (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). Therefore, India objects to CPEC as its route crosses the disputed Kashmir region, which India claims as its sovereign territory, intensifying tensions with Pakistan (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). Moreover, India has argued that the project (CPEC) crosses Gilgit-Baltistan which is also a part of Indian-claimed territories (Iqbal, 2017). Also, India fears that CPEC's operation through Gilgit-Baltistan could internationalize the Kashmir dispute, which it insists is a bilateral issue with Pakistan (Aamir, 2020). Furthermore, another reason for India's opposition to CPEC is the fear that it is part of China's strategy to boost Pakistan's economy and counter India's economic growth (Aamir, 2020). In addition, India is also concerned that China could use Gwadar Port for military purposes and is defying CPEC by developing Chabahar Port in Iran as a substitute trade route (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). India invested \$100 million in Chabahar Port, just 175 kilometers from Gwadar, aiming to counter CPEC's success; however, U.S. sanctions on Iran reduced Chabahar's development which results in boosting Gwadar's importance, including its use for Afghan transit trade (Aamir, 2020).

There is no doubt that India is dissatisfied and is generating every hurdle possible to reduce the benefits of this project. Pakistan, on its part, has accused India of undermining CPEC though supporting insurgents and militant groups in the province of Baluchistan. For instance, in 2016, Pakistani forces caught Indian spy Kulbhushan Jadhav, who self-confessed to working for RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) to weaken Pakistan by supporting insurgent groups, inflaming unrest, and funding the Baloch independence movement (Geo News, 2017). Hence, CPEC faces a significant security challenges due to China-Pakistan's geopolitical rifts and regional competition with India.

2.2 China-US Strategic Competition

China's emergence and rise as a major power fears the United States leading to an economic battle with trade tariffs that have deteriorated their relationship. Trade clashes between the United States and China have been marked since 2011, as the trade deficit in China's favor developed from \$273.1 billion to a record \$295.5 billion, but tensions intensified after Donald Trump's 2016 presidential election campaign with the slogan 'Make America Great Again' (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). Therefore, the US-China strategic rivalry is affecting South Asia's political dynamics, with Pakistan firming bonds with China through CPEC, while the US invests in India making it harder for Pakistan to maintain a balanced relationship with both powers (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). CPEC is a key part of China's strategy to reduce U.S. influence by building trade routes and infrastructure, making countries dependent on China through debt, which gives China power over them and limits their support for U.S.-led efforts (Elmali, 2024). Therefore, US has taken a stricter strategy to CPEC as part of its rivalry with China including putting Pakistan on the FATF 'grey list', whereas China claims CPEC is only meant to lift regional economic growth (Rehman & Mingjin, 2024). Hence, CPEC increases China's influence in South Asia, stimulating U.S. interests in stability, security, and trade, leading the U.S. to react with alternative projects, chasing CPEC's progress, and addressing human rights concerns in Baluchistan (Elmali, 2024).

2.3 Afghanistan's Volatile Security

Harmony and financial stability are mutually linked and inter-related. Long-term economic development, trade and prosperity all require peace and stability. Afghanistan's political situation is also very important for CPEC since it has regional consequences and Pakistan's security has suffered

as a result of Afghanistan's unrest since 1979. Since the 1979 Soviet-Afghan war, Pakistan has accommodated millions of Afghan refugees with 1.38 million registered by the UNHCR and over a million unregistered, placing a major pressure on Pakistan's economy (Hashim, 2018).

Afghanistan has been in conflict for over forty years, with internal power struggles and global involvement, and the Taliban's return to power in 2021 has worsened its already difficult relationship with Pakistan (Abbas & Masood, 2024). Moreover, the Tehreek Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has increased attacks on CPEC projects and Chinese interests in Pakistan including a 2021 bombing in Quetta, and continues to operate with Afghan Taliban's support regardless of Pakistan's efforts to push them into Afghanistan (Notezai, 2021).

