



## Revisiting Security Challenges of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Critical Literature Review

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### Abstract

*The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been described as a transformative initiative under China’s Belt and Road framework, linking Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar Port in Pakistan. While the corridor promises economic development and enhanced connectivity, its implementation has been persistently hindered by multifaceted security challenges. This paper examines the security dimensions of CPEC through a literature-based review. It identifies recurring themes, including insurgency in Balochistan, terrorism, sectarian and ethnic violence, Indo-Pakistani rivalry, external geopolitical competition, and governance-related weaknesses. The review also highlights underexplored areas, such as the role of climate change and community-level grievances, that demand further academic attention. The findings suggest that CPEC’s viability depends not only on physical security measures but also on broader political, socio-economic, and environmental strategies.*

### Introduction

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched in 2015 as a flagship of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been heralded as a “game changer” for Pakistan and the broader region (Javaid, 2016; Anjum & Manzoor, 2020). Connecting Kashgar in China’s Xinjiang province to Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the project promises extensive infrastructure development,



energy security, trade connectivity, and industrial modernization. Scholars have emphasized its potential to revitalize Pakistan's struggling economy, alleviate energy shortages, and strengthen China's access to maritime trade routes (McCartney, 2022; Ali, Riaz, Ali, & Bano, 2020). For Beijing, CPEC offers strategic depth and a viable response to the "Malacca dilemma" by reducing dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints (Ji, 2007; Lanteigne, 2008).

Despite its transformative potential, the corridor faces severe and multidimensional security challenges. Internally, insurgencies in Balochistan, ethno-sectarian strife in Gilgit-Baltistan and Quetta, and terrorism linked to extremist networks such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) threaten to undermine stability along the route (Syed, 2017; Javed, Nazir, & Chaudhry, 2022). Governance failures, including corruption, lack of transparency, and weak institutions, exacerbate insecurity and weaken public trust in CPEC (Javaid, 2016; Iqbal, 2020). Externally, India's opposition, framed around territorial disputes in Gilgit-Baltistan and broader rivalry with China, remains the most overt challenge (Mujahid, 2022). Simultaneously, instability in Afghanistan, competition from Iran's Chabahar Port, and shifting alignments involving the United States and Gulf states complicate the security environment (Hussain, 2020).

The scale and persistence of these challenges highlight CPEC's dual character as both an economic opportunity and a security liability. In Balochistan, for example, nationalist groups contest the project on grounds of political marginalization and inequitable distribution of benefits, fueling targeted violence against Chinese workers and infrastructure (Isran, Siddiki, Kumar, & Zaidi, 2019; Mujahid, 2022). In Gilgit-Baltistan, where the corridor enters Pakistan, sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni communities has intensified local fragility (Javed *et al.*, 2022; Ismail, Hassan, Haq, & Mir, 2023). Such incidents underscore how local grievances intertwine with broader geopolitical rivalries, creating a layered security problem that extends beyond conventional counterinsurgency.

The literature also suggests that Pakistan's security responses have been heavily militarized, with the creation of the Special Security Division (SSD) to protect Chinese assets (Sial, 2016). While these measures have provided short-term safeguards, they risk sidelining democratic institutions, alienating local populations, and reinforcing Pakistan's entrenched civil-military imbalance (Wolf, 2016; Khan & Jaffari, 2023). The securitization of development, in turn, raises concerns about the sustainability of CPEC as an inclusive economic project rather than a narrowly defined strategic corridor.

Moreover, CPEC's security challenges cannot be understood in isolation from broader global and regional transformations. India's expanding defense cooperation with Israel and alignment with the United States reflect attempts to counterbalance China's growing influence (Sharma & Bing, 2015; Farid & Adnan, 2022; Dar, 2024). Meanwhile, China's long-term economic and security calculations - including stabilizing Xinjiang, exporting industrial overcapacity, and securing access to the Arabian Sea - make the corridor central to Beijing's global strategy



(Rahman & Shurong, 2017; Hussain, 2021). Climate change adds yet another layer of complexity, as extreme weather, water scarcity, and environmental degradation threaten both infrastructure and livelihoods along the corridor (Bao *et al.*, 2024; Khalid, Ahmad, & Ullah, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present study synthesizes existing academic literature to provide a comprehensive analysis of the security challenges surrounding CPEC. Unlike works that focus exclusively on its economic benefits or diplomatic significance, this article foregrounds security as the defining variable in CPEC's viability. Drawing on a wide range of scholarly sources, it identifies recurring themes of insurgency, sectarianism, terrorism, governance deficits, and geopolitical rivalry. It also highlights critical research gaps, including the absence of subnational perspectives, limited analysis of insurgent motivations, and insufficient comparative studies of mega-corridor projects.

By situating CPEC within both local and global contexts, this article contributes to scholarly and policy debates in three ways. First, it provides a structured overview of internal and external threats that undermine the project. Second, it integrates cross-cutting themes, such as climate risks, civil–military relations, and regional defense alignments, often treated as peripheral in existing research. Third, it underscores the need for holistic policy approaches that move beyond military securitization to prioritize inclusive development, regional diplomacy, and environmental resilience.

