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Pakistan-Central Asia Connectivity through CPEC Evaluating Opportunities and Geopolitical Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This has given rise to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as one of the strategic initiatives under the flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to strengthen connectivity between Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs). This paper traces this path to explore opportunities and challenges along CPEC as a facilitator of regional integration and its geopolitical consequences, in terms of trade and infrastructure investments. The study underscores the opportunities for landlocked Central Asian countries by positioning themselves in the Gwadar Port and the Arabian Sea region, in terms of lowering the cost of transit, increased regional markets and improved energy cooperation initiatives, including CASA-1000 and TAPI. At the same time the study shows how serious security concerns are, how unstable the political climate is, how weak the U.S. and Pakistani governments are in comparison to their neighbor India, how geo-politically competitive the area is between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and the United States. The conclusions highlight the need to ensure good governance, collaboration regions and sustainable security arrangements to fully realize the potential of CPEC for regional connectivity and economic integration in the longer term.

INTRODUCTION

In addition to boosting the economies of China and Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can bring about a significant change to the entire region by providing land locked Central Asian



Republics (CARs) access to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Gwadar Port. CPEC is strategic connectivity framework designed to benefit regional stability, economic integration, infrastructure development and trade expansion. Pakistan plays a pivotal role in the process due to its strategic location of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. The CARs – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan – have significant stockpiles of natural resources, however not direct connections to seaports. Logistical constraints such issues can be alleviated by CPEC, which provides them a shorter and more feasible link connecting them to global markets via Gwadar. Recent development also reinforces it further adding that the importance of Pakistan-Central Asia connectivity has become more relevant these days (Kulyntay, G., Ospanova, A., Mukanov, M., Abdullin, R., Seilkhan, B. & Zhaksylykova, A., 2025).

In 2024, Turkmenistan officially inked a pact allowing for access to Gwadar Port, signifying an integral advancement towards regional integration. During 2024, Turkmenistan has signed the first regional accord for access to Gwadar Port, an important step in regional integration. This move could serve as an example to other CARs for more such trade considerations for the CPEC's role in regional trade. Additionally, participation in infrastructure projects like the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor is intended to connect Pakistan with Afghanistan, even more to Central Asia, aiming at trade and inter-border economic cooperation. Further improvement in logistics capability around the region has been achieved operationalizing New Gwadar International Airport in January 2025 to facilitate the movement of cargo and passengers. Z, 2020).

Energy cooperation is also part of the benefits CPEC is bringing about in the field of connectivity. Proposed projects like CASA-1000, scheduled for completion by 2026, will allow for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to export leftover hydroelectric power to Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to cushion energy imbalances and enhance the regional reliance. But the security situation, especially in Balochistan, creates worry on safety of the local population, infrastructure works and the foreign investors. Moreover, geopolitical tension, particularly India's opposition towards CPEC, as well as on-going regional rivalry, makes cooperation somewhat complicated. In spite of all these, the CPEC can provide significant opportunities to the CARs through enhanced connectivity of seaports, energy trade, decrease in transportation costs, and enhancing infrastructure connectivity. Hence, CPEC is one of the major tool for economic integration and future development in the region (Bibi, M., Yaseen, Z., & Qasim, G, 2025).

CPEC is a central connectivity hub that connects Gwadar port of south Pakistan with Kashgar in China's Xinjiang region. It was started in 2013 and has become one of the largest cooperation projects to date between China and Pakistan, which has attracted the investment of more than \$46 billion. CPEC is seen as a pivotal opportunity for Pakistan to reshape its economic landscape, bolster infrastructure development, and boost trade relations across the region. In China's case, it facilitates the unifying the broader connectivity goals of China, which connect South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. CPEC, in this context is not a bilateral project but it is a corridor to make a transformation in the Asian region's trade routes, energy corridors, and geopolitics as well (Majeed, T., Anwar, Z., & Bashir.). F, 2023).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addition to boosting the economies of China and Pakistan, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can bring about a significant change to the entire region by providing land locked Central Asian Republics (CARs) access to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan's Gwadar Port. CPEC is strategic connectivity framework designed to benefit regional stability, economic integration, infrastructure development and trade expansion. Pakistan plays a pivotal role in the process due to its strategic location of South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. The CARs – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan – have significant stockpiles of natural resources, however not direct connections to seaports. Logistical constraints such issues can be alleviated by CPEC, which provides them a shorter and more feasible link connecting them to global markets via Gwadar. Recent development also reinforces it further adding that

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Research Objectives

- To study the contribution of CPEC towards strengthening connectivity of Pakistan with Central Asian Republics for the purpose of trade and other aspects of connectivity such as infrastructure development, energy collaboration and the opportunities for market access to Pakistan and Central Asian countries.
- To understand the strategic relevance of Gwadar Port and transport corridors for the land locked countries of Central Asia with regard to access to international markets and integration into regional economic flows.
- Identify domestic challenges, and policy considerations for the implementation of CPEC which involve security, political stability, bureaucratic inefficiency and governance issues along with solutions to bring regional connectivity inclusive, sustainable and effective.

