

China's Belt and Road Initiative and its Impact on Pakistan and India: With Special Reference to Gwadar Port

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In the twenty-first century, countries are competing to enhance their regional connectivity. China and Pakistan are promoting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to promote their respective interests and upgrade regional integration under the leadership of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It ensures a long-term economic partnership between two countries primarily based on commerce, communication, and transport. The BRI involves many Ports, like Chittagong Port in Bangladesh, Sittwe Port in Myanmar, and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka. Gwadar Port in Pakistan is one of these ports. Gwadar Port, positioned in the southwest of Pakistan and 400 kilometres away from the Strait of Hormuz, holds strategic importance for China, aiming to boost its naval power and trade connectivity through this location. This paper explores three key aspects: first, what are the significant concerns in CPEC? Second, how does it impact Pakistan, and why are Pakistani people against this project? Third, why is India reluctant to join this initiative?

Keywords: BRI, CPEC, Gwadar Port, State security, Naval power, Strategic competition

The post-Cold War scenario and the opening of a never-before global supply chain complimented by ICT have shaped the priorities of States. Countries are competing to increase the effectiveness of their supply chain, geostrategic importance, and partnership with interested allies. In this context, the emerging importance of regional connectivity in the South Asian States gains relevance for examination. Since China initiated market reforms in 1978, its economy (GDP) has experienced substantial growth, averaging nearly 9% annually. This progress has lifted over 800 million people out of poverty (2023). Chinese are extending their market outside of China to find new markets and consumers for their products. Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, is continuously trying to boost China in the global sphere. So, he promoted cooperative initiatives to foster closer ties with more countries and expand China's influence internationally. One of the vital initiatives is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to be the most enormous initiative ever. It combines a domestic investment drive in which the majority of the provinces of China are interested in restoring, strengthening, and better cooperating to enhance China's influence abroad (2015). The Belt and Road Initiative, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) or the New Silk Road, is a strategic policy introduced by the Chinese government. Its main goal is to strengthen relations between the nations of Asia, Africa, and Europe through

increased connectivity, trade, and cooperation (Seth, 2020). President Xi Jinping announced the initiative during official visits to Indonesia in 2013. In 2015, on the occasion of the 13th five-year plan, Xi presented a proposal for BRI (Khan M. Z., 2019).

The project comprises two functionalities: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Along these lines, China's strategic aims include several coordination policies, infrastructure development, connectivity, Pillars, Roads, and bridges, developing ports, Pipelines, free trade, people-to-people contact, and financial integration. The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) represents the land-based component of the initiative, spanning a vast region across Asia and Europe through six specific routes: the China-Central Asia-West Asia, New Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Indochina Peninsula, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM), and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Rahman, 2020). The second element is the Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which operates along maritime routes and aims to enhance China's supply chains by constructing shipping ports, oil refineries, industrial parks, etc. The MSR commences in the South China Sea, passing through strategic points like the Strait of Malacca, Malaysia, the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean, Africa, the Red Sea, and the Suez Canal before reaching Europe. These two were once called the One Belt One Road (OBOR) Initiative but later changed to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The primary objective is to increase communication infrastructure, trade and investment, financial markets, and tourism while fostering cultural connections with participating BRI countries (Adarov, 2018).

China is ambitious to strengthen the connections between its underdeveloped Western region and the global community. Beijing aims to boost economic growth in this area by linking it with Central and West Asia to facilitate energy supplies and promote the development of Xinjiang, a Western Province of China. As part of this project, a substantial network of railways, highways, pipelines, electricity, and special economic zones will be constructed (McBride, 2020). Pakistan has significantly gained from the BRI through CPEC, which received a substantial investment of over \$60 billion. This funding has led to the development of crucial infrastructure, notably the Gwadar Port on Pakistan's Southwestern coast. Gwadar port now plays a vital role as a key regional trade hub, serving as a gateway for trade among West Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Africa. As a crucial element of the BRI, the CPEC has seen significant investment from the Chinese government in developing Gwadar Port.

A glance into the historical background of the Silk Road

The term Silk Road is not new; it originated during the Han Dynasty in China (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.) for spreading trade relations throughout Southeast, West Asia, Central Asia, and Europe from 130 B.C. until 1453 A.D. In 1877 CE, the German explorer and geographer Ferdinande von Richthofen first referred to the term "Silk Road" to denote the route that connected Europe and East Asia. The term can also represent exchanges of goods and ideas among distinct cultural groupings. Traders transported silk and other valuable gems from China to Europe, such as tea, spices, and jade. In exchange, horses, glass, textiles, and manufactured goods could be transported eastward. International trade has carried along the Silk Road for 600 years. In the past days, Susa (now Iran) has connected to Sardis (close to the Mediterranean region, now Turkey) through the Royal Road. The Greek (Macedonia) ruler Alexander the Great enlarged his supremacy through this Royal Road. The

term “Silk Road” comes from the widespread use of Chinese Silk in ancient Rome and other parts of Europe. The paper originated in China, and the Silk Road helped popularise it. Marco Polo (Venetian explorer) made the term “Silk Road” famous for traveling from Italy to China; the Mongolian Empire controlled that route then. Marco Polo described his journey in his book “The Travels of Marco Polo” (p. 37), which clearly shows Asian trade and culture (2017). In ancient times, China supplied goods to Europe, the Middle East, and Roam through the old Silk Route. Therefore, in ancient times, the Silk Road was quite significant.