In doing so, this article positions CPEC not simply as an infrastructure initiative, but as a prism through which to examine the intersection of economic development, national security, and geopolitical competition in South Asia.

## **2. Historical and Strategic Context**

CPEC did not emerge in isolation but is rooted in a long trajectory of China–Pakistan cooperation shaped by geopolitical shifts since the 1960s. The partnership, initially driven by shared rivalry with India, gradually expanded into economic and infrastructural collaboration for the two nations. Understanding this historical and strategic context is essential for grasping both the opportunities and security dilemmas surrounding the corridor.

### ***2.1 Early Foundations of Sino-Pakistan Cooperation***

Following the Sino-Indian war of 1962, China and Pakistan formalized their strategic alignment through the 1963 boundary agreement, which settled territorial disputes and deepened trust (Rasool, Mangi, Ahmed, & Charan, 2024). This agreement laid the groundwork for long-term cooperation, particularly in infrastructure. The construction of the Karakoram Highway in the 1970s, linking Pakistan's northern areas with Xinjiang, represented the first tangible step in overland connectivity and foreshadowed later developments under CPEC (Khan & Ilmas, 2023).



Gwadar Port also featured in early strategic calculations. Acquired by Pakistan from Oman in 1958, Gwadar was long envisioned as a potential deep-sea hub providing access to the Arabian Sea. By the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese technical and financial support contributed to feasibility studies and limited port development, though political instability and resource constraints delayed large-scale investment (Rakisits, 2015). These initiatives signaled Beijing's recognition of Pakistan's geostrategic role as a gateway to the Indian Ocean and the Middle East.

### **2.2 Strategic Shifts in the 21st Century**

The early 2000s marked a decisive turning point. After the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, China became increasingly wary of its reliance on maritime trade routes passing through the Strait of Malacca, a chokepoint vulnerable to disruption (Ji, 2007; Lanteigne, 2008). This concern, known as the "Malacca dilemma," spurred Beijing to pursue overland corridors through South and Central Asia. Pakistan, with its geographic position and long-standing alliance with China, emerged as a natural partner (Rakisits, 2015).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, institutionalized this strategy. Pakistan became one of the earliest and most significant BRI partners, with CPEC formally announced in 2015 during President Xi Jinping's visit to Islamabad. The initial portfolio, valued at US\$46 billion, expanded to over US\$62 billion with the inclusion of new energy, transport, and industrial projects (Rahman & Shurong, 2017; Ali, Riaz, *et al.*, 2020). For Pakistan, CPEC represented not only an opportunity for infrastructure modernization but also a potential remedy for chronic energy shortages and sluggish economic growth (McCartney, 2022). For China, it was both an economic outlet and a strategic hedge against U.S. and Indian influence in the Indo-Pacific.

### **2.3 Civil–Military Dynamics in Pakistan and CPEC's Execution**

The strategic importance of CPEC within Pakistan cannot be separated from the country's entrenched civil–military imbalance. Since independence, Pakistan's military has exerted significant influence over national security and foreign policy, often sidelining civilian governments (Rizvi, 1998; Staniland, 2008). With the launch of CPEC, this trend intensified. The Pakistani military positioned itself as the principal guarantor of the project, spearheading the creation of the Special Security Division (SSD), a 10,000-strong force dedicated to protecting Chinese workers and infrastructure (Sial, 2016).

While military oversight brought a degree of operational efficiency, it also marginalized civilian institutions and local stakeholders. Route selections and resource allocations were frequently shaped by strategic rather than developmental priorities, fueling grievances in provinces such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Wolf, 2016; Khan & Jaffari, 2023). Critics argue that this securitized approach reinforced Pakistan's history of weak democratic governance, limiting parliamentary oversight and local participation in decision-making (Safdar, 2024).



## **2.4 Strategic Implications for China and the Region**

For Beijing, CPEC is more than an economic investment. It represents a multidimensional strategy to stabilize Xinjiang through development, export industrial overcapacity, and expand maritime access through Gwadar (Hussain & Hussain, 2017; Hussain, 2021). Gwadar's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz makes it an attractive node for both commercial and potential naval operations, providing China with strategic depth in the Indian Ocean (Ali *et al.*, 2020).

Regionally, the deepening China–Pakistan alignment through CPEC has triggered recalibrations. India views the project as a direct threat, particularly due to its passage through Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed territory. At the same time, other regional powers such as Iran, Russia, and Gulf states monitor CPEC closely, weighing both economic opportunities and strategic risks (Hussain, 2020). Thus, CPEC sits at the intersection of local grievances, national ambitions, and regional rivalries.

In historical perspective, CPEC is not a sudden innovation but the culmination of decades of Sino-Pakistani strategic convergence. Its foundations lie in both countries' attempts to address their respective vulnerabilities: Pakistan's chronic economic fragility and China's overdependence on maritime chokepoints. However, the execution of CPEC within Pakistan reflects deep-rooted political dynamics, particularly the dominance of the military over civilian institutions. These factors shape not only how CPEC is implemented but also the nature of the challenges it faces.