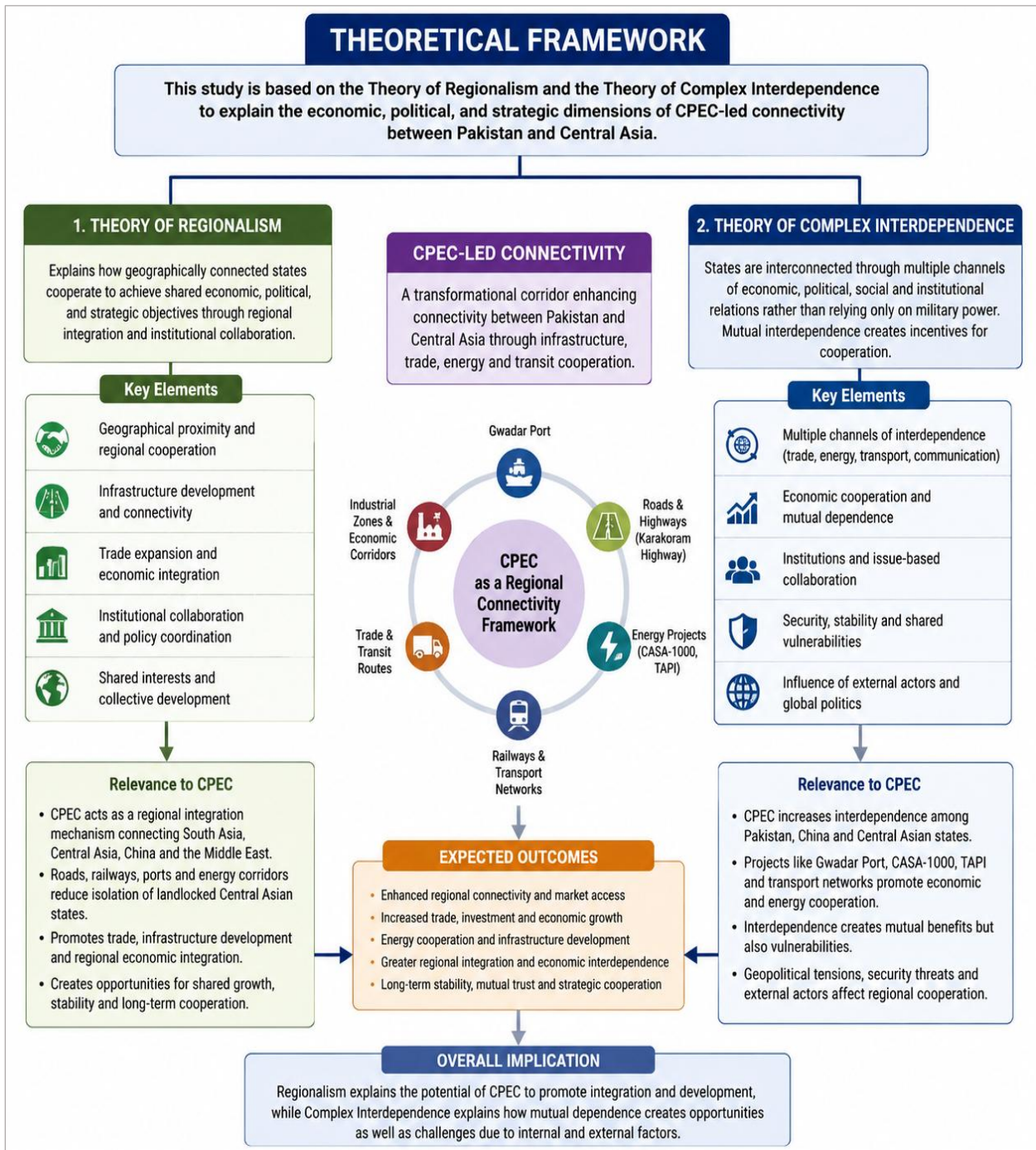
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method adopted in this study is qualitative and analytic approach, with an emphasis on secondary data. The secondary data examined in this study are academic sources, sources that are government reports, policy paper, official publications, newspapers and international organization sources. It delves into the geopolitical, economic, strategic and infrastructural aspects of CPEC-related connectivity between Pakistan and Central Asia. The research method used is descriptive, comparative, case study and

