

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and India's Security Concerns

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Abstract

During the visit to Pakistan in May 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang proposed a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for connecting Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region with the southwestern Pakistani port of Gwadar. China in recent years made significant offers to Pakistan because the former conceives Islamabad as a partner that can play a crucial role in restraining India. Many observers, including political analysts and security and defense experts, interpret these actions as a Chinese make attempt to further its expansionist agenda in the broader Indo-Pacific region and achieve a strategic encirclement of India in South Asia. India has expressed its limitations about the project, as the proposed CPEC will pass through the territory disputed between Pakistan and India. In this context, the present paper sought to assess the crucial security issues involved in CPEC. It would also throw light on the concealed rationale behind the CPEC initiative. Further, it would discuss the security implications to India from CPEC.

Key Words: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Belt, and Road Initiative, India, Jammu, and Kashmir.

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Introduction

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has to be seen in the context of the ever-expanding 'all-weather' and 'time-tested' strategic partnership between China and Pakistan. The relations between the two nations have seen an upward trajectory over the last many decades based on the convergence of interests. Pakistan, in particular, considers China as an essential and reliable partner in the 21st century for several reasons, including providing arms and equipment requirements of the forces and lifeline. In addition, China and Pakistan are India's traditional threats because of historical memories and existing differences and their abilities to interrupt New Delhi's rise to becoming a great global power.^[1]

India in the current century has gained significant weight on the international stage with its growing economic and military might. However, Pakistan and China share a powerful desire to halt India's progress in this direction. Pakistan's search for a country that can help sustain a sufficient military capacity against India coalesces with China's intention that a militarily strong Pakistan would serve their objective of keeping India preoccupied on two fronts, thereby safeguarding their national security interests.^[2] The improving partnership between Pakistan and China revolves around four crucial areas encompassing geostrategic fears, energy security concerns, economic collaboration, and security concerns.^[3]

The idea of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor was initially proposed by Premier Li Keqiang when he visited Pakistan in May 2013. Such a project aimed to enhance the exchange and cooperation between China and Pakistan in transportation, energy, strengthens connectivity, and promote joint development. It connects to the Silk Road Economic Belt in the north, 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in the south and serves as a strategic hub. It is a trade corridor that includes highway, railway, oil, natural gas, and an optical cable channel, and it is an essential part of the 'Belt and Road' Initiative.

Once it is completed, China will not have to travel through the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait to import the crude oil and cargo from the Middle East and ship back the goods from the South China Sea. The goods can get on board at the Gwadar port and be transported to China through the economic corridor. It will save two-thirds of the distance and will decrease relevant risks. The reality, however, is far from it. Shipping oil and other goods through the economic corridor by railway and highway will cost four times more than the Malacca Strait, so it is not cost-effective. Taken from the Gravity Model of Economics, the volume of goods transported can cover the odds of the daily operating costs. However, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor goes across the Kashmir region, which Pakistan controls, so India has serious concerns over this, as this might be used for military purposes by China and Pakistan.^[4]

The debate is still on regarding the possible implications of CPEC to India's security as it is considered the biggest threat to India. From the beginning, New Delhi has expressed serious concerns regarding the CPEC project due to the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) area that is an integral part of our country. India thinks of this project as a sign of harm to its sovereignty.^[5] The present paper sought to assess the crucial security issues involved in CPEC. It would also throw light on the concealed rationale behind the CPEC initiative. Further, it would discuss the security implications to India from CPEC.

CPEC - Understanding the Economic and Strategic Rationale Behind It:

This section highlights the concealed rationale behind the CPEC initiative. Furthermore, what it means for both China and Pakistan. The CPEC is a planned corridor. It constitutes various energy projects, transportation/infrastructure networks, and economic free zones within Pakistan.^[6] Beijing's development endeavor is initiated as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).^[7] The corridor is the first large-scale, cross-sectoral attempt to bolster economic ties between China and Pakistan. It was formally launched on 20 April 2015 as a multi-billion USD economic and development package. This initiative included loans, investments, and grants to carry out a series of energy and infrastructure measures for over 15 years.^[8]

The Chinese white paper 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road' identify BRI's overall goals- policy coordination; facilities connectivity; unimpeded trade; financial integration; people-to-people bonds.^[9] Highlighting the significance of CPEC, Chinese President Jinping stated that "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is an important point of our joint efforts to procure common development. Moreover, we should use this economic corridor to drive our practical cooperation, focusing on Gwadar Port, energy, infrastructure development, and industrial cooperation."^[10] It is estimated that China's financial engagement in BRI comprises an investment volume of roughly 1000 billion USD, seven times more than what the U.S. spent under the Marshall Plan. The initiative includes more than 1000 individual projects across about 80 participating states – representing around two-thirds of the world's population (estimated 4.4 billion people). The combined GDP of all countries involved is approximately 23 trillion USD.^[11]