This historical and strategic context underscores why CPEC cannot be reduced to an infrastructure project. It is instead a geopolitical undertaking embedded in a long-standing alliance, subject to civil–military tensions, and situated in a contested regional environment. These historical legacies frame the security dilemmas that continue to define CPEC's trajectory.

## **3. Internal Security Challenges**

While CPEC has been promoted as a driver of economic modernization and regional connectivity, its trajectory is shaped as much by security risks as by economic opportunities. The most immediate threats arise within Pakistan itself. Insurgency, sectarian violence, terrorism, and governance failures converge to create a volatile environment that undermines the implementation and sustainability of the project. These internal security challenges are not isolated phenomena but interlinked dynamics that both reflect and reinforce Pakistan's structural fragility.

### **3.1 Insurgency in Balochistan**

Balochistan represents the most persistent internal security challenge to CPEC. The province, which hosts Gwadar Port and several key projects, has long been a site of nationalist insurgency. Groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF)



oppose CPEC on the grounds that it disproportionately benefits external actors - the federal government and China - while marginalizing local communities (Syed, 2017; Mujahid, 2022). Attacks on Chinese engineers, security convoys, and energy installations underscore the intensity of resistance.

The insurgency is rooted in decades of political and economic grievances. Despite being resource-rich, Balochistan remains Pakistan's least developed province, with high poverty rates, weak infrastructure, and limited access to education and healthcare (Isran, Siddiki, Kumar, & Zaidi, 2019). Many Baloch view CPEC as a continuation of historical exploitation, whereby local resources are extracted without adequate reinvestment in the region. This perception has been amplified by the lack of transparency in project planning and the limited involvement of provincial authorities in decision-making (Iqbal, 2020).

Military operations have contained, but not eliminated, insurgent activity. Counterinsurgency campaigns have at times exacerbated grievances, as allegations of human rights violations and enforced disappearances erode trust between the state and local populations (Siddiqui, 2023). Thus, while CPEC offers potential for economic integration, it simultaneously fuels a cycle of resistance where development is perceived as securitization.

### ***3.2 Sectarian Violence***

Sectarian conflict constitutes another destabilizing factor along the CPEC route. Gilgit-Baltistan, the northern gateway of the corridor, has witnessed recurrent clashes between Shia and Sunni groups, often influenced by external networks (Javed, Nazir, & Chaudhry, 2022). The Hazara Shia community in Quetta, Balochistan, has been a frequent target of extremist violence, with attacks such as the 2013 Hazara Town bombing leaving deep scars (Ismail, Hassan, Haq, & Mir, 2023).

These patterns of sectarian violence carry direct implications for CPEC. Gilgit-Baltistan's instability undermines the security of the Karakoram Highway, while attacks in Quetta, close to Gwadar, discourage foreign workers and investors. Moreover, sectarianism intersects with regional geopolitics. Iran, as a Shia-majority state, has been accused of cultivating influence in Gilgit-Baltistan, while Saudi Arabia's patronage of Sunni groups adds a transnational dimension to local conflict (Mansab & Hussain, 2023).

The literature indicates that sectarian insecurity is often treated as peripheral to CPEC's security analysis. Yet, it represents a significant "soft underbelly" of the project, capable of disrupting construction schedules, deterring investment, and undermining social cohesion along the corridor (Syed, 2017; Shahzad & Sunawar, 2024). Addressing sectarian violence requires more than military responses; it demands interfaith dialogue, equitable resource distribution, and stronger community integration mechanisms.



### ***3.3 Terrorism and Religious Extremism***

Religious militancy presents a further challenge to the security of CPEC. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and affiliated groups have repeatedly targeted state infrastructure, security forces, and foreign workers. Although military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb (2014) and Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) reduced the operational space of these groups (Javaid, 2015; Ahmed, 2016), their networks remain resilient. Attacks in urban centers and along CPEC routes illustrate their enduring capacity (Adil, Uzzaman, & Noor-e-Hera, 2024).

The relationship between terrorism and CPEC is multifaceted. Militant groups oppose the project as an extension of state authority and foreign influence, framing it as incompatible with their ideological objectives. At the same time, they exploit the grievances of marginalized communities, portraying themselves as defenders against state and foreign exploitation (Limodio, 2022). This creates a feedback loop in which terrorism both reflects and reinforces local discontent.

Another layer of complexity arises from cross-border militancy. The porous Pakistan–Afghanistan border facilitates the movement of fighters and weapons, with Afghan-based militants occasionally striking Pakistani territory (Bakrania, 2017). The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 has heightened uncertainty, raising fears that instability may spill over and disrupt CPEC projects (Zhu, 2024).

China, too, views terrorism as a direct threat to its domestic security. Militants operating in Pakistan are perceived as potential collaborators with Uyghur separatist movements in Xinjiang, thereby linking local insurgency with Beijing's internal concerns (Hussain, 2021). This convergence of Pakistani and Chinese vulnerabilities underscores the high stakes of counter-terrorism efforts in the CPEC context.