content analysis. The key cases are: Gwadar Port, Karakoram Highway, CASA-1000, TAPI and trans-Afghan trade corridors. Overall, the study is descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory in nature to study the opportunities, challenges, and policy implications of CPEC for the connectivity in the region.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of Regionalism as well as the Theory of Complex Interdependence are the bases for this study. In fact, both are applicable, as CPEC-related connectivity with Central Asian countries is about regional cooperation, having increased trade volume, infrastructure construction, energy facilities and geopolitical interaction.



Theory of Regionalism

- **Theory of Regionalism.** Theory of Regionalism is a regional diplomatic approach to inter-state collaboration to attain shared regional economic, political and strategic goals. Regionalism highlights the primary role of trade and transport routes, infrastructure enhancement and cooperation of institutions and mutual interest in economic integration of the region (Baral, B. N., 2024).
- **Application of Regionalism to CPEC.** CPEC can be understood in relation to this study as a corridor for regional connectivity between Pakistan, China, Central Asian region and the Middle Eastern region. The CPEC can offer access to the Arabian Sea to the landlocked Central Asian Republics via road and rail corridors, energy corridors and trade paths from Gwadar Port. The access will help to decrease transportation expenses, develop regional trade and provide new market opportunities for Central Asian energy, minerals and agricultural products.
- **Role in Economic Integration.** The theory is helpful to explain the potential role of the CPEC in decreasing the economic isolation of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. CPEC can boost the interdependence of South Asian and Central Asian countries helping to foster regional economic integration through the enhancement of connectivity through Pakistan.

Theory of Complex Interdependence

- **Complex Interdependence Theory.** The concept of Complex Interdependence, advanced by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, is based on the premise that states are interrelated by a series of economic, political, social and institutional linkages. It suggests that a more significant level of cooperation is achieved through trade, energy and communication, transport, investment and common economic gains, which are not solely military (Keohane, R. O., & Nye, J. S., 2017).
- **Relevance to CPEC Connectivity.** This theory has evident direct relevance to the CPEC-related connectivity, since CPEC makes the Central Asian states and China and Pakistan dependent on each other. The building of Gwadar Port, CASA-1000 pipeline, TAPI, the Karakoram Highway and the proposed corridors for the trans-Afghan corridor illustrates how infrastructure and energy cooperation can bring close the economies of the region. These projects can contribute to various aspects of trade cooperation, energy security and investment.
- **Vulnerabilities and Strategic Risks.** Simultaneously, Complex Interdependence also outlines the vulnerabilities which surround the connectivity of the regions. A series of security threats both in Balochistan and Afghanistan, weak bureaucracy, and geopolitical rivalry can impact the chances of the success of CPEC. Connectivity is affected by external factors, including Indians, U.S., Iran, Afghanistan, which are beneficial or may be obstructive to connectivity.

Importance of Study

- **Theoretical Framework for Connectivity Analysis.** It is important that social items are relevant to the study. Buoyed by these theories, the opportunities as well as challenges of connectivity programs under CPEC can be analysed. The potential of CPEC for trade, infrastructure, market access and regional integration is what regionalism entails. The concept of modern cooperation for mutual benefit in economics is known as Complex Interdependence, while the potential risks of security and politics or geopolitical competition must be accounted for as well.
- **Complex Interdependence and Risk Considerations.** This theory supports the analysis of CPEC as an economic corridor and a strategic regional project which can have an impact on the connectivity among South Asian countries, Central Asian countries, China and the Middle East.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

- **Geopolitical Leverage.** CPEC offers a strategic option to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to connect to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan's Gwadar Port. This project improves the negotiation skills of such countries by providing alternative longer and/or politically unstable corridors for imports and trade. The alternate connectivity route helps the states of Central Asia diversify their trade

partners and economic opportunities, enhancing their geopolitical power in the region, which has why they have adopted multi-vector foreign policies (Ali, 2021).