The inspiration for the New Silk Route originated from the old Silk Route. It has two major parts, these SREB and MSR. China seeks to establish connections with both African and Eurasian countries. By fostering intercultural exchange along these routes, China can revitalize its historical and cultural heritage and boost trade and economic cooperation with other nations (Lee, 2019). After decades of rapid growth, China mainly seeks new business and investment opportunities outside its boundaries. With countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, Beijing seeks to expand commerce. Beijing’s New Silk Road initiative may be the answer to the region’s ethnic disputes and a method to stop Xinjiang from seceding and becoming a renegade state, as some “separatists have sought to do in the past” (Ray, 2016). Two routes are described on the map below to demonstrate China’s blueprint for the BRI project.

FIGURE 1. Map indicating OBOR project.



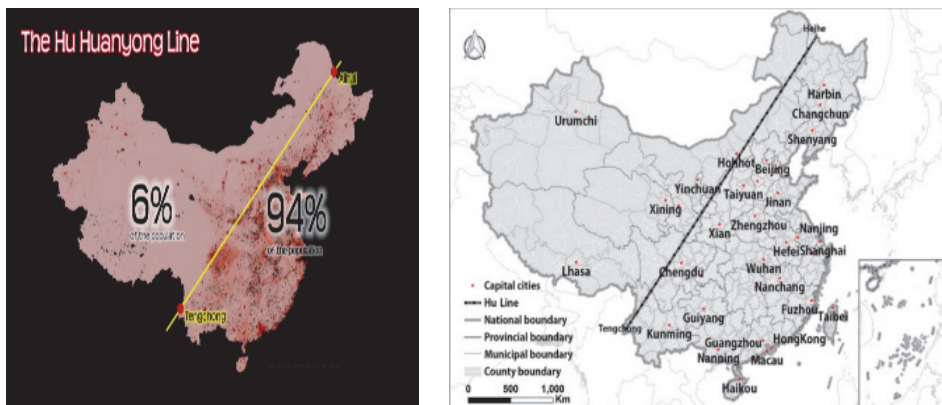
Source (China Investment Research)

1. China’s Geostategic Motive Behind CPEC: Before going into the discussion, we must understand the geostategic relevance of the Indian Ocean for CPEC. Strategically, the Indian Ocean holds importance because it connects with

many straits. Beijing's first motive is to link the Gwadar Port with China's northwestern region, which is lagging in development, and to fulfill its energy requirement. Secondly, Beijing wants to tackle its Malacca dilemma through this CPEC route and enhance naval power. Thirdly, the purpose is to increase trade and commerce.

a. Development of China's Western Region: China needs to develop its Western region because it is less developed than mainland China. The underdevelopment of these provinces is mainly due to the challenges in accessing resources transported via sea routes, longstanding neglect faced by the central government, and vulnerability to terrorist threats, with Uighur separatists, aided by groups like East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), posing significant risk (Hussain & Hussain, 2017). Due to the underdevelopment of China's western region, most of the population resides on the eastern side. The Hu Huanyong Line shows that 94% of China's population lives in the East, and only 6% live in the Western part of mainland China. Through the China-Pakistan economic corridor, China is particularly interested in developing its Xinjiang province (Adarov, 2018). The map given below is the demarcation of the Hu Huanyong line.

FIGURE 2. Map representing the Hu Huanyong Line.



Source: www.sciencedirect.com

b. China's Energy Requirement: Energy is an essential source for a country; we can call it a "strategic commodity." The deficiency or plenty of energy can smash or strengthen a nation's development. Comparatively, China's rapid increase in the consumption of refined oil products outpaces its utilisation of crude oil, leading to a growing energy supply deficit and an escalating dependency on imported oil (Fareed, 2019). As a developing country, China needs enormous energy resources for its growth and development; the Central Asian countries can fulfil their energy needs by accessing the CPEC.

c. Malacca Dilemma: The advancement of the CPEC is perceived as a possible solution to the Malacca dilemma, as it gives China a substitute route to sidestep the strait of Malacca. The Chinese President Hu Jintao coined the term "Malacca Dilemma" in 2003. It is a term that refers to potential elements that might restrict China's ability to import enough oil to sustain its growing economy. The Strait of Malacca is strategically located between the Malaya peninsula and Sumatra islands, with Singapore to its East. Since this strait has been in use for almost 80% of China's

exports, the rival nations of China might easily block it, which would impact large Chinese machines. Singapore undoubtedly plays a significant role due to its alliance with the USA and India and the possibility of being influenced by these countries. Due to the dynamic nature of politics, China has feared that this may come true at some point shortly. If it does, it might slow down the massive Chinese machine, something China is not yet willing to tolerate amid its “China Dream.” There has been an effort to find other land routes that would benefit China (Mudunuri, 2020). That land route is CPEC, which connects Gwadar, the Baluchistan province of Pakistan, to Kashgar, the Xinjiang province of China. It is clear from the CPEC that the participation of China and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean through the CPEC can fulfil the geostrategic interest of both countries (Gill, 2019). China aspires to find extensive projects and new markets for Chinese companies throughout various belts and roads. Xi Jinping aims to make China a robust and influential world leader globally and increase its political, economic, global, and regional influence. This initiative carries strategic importance because it shows Xi’s ambition to pursue greater power and global position (Greenberg, 2018).