### ***3.4 Governance Failures and Corruption***

Beyond insurgency, sectarianism, and terrorism, governance weaknesses pose a structural challenge to CPEC. Pakistan's bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of transparency, and pervasive corruption undermine both project execution and public confidence (Javaid, 2016; Shahzad & Sunawar, 2024). Studies suggest that elite capture has skewed the distribution of benefits, with powerful groups monopolizing opportunities while local populations are sidelined (Iqbal, 2020). Corruption also intersects with security. Delays in compensation for land acquisition, opaque bidding processes, and inequitable distribution of jobs fuel local grievances, making communities more susceptible to insurgent narratives (Saleem, Nawaz, Hussain, & Saleem, 2023). Governance failures thereby create a permissive environment in which insecurity flourishes.

Moreover, the dominance of the military in CPEC's decision-making structures has marginalized democratic institutions and provincial governments (Wolf, 2016; Safdar, 2024).



While military oversight may provide short-term stability, it reduces accountability and deepens perceptions of exclusion among local communities. This imbalance raises fundamental questions about whether CPEC is being pursued as a development initiative or primarily as a strategic project.

These internal security challenges converge to create a fragile environment for CPEC. Each dynamic not only disrupts physical infrastructure but also erodes the political and social foundations required for long-term stability. Insurgency undermines state legitimacy, sectarian violence fractures social cohesion, terrorism threatens both local and international stakeholders, and governance failures weaken trust in institutions.

These challenges highlight the limits of securitized responses. While military operations and special protection forces have contained some threats, they have not addressed the root causes of insecurity. Without inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and community-level integration, CPEC risks becoming a corridor of insecurity rather than prosperity.

#### ***4. External Security Challenges***

While internal fragilities undermine the execution of CPEC, external security challenges are equally formidable. CPEC is embedded in a contested regional and global environment shaped by territorial disputes, great power rivalries, and shifting alignments. These dynamics generate not only overt opposition to the project but also more subtle forms of strategic interference. The following subsections analyze the external threats emanating from India, Afghanistan, port competition, US–China rivalry, and the evolving roles of Gulf states and Iran.

##### ***4.1 India's Opposition and Hybrid Warfare***

India has been the most vocal and persistent critic of CPEC. Its opposition centers on the corridor's passage through Gilgit-Baltistan, which New Delhi considers part of the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir (Javaid, 2016). Beyond legal objections, Indian policymakers view CPEC as a dual threat: consolidating Pakistan's hold over contested territory and enabling China to expand its strategic influence in South Asia (Mujahid, 2022).

India's resistance is not confined to diplomatic protest. Analysts suggest that Indian intelligence agencies have supported groups opposed to CPEC as part of a broader hybrid warfare strategy. Cyber campaigns, disinformation efforts, and covert funding are reported to have accompanied military modernization aimed at countering China's presence in the region (Nadeem, Mustafa, & Kakar, 2021).

Strategically, India has responded by forging alliances with the United States, Japan, Israel, and Australia, positioning itself as a critical partner in the Indo-Pacific security architecture (Saud & Arif, 2018; Dar, 2024). Its deepening defense ties with Israel — encompassing drones, missile defense systems, and intelligence sharing — further enhance its ability to monitor and potentially disrupt CPEC-linked activities (Sharma & Bing, 2015; Krishnan & Paramesha



Chaya, 2024). For Pakistan, this alignment amplifies perceptions of encirclement and feeds into a security dilemma that heightens the stakes of CPEC's survival.

#### **4.2 Afghanistan's Instability and Spillover Effects**

Afghanistan's enduring instability represents another significant external challenge. The porous border shared by Pakistan and Afghanistan facilitates the movement of militants, weapons, and illicit goods, which directly affects CPEC security (Bakrania, 2017). Even after the U.S. withdrawal in 2021, Afghan territory continues to serve as a base for groups capable of targeting CPEC infrastructure in Pakistan (Zhu, 2024).

The situation is complicated by the ambiguous relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan's ruling authorities. While Islamabad seeks a cooperative arrangement to secure its western frontier, mistrust lingers due to accusations of cross-border interference. Militants, such as the TTP, exploit this environment, moving across the border to stage attacks on Pakistani soil (Iqbal, Shoaib, & Bakhsh, 2024).

For China, Afghan instability is also a direct concern. The potential for Afghan-based groups to collaborate with Uyghur militants threatens Xinjiang's stability, a key driver behind Beijing's interest in CPEC as a developmental and security mechanism (Hussain, 2021). Thus, Afghanistan represents not merely a neighborly complication for Pakistan but a regional flashpoint with global implications.

#### **4.3 Port Rivalry: Gwadar versus Chabahar**

Port development has become a focal point of regional competition, with Gwadar and Chabahar symbolizing competing visions of connectivity. Gwadar, developed with Chinese support under CPEC, is envisioned as a deep-sea hub connecting western China to the Arabian Sea. Its location near the Strait of Hormuz grants it immense strategic value (Ali *et al.*, 2020).

In contrast, Iran's Chabahar Port, developed with Indian assistance, is often framed as a counterweight to Gwadar. Chabahar offers India a direct trade route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan (Usman, 2020; Hussain, 2020). For New Delhi, this project reduces its dependence on Pakistan for regional connectivity, while simultaneously limiting the strategic value of Gwadar.