- **Opportunities for Economic and Trade Activities.** CPEC is a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that spans two-thirds of the world's population and about one-third of the global GDP. It provides landlocked and developing countries with chances for better infrastructure, trade and employment. With proper execution, CPEC initiatives can foster regional integration, alleviate poverty, and help ensure the economic stability of the regions involved in the project (Nadin et al., 2024).
- **Strategic Integration and Multilateral Connectivity.** External conflicts and geopolitical tensions affect connectivity initiatives such as CPEC. The CPEC could be extended to Central Asia, paving the way to a multi-lateral relationship between Pakistan and China, where Afghanistan and other countries in the region can also be thrown in. This multipolar approach enables states to diversify supply routes, open up new markets, and enhance regional interdependence.
- **Internal Security Challenges.** CPEC projects face threats from security threats in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Historical incidents, such as attacks on Chinese personnel and infrastructure (e.g., the Dasu Hydropower Project attack in 2021), indicate gaps in security for projects. The Special Security Division (SSD) has been set up for operational security, but long-term stability is unguaranteed.
- **Environmental Quality.** Project continuity and resources allocation are affected by political turnovers and administrative inefficiencies. Finally, regional opposition and local grievances have slowed the implementation of CPEC in the corridor regions especially Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The absence of institutional coordination has an impact on investor confidence, and infrastructure development is delayed.
- **Perception Management Issues.** Hesitations related to transparency, debt dependency, and fair benefit sharing, among others, question CPEC acceptance by the public. There have been concerns raised by communities on issues of relocation, low job opportunities, lack of water, and the impact on traditional livelihoods. National narratives and local experiences may not align, which could lead to a decline in social support for the corridor.
- **External Geopolitical Challenges.** Geopolitical competition adds to CPEC's expansion. The corridor's operational feasibility is affected by political instability in Afghanistan, U.S. concerns on strategic influence, and India's opposition to the corridor via its alternative ports (Chabahar). Regional competition for influence poses strategic challenges for future connectivity and investment.
- **Environmental Protection and Climate Action.** CPEC helps build port complexes, industrial zones, and transport corridors, promoting trade between the nations of Pakistan, China, and Central Asian Republics. Better roads, railways and ports boost transport cost, efficiency and regional economic interdependence.
- **Infrastructure and Energy Cooperation.** Some of the energy corridors and energy projects such as CASA-1000 under CPEC will help solve the energy deficit in the region and improve the interconnectivity. The corridor has significant socio-economic benefits for Pakistan as well as Central Asia, and facilitates industrial development, infrastructure projects and cross-border energy commerce.
- **Strategic Positioning.** CPEC enhances Pakistan's strategic significance as a regional hub between South Asia, Central Asia and China. Especially the port of Gwadar provides a gateway to the international markets for Central Asian countries, so contributing to the economic and geopolitical stability in the region.

Key Findings

- **Strategic Alternatives for Central Asian Countries.** The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offers important strategic options to landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs). CPEC will



enhance regional economic capacity, trade corridors and energy connectivity between these countries and Pakistan's Gwadar port. This connectivity helps to lower transportation expenses, open up access to international markets and embed CARs more directly in regional economic systems, enabling them to diversify their trade routes and economic relationships.

- **Key Implementation Challenges.** The implementation of CPEC is challenged by various major issues, such as the security situation in regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, political instability and the inefficiency of bureaucracy. These obstacles can slow down the project process, make investors look elsewhere, and diminish the corridor's ability to boost trade and energy transactions. To achieve CPEC projects timely completion and sustainability, it is very important to address these challenges.
- **Importance of Local Involvement and Public Opinion.** The success and sustainability of projects such as CPEC largely depends on the acceptance and perception of the local community. Community involvement is important to a stable society, helps minimize opposition to land acquisition and/or construction projects, and promotes local ownership of infrastructure projects. Inclusion of people in decision-making and raising public awareness helps to reduce grievances and increase recognition and support for development benefits.
- **External Geopolitical Influences.** Geopolitical events outside of CPEC's orbit have a strong influence on CPEC's efficiency. The security of trade, the governance of the trade corridors, and the diplomatic negotiations surrounding them are affected by the rivalries and strategic interests between India, the United States, Iran, Afghanistan and the other regional players. India's opposition to CPEC on the disputed territories and construction of alternative routes such as Chabahar Port, for instance, could affect the confidence in investment and regional cooperation. In the same way, macro-economic circumstances might impact corridor stability and long-term analysis.
- **Infrastructure, Energy and Transport Opportunities.** Though it faces challenges, CPEC presents enormous prospects in infrastructure development, energy cooperation and transportation corridors. Road, rail, port, and energy pipeline investments improve regional trade patterns, generate new economic ties and aid sustainable growth. CPEC can significantly change the dynamics of trade, enhance energy security and foster regional economic integration, enabling Pakistan to become a key player in connecting the country with China, Central Asia and other nations.
- **CPEC as a Regional Connectivity Framework.** The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emerged as an important economic and connectivity framework as it gives access to the Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to sea ports and international market through Pakistan.
- **Infrastructure and Trade Enhancement.** The construction of Gwadar Port, the extension of the road system, and the establishment of regional transport systems has bolstered trade connectivity and improved Pakistan's status as a regional trade hub.
- **Trade Growth and Regional Integration.** Trade between the two countries witnessed a massive expansion since the launch of CPEC in 2016, growing from mere US\$19.49 million in 2003 to US\$428.85 million in 2024. In 2003, the value of goods exports was 17.96 million, and in 2024, increased to 402.6 million, with imports also rising rapidly, especially since 2022, reaching 26.25 million in 2024. This significant development in trade highlights the role of CPEC-driven infrastructure and connectivity in strengthening Pakistan's economic ties with Central Asian nations, fostering regional economic integration, and enhancing market access (Khan, M. B, 2024).