The Taliban's resurgence has turned Afghanistan into a hub for extremist groups including the TTP and Baloch insurgents posing significant threats to Chinese nationals and infrastructure in Pakistan (Abbas & Masood, 2024). Since 2021, Pakistan has experienced a surge in terrorism and has repeatedly urged the Taliban to prevent militant groups from using Afghan territory as a base for operations (TRT World Research Centre, 2024). Achieving regional stability is crucial for ensuring the success of CPEC and broader economic goals.

In the following section, the paper presents some recommendations which may have positive effects for the successful execution of CPEC.

3. Recommendations

The successful accomplishment of CPEC is important to tackling the multiple security challenges that have evolved in recent years. Both the discussed internal and external challenges pose serious obstacles to CPEC's ambitious economic program seeking to promote regional growth and improve regional integration. Given these complications, a proactive and all-encompassing strategy for security is necessary to protect CPEC infrastructure and foster confidence among regional stakeholders and local communities. Strategic actions that Pakistani authorities can take are outlined in the following recommendations:

- i. The government has made significant development in increasing security for Chinese nationals through measures like as the Special Security Division (SSD), which employs hundreds of armed soldiers to secure CPEC sites (Saeed, 2024). To improve the effectiveness of the Special Security Division (SSD), the division should expand its staff, offer enhanced training, and adopt advanced surveillance technologies. These improvements will allow the SSD to respond more quickly and effectively to security threats, ensuring better protection for critical infrastructure and foreign personnel involved in the CPEC initiative.
- ii. To maximize the benefits of the project and gain more trust from the local community, it is essential to strengthen engagement with the local community especially in Baluchistan. This can be achieved by actively involving locals in decision-making processes, addressing their concerns and ensuring that the project brings tangible benefits to them. Building strong, transparent relationships with the community will not only enhance the project's success and long-term viability but will also foster a sense of ownership and cooperation among local stakeholders.
- iii. For CPEC to succeed, improved relationship between Pakistan and India is important. Both countries should negotiate to create an optimistic environment that benefits regional trade and connectivity. Improvement in this relationship would boost CPEC's effectiveness and stimulate shared infrastructure development in the region. India should recognize CPEC's potential and actively engage in regional collaboration to increase trade and development.
- iv. It is vital to build political consensus within Pakistan on the significance of CPEC for the country's development. An established political setting, where all political groups support the

project, is necessary for the fruitful performance of CPEC initiatives. This political consensus among different stakeholders will help ensure the smooth implementation of CPEC projects.

- v. Pakistan should diplomatically try to forge international partnerships with allies and like-minded regional states having partnerships with China for intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism to support and strengthen overall regional security and stability. This cooperation would help in strengthening regional security frameworks which would indirectly help the timely execution of CPEC in a secure and conducive regional strategic environment.

Conclusion

The analysis of this paper finds that as a pivotal economic project between China and Pakistan, CPEC has a real potential to further strengthen the cordial bilateral relationship between the partner states: China and Pakistan. Due to the enormous economic and geopolitical importance of the project, the paper has explored and analyzed in detail the internal and external security challenges hindering the successful and timely execution of the project. The study finds that a holistic and multipronged strategy is needed by both the partner states of the project in their respective national security and foreign policies to tackle the discussed security challenges faced by CPEC. As the main theater of CPEC's execution, Pakistan needs to be more proactive in its foreign policy to counter the anti-CPEC narratives emanating from the hostile regional strategic environment. At the domestic front, it is imperative for the Pakistani government to take effective measures to build political consensus around CPEC, as well as implement concrete counter-terrorism measures, both of which are crucial factors in determining the future direction and outcome of the project. If effective measures are taken to address the identified security challenges, CPEC rightly has the potential not only to be a catalyst for economic prosperity for China and Pakistan but also to provide a strong foundation for China's vision of regional connectivity, as outlined in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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