The rivalry extends beyond India and Pakistan. Gulf states, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), view Gwadar as a competitor to their established ports such as Dubai's Jebel Ali. Concerns that Gwadar may divert regional shipping traffic have made some Gulf actors cautious about endorsing CPEC (Javaid, 2016). As a result, port development has become both an economic contest and a strategic maneuver, shaping regional alignments and complicating CPEC's operational viability.

#### **4.4 US-China Strategic Competition**



CPEC also unfolds against the backdrop of intensifying US-China competition. Washington has long been skeptical of the Belt and Road Initiative, viewing it as a vehicle for Beijing's geopolitical expansion (Chubb, 2023). The U.S. "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" strategy explicitly seeks to counterbalance Chinese influence by strengthening partnerships with India, Japan, and Australia.

For Pakistan, this rivalry generates a difficult balancing act. While CPEC deepens its dependence on China, Islamabad cannot afford to entirely alienate the United States, a key source of aid, military assistance, and diplomatic leverage. Scholars argue that Pakistan has pursued a hedging strategy, seeking autonomy by maintaining ties with both Washington and Beijing, albeit with limited success (Adil, Uzzaman, & Noor-e-Hera, 2024).

The U.S. critique of CPEC also extends to issues of debt sustainability and transparency. American officials have warned that Chinese infrastructure loans may create long-term dependency, echoing broader debates about "debt-trap diplomacy." While Pakistan has rejected these claims, such narratives shape international perceptions of the corridor and may influence foreign investment decisions (Hussain, 2020).

#### **4.5 Gulf States, Iran, and Regional Rivalries**

CPEC's regional environment is further complicated by the strategic roles of Gulf states and Iran. Pakistan's historical ties with Saudi Arabia are critical for financial assistance and labor remittances, but Riyadh has been cautious about CPEC, partly due to its rivalry with Iran (Mansab & Hussain, 2023). While Saudi Arabia has signaled interest in investing in Gwadar, its engagement remains limited, reflecting concerns about overcommitment to a project so closely tied to China.

Iran, meanwhile, presents a dual challenge. On the one hand, it has expressed interest in joining regional connectivity initiatives, recognizing CPEC's potential to enhance trade. On the other, its partnership with India on Chabahar positions it as both a competitor and a potential spoiler (Hussain, Jamali, Nisar, & Omar, 2024). Iran's influence in Afghanistan and among Shia networks in Pakistan adds another layer of complexity, intertwining sectarian dynamics with regional geopolitics.

China has attempted to mitigate these rivalries by promoting pragmatic balancing. Its engagement with both Iran and Gulf states reflects an effort to shield CPEC from sectarian polarization (Hussain *et al.*, 2024). Nevertheless, the intersection of Saudi-Iranian rivalry with South Asian security creates structural uncertainties that Pakistan alone cannot resolve.

External security challenges compound the risks posed by internal fragilities. India's opposition, framed through territorial disputes and hybrid warfare, remains the most direct threat. Afghanistan's instability provides fertile ground for cross-border militancy, while port rivalries



with Iran and the UAE challenge CPEC's economic logic. US-China strategic competition further complicates Pakistan's diplomatic environment, forcing Islamabad into a precarious balancing act. Meanwhile, Gulf-Iranian rivalries add sectarian and regional layers of insecurity that intersect with local tensions in Pakistan.

Together, these external threats highlight the geopolitical vulnerability of CPEC. The corridor is not merely an infrastructure initiative but a strategic battleground where regional rivalries and global power competition converge. Its future will therefore depend as much on diplomatic management as on domestic stability and technical execution.

### **5. China's Security and Economic Interests**

CPEC is more than a bilateral initiative for Pakistan and China. At the same time, it is a strategic linchpin in China's broader economic and security calculations. For Beijing, CPEC addresses long-standing vulnerabilities in energy supply chains, regional stability, and industrial restructuring, while simultaneously enhancing China's maritime and geopolitical reach. Understanding these drivers is crucial to situating CPEC within the larger framework of China's BRI and global strategy.

#### ***5.1 Overcoming the "Malacca Dilemma"***

A central motivation behind CPEC lies in China's quest to overcome the so-called "Malacca dilemma" - the strategic vulnerability of its energy imports transiting through the Strait of Malacca, a chokepoint susceptible to piracy, blockades, or great power confrontation (Ji, 2007; Lanteigne, 2008). Nearly 80 percent of China's oil imports pass through this narrow maritime passage, making it a critical security concern.

By connecting Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea, CPEC offers China an alternative energy corridor that shortens transport routes and reduces dependence on contested waters. Crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) imported through Gwadar can be transported overland to western China, bypassing maritime vulnerabilities (Ali *et al.*, 2020). Although questions remain about the economic feasibility of large-scale overland transport, the strategic rationale is undeniable: CPEC provides Beijing with redundancy and resilience in energy security planning.

#### ***5.2 Stabilizing Xinjiang through Development***

Another key driver of CPEC is China's domestic security agenda, particularly the stabilization of Xinjiang. The province has long been a site of separatist sentiment, with Uyghur militant groups occasionally linked to transnational jihadist networks. Beijing's approach has been twofold: heavy-handed security measures and large-scale economic development (Hussain, 2021).