It is a complex aggregation of several transportation and energy projects comprising 3218 KM routes, including infrastructural Railways, projects, pipelines, economic free zones, and Highways between Pakistan and China.^[12] The key concept behind CPEC is China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy, which comprises Economic Belt, Silk Road, and twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road. OBOR's significance with incorporating the twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road and China Road Economic Belt have taken their roots from the aspiration to get free trading of economic factors, improved integration among countries' markets, and well-balanced economic collaboration.

Map 1: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



Source: Priyanka Singh, "India's Participation in CPEC: The Ifs and Buts," *Indian Defence Review*, 20 February 2017, available at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/indias-participation-in-cpec-the-ifs-and-buts/>.

Besides economic, there are several reasons for Chinese motivations in carrying out the CPEC, including political, geostrategic, and security interests. Even though many threats and issues can seriously challenge the establishment and smooth functioning of the initiative, China remains very much committed to the project.^[13] China sought to exploit Pakistan's needs for significant development projects to bring stability. It will help keep India engaged in the South Asian region, not flexing its muscles beyond the region. Beijing sought to serve multiple objectives - protect Chinese economic interests, reduce terrorist threats coming from Pakistan, and keep India engaged. In other words, China aims to secure a win-win situation by eradicating the threat within Pakistan and protecting its economic interests.^[14]

China's desire for CPEC stems from its desire to improve its trade activities with various world regions. This visualization was shown by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, who highlighted the promotion of a trade network connecting China to Europe and Central Asia via three key corridors through northern, southern, and central Xinjiang. It connects China to Pakistan and Russia to Europe. On similar lines, China has now highlighted the importance of developing the Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar corridor that could connect the non-coastal province of China's Yunnan to the Bengal's harbor.^[15]

CPEC aims further to strengthen the economic ties between China and Pakistan. This project will offer tremendous opportunities to allow China to expand its interests in the region further. Further, it will replace the current Chinese lengthy route of 12,500 km, reducing time and tremendous shipping expenses for China's trade to the Persian Gulf and worldwide.^[16] The key objective of CPEC is to lift Pakistan's economy and enhance Pakistan's infrastructural and social development. On the contrary, it will boost trading and investment activities with China and worldwide by giving Malacca the safest and shortest optimal replacement. Advanced logistics, upgraded infrastructure progress, and enhanced transportation systems among countries are essential for economic well-being.^[17] Thus, CPEC will play a significantly important role for the whole economy.

Routes of CPEC and its Shifting Directions:

Every move undertaken by China and Pakistan regarding CPEC needs to be closely observed. CPEC has three crucial routes after it arrives. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province of Pakistan from China Khanjerab pass and Northern areas now Gilgit-Baltistan. The Western route of CPEC enters Baluchistan from D.I. Khan through Zhob, Qilla Abdulla, Quetta, Panjgor, Qallat, Turbat, and Gawadar. The central route enters Punjab from D.I. Khan and goes to Dera Murad Jamalee, Khuzdar, Punjgur, Turbet to Gwadar. The Eastern route enters Punjab from KPK and passes through Lahore, Multan, and Sukkur. It enters Baluchistan on the highway from Punjab through Khuzdar, Panjgor, Turbat, and Gwadar. Another route is planned from Sukker to Karachi and then to Gawadar.^[18]

Everyone is familiar with CPEC as China's high-profile development initiative in Pakistan, which has entered a new phase. Whereas the first CPEC projects focused primarily on the construction of new physical infrastructure, such as power plants and highways, the next iteration of CPEC will focus on a broader range of projects aimed at spurring economic development and job creation. CPEC changes were prompted by Pakistan's political and institutional realities, as well as the broader evolution of China's global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC has always played an important role. However, Pakistan's weak institutions and domestic political cleavages slowed or stymied the early stages of CPEC. The next phase is almost certain to yield similar if not more significant frustrations.^[19]

Pakistan Response to China's Initiative:

