

## EXAMINING HOW CPEC INFLUENCES PAKISTAN'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES AND GLOBAL POWERS

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**Abstract:** CPEC, which is dubbed as the 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)', represents a centre point of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This project is boasted of being pivotal in terms of reshaping the geopolitical dynamics of South Asia and beyond. Since its commencement, CPEC has not only catalysed economic development in Pakistan but also significantly influenced Pakistan's diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries including India, Afghanistan, and Iran, as well as major global powers like China, the United States, and Russia. Considering these notions, this research endeavours to assess the geopolitical implications of CPEC by examining how it has strengthened Sino-Pakistani ties, escalated tensions with India, and altered Pakistan's diplomatic strategies on a global scale. Through an exhaustive literature review and thematic analysis of previous studies and geopolitical reports, this research attempts to explore the multifarious challenges and opportunities that CPEC poses and presents, respectively. The findings highlight the corridor's

potential in redefining regional alliances, drive economic integration, and shift power balances in South Asia, thereby, rendering key insights into the interconnectedness between economic initiatives and geopolitical strategies in the 21st century.

### **Introduction:**

#### **Background of the Study**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is regarded as a flagship project of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa through a network of rails, roads and economic partnerships. Since its inception in the year 2013, CPEC is designed to strengthen economic ties between China and Pakistan by linking Gwadar Port in Pakistan's south-western province of Balochistan with Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province. The corridor encompasses a wide array of projects, including road and rail networks, energy pipelines, special economic zones (SEZs), and various infrastructure developments, all collectively amounting to an estimated investment of over \$60 billion (Abbasi, 2023)

Moreover, when it comes to the strategic importance of CPEC, it cannot be overstated. For China, it offers a shorter and more secure route to the Arabian Sea by reducing its reliance on the vulnerable and congested Strait of Malacca for energy imports and trade. On the other side, for Pakistan, CPEC promises significant economic benefits, including job creation, energy security, and infrastructure development, which are expected to address some of the country's longstanding economic challenges. Taking these perspectives into consideration, this research aims to explore the broader geopolitical implications of the corridor, with a specific focus on how it is influencing Pakistan's relationships with its neighbours and global powers. For this, it is important to provide with a comprehensive analysis of the strategic challenges and opportunities that CPEC presents for the region in general and for Pakistan in particular.

#### **Problem Statement**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is boasted of being one of the most significant components of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by enhancing connectivity and fostering economic cooperation on a global scale. CPEC, which connects China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar port, is not solely an economic endeavour, but it also carries profound geopolitical ramifications. It is important to mention that the development of the corridor has been instrumental in solidifying the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan. Yet, it has sparked considerable concern and opposition from other regional actors, most notably India (Iqbal, 2018). Thus, the key problem underlined in this research is to understand how the strategic imperatives of CPEC are shaping Pakistan's foreign policy and regional alliances amidst a backdrop of growing geopolitical tensions and shifting global power dynamics.

#### **Rationale of the Study**

The purpose for this study is to evaluate the increasingly pivotal role that CPEC plays in South Asian geopolitics. Given its strategic importance, there is an inevitable need to critically assess how CPEC is influencing Pakistan's diplomatic relationships and its position in the global geopolitical arena. This research is significantly relevant at a time when regional tensions are soaring, whereas global powers are re-evaluating their strategies in South Asia in order to consolidate their influence. As a linchpin of China's BRI, CPEC offers unique opportunities through broader geopolitical shifts that are taking place in the region (Studies, 2021). By stressing on the geopolitical dimensions of CPEC, the strategic challenges and opportunities that Pakistan faces can clearly be understood, especially its relationships with its neighbours and global powers. It is also important to re-evaluate Pakistan and China's cooperation in achieving regional integration alongside crucial steps towards a new phase of geo-economic relations.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in a manner that it contributes to the existing body of literature by offering a thorough analysis of the geopolitical implications of CPEC, an aspect that has often been scarcely discussed with respect to its economic and infrastructural aspects. Secondly, the study provides an exhaustive examination of how CPEC is influencing Pakistan's relationships with key regional actors such as India, Afghanistan, and Iran, as well as global powers like China, the United States, and Russia (Khan, 2024). Understanding these elements is indispensable for assessing the broader geopolitical shifts in South Asia and their implications for regional stability and security. More importantly, this research is a blueprint of strategic recommendations to be offered for policymakers in Pakistan and other regional stakeholders on how to effectively overhaul the compounded geopolitical landscape shaped by CPEC. An amalgam of suggestions will be instrumental in enhancing regional cooperation, mitigating potential conflicts, and capitalising on CPEC's potential to nudge economic growth and regional integration.