d. Naval Power: Sea transportation gives independent routes for trade and shipment and remains open under International Maritime Law (Fareed, 2019). However, the sea route is very long for China, and also it has to go through the South China Sea. From a strategic point of view, CPEC is crucial because China imports 7 million barrels of oil from the Middle East in a day. Gwadar Port will help China to access the Arabian Sea and provide strategic power. Currently, the oil travels a circuitous route spanning 13,000 km around the Indian Ocean, passing through the Strait of Malacca before reaching its destination in China. The Strait of Hormuz is the channel for one-third of global oil transportation. All the major oil-producing countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are nearer to the Strait of Hormuz, so China wants to supply oil through this strait using Gwadar Port. According to the Journal of the Indian Ocean Region, “the choke points in the Indian Ocean carry more than 80% of the world’s seaborne oil trade: 40% through the Strait of Hormuz, 35% through the Strait of Malacca, and 8% through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.” (Gill, 2019). Figure 3 shows the location of the Strait of Hormuz, Arabian countries, and Pakistan.

FIGURE 3. Strait of Hormuz and Arab countries.



Source: Google Image

The naval expansion of Pakistan and China in the Indian Ocean region and India's territorial integrity issue pose significant geostrategic and geopolitical concerns. The "New Maritime Silk Route" (MSR) will ensure an active foreign military occupancy in the Indian Ocean, which is crucial for India's strategic interest in the region (Ray, 2016). China's targets include building a naval base, expanding diplomatic ties, gaining more energy, and accessing modern military forces. China has invested in commercial ports and signed an arms pact with countries bordering the Indian Ocean, including Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Somalia. China's economic diplomacy attracted these countries (Fareed, 2019). China adopted the "String of Pearls" strategy to strengthen its naval power and encircle India. This strategy considers each port a pearl in the Maritime Silk Route. Gwadar Port is observed as one of the "pearls," along with other ports in the Indian Ocean region, including Kyaukpyu in Myanmar and Hambantota in Sri Lanka.

2. China's Expansion Policy

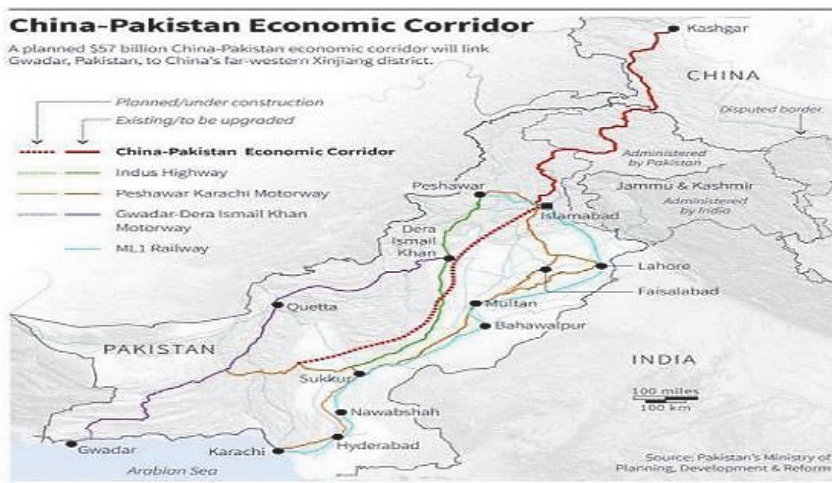
According to the Financial Times article, BRI is the most extensive economic development plan, often linked to the US-led Marshall Plan (Bin, 2018). It represents China's strategic interest in achieving domination in the Asia-Pacific by expanding its impact in the region. It has touched 138 countries, including \$29 trillion in Gross Domestic Product and 4.6 billion people up to October 2019. China targets many areas suffering from the economic crisis and frequently registers on the Human Development Index by the United Nations by providing monetary assistance through loans for infrastructure development and allowing the country to borrow cheaply from Chinese banks to work on the BRI project. To strengthen BRI, Beijing introduced enormous amounts of money into "Chinese public financial institutions like the Export-Import Bank of China (EXIM) and the Chinese Development Bank (CDB)" (2019). Through the CPEC, China aims to subjugate Sindh and Balochistan and occupy the coasts and resources from Badin to Gwadar (Mohan, 2020). Baloch Khan, the Spokesperson of Balochi Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), said to the media in an announcement that Sindh and Balochistan are equally affected by China's expansionist and oppressive intentions. Currently, the project OBOR is the exposition of the Chinese target to become a global and regional power. South Asian countries like- Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal have signed this project (Narayan, 2017).

China has been investing heavily in modernising its military capabilities, including the development of advanced weaponry, cyber capabilities, and space capabilities. The goal is to enhance its military strength and project power beyond its borders. China has set ambitious goals in the technological realm, aiming to become a global leader in areas such as artificial intelligence, 5G technology, quantum computing, and space exploration. These efforts have global implications and contribute to China's overall influence. To achieve all this, China needs to move beyond its borders and expand its realm to fulfil domestic demands and requirements. Xi Jinping's leadership has been marked by a range of policies and initiatives, both domestically and internationally. China, under Xi's leadership, has asserted itself more prominently on the global stage, economically, politically, and militarily. Some observers have raised concerns about China's ambitions, and there are different perspectives on the nature of these ambitions.

3. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Major Concerns towards It

The historic Silk Road played a vital role in bolstering trade between South Asia and China. China seeks to rejuvenate this trade route through BRI. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the “flagship project” of BRI. During his visit to Pakistan in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping negotiated 51 MoUs between China and Pakistan to facilitate the implementation of the CPEC project (2018). The project’s initial cost was US\$46 billion, which increased to US\$62 billion by 2020. It will link the city of Kashgar in Xinjiang province with the port of Gwadar in the Balochistan province of Pakistan. In Gwadar, a deep-water port will be developed which is capable of transporting 300-400 million cargo. A multi-billion-dollar effort by China aims to develop its western region while also looking for a solution to the Malacca Dilemma to ensure continuous supply lines in any possible future conflict (Bhatia, 2022). The CPEC project is crucial to the Arabian Sea for supplying material and power to the Middle East and Africa, where China has already pumped money and prepared the ground. By keeping a close eye on Andaman Nicobar Islands at ten and six degrees of sea lanes, the Indian Army sits at the mouth of the Malacca strait; the CPEC provides another choice route for the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf. CPEC has a special place in BRI; one Pakistani bureaucrat said, “CPEC is the jewel in BRI’s crown, and Gwadar is the jewel in CPEC’s crown” (2020). Pakistani policymakers consider CPEC to be the country’s top priority. CPEC is the only bilateral corridor within the five economic corridors of BRI. China has spent 6.5% of the money on the CPEC project from the total spending on BRI. Pakistan strongly supports this project because it helps develop its infrastructure building (Ahamed, 2017). Figure 4 shows the CPEC project.

FIGURE 4. Map indicating CPEC from China to Pakistan.



Source: China Investment Research

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan stated during the BRI Forum 2019 that CPEC, one of the BRI’s significant elements and early manifestations, has made major progress. Some quarters of announced projects have finished, and some are underperforming. By constructing modern transportation networks, a range of energy products, and special economic zones, CPEC sought to improve Pakistan’s

infrastructure and economy rapidly. There are 11 Special Economic Zones included in this project, and other industrial zones are planned (Hillman, 2020). As of May 2022, according to the CPEC Authority, Pakistan could only complete three projects worth more than \$300 million under CPEC in Gwadar. Twelve other projects, including those for the provision of electricity and water, still need to be completed and will cost close to \$2 billion (Rana, 2022). See Figure 5 about the major Projects of CPEC.

FIGURE 5. Map demonstrating major projects of CPEC



Source: CPEC Authority, Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiative.

The \$46 billion CPEC primarily allocates \$33 billion to energy projects. These initiatives encompass coal, hydropower, solar, and wind energy projects, focusing on energy generation (Mughal, 2016). The corridor's budget designates around \$10.63 billion for enhancing and improving Pakistan's transportation infrastructure, including roads and railways. The Central Alignment, the Eastern Alignment, and the Western Alignment are the three key routes that comprise the CPEC transportation network. The Thakot-Havelian part of the Karakoram Highway (KKH-II), which costs \$1.3 billion, and the Multan-Sukkur segment of the Karachi-Lahore motorway, which costs \$2.9 billion, one of the major road projects included in the Eastern Alignment, valued at \$4.2 billion, is among the significant components (2016). Starting at Hassanabdul and running for 1633 kilometres, the Central Alignment of CPEC passes via Peshawar, Kohat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Rajanpur, Kashmir, Ratodero, Khuzdar, Panjgur, and Turbat before coming to an end in Gwadar. Conversely, the Western route begins at Khunjerab Pass and extends over a road network of 2463 km, connecting Burhan, Dera Ismail Khan, Zhob, Quetta, Surab, and Hoshab before arriving at Gwadar. The construction of western Alignment incurred an estimated cost of \$1.05 billion (2017). The Main Line (ML) Railway-1 runs from Karachi to Peshawar and will undergo extensive modifications as part of the CPEC railway network, costing \$8.2 billion. The 1254-kilometer-long ML-3 modernization, which includes building a 560-kilometer track between Bostan and Kotal Jam, is another crucial project. Alongside these developments are other key initiatives in the infrastructure sector, such as constructing the \$ 1.6 billion Orange Line Metro in

Lahor and establishing the 682 km long Khunjerab Railway. This railway will connect Havelian City in Pakistan to Kashgar, extending China's Lanxin Railway via the Khunjerab Pass (2016).

Challenges and Impact of CPEC on Pakistan

Experts have identified various challenges that impede the successful implementation of the CPEC, both internally and externally. These challenges can be broadly categorised into three main areas: economic, security, and political challenges. Firstly, these projects are slowing down due to the financial crisis (Chaudhury, 2020). To increase Pakistan's energy security, Shehbaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, recently inaugurated a reactor. Even though the reactor started at the beginning of CPEC, China has hesitated to finance a new one (2023), and Pakistan has delayed completing the infrastructure project. CPEC faces significant challenges from competitors as it offers tax incentives and rebates to Chinese companies. This arrangement could lead to a flood of Chinese products in the local market, posing intense competition for Pakistan's domestic industries (2017). Business communities are questioning the fairness of the treatment given to Chinese investors compared to Pakistani businesses.

Additionally, concerns arise regarding how a smaller economy can effectively engage with the World's second-largest economy. Repayment of debts and circular debts is another worry, given that many CPEC packages are loan-based. These issues highlight the complexities and concerns surrounding CPEC's economic impact (Afzal & Naseem, 2018). Secondly, China is concerned about the rising security risks in Pakistan. The frequent attacks against Chinese nationals in Pakistan's Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir region since Beijing announced the CPEC project reveal the intense opposition of Pakistani citizens to Chinese interests (2022).