CPEC aligns with this strategy by integrating Xinjiang into broader trade and infrastructure networks. The corridor promises new markets for Xinjiang's industries and enhanced



connectivity that could reduce the region's isolation. In Beijing's calculus, economic growth is expected to mitigate separatist tendencies by fostering interdependence with national and international markets (Hussain & Hussain, 2017). However, this developmental logic faces challenges: instability in Pakistan and Afghanistan threatens to spill over into Xinjiang, and coercive governance in the region risks perpetuating rather than resolving discontent.

### **5.3 Exporting Industrial Overcapacity**

CPEC also serves China's economic restructuring goals. Over the past two decades, China has accumulated significant industrial overcapacity in sectors such as steel, cement, and energy (Tong, 2014). As domestic demand plateaus, Beijing has sought to export this surplus through overseas construction projects. CPEC provides a prime avenue for deploying Chinese capital, technology, and labor in large-scale infrastructure initiatives (Rathore, Ali, & Khan, 2020).

Energy projects have been particularly prominent. Chinese financing has supported coal, hydropower, solar, and wind plants across Pakistan, addressing the country's chronic energy shortages while creating markets for Chinese firms (Rahman & Shurong, 2017). Similarly, transport projects, highways, railways, and metro systems, have allowed Chinese companies to extend their global footprint. This dynamic reinforces CPEC's dual function as both a developmental initiative for Pakistan and an outlet for China's domestic economic imperatives.

### **5.4 Expanding Maritime Access through Gwadar**

Gwadar Port is often described as the "jewel in the crown" of CPEC. Located near the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar offers China direct access to the Arabian Sea and proximity to one of the world's busiest energy transit routes (Ali *et al.*, 2020). For Beijing, Gwadar has both commercial and strategic significance.

Commercially, Gwadar provides a base for trade with the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. Plans for free zones, industrial parks, and logistics hubs underscore its envisioned role as a regional transshipment center. Strategically, Gwadar enhances China's presence in the Indian Ocean, enabling surveillance and potential naval resupply functions. Although Beijing has downplayed military ambitions, the dual-use nature of port infrastructure raises concerns among regional competitors, particularly India and the United States (Hussain *et al.*, 2024).

Gwadar also fits into China's broader "string of pearls" strategy, which involves developing a network of ports across the Indian Ocean to secure sea lines of communication. In this sense, Gwadar is not an isolated investment but part of a wider maritime strategy that complements China's naval modernization.

### **5.5 Balancing Opportunity and Exposure**

Despite these benefits, CPEC also exposes China to new vulnerabilities. Attacks on Chinese nationals and projects in Pakistan highlight the risks of operating in conflict-prone



environments (Syed, 2017; Mujahid, 2022). The killing of Chinese engineers in Balochistan and terrorist assaults on the Chinese consulate in Karachi underscore that Beijing's economic interests are inseparable from local insecurities. As China deepens its footprint, it is compelled to play a more active security role, ranging from pressuring Islamabad to strengthen counterterrorism measures to considering limited direct involvement in protection efforts (Wolf, 2016).

This raises questions about the evolving character of Chinese engagement abroad. While Beijing traditionally adhered to a policy of non-interference, its growing exposure in Pakistan and other BRI states is forcing greater flexibility. CPEC thus represents both an opportunity for strategic expansion and a test case for how China manages security risks in volatile environments.

China's stakes in CPEC are multidimensional. The corridor addresses structural vulnerabilities in energy security, provides a mechanism for stabilizing Xinjiang, exports industrial overcapacity, and expands Beijing's maritime access through Gwadar. At the same time, it exposes China to new risks, compelling a reconsideration of its role in the security governance of host states.

CPEC is therefore best understood as a convergence of economic and security logics. It symbolizes Beijing's transition from a primarily economic power to one increasingly enmeshed in global strategic competition. For Pakistan, this deepens dependence on China but also ties its domestic stability more closely to Beijing's security concerns. The interplay between opportunity and vulnerability makes CPEC not only a bilateral partnership but also a prism through which to assess the evolving nature of Chinese global engagement.

## **6. Cross-Cutting Themes**

The security challenges confronting CPEC are not confined to distinct categories of internal insurgency or external rivalry. Several cross-cutting themes intersect these domains, amplifying risks and complicating governance. These include environmental insecurity, emerging defense alignments, Pakistan's entrenched civil-military imbalance, and local perceptions of exclusion. Each theme underscores how non-traditional and structural factors shape the broader viability of CPEC.

### ***6.1 Climate Change and Environmental Security***

Climate change has emerged as a critical but underexplored dimension of CPEC's security landscape. Pakistan is among the countries most vulnerable to climate shocks, experiencing extreme floods, droughts, and heatwaves in recent years (Khalid, Ahmad, & Ullah, 2022). These phenomena threaten both infrastructure and livelihoods along the CPEC route. For instance, flooding in Sindh and Balochistan has repeatedly damaged roads and disrupted supply



chains, while glacial melting in Gilgit-Baltistan poses risks to the Karakoram Highway (Bao *et al.*, 2024).