### **Literature Review**

#### **CPEC and Sino-Pakistani Relations**

Considering the relationship between China and Pakistan, it dates back to the mid-20th century, and since then, both countries have had amicable relations with each other. Initially materialised during the Cold War, this partnership has been driven by mutual-cum-strategic interests. As noted by Khan et al., (2018), both countries appeared to have found common ground in their desire to neutralise or counterbalance India's influence in the region. The early support from China to Pakistan, both economically and militarily, laid a strong foundation for their enduring partnership. In view of Batool (2021), this early support has further strengthened in the recent times, and in spite of the fact that India has serious reservations regarding the route of CPEC, passing through Pakistan-Administered Kashmir over which India holds its claims, China and Pakistan are moving ahead with this project. India considers it to be a concern for India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Such a historical context

has been a lynchpin to their bonhomie, which paved the way for the CPEC project, as it represents a modern extension of this long-standing alliance.

### **Strategic Partnership and CPEC**

The commencement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013 marked a significant milestone in their strategic partnership. CPEC, as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is boasted of enhancing connectivity between China's western regions and the Arabian Sea through Pakistan. In this regard, Ahmed and Qazi (2017) are of the view that CPEC has not only consolidated the strategic partnership between the two nations but also forged Pakistan into China's broader geopolitical and economic strategies. This development showcases China's commitment to further strengthening its influence in South Asia while providing Pakistan with the requisite infrastructure along with economic support.

### **Economic and Military Assistance**

There is no denying the fact that CPEC has further intensified the economic and military cooperation between China and Pakistan. The investments to Pakistan from China under the aegis of CPEC, including major infrastructure projects, reflect a strategic effort to secure a reliable trade route and energy corridor. In this regard, Zhao and Khan (2019) argue that this economic support extends beyond mere financial investment, as it also entails advanced military technology and increased defence collaboration. Such deepened ties have undoubtedly enhanced Pakistan's strategic importance to China and contributed to a stronger bilateral relationship.

### **CPEC's Influence on Pakistan-India Relations**

The reaction from India to CPEC has been one of apprehension, primarily owing to the fact that the corridor passes through the disputed region of Gilgit-Baltistan, which India claims to be its part. As noted by Saran (2018), this route has somehow aggravated existing tensions over Kashmir and challenged India's claims to the territory. The strategic implications of CPEC for India involve not only a potential shift in regional power dynamics but also a direct challenge to its influence in South Asia. The Indian government has been strongly vocal in its criticism by considering CPEC as a threat to its geopolitical interests.

On the other hand, the Kashmir conflict, which is a long-standing territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, has been further complicated by CPEC. Abb (2023) states in his study that the development of infrastructure in Gilgit-Baltistan under CPEC could alter the balance of power in the region. If Pakistan's control over contested areas is further consolidated, it is highly probable that CPEC may impact India's strategic calculations and further heighten regional tensions (Hussain, 2017).

Though CPEC has been a gamechanger for Pakistan as far as its reeling economy and predicated infrastructure is concerned, it has introduced new complexities to the dynamics of regional security. According to Hussain (2019), the development of the corridor has exacerbated rivalries between India and Pakistan by coaxing both countries to adjust their military and diplomatic strategies. In view of Habib (2023) the strategic significance

of the corridor is extensive of bilateral relations, which is affecting the frameworks of broader regional security as well as leading to new flashpoints in South Asia.

### **CPEC and Pakistan's Relations with the United States**

It is considered that CPEC has redefined Pakistan's foreign policy by nudging it closer towards China and furthering it away from its traditional ties with the United States. With regards to it, Khan and Siddiqui (2021) highlight a broader realignment of strategic priorities, with Pakistan increasingly dependent on Chinese investment and support. Such a realignment showcases a significant shift in Pakistan's foreign policy orientation and the repercussions of its relationship with the U.S.

The United States has responded to CPEC with an amalgam of concern and strategic recalibration. Smith (2020) notes that the U.S. views CPEC as part of China's broader strategy to solidify its influence in South Asia. In response, the U.S. has accentuated its diplomatic efforts to alleviate China's growing presence, particularly by strengthening its ties with India and recalibrating its strategic priorities in the region. The U.S. response reflects wider concerns about the implications of CPEC for regional stability and specifically its own strategic interests.