Furthermore, a region marred/ruined by militancy space from Xinjiang to Gwadar, using various groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Leshkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Daesh (ISIS), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and militant fractions associated with certain political parties. While many of these groups may not harbour directly towards China, their intent often revolves around targeting Chinese interests like the CPEC as a means to confront the Pakistani government (Falak). Terrorists attack Chinese citizens participating in the CPEC Project. China has demanded the deployment of Pakistan's army in this region to protect its workers from terrorist attacks (Xu, 2016). Many Non- Punjabi-dominated provinces are left out and strongly object to CPEC. CPEC is a game-changer because it allows Pakistan to maximise its geoeconomic advantage rather than just its geopolitical advantage (2018). Thirdly, China's dealings with Pakistan's new Shehbaz Sharif government did not foster the confidence necessary to advance bilateral relations, especially in providing the impetus for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Pakistan's political instability has caused delays in all these investment plans (2022). China, the sole investor in this project, hesitates to invest due to the present economic crisis and the political unrest in Pakistan (2022).

Additionally, CPEC has sparked controversy between Pakistan's provinces and the federal government from its early development stages. Prominent leaders have

accused the federal government of intentionally altering the route to concentrate the benefits in the capital, Islamabad, while depriving other regions of the potential advantages of CPEC (2015). Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) is concerned about the unequal circulation of economic projects and a route completely bypassing their region (Baloch S., 2016). The federal government and the developed province of Punjab are exploiting its resources, leading to voiced concerns from the Baloch people about the province's deprivation (Shams, 2015). The initial neglect of Balochistan has led to insurgencies, and these long standing grievances gained momentum when the federal government handed over the operational rights of Gwadar port to China. Additionally, the allocation of only eight projects to Baluchistan, compared to 176 allocated to Punjab out of 330 projects under CPEC, intensifies their concerns about discrimination (Tanoli, 2016).

Furthermore, the primary factor preventing Chinese investment is the decline of the Pakistani rupee (PKR). According to its short-term plan, the Gwadar projects face problems like - deficiency in water and energy, and new issues emerge frequently. These shortages have so far slowed down the project's implementation and progress. As of this point, the CPEC project in Gwadar has completed four projects: the modernization of the port and free zone, the development of the Master plan for Gwadar Smart City, the establishment of the Pak-China Technical and Vocational Centre in Gwadar, and the construction of the Gwadar East Bay Express. Six projects are currently under construction: the 300 MW coal-fired power project, the 1.2 MGD and 5 MGD water desalination plants in Gwadar, the Pak-China Friendship Hospital, the Necessary Facilities for Freshwater Treatment, Water Supply, and Distribution, and the New Gwadar International Airport. The four ongoing projects include the construction of breakwaters, dredging of berthing areas and channels, the development of a landfill, a fish landing jetty, and a boat manufacturing industry on West Bay. The minister also urged the National Development Reform Commission (NDRC) and other pertinent Chinese government agencies to work closely together to speed up the execution of ML-1, KRC, and other energy projects per the leadership agreement. After celebrating the completion of several significant projects at the port, the two sides decided to continue their efforts to make Gwadar Port a center of global trade and regional connectivity (2023)

The construction of the port has also led to the displacement. However, the BRI has also been the subject of controversy in Pakistan. Critics argue that Chinese investment in Pakistan is leading to a debt trap, with the country becoming increasingly indebted to China. The terms of Chinese loans are often opaque, and there are concerns that Pakistan may be unable to repay its debts. Moreover, the development of the Gwadar Port has also been controversial, with the Balochistan province being home to a longstanding separatist movement. Baloch nationalists have opposed the project, arguing that it will lead to the exploitation of Baloch resources by the Pakistani state and its Chinese allies. A massive protest erupted against China for building the Neelum Jhelum Kohala Hydropower Station unlawfully in Muzaffarabad, Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, in July 2020. Political activists and Pakistani citizens raise pro-freedom slogans in local communities and the destruction of the local environment. Addressing these concerns necessitates vigilant preparation, transparency, efficient governance, and wide-ranging development. The Chinese and Pakistani governments must address these concerns to ensure that CPEC serves all stakeholders' interests and upholds extensive economic

growth in Pakistan. According to the World Bank, Pakistan experienced a gain of 5.4% in 2016, rising from 4.7% in 2015. By 2017, Pakistan's GDP exceeded \$300 billion, significantly increasing from \$244 billion in 2014. The IMF anticipates a 13% GDP growth for Pakistan by 2025, while the Centre for Applied GDP Research forecasts an annual growth rate of 2.5% until 2030 (Shahzad et al., 2023).

In contrast, in Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23), Pakistan's economy shrank by 0.6% due to challenges like flood, political uncertainty, tight global financing, import restrictions, and high commodity prices, leading to a poverty rate of 39.4%. The World Bank (W.B.) emphasised the need for careful economic management and extensive structural reforms for stability. Implementing IMF's Stand-By Arrangement (SBA), new external financing, and fiscal restraint, real GDP is projected to recover to 1.7% in FY24 and 2.4% in FY25, below its potential. Comprehensive budgetary reforms are crucial, including tax exemptions and broadening the tax base, improving public expenditure quality, and enhancing energy sector viability (2023). According to the W.B., Pakistan's Human Capital Index (HCI) value of 0.41 is below the average of 0.48 in South Asia. Moreover, Pakistan's Human capital results closely resemble those in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the average HCI score is 0.40 (Amin, 2023).