Table : Bilateral Trade: Pakistan and Central Asian States

Year	Imports (\$ Million)	Exports (\$ Million)	Total Bilateral Trade (\$ Million)
2013	23	22.35	45.36
2014	22.49	25.07	47.57
2015	19.7	27.81	47.52

2016	49.96	37.47	87.43
2017	36.23	81.6	117.8
2018	28.2	116.62	144.8
2019	13.12	118.65	131.7
2020	15.25	90.36	105.6
2021	73.51	250.91	324.4
2022	89.36	260.02	249.38
2023	35.3	226.9	262.2
2024	26.25	402.6	428.85

(Source: Pakistan Business Council, 2024)

DISCUSSIONS

Opportunities

- Enhanced Geopolitical Leverage.** Beyond its economic advantages, CPEC has implications for geopolitical interests of Central Asian countries. Central Asian Republics' foreign policy is being evolving into “multi-vector” foreign policy since independence, which means that they try and maintain balance between relations with great powers. Yet, their existing trade and infrastructure has ensured a very strong reliance on China for investment, markets, and financing while Russia is vital for security, trilateralism and regional influence. This level of dependency might restrict policy choice: export receipts, transport expenses, pipeline locations, and the stability of the region may be impacted or be influenced by political or economic tensions between Russia and China. However, CPEC is an alternate route for Indian Ocean connectivity via Pakistan. CPEC can enhance the negotiation capability of Central Asian countries due to the facilitation of import and trade routes through Gwadar port into the Arabian sea as well as chalk a new alternative strategy and economic opportunity for Central Asian countries (Ali, G., 2021).
- Other Emerging Opportunities.** CPEC fits within the larger opportunities enabled by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI economies are home to almost two-thirds of the globe's population and represent c. one-third global GDP and international trade. Such broad geopolitical and economic scale can make development projects under BRI have significant implications for the region and even the global economy. In many States, including landlocked and developing States, poverty, poor infrastructure, inadequate levels of investment and access to markets remain. However, there is still poverty in certain countries under BRI, such as Kenya, Djibouti, Uzbekistan and Laos. BRI and CPEC-related projects offer the possibilities to fill the development gap by improving infrastructure, facilitating trade, expanding cross-border cooperation and employment opportunities in this regard. When properly effected these can enhance regional integration, promote growth in the regions involved, alleviate poverty, and aid long-term stability in the participating regions (Nadin, R., Mami, E., Calabrese, L., Cao, Y., & Chen, Y., 2024).
- The Geopolitical Dynamics and Economic Corridors.** Dr. Syed Rizwan Haider Bukhari's research postulates the influence of external conflicts and geopolitical tensions on the viability of major economic corridors, such as China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In a study on Economic corridors and Geopolitical disruption, Bukhari et al., highlight on the impact of wars on economic corridors both CPEC and India Middle East Economic corridor (IMEEC) and the North-South International economic corridor (INSTC) are also considered. The authors suggest that such turbulence can redefine investment priorities, postpone the development of infrastructure and alter geopolitical dynamics at regional level, demonstrating the fact that corridor projects cannot be detached from the dynamics that prevail in the world. This is crucial for the perception of transit

CPEC or multilateral connectivity CPEC that is to expand bilateral China–Pakistan relations into a wide-multilateral network of connectivity involving Central Asia (Bukhari et al. 2024).