The changing paradigms of CPEC have contributed to a more fatigued relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan. In his study, Ahmed (2021) states how the reduction in U.S. aid and increased emphasis on counter-terrorism efforts have been impacted by Pakistan's growing alignment with China. Such a shift has ensued a realignment of strategic interests, with the U.S. rethinking its approach to Pakistan in light of the changing geopolitical landscape influenced by CPEC.

### **CPEC and Regional Economic Integration**

CPEC has been contributory in enhancing regional economic connectivity by connecting China's western regions with the Arabian Sea and forging closer integration with South Asia. In this regard, Wang and Ali (2018) argue that the corridor facilitates increased trade and investment flows, which are fundamental for regional economic development. Also, the seemingly improved connectivity materialised by CPEC is expected to boost economic cooperation and, ultimately, create new opportunities for trade and investment across the region.

The impact of CPEC on trade and investment in the region is undoubtedly significant, especially when it is highlighted by Zhang and Han (2019) that how the corridor is poised to increase trade volumes and attract foreign investment by benefiting Pakistan's economy and expanding its role in regional trade networks. The development of key infrastructure projects, such as the Gwadar Port, is central to this economic integration that offers new avenues for regional and international trade.

When it comes to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) they were established under CPEC to stimulate industrial growth and attract investment. Latif et al., (2020) discusses how these zones provide a supportive environment for businesses through incentives such as tax breaks and infrastructure development. The

establishment of SEZs is expected to drive industrialization, create jobs, and contribute to Pakistan's economic development by enhancing its industrial base.

### **CPEC and Pakistan's Domestic Challenges**

CPEC offers a heap of economic benefits, which involves infrastructure development, job creation and economic growth. However, there are also significant risks that range from debt sustainability and economic dependency on China. Explored by Hussain et al, (2021), it noted that while CPEC promises considerable economic advantages, it is essential to manage potential challenges to maximize benefits and ensure long-term economic stability. Moreover, the socio-political impact of CPEC within Pakistan includes changes in local communities and political dynamics. Khan and Malik (2021) discuss issues such as land acquisition, environmental concerns and political hostility related to CPEC projects. Thus, with a view to maintaining socio-economic stability, addressing these socio-political challenges so that umpteen benefits emanated from CPEC are equitably distributed across different regions and communities.

Besides, environmental concerns related to CPEC projects involve issues such as land acquisition and potential ecological damage. There is an urgent need for sustainable development practices to mitigate the environmental impact of infrastructure projects (Bhatti, 2020). Also, making certain that the development of CPEC corresponds with environmental protection goals is indispensable for balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability.

### **CPEC's Geopolitical Implications for Global Powers**

It has been understood with the above assessment that CPEC is a key element of China's broader geopolitical strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Hussain et al., (2021) is of the view that the corridor consolidates China's strategic influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, in line with its goals of expanding economic and political influence. China's efforts are apparently reflected from CPEC by creating a global trade network that supports its strategic objectives and reinforces its position as a major global power.

The impact of CPEC on global power mobility encompasses unforeseeable paradigm shifts in regional and global influence. Ullah et al., (2021) in his study discuss how the corridor greatly contributes to the reconfiguration of power dynamics by influencing international relations and global stability. There is no denying the fact that the development emanated from CPEC has influenced the strategic rivalry between China and the United States and prompted new hostilities and geopolitical realignments.

Other global powers, including Russia, the European Union, and the Gulf States, have responded to CPEC with varying degrees of concern and interest. These reactions reflect a blend of strategic, economic, and diplomatic considerations. The broader geopolitical significance of CPEC is explicit in the diverse responses from global powers, each of which pursues to overhaul the implications of the corridor for its own strategic interests.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on CPEC and Geopolitics**

Firstly, Realist theories in international relations are much popular when there is an emphasis on power, security, and strategic interests. Gill (2019) is of the view that CPEC represents China's shenanigans of power and strategic advantages in South Asia. From a realist point of view, the corridor ruminates China's efforts to balance against regional rivals, such as India and the United States, in order to enhance its geopolitical position.

On the other hand, Liberal theories emphasize cooperation, economic interdependence, and institutional frameworks. In her study, Ayesha (2020) infers that CPEC represents an opportunity for regional cooperation and economic integration. From a liberal point of view, the corridor showcases economic development and promotes peaceful relations through increased degree of trade and investment, which contribute effectively to regional stability and cooperation.

Finally, Critical theories, which involve the ramifications of dependency theory and post-colonialism, offer alternative views on CPEC. It is strongly argued that CPEC could fortify economic dependency on China, which potentially leads to neo-colonial dynamics. Nonetheless, there are several concerns with regards to Chinese hegemony and the potential for economic and political domination.