The Effects of the Gwadar Port on Native People

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would connect Kashgar in Xinjiang, northwest Chinese province, to the port city of Gwadar in Pakistan's Balochistan province. In constructing Gwadar port, China funded 80 percent, and Pakistan invested 20 percent, which is less expensive for Pakistan. Gwadar Port can benefit Pakistan through seaborne trade, offering economic growth for Pakistan. To link with West Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe, CPEC provides the shortest path to China. As a result, the distance that oil must travel from the Gulf region to China (through the Strait of Hormuz) will be shorter, and it will also promote trade between Pakistan and China. Under CPEC, several energy and infrastructural projects will create job opportunities and support the fulfilment of energy scarcity in Pakistan. The CPEC is not just an economic project but also a strategic and political one for China and Pakistan (Khan M. Z., 2019). CPEC has four phases; the first includes energy and infrastructure. The second phase is constructing the railway and road and "building the cross border optical fiber cable system." The third phase (2025) is the development of the Gwadar port and railway link. The fourth phase is to set up a Special Economic Zone and "to complete a rail link to Khunjerab Pass by the year 2030" (ibid). The project completed its first phase in 2017, and the second phase concluded in 2020. China encourages industry and export, captivates FDI through Special Economic zones, produces enormous employment opportunities, and supports reforms. On the Human Capital Index, Pakistan ranked 134th among 157 countries, according to 2018 data. China is helping Pakistan with its Growth of good quality Human Capital. For this reason, China invests a massive amount of money in education, health, and skill development (Ramay et al., 2020).

Since Gwadar's construction, the local fishing community has been displaced, witnessed environmental degradation, and feared losing its source of income as the infrastructural boom in Gwadar ignores its misery. A fisherman of Gwadar stated, "During the administration of former president retired General Pervez Musharraf, we knew they might relocate us from Mulla Band. ... We understand they might make

us leave this area (Komari Ward) too because we do not align with the country's overall development plan, and particular for Gwadar" (Notezai, 2017). China granted tax exclusions to operate the Gwadar Port for the ensuing 40 years in 2017, according to Mir Hasil Bizenjo, the Federal Minister for Ports and Shipping. During this time, China will receive 91% of its earnings. The major projects for the port include the Gwadar University, a coal-fired power plant, the Pak-China Friendship Hospital, an extension of the current rail connections, and the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) (Khan I. A., 2017). We must look at several factors to better understand how the Port project has affected the lives of the locals:

Living Standards: If we evaluate the living standard of native residents in Gwadar, their living condition is deplorable. They do not have proper drinking water, health facilities, education, or a home. In the opinion of one resident from Gwadar during the first phase of the project in 2007, "We desired a pukka (formal) home, broad streets, and a stable source of income. The cost of land in Gwadar was rising daily, and we thought that owning a plot of land and a home in the New Town development would allow us to take advantage of opportunities in the emerging city. We hoped our children would attend an English-medium school and grow up to be engineers and doctors instead of being disadvantaged fishermen like us" (Ijaz, 2018). The local fisherman community is losing its preferential status in economic development due to large trawlers fishing and using advanced technology. They even catch small fish with prohibited equipment.

Conversely, conventional fishing methods deprive the local fishing community of fishing opportunities. People pushing a political agenda have been agitating for their fundamental rights. It is not a new demand for fisherfolk to have entry to fishing in their waters, to have the security of tenure over their settlements, to be more included in the job market, to have less involvement from security forces in day-to-day city affairs, and to have access to adequate healthcare and education. They have continuously heard this since Gwadar was named the second-most important port after Karachi (Ahmed, 2023). If all the infrastructural developments in Gwadar do not improve the lives of those needing them the most, they are all just mere concrete sculptures.

Human Development Initiative: Currently, in Gwadar, fishermen comprise around 80% of the total population (Baloch, 2016). At a news conference in 2017, officials asserted that the creation of the Gwadar free zone had brought residents 404 direct jobs and 2000 indirect jobs. Providing 2000 temporary employment to workers cannot be justifiable for their development. Locals believe that economic progress drives growth, and they cause the state of neglecting the social and human costs. Due to their lack of skills, the locals have never participated in any port activities. Fishermen have never assisted in modernising their vessels or occupation fields (Ebrahim, 2017). The Pakistani senator Mandviwalla stated that water, electricity, and gas are the major problems for the city. Unless authorities take steps to address and resolve these problems, the residents of Gwadar will continue to face challenges, and their quality of life will not improve; despite allocating significant amounts on paper, authorities seldom implement these into practice (Kiani, 2021).

Inclusivity in the Development Process: The fishermen are scared of the future, and some have claimed they will not have access to the jetty once the port is in effect. Officials from the government and individuals in charge of the CPEC projects in the

area have not officially addressed these concerns. Although the GDP and number of constructions are rising, their reliance on them pushes them to neglect the legitimate worries of the native populations, who seem to have less access to this prosperity. The exclusion of native fishermen, Baloch firms, and labor from Gwadar associated with the CPEC project forced the Baloch nationals to voice against it and demand a greater share. They are looking at it as extractive and exploitative. This project added a separatist feeling among local Balochs (Azam, 2022).