- **Pakistan's Foreign Policy Approach towards CPEC is Strategic.** Pakistan's foreign policy approach to CPEC is of Strategic nature. The expert work of Bukhari further establishes linkages between CPEC and Pakistan's new orientation in its foreign policy. Although the focus isn't always on Central Asia, research related to the geopolitical significance of CPEC highlights the move of Pakistan's foreign policy from Old Geopolitics to New Geo-Economics, highlighting infrastructure diplomacy, geoeconomics links and regional integration (Khan & Alvi, 2026). It is an important reframing strategy that might put CPEC into perspective in the context of Pakistan's future vision of becoming a hub for connectivity between South Asia, East Asia and potential gateway to markets of the central Asian nations through transport corridors. Pakistan's new national policy can bolster its position in regional cooperation forums and multilateral initiatives, paving the way for stronger cooperation with the landlocked Central Asian Republics (Bukhari, 2025).
- **Strategic Integration and Risks in Connectivity Projects.** While the investigation in Bukhari's main concern is not empirical but a thematic one, his considerations suggest that such connectivity projects as the China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation programme (CPEC) need to be aware of the intricate security and geopolitical dangers involved that could have an impact on the wider framework of regional integration. In the context of global conflicts, for instance, economic corridors can turn into economic lifelines and become strategic flashpoints, attracting partnership interest on one side, while also heightening geopolitical competition from the other. In the context of CPEC, this implies that the corridor could provide Pakistan with greater access to sea ports, with new trade routes available once there is a sense of security and cooperation in the region (Bukhari, Iqbal, & Khan, 2024).
- **Connectivity Within a Multipolar Regional Framework.** In this context the Bukhari worldview would dictate how states would interpret an initiative like connectivity through CPEC as acting as a form of economic corridor in order to gain access to markets and diversify supply routes and/or establish strategic partnerships. The strategy mirrors the trend of the developing world to pursue interest-based economic diplomacy that leverages infrastructure projects such as CPEC to achieve both economic and geostrategic objectives . In this context, the extension of CPEC towards Afghan and Central Asian connectivity which involves Paksitan's intent to establish the corridors through Afghan soil and beyond is a coordinated effort to bring Pakistan into a multipolar trade arrangement which will offset the traditional power dynamics and promote economic interdependence.

Challenges

- **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Overview.** Generally, the main goal of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is to promote infrastructure-carrying as a part of the overall investment plans of China across the globe. In the meantime, by the end of March 2020, about 138 countries have signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) under BRI. By this time, roughly 138 countries have signed MoUs under the BRI framework. But the size of the project has also raised questions about China's capacity to continue funding, logistics, providing political backing and/or executing projects in the regions that are involved.
- **Role of CPEC within the BRI Framework.** CPEC is playing a crucial and pivotal role within this comprehensive framework. It is viewed not only as a gateway corridor for the socio-economic development of Western China but as an important example of how a key BRI initiative will can be successfully implemented in China. Xinjiang is seen as a gateway that will link Chinese market with Pakistan and potentially with south and central Asian markets. With road, rail and port initiatives, CPEC can connect with other regional modes of transport, besides enhancing interregional trade and connectivity.

- **Strategic Significance in Regional Trade.** The project is touted as an additional trade point for the region other than the Iranian port of Chabahar, which seems to avoid the comparison that it is competing with Iran's port. This is aligned with Asia's overall goal of the economic integration and diversification of Asian trade routes. However, the future expansion, credibility and success of this wide-ranging BRI framework highly rely on the effective implementation, security, and stability of CPEC (Zamir, F. 2023).

Landlocked Countries



- **Concerns about Shortfalls in Regional Connectivity and Trade Facilitation.** Concerns about shortfalls in Regional Connectivity and Trade Facilitation. Issues of lack of Regional Connectivity and Trade Facilitations. Central Asia is a vital but fraught geopolitical and economic region, with a range of different geopolitical, economic, and political concerns. The major powers who are interested in boosting engagement and regional integration need a multi-faceted approach in the region.
- **Challenges in Regional Integration.** China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and CPEC, in this context, are focused on connectivity and economic cooperation in the region, but there are some structures that still remain a hurdle in regional integration. Some disagreements with neighbours remain over borders and water supplies, and governance issues and clan-based political systems have

restricted cooperation effectively between countries in the region. However, these challenges are reflected in trade facilitation indicators as well.