### **Literature Gap**

Even with the large amount of research on CPEC, there are still a few gaps. The majority of existing researches have concentrated on the strategic and economic aspects of CPEC by scarcely assessing its long-term geopolitical ramifications, which requires more attention. For this, further research is also required to fully understand how Pakistan's ties with various regional and international players are being impacted by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), especially in light of the shifting global power dynamics. By delivering a thorough analysis of the geopolitical implications of the CPEC, with an emphasis on how it may affect Pakistan's foreign policy and ties with neighbours and major world powers, this paper aims to bridge these gaps.

### **Research Methodology**

In this research, a 'Secondary Qualitative' method was adopted. For this, the existing literature was explored to understand the geopolitical implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As per Chatfield (2020), this method involves the systematic collection and analysis of data from high-impact, peer-reviewed journals, in addition to books, government reports, and reputable annual reports. The sheer focus is on accumulating as much profound insights from sources that are highly regarded in the academic and policy-making communities. This ensured that the analysis was well-adjusted through credible and authoritative information.

The selected literature spans a range of topics including geopolitics, international relations, and economic development, with a particular emphasis on studies that have discussed both the positive and negative impacts of CPEC on Pakistan's relationships with neighbouring countries and global powers. To ensure that the literature is comprehensively covered, sources were selected on the basis of their contribution and relevance to the ongoing discourse on CPEC and its geopolitical ramifications. The analysis below revolves around a thematic framework

that identified and subsequently examined recurring themes and patterns across the chosen literature. This framework helped in exploring how CPEC has reshaped geopolitical aspects in South Asia and beyond.

It is important to mention that the literature was identified through a systematic search of academic databases which mainly involved Elsevier, Web of Science, and Emerald, along with other reputable publications on an institutional level. The selection criteria include relevance to the research topic, coupled with quality of the publication and the impact factor of the selected sources. The chosen literature was then subjected to thematic coding, where key themes and sub-themes were identified on the basis of the content of the texts. Thus, relevant themes were categorised by specifically focusing on CPEC's geopolitical impacts for Pakistan and its relations with global powers.

## **Results**

The thematic analysis of the data compiled formed the basis for generating several key themes in relation to CPEC's impact on Pakistan's geopolitical relationships. These themes were discussed in terms of passages, ranging from the strengthening of Sino-Pakistani ties and the escalation of tensions with India, to the mixed impact on Pakistan's relationships with Afghanistan and Iran along with the strategic recalibration of Pakistan's relationships with the United States and Russia.

Firstly, it was noted that the development of CPEC has significantly strengthened the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, which is considered as a relationship that spans several decades. CPEC is often hailed as the "flagship project" of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and which is in line with Beijing's global ambitions. For Pakistan, CPEC is nothing short of an opportunity to bolster its economy, enhance its strategic importance, and keep its alliance with China intact. The data suggests that CPEC has deepened the economic and military ties between the two countries, with China providing substantial financial and technical support for various CPEC projects (Lokman et al., 2022). Such a strengthened relationship has broader implications for regional stability, as it is continuously enhancing China's influence in South Asia and providing Pakistan with greater capitalisation on its dealings with other regional and global powers.

Furthermore, CPEC has facilitated the transfer of Chinese technology and expertise to Pakistan, which is likely to have a long-term impact on the country's economic development. Also, the intermittent influx of Chinese investment in Pakistan's infrastructure and energy projects has also created new economic opportunities for the latter for reducing its dependence on traditional Western allies. However, the deepening of Sino-Pakistani ties is not without some foreseeable challenges. In particular, the growing Chinese presence in Pakistan has raised significant concerns about the potential for economic dependency and the erosion of Pakistan's sovereignty (Fayyaz, 2019). More importantly, the strategic alignment with China has somehow complicated Pakistan's relationships with other global powers, particularly the United States.

It was also understood that the development of CPEC has aggravated the already existing tensions between Pakistan and India, particularly within the ambit of the never-ceasing Kashmir dispute. India has



consistently opposed CPEC and is adamant that the corridor goes against their territorial integrity by arguing that it passes through the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan, which India claims as part of its territory. It is also suggested from the data that CPEC has heightened India's security concerns, which has compelled it to increase its military posturing and harden its stance on regional issues. India views CPEC as part of a broader strategy executed by China to encircle and contain the former's influence in the region, which is a perception that has led to increased friction between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