Environmental degradation compounds these risks. Coal-based energy projects financed under CPEC have raised concerns about air pollution and carbon emissions, undermining commitments to sustainable development (Saleem *et al.*, 2023). Critics argue that Pakistan's dependence on fossil-fuel projects may generate long-term ecological insecurity, offsetting short-term energy gains. These environmental vulnerabilities intersect with social discontent, as communities displaced by infrastructure projects or exposed to environmental hazards increasingly question the benefits of CPEC (Wolf, 2016).

Integrating climate resilience into corridor planning is thus imperative. Yet, the militarized governance of CPEC has sidelined environmental stakeholders, limiting adaptation strategies. Without addressing climate risks, CPEC faces the prospect of becoming ecologically unsustainable, adding a new layer of insecurity to its already fragile foundations.

### **6.2 Indo–Israel Defense Nexus**

Another cross-cutting theme shaping CPEC's security environment is the Indo–Israel defense partnership. Over the past two decades, India has emerged as one of Israel's largest defense clients, procuring drones, missile defense systems, and advanced surveillance technologies (Sharma & Bing, 2015; Farid & Adnan, 2022). This partnership strengthens India's capacity to monitor, deter, and potentially disrupt CPEC-related activities.

The Indo–Israel nexus intersects with broader regional alignments. Israel's growing defense cooperation with India complements New Delhi's strategic partnership with the United States and its role in the Quad alliance, amplifying its ability to counterbalance China (Dar, 2024). For Pakistan, this dynamic generates heightened insecurity, as Israeli technology may be deployed to reinforce Indian surveillance and hybrid warfare campaigns against CPEC (Zahra & Liaqat, 2023).

At the same time, Pakistan's lack of formal ties with Israel complicates its diplomatic maneuverability. Islamabad remains locked out of potential regional dialogue involving Tel Aviv, further isolating it from emerging security architectures. The Indo–Israel partnership therefore represents a transnational layer of threat that, while external in origin, directly intersects with Pakistan's internal security environment.

### **6.3 Civil–Military Imbalance and Democratic Deficit**

The governance of CPEC illustrates Pakistan's entrenched civil–military imbalance. Since the corridor's inception, the military has positioned itself as the principal guarantor of security, overseeing route protection and infrastructure defense through the SSD (Sial, 2016). This securitized approach has sidelined civilian institutions, limiting parliamentary oversight and provincial autonomy.



The imbalance carries significant implications. By prioritizing strategic and security concerns, military-led decision-making has often neglected socio-economic development at the community level. Route selections perceived as favoring Punjab over smaller provinces have generated discontent in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Wolf, 2016; Khan & Jaffari, 2023). Critics argue that this approach reproduces Pakistan's historical pattern of centralization, undermining democratic accountability and local participation (Safdar, 2024).

Civil–military dynamics also shape Pakistan's external posture. Military dominance in CPEC governance reinforces the perception that the project is less about development and more about geostrategic alignment with China. This securitized framing limits opportunities for inclusive diplomacy with neighboring states, narrowing CPEC's potential as a regional cooperative initiative.

#### **6.4 Local Perceptions, Employment, and Social Inclusion**

Local perceptions represent another cross-cutting factor. For many communities along the CPEC route, expectations of employment and development remain unfulfilled. While the corridor has created jobs, particularly in construction and energy projects, these opportunities are often temporary and skewed toward skilled labor imported from outside the region (Saleem *et al.*, 2023). In Balochistan, where unemployment and underdevelopment are acute, perceptions of exclusion have reinforced insurgent narratives (Isran, Siddiki, Kumar, & Zaidi, 2019).

Land acquisition practices have further exacerbated discontent. Allegations of inadequate compensation, lack of consultation, and displacement without resettlement have fueled grievances (Iqbal, 2020). These local frustrations intersect with broader governance failures, creating fertile ground for resistance. The perception that CPEC is a project “for outsiders,” benefiting Chinese companies, federal elites, and urban centers, undermines its legitimacy at the grassroots level (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires a participatory development approach. Inclusion of local stakeholders, transparent allocation of resources, and equitable employment policies are essential to prevent alienation. Without such measures, local grievances will continue to undermine the corridor's sustainability, regardless of external security measures.

Cross-cutting themes complicate the conventional framing of CPEC's security challenges. Climate change introduces environmental risks that threaten both infrastructure and livelihoods, while the Indo–Israel defense nexus embeds CPEC within broader transnational rivalries. Pakistan's civil–military imbalance securitizes development at the expense of democratic inclusion, and local perceptions of exclusion reinforce insurgency and discontent.



Together, these dynamics reveal that CPEC's vulnerabilities extend beyond insurgency and geopolitical rivalry. They are embedded in structural governance patterns, environmental fragility, and social perceptions. Addressing these cross-cutting themes is therefore central to any strategy that seeks to transform CPEC from a contested corridor into a sustainable pathway for development and cooperation.