In April 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Islamabad to announce the start of CPEC amid much fanfare. Pakistan's leaders described the initiative as a "fate changer" or "game changer," a transformative development package that would deliver economic growth, peace, long-term security, and political stability, as well as security for Pakistan.^[20] As a result, CPEC would help China address its concerns about the threat of Islamist ideology along its western border. Despite China's official statements being more circumspect about Beijing's specific funding plans, promises of \$40 billion-\$60 billion or more in Chinese investment dominated Pakistani headlines, emphasising the country's troubled energy sector. Although CPEC is unlikely to live up to these early claims, the accomplishments of the last five years should not be overlooked. Pakistan has received at least \$19 billion in new infrastructure, including Chinese-built power plants that have reduced, if not eliminated, the country's once crippling rolling blackouts. According to Beijing, its

projects have employed an estimated 75,000 Pakistanis. As a result, CPEC would assist China in dealing with its concerns about the threat of Islamist ideology along its western border. Even though China's official statements were more cautious about Beijing's specific funding plans, promises of \$40 billion–\$60 billion or more in Chinese investment in Pakistan's troubled energy sector dominated Pakistani headlines. Although CPEC is unlikely to live up to these early claims, the last five years' achievements should not be overlooked. At least \$19 billion in new infrastructure has been provided to Pakistan, including Chinese-built power plants that have reduced, if not eliminated, the country's once crippling rolling blackouts. According to Beijing, 75,000 Pakistanis have been employed as a result of its projects. Other China-backed infrastructure improvements include roads, rails, and the new deep-sea port of Gwadar in Balochistan Province. These are significant accomplishments for Pakistan, which have been challenged by a challenging business environment, contentious politics, and long-standing domestic and regional security threats.^[21]

CPEC connects both partnering countries not only to their neighbouring countries, but also to over 60 other countries. Chinese President Xi Jinping has garnered considerable attention for introducing a new mode of globalisation through CPEC. This project has been prepared by Xi Jinping as a cornerstone of China's domestic economic strategy and foreign policy. This transportation corridor's goal is to promote economic inclusion, regional connectivity, and the development of promising economic zones. Furthermore, 21,690 MW of energy, hydro, nuclear, coal, and solar power projects, the formation of many economic zones, and the improvement of Gwadar seaport and International Airport are critical CPEC projects. CPEC, a well-known "Belt and Road Initiative," aimed to benefit 66% of the global population, including Europe, Asia, and Africa.^[22]

China has significant investment and bilateral trade potential, which could be advantageous in developing strong economic ties with Pakistan. China has established itself as Pakistan's most important trading partner. Both countries have a strong relationship in terms of trade and economics, as well as peacekeeping strategies. Some of the most crucial issues are the wealth disparity between Pakistan and China, Pakistan's threatening security situation, and India's imminent presence on both Pakistan's and China's borders. Pakistan was convinced that CPEC would bring economic vitality, infrastructure development, significant foreign investment, technology transfer, job opportunities, and so on. It will end the marginalization of far-flung areas and more regional, national, and sub-national connectivity.

CPEC and India's Security Concerns:

India has been closely observing CPEC-related developments with significant suspicion. CPEC will originate from Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), and then enter Gilgit Baltistan via the Khujerab Pass before spreading out in Pakistan through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, before culminating at the warm water deep-sea port at Gwadar, situated at the southern edge of the restive Balochistan province.^[23] India's security concerns regarding the CPEC can be reflected from the fact that the corridor connects the maritime and land component of BRI, linking North-west China with ports in the Arabian Sea via a road and rail corridor. Thus, providing China with the shortest and quickest access to the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean Region.^[24]

India has expressed deep concerns over the ongoing project between China and Pakistan that hurts our country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. India's objection to the project needs to be seen in the context of the approximately 300-kilometer long passage of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Gilgit Baltistan, which India claims has been under Pakistan's control since 1947.^[25] As a matter of principle, CPEC violates the doctrine of peaceful coexistence that China had promised to uphold.^[26]

Indian Prime Minister Shri. Narendra Modi has firmly stated that

"Regional connectivity corridors can only fulfil their promise and avoid differences and discord if the sovereignty of the countries involved is respected."^[27]

It was further reinforced by Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar when he underlined, "China is a compassionate country on matters concerning its sovereignty. So we would expect that they would have some understanding of other people's sensitivity about their sovereignty."^[28]

Responding to a query in the Lok Sabha in December 2014, Minister for External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj stated,

"According to reports, China and Pakistan are involved in infrastructure construction activities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), including the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The government has expressed its concerns to China about their activities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and has asked them to stop."^[29]

In support of the claim made by the Government, Indian security expert Harsh V Pant argues that "China's decision to construct major civil, energy and military infrastructure projects in the CPEC, which runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the areas of Gilgit and Baltistan, has essentially accorded de facto 'legitimacy' to Pakistan's illegal occupation of these areas."^[30]