- **Trade Facilitation Indicators.** The World Bank also measured and published a worldwide Trading Across Borders Index in 2018, in which Kyrgyzstan is in 84th place, Kazakhstan in 123rd, Tajikistan in 149th and Uzbekistan in 168th place. Together with the many challenges of opaque rules, corruption at border and restricted domestic rules, informal trade restrictions persist, making cross-border trade costs more. While these obstacles can be overcome, the overall ambition of BRI and CPEC, to develop Pakistan as a safe country for establishing a land-sea connection between these two critical zones of the world, might be challenging if they are not reduced (Vakulchuk & Irnazarov, 2017).
- **Internal Challenges**
 - **Internal Challenges to CPEC Implementation.** Although connecting China and Pakistan is a huge economic potential, there are several internal challenges being faced within Pakistan regarding the successful implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Interaction of Challenges and Impacts These cover area of security threats, political instability, bureaucratic inefficiencies, governance shortcomings and perception management areas. All these factors interact with each other which affect investor confidence, project execution and cooperation between regions in CPEC (Latif S, Khan NH, 2025).
 - **Internal Security Challenges.** Another important challenge for CPEC is, security, especially in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where many CPEC projects are situated. There are questions about the militancy, terrorist activities and allegations of attack on Chinese nationals and sabotage of development projects. The Special Security Division (SSD) for security of projects and personnel related to CPEC has been formed but long-term stability is a challenge in that regard. In 2023 and 2018, there were various attacks against Chinese engineers and CPEC structures. A suicide attack that claimed the lives of thirteen – nine of them Chinese at the Dasu hydro power project in KPK in 2021 was one of the biggest events. The project was suspended for the interim following the attack and serious concerns have been raised about the security situation in and around CPEC (Ismail, M., Hassan, T.U, Haq, A.U, & Mir, W, 2023).
 - **Political Dynamics and Bureaucratic Constraints.** The political instability is continuing to hinder the implementation of CPEC projects. Issues related to political instability and the weakness of institutions are still hampering the implementation of the CPEC projects. The governance and policy making have been hindered due to lack of continuity or extended political hegemony by successive governments. While the federal government's focus remains on fairness in the benefits of CPEC across the different provinces, there is some concern about resource allocation and development priorities being addressed, particularly in Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Local opposition has also posed difficulties in implementation, with disruption of development projects and tensions in corridor areas in such local groups (Ul Hassan, Y., 2020).
 - **Perception Management Issues.** Dealing with internal perception management becomes another big problem faced by CPEC. Perceptions of the project have been affected by public concerns that are related to transparency, financial arrangements, debt dependency and inequalities concerning outcomes. Local communities have voiced concerns related to issues like relocation, prospects of limited employment, scarcity of water, and disruption of traditional livelihoods, including fishing, in these areas such as Gwadar. These local experiences contradict the national narratives of “game changing” CPEC as a transformative “game changer”. If these concerns are not addressed, these deter the acceptance of the transport corridor by the public, and may also cause further social and political issues for the transport corridor (Hassan, M. U., Khakwani, I., Ahmad, W., & Ali, N. E., 2025).
- **External Challenges**

- **External Challenges and Geopolitical Rivalries.** There are also several external challenges facing CPEC due to the rivalry and geopolitical competition among the region's states and countries and instability across the border. The strategic competition in the region between India, U.S., I.R. I, Afghanistan & other players highly impact the future of the CPEC-led connectivity initiatives (Hussain, H., Bogheiry, A., & Alam, T., 2023).
- **India's Opposition and Strategic Concerns.** The opposition vs Chabahar Port is an ongoing rivalry which is seen in India. India vehemently does not like CPEC as its major parts traverse through the territory of disputed Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan that India considers part of its territory. India considers CPEC to be both the strengthening of China and Pakistan's strategic partnership and as a possibility to the balance of power in the Arabian Sea. In addition, New Delhi has also raised an issue regarding CPEC's extension into Afghanistan.
- **Rivalry with Chabahar Port.** In July 2025, India made it public that it did not want India to join Afghanistan in the CPEC because it was rejecting the idea of a trilateral meeting of China, Pakistan and Pakistan's ally Afghanistan's Taliban government. At the same time, India still partners with Iran for strategic demarcation of Chabahar Port as an alternative route to connect in the region, thus creating strategic rivalry between the two lines (Khan, K. H., 2023).
- **U.S. Sanctions and Great-Power Competition.** The competition between two giants (USA and China) has also been making expansion of CPEC difficult. The Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC have been under frequent attack by the U.S. political and security establishment due to issues of debt dependency, transparency and strategic influence. In the bigger picture of the Indo-Pacific policy, the USA now is concerned about the gradual sprawl of China's geopolitical footprint on South Asia and sees CPEC as a part of it. This has boosted the demand for alternative connectivity schemes with India and other neighbourhood countries. This geopolitical rivalry could lead some states and investors to be wary of investing in the CPEC infrastructure and trade networks, thereby making them less likely to be deepening their relations with CPEC. This geopolitical rivalry could also induce some to regard the line as less inclined to invest in CPEC infrastructure and trade connections (Khan, K. H., & Omid, A., 2023).
- **Iran's Regional Role.** The Iranian role in this connectivity's context of Pakistan is a complex one. Gwadar and Chabahar ports have the potential to complement each other and trade to different regional markets on the other hand. India, however, is tied up in the port of Chabahar and occasional territorial disputes with Pakistan along their border, thus creating geopolitical tension in regional trade. Iran's involvement in this International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is also helping the Central Asian states develop alternative trade routes to the nations in Persian Gulf and Mediterranean Basin. Yet longer term regional investment and trade mutually cooperation are uncertain due to ongoing U.S.-Iran tensions and sanctions (Ali, R., 2025).
- **Afghanistan's Political Uncertainty.** One of the biggest challenges and most unknown elements of the CPEC and its connection with Central Asia is Afghanistan. Taliban government recaptured the territories from 2021 onward but has not been officially recognized by the states of the world due to issues related to governance, inclusivity and counterterrorism pledges. Political instability in Afghanistan makes it difficult to plan projects like TAPI, trans-Afghan railways and other potential branches of the CPEC into Central Asia for future. In view of Afghanistan's political instability, therefore, the pursuit of regional connectivity visions between Pakistan and Central Asia through Afghanistan is still a big challenge (Haider, Z., & Khan, R. A., 2025).