Though Gwadar Port's construction promises to provide much-needed growth to the city, if it does not improve the lives of individuals who have lived in the area since before it attracted commercial attention, then is the development meant for whom? The achievement of CPEC and the growth in Gwadar cannot be determined by quantitative analysis of massive data sets; preferably, it should benefit the indigenous people. Even if the investment is a positive step for a region's development, if the proper framework for policy and implementation is not in effect, it would be catastrophic steps towards development. This framework should include not only the white-collar sector but also the blue-collar employees and small local traders. It is crucial for the stakeholders connected in the advancement of Gwadar Port to concentrate on these challenges and guarantee that the rights and welfare of the native people are protected. The policy framework comprises providing suitable rehabilitation and reimbursement measures for those impacted by displacement, focusing on the sustainability of the environment, encouraging all-encompassing development, and engaging locals in the decision-making process.

Why India is Reluctant to Join BRI

China and Pakistan referred to one another as "Iron Brothers" (Qingyan, 2021), a phrase used during the Cold War when they teamed up against India. Under the CPEC project, the Chinese government and banks provided economic assistance to Chinese companies for building infrastructure development and energy projects in Pakistan, making Gwadar one of the most sophisticated ports between the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It aims to alleviate power shortages and facilitate trade on an overland route connecting Kashgar with Gwadar through railways, highways, oil pipelines, and optical fiber construction. The corridor aims to expand and renovate the Pakistani infrastructure as soon as possible (2018). Both countries have developed wind, solar, thermal, and water generation projects to produce about 16,520 megawatts of energy so that Pakistan can fulfill its energy deficiency. China officially took the Gwadar Port for a 43-year lease from Pakistan. The motive is to build Gwadar as an international business city. Due to its geographical location, the region has strategic, economic, political, and military importance. Hence, through the flagship project of BRI, China wants to fulfill its strategic and economic interests in this region. This CPEC project will directly connect China with the Gulf countries. Through this corridor, China can provide military assistance, equipment, arms, and ammunition to Pakistan (Sekhon, 2016).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has raised various geopolitical concerns, particularly in the context of regional power dynamics and the broader strategic landscape. CPEC strengthens China's economic and strategic influence in the region. The corridor not only provides China with direct access to the Arabian

Sea through Gwadar Port but also enhances its connectivity with the Middle East and Africa. This growing influence has implications for the balance of power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region, raising concerns among other regional players. The security situation in certain regions along the CPEC route, particularly in Balochistan province, has raised concerns. Insurgent and terrorist activities pose security challenges, potentially disrupting the smooth functioning of the corridor. This has implications not only for Pakistan but also for China, which seeks a stable and secure environment for its investments. As CPEC enhances connectivity between China and Pakistan, it could influence global trade routes. The corridor may contribute to the reorientation of trade flows, impacting established routes and alliances. This has implications for global economic and geopolitical dynamics. The geopolitical concerns surrounding CPEC are complex and multifaceted. The project has implications for regional stability, major power relations, and the balance of influence in South Asia. Addressing these concerns requires careful diplomacy and cooperation among the involved countries to ensure that the economic benefits of CPEC contribute to stability and development in the region. India has been reluctant to join China's BRI due to several reasons, including:

Territorial Disputes: India and China have longstanding border disputes, especially over the Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin regions. The CPEC, a flagship project of BRI, passes through the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, which India is claiming its own. India sees this as violating its territorial integrity and sovereignty (2022). India's officials at the U.N. have referred to the CPEC as an unlawful occupation since it uses disputed territory without India's permission (2018). In addition to causing geopolitical instability in the region, the problem also puts India's national security at risk. India is concerned that Chinese investment in Pakistan could undermine its claims in the contentious Kashmir region. So, India's resistance to the CPEC and China's Policy is a de facto hostile act.

Strategic Concerns: India is wary of China's strategic goals with the BRI, which it sees as a means for China to increase its strategic and economic influence in the region and beyond. India is concerned about China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, which it sees as a security threat (Baruah, 2022). Furthermore, China has access to the Indian Ocean through the engagement of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in the port of Gwadar, which is part of an effort to undermine India's supremacy in the area by manipulating the economy of South Asian Countries.

Economic concerns: India has raised concerns about the lack of transparency in the BRI projects, the high debt burden that these projects may impose on recipient countries, and the potential for Chinese companies to dominate local markets in recipient countries, crowding local businesses. China includes Pakistan in its BRI project because it connects Central and West Asia. So, geopolitically, it is crucial for China that she can establish good trade relations with these countries.-Additionally, China's reputation as a significant economic force has had an enormous impact: as the second largest economy in the World with powerful global companies and investments and the initiator of the BRI massive project, China's growing financial power has made business partnerships with China appealing. Many South Asian countries actively engaged with it, and China has received goodwill by providing financial assistance to these countries (Jain, 2018).

Regional competition: India sees the BRI as a challenge to its regional connectivity

initiatives, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which aims to connect India to Central Asia and Russia through Chabahar Port in Iran (2023). India is concerned that the BRI may undermine its efforts to integrate South Asia and compete with China. This region has considerable strategic importance for India's regional security.

India's opposition to the BRI has led to tense relations between India and China, with both countries engaging in a military standoff in the Himalayas in 2020. India can avoid Pakistan, which prevents it from accessing Afghanistan and Central Asia due to the Chabahar project. Indians know the country's strategic location and ability to provide access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Japan has encouraged India to proceed with the Chabahar project, Iran, and Afghanistan. India and Japan hope to form a strategic alliance in Chabahar because it will enable landlocked Central Asian countries to avoid Chinese-controlled ports like the port of Gwadar. India could also consider implementing its Look East Policy from Bangladesh's perspective. This idea may be a starting point for the South Eastern Corridor, which might parallel the CPEC and connect India's quadrilateral to the economic center of Southeast Asia via Myanmar.