## **7. Discussion and Research Gaps**

The preceding analysis illustrates the multidimensional nature of CPEC's security environment, shaped by insurgency, sectarianism, terrorism, governance deficits, external rivalries, and cross-cutting structural factors. While scholars have contributed significantly to understanding these dynamics, the literature remains fragmented, with notable blind spots that limit a holistic appraisal of CPEC's prospects. This section synthesizes recurring insights and identifies key research gaps that future scholarship must address.

### ***7.1 Fragmentation of the Literature***

Existing research on CPEC's security largely falls into discrete categories: internal security threats (Javaid, 2016; Mujahid, 2022), external geopolitical rivalries (Dar, 2024), and governance dynamics (Iqbal, 2020; Shahzad & Sunawar, 2024). While each strand contributes valuable insights, their separation obscures the interconnections between local grievances and global rivalries. For example, insurgency in Balochistan cannot be understood solely as a local phenomenon; it is reinforced by India's strategic interests and sectarian rivalries involving Iran and Saudi Arabia (Mansab & Hussain, 2023). Similarly, environmental risks intersect with governance failures, yet these themes are often treated in isolation. A more integrated approach is needed to capture CPEC's layered vulnerabilities.

### ***7.2 Motives and Strategies of Insurgents***

A major gap lies in the limited analysis of insurgent motivations. While the literature documents attacks on Chinese nationals and infrastructure, it often treats insurgency as a given rather than interrogating its underlying drivers. Few studies provide ethnographic or sociological perspectives on how insurgent groups frame their struggle in relation to CPEC (Isran, Siddiki, Kumar, & Zaidi, 2019). Understanding whether resistance is primarily political, economic, or identity-based is essential for designing effective policy responses. This gap reflects a broader neglect of insurgent agency in security studies, where groups are often depicted as obstacles rather than actors with distinct worldviews.

### ***7.3 Subnational and Community-Level Perspectives***

Research on CPEC overwhelmingly privileges national and regional scales, overlooking the perspectives of local communities most affected by the project. Studies have noted grievances related to land acquisition, employment, and environmental degradation (Saleem *et al.*, 2023; Iqbal, 2020), but these findings remain sporadic. Systematic subnational case studies are rare, particularly those incorporating voices from marginalized groups such as women, youth, and



religious minorities. Without these perspectives, analyses risk reproducing the top-down logic of CPEC's governance, reinforcing rather than challenging elite narratives.

#### **7.4 Comparative Frameworks**

Another research gap concerns comparative analysis. While CPEC is often described as a “flagship” of the Belt and Road Initiative, little work systematically compares it with other corridors, such as the China–Myanmar Economic Corridor or the China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor. Comparative research could illuminate why certain projects encounter greater resistance, how governance models vary, and what lessons can be drawn for policy and scholarship (Preiser, Cilliers, & Human, 2021). Similarly, comparisons with non-BRI megaprojects could help contextualize whether CPEC's challenges are unique or symptomatic of broader patterns in transnational infrastructure development.

#### **7.5 Interdisciplinary Approaches**

Finally, the literature would benefit from greater interdisciplinarity. Much of the existing scholarship is dominated by political science and international relations frameworks. While these are valuable, they often neglect insights from sociology, anthropology, environmental studies, and psychology. For instance, qualitative research methods such as interpretative phenomenological analysis could shed light on how individuals and communities experience insecurity under CPEC (Elliott & Timulak, 2021). Similarly, environmental science perspectives are needed to assess climate risks more systematically (Bao *et al.*, 2024). Interdisciplinary approaches would thus broaden the analytical lens and enhance the robustness of policy recommendations.

Scholarship on CPEC has advanced considerably in documenting internal and external threats but remains constrained by fragmentation, lack of local perspectives, limited exploration of insurgent motives, and weak comparative and interdisciplinary engagement. Addressing these gaps is vital for both academic and policy communities. For scholars, it offers opportunities to generate more nuanced and empirically grounded analyses. For policymakers, it highlights the need to design responses that address the complex intersections of local grievances, governance failures, and global rivalries. Without such advances, discussions of CPEC risk remaining partial, overlooking the very dynamics that will determine its long-term sustainability.

### **8. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

CPEC embodies both immense promise and profound vulnerability. Envisioned as the flagship project of China's BRI, it offers Pakistan prospects for economic revitalization and China an avenue to address structural vulnerabilities in energy security and regional connectivity. Yet, as the preceding analysis has shown, CPEC is equally a corridor of insecurity. Internal insurgencies, sectarian violence, terrorism, and governance failures converge with external rivalries involving India, Afghanistan, the United States, Gulf states, and Iran. These challenges



are further compounded by cross-cutting factors such as climate change, civil–military imbalance, and local perceptions of exclusion.

The overarching conclusion is that CPEC's future will not be determined solely by technical execution or financial investment. Rather, its viability depends on addressing the intertwined security and governance dilemmas that undermine its foundations. For Pakistan, this means moving beyond a narrowly securitized approach dominated by the military. For China, it requires adapting its traditional non-interference doctrine to the realities of operating in volatile environments. For the broader region, it necessitates diplomatic innovation to manage competing interests.

### ***8.1 Policy Recommendations***

#### ***1. Strengthen Inclusive Governance***

Pakistan must prioritize institutional reforms