The CPEC project is based on a Chinese strategy to secure and shorten supply lines through Gwadar while also expanding its presence in the Indian Ocean. As a result, it is widely assumed that if CPEC is completed, a large Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean will diminish India's influence. The prospect of a robust naval presence in a critical location that could give China "a commanding position at the mouth of the Gulf" in India's perceived "home-ground" has serious consequences for India.^[31] Defense and security analyst Sameer Patil had in this connection very rightly argued that 'India's concerns about the CPEC and China-Pakistan ties are combined with Beijing's growing presence and influence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. China has systematically engaged with countries in India's neighborhood in the last decade - Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives - through economic and military aid. Although India's poorly-executed neighborhood policy may be partially responsible, India sees China's growing profile in the region as an "encirclement."^[32]

Rising Chinese activities in Pakistan could increase Pakistan's threat and challenges to India. If China expands its military position there and Pakistan does not curtail its use of terrorism as a tool and abet cross-border terrorism in India.^[33] The corridor is one of the latest Chinese efforts to help Pakistan grow economically. China has remained the key source of strength for Pakistan to create a problem for India's security over the last many decades. From the 1950s onwards, China

has supplied approximately 40 percent of Pakistan's weapons and equipment requirements for the latter forces. Besides, Beijing had supported the development of Pakistan's ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs. In the 1990s, following the U.S. decision to impose sanctions on Pakistan for its nuclear program, Beijing and Islamabad initiated a program to develop - and eventually co-manufacture - a jet fighter.^[34]

In terms of security implications for India, CPEC is an effort to strengthen their mutual understanding. Furthermore, it strengthens relations in order to exert pressure on India. In addition, gaining a foothold in the Arabian Sea will allow China's People's Liberation Army to project power throughout the Indian Ocean region.^[35] China's expanding activities in Pakistan are a major source of concern for India. Furthermore, China's increased presence raises the stakes of a conflict between India and Pakistan. China's consistent support will help Pakistan. Terrorism, as well as an expansion of Pakistan's conventional and strategic arsenals, will be used to challenge India. As a result, India is likely to take precautions against a more assertive Chinese presence in Pakistan, including an increased military presence.^[36]

From the maritime perspective, the naval forces of China and Pakistan have already started a collaboration to guard trade convoys on international waters. It will ease the way for Pakistan to expand its maritime footprint in the Arabian Sea, thereby creating maritime-related threats to India's security like the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. Pakistan's Navy had also announced raising a special taskforce, "TF-88," to ensure safety for CPEC sea-bound trade.^[37]

Besides, there is always a possibility of severe proliferation of military complement in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), especially the People's Liberation Army, which will pose a grave security threat for India. Gwadar is a strategic Naval Port. It may well turn out to be China's first overseas Naval Port that can be used to encircle India and expand its influence in the Indian Ocean region.^[38]

Conclusion

Because of their systematic compatibility and cultural openness, China and Pakistan have a one-of-a-kind association. CPEC is a complex aggregation of several transportation and energy projects spanning 3218 kilometers between Pakistan and China, including infrastructure projects, pipelines, economic free zones, railways, and highways. The central idea behind CPEC is China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) strategy, which includes the Silk Road, the Economic Belt, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The significance of OBOR, which includes the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the China Road Economic Belt, stems from the desire for free trade of economic factors, improved market integration among countries, and well-balanced economic collaboration.

The absence of India from the Belt and Road Forum demonstrated its stance on the BRI. In response to media inquiries about whether India had been invited to the forum, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) raised several concerns about the project. 'We are firmly convinced that connectivity initiatives must be founded on universally recognized international norms, good governance, the rule of law, openness, transparency, and equality,' said the statement. To avoid projects that would place an unsustainable debt burden on communities, connectivity initiatives must adhere to financial responsibility principles, such as balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards, as well as transparent cost assessment. Furthermore, skill

and technology transfer to aid in the long-term operation and maintenance of assets created by local communities. Projects for connectivity must be pursued in a way that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity.^[39]

Since China displays a disregard for territorial integrity concerning the CPEC, which runs through the disputed territory of PoK, this is a clear violation of New Delhi's sovereignty; therefore, any participation in the BRI would undermine New Delhi's position on the dispute. The CPEC shall boost the Sino-Pakistan strategic relationships to the next level with grave strategic implications for India, especially in India not gaining access to Afghanistan through Pakistan.

India's main concern would be sustained Chinese military presence in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which would have profound security implications for India. Given the recent border skirmishes between Beijing and New Delhi forces, further long-standing military presence on India's northwestern border would affect New Delhi's defense and security priorities. There have already been reports of a Chinese military presence on the Pakistani side of the Kashmir Line of Control (LoC). According to reports, China will station 30,000 army personnel in occupied Kashmir to protect its economic interests.^[40]

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