Furthermore, Prime Minister Modi announced the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) during the G20 meeting, with a memorandum of understanding signed between the European Union, India, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, France, Germany, and Italy (Gilani, 2023). IMEC is a transformative project focusing on multi-modal connectivity, including physical, digital, and financial dimensions. It involves cooperation among multiple countries and aims to stimulate economic development, increase trade, and significantly reduce transportation time and costs. The IMEC also has strategic importance, connecting Southeast Asia to Europe and aligning with India's "Act East Policy" (Pradhan, 2023). The IMEC presents a viable alternative to BRI, emphasising cooperation over central design, mutual benefit, and respect for national sovereignty. The success of IMEC will depend on swift implementation by partner countries (Jain S., 2023).

China's 'Sharp Power' Ambition in Display through CPEC

"Sharp power" is a term used to describe the various means through which a country seeks to influence and shape opinions and attitudes abroad, often in ways that are more subtle and indirect than traditional "hard power" methods such as military force. China has been associated with sharp power ambitions as it seeks to expand its influence globally. The narrative surrounding CPEC as a positive development and growth of the world is a strategy China has used effectively through Media and Information control, Confucius institutes, the United Front Work Department, Technology and Surveillance, and Global Governance and Norms. China has invested heavily in shaping its narrative abroad through state-controlled media outlets such as Xinhua and CGTN (China Global Television Network). It also employs tactics like censorship, online surveillance, and control over social media platforms to manage its image and control the information available to its citizens and the international community. China has established Confucius Institutes in various countries as part of its cultural diplomacy efforts. While these institutes aim to promote the Chinese language and culture, they have faced criticism for potentially being used to influence academic discourse and limit discussions on sensitive topics such as CPEC. China's United Front Work Department (UFWD) plays a crucial role in

exerting influence abroad. It engages with overseas Chinese communities, promoting Chinese interests and stifling criticism of the Chinese Communist Party. The UFWD's activities have raised concerns about interference in the internal affairs of other countries including CPEC and Pakistan. China actively engages with international organisations, seeking leadership roles and influencing decision-making processes. This includes its involvement in United Nations agencies, where it aims to shape norms and standards in ways that align with its interests. This engagement has effectively subdued the voice of the Baloch people and their concerns reaching international organisations. This was also criticised when China was left scot-free during the COVID-19 crisis too. China seeks to play a more prominent role in shaping global governance and norms. This involves pushing for alternative models of governance that may differ from Western liberal democratic ideals. China's involvement in international institutions reflects its ambition to influence global rules and standards. By doing this it wants to show BRI and CPEC as some of the alternate models available in the world other than the ones proposed by the West. It's important to note that perceptions of China's sharp power activities vary, and opinions on the matter are often divided. While China emphasises its commitment to peaceful development and non-interference, critics argue that some of its actions raise concerns about the erosion of democratic values, human rights, and the sovereignty of other nations. As China's global influence continues to grow, discussions surrounding its sharp power ambitions will likely remain a topic of international debate. CPEC has been a concern for the Baloch people in terms of suppressing democratic values, human rights, and sovereignty by joining and influencing Pakistan.

Conclusion

The BRI has significantly influenced Pakistan's economic landscape, primarily through the development of the Gwadar Port. While this initiative promises economic advancement, it concurrently stirs controversies. Concerns loom large regarding its potential negative impacts on local communities and environmental sustainability. Additionally, fears of nations falling into a 'debt trap' have been voiced. China and India are still competing for regional dominance through their initiatives due to India's objection to the project, which has strained relations between the two countries. China seeks to sustain healthy diplomatic ties with the countries of South Asia. Except for India, many South Asian nations have welcomed the BRI. This project benefits most participating nations, including Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. It is interesting to notice that delegations from countries like the U.S. and Japan, which are not even BRI members, were sent to observe the proceedings of BRI. It could be considered a strategic move to keep an eye on China. India must send officials to BRI conferences and meetings to learn from these countries and analyse China's intentions. The BRI's long-term success and the Gwadar Port's development will depend on all stakeholders' willingness to collaborate and foster regional confidence and trust. It is essential for China to address the concerns of India and other countries in the region and to ensure that the BRI projects are transparent, sustainable, and mutually beneficial for all parties involved.

India and Pakistan should take responsibility and precautions to ensure that Gwadar doesn't become a friction point and destabilise regional security. The region's interest is to handle a triangular issue between India, Pakistan, and China carefully.

As BRI has become an issue between India and China due to Pakistan allowing China to access the Gilgit-Baltistan region, it becomes the prerogative of Pakistan not to escalate the matter further to deteriorate the security scenario between the arch-rivals. Given the nature of Pakistan's hostility towards India and understanding that the Chinese initiative is just an offshoot of the Chinese Dream, Indian mandarins should chalk out a plan for deliberating with their Chinese counterparts. It is evident that despite serious border issues at Doklam and Arunachal Pradesh, India's and China's bilateral relations are intact, which is apparent in the trade figures. Considering the nature of the connectivity and India's interest, the time has ripened to open corridors of dialogue on India's engagement with CPEC, keeping the Aksai Chin Issue and Pok issue aside.

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