It has been learned that CPEC has had a convoluted impact on Pakistan's relationships with its western neighbours, Afghanistan and Iran. On one hand, the economic benefits of CPEC have the potential to enhance regional connectivity and promote economic cooperation between Pakistan and its neighbours (Ibanez, 2020). The development of infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and energy pipelines could facilitate trade and investment in the region, which would effectively contribute to regional stability and integration. However, when considering the strategic implications of CPEC, some strong have been raised by both Afghanistan and Iran. Afghanistan, which has had a fraught relationship with Pakistan, is wary of the growing Chinese influence in the region and the potential for CPEC to exacerbate existing security concerns. It is suggested from the data that Afghanistan is cognizant of the implications of CPEC for its own infrastructure projects, particularly those that are being developed in cooperation with India. Also, there are concerns that the development of CPEC ensue increased instability in Afghanistan, especially if it leads to a further militarization of the region.

It was also learned from the data that the United States views CPEC with suspicion by perceiving it as a threat to territorial sovereignty for India and other regional states, and particularly in the context of its broader concerns about China's rise and its strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific region. At times, the United States has expressed concerns about the potential for CPEC to enhance China's strategic presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean, which could undermine its own influence in the region. The United States is also concerned about the possibility of exacerbating regional tensions, particularly within the context of the India-Pakistan rivalry. Ultimately, the United States has been cautious in its approach to CPEC by balancing its concerns regarding China's rise as a regional power against India along with its desire to maintain stable relations with Pakistan.

## **Discussion**

The overall findings of the present research articulated above highlight the complex and multifarious nature of CPEC's impact on Pakistan's geopolitical relationships within and outside the region. There is no denying the fact that the development of CPEC has significantly strengthened Sino-Pakistani ties by providing Pakistan with a credible ally and enhancing its strategic importance in the region. However, such an alignment with China has also complicated Pakistan's relationships with other regional and global actors, particularly India, Afghanistan and the United States. Therefore, it can be inferred that CPEC possesses the capacity to redefine regional alliances and power dynamics, with significant repercussions for regional stability and security.

One of the key challenges highlighted in this research is the viability of CPEC to connect regional actors through rails and roads; however, it has also the potential to exacerbate existing regional tensions, particularly in the context of the India-Pakistan rivalry. India's security concerns have been heightened too as a result of CPEC development, which is leading to an escalation of tensions and increased militarization in the region. This rivalry has broader implications for regional stability, as it could lead to a further destabilization of South Asia and an arms race between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. Besides, the involvement of China in CPEC has internationalized the Kashmir dispute, which adds a new degree of complexity to an already volatile situation.

Another significant challenge identified in this research is the possibility of complicating Pakistan's relationships with its western neighbours, Afghanistan and Iran. While CPEC has the potential to enhance regional connectivity and promote economic cooperation, the strategic repercussions of the project have raised concerns in both countries. In particular, Afghanistan appears to be concerned about the potential for CPEC to exacerbate existing security concerns, whereas Iran seems to be wary of the growing Chinese influence in the region and the potential for CPEC to enhance Pakistan's strategic importance at its expense.

Finally, the study materialised the tactical recalibration of Pakistan's relationships with the United States and Russia as a result of CPEC. The growing bonhomie between Pakistan and China has complicated its ties with the United States, which views CPEC with susceptibility and is concerned about its implications for regional stability and U.S. influence in South Asia. At the same time, CPEC has opened up new avenues for Pakistan to enhance its strategic partnership with Russia, which reflects a shift in the balance of power in the South Asian region and the growing importance of the China-Pakistan-Russia axis.

## **Conclusion**

Keeping the whole above perspective into view regarding the influence of CPEC on Pakistan's relations with regional and global countries, it can be deduced that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a significant geopolitical development that has prolonged implications for Pakistan's relationships with its neighbours and global powers. The findings of this study insinuate that CPEC has the potential to reshape regional alliances, drive economic integration, and shift power dynamics in South Asia, with significant implications for regional stability and security. However, the development of CPEC comes with significant challenges, particularly in the context of the India-Pakistan hostility and the already strained relationships with Afghanistan, Iran, the United States, and Russia.

As CPEC continues to be a conflict of interest for Pakistan's relations with global powers, it is indispensable for policymakers in Pakistan and other regional stakeholders to overhaul the intricate geopolitical landscape shaped by the project by calibrating the potential economic benefits with the strategic challenges and risks. By enhancing regional cooperation, mitigating potential conflicts and capitalising on CPEC's potential to drive economic growth and regional integration, Pakistan and its regional and global partners can ensure that the

project contributes duly to regional stability and prosperity in the long term rather than be a threat to any state's regional stability.

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