CONCLUSION

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is undoubtedly one of the boldest connectivity initiatives in current international policies and economic development in the region. CPEC is a pivot to the Belt Road which could give a boost to Pakistan to become a trade and transit hub for Central Asian Republics to



open new roads to the global markets through Gwadar Port and Pakistan's transportation system. The results of this study show that CPEC provides great potential in terms of trade expansion, infrastructure development, energy cooperation, foreign direct investment and regional economic integration. Enhanced connectivity via roads, railroads, ports, energy corridors and Special Economic Zones will minimize the cost of transport, increase economic interdependence and ensure more integrated economic cooperation, further between South Asia, Central Asia and China. The corridor also has major issues related to its interiors and exteriors. The implementation of these policies is still hampered by security risks, political uncertainty, inefficiency in the bureaucracy, local grievance and governance problems in Pakistan. Geopolitical tussles between India, the United States, Iran and Afghanistan add to the strategic challenges in region connectivity. Finally, there are many elements of good governance, regional cooperation, political stability, inclusive development and strategic diplomacy that are key to the success or failure of CPEC. CPEC, with proper implementation, can bring about a new economic and geopolitical landscape of South and Central Asian countries, which will involve regional connectivity, interdependence and long-term integration.

Recommendations

Many policy measures are required to better utilize opportunities and remove hurdles that result from CPEC's connections with the Central Asian region.

- **The transport infrastructure needs to be modernized. Its a need for modernizing transport infrastructure.** While modernization of transportation infrastructure is an agenda item in Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics and China, a specific priority is needed for dry ports, border facilities, rail and highways. Embarking on the Karakoram Highway (KKH) to improve the efficiency of trade, in addition to expanding, should be hurried and the modernisation of railway line (ML-1) should be promoted with the goal of decreasing the transit costs. The expansion of Karakoram Highway (KKH), the modernisation of railway line (ML-1), to make trade more efficient should be accelerated, whereas projects such as CASA-1000, TAPI and trans-Afghan railway should be pursued to decrease the cost of transport.
- **Expertise and Development in Security Measures.**
- ✓ **Security measure improvements.** A strengthened infrastructure protection system, better coordination of the intelligence and better security for foreign workers are required to protect CPEC-related activities. Increase in socioeconomic development programs in Balochistan and K-P AKTU must be accompanied with security measures to resolve the grievances of the masses and generate support amongst the masses.
- ✓ **PPC – Strengthening of Political and Institutional Coordination.** This calls for more policy continuity, administrative reform, transparency and even better coordination between the federal and Provincial governments in Pakistan. Effective action must be taken on protection of investor confidence through a proper solution of lacunae in the bureaucracy and governance.
- **Most importantly, promotion of Inclusive Economic Development.** Promote more inclusive benefits of CPEC, allowing local industries to participate and by providing jobs and various education and healthcare services. To ease the perception management, Public Awareness sessions and clear understanding of financial and developmental dimensions of CPEC can be conducted.
- **Strengthening Regional Diplomacy.** In the regional aspect, the two countries should collaborate with the Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, Iran and other regional actors more on diplomatic level in the framework of regional organizations like the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Constructive diplomacy will contribute to a decrease in distrust, and can foster peace, cooperation and connectivity among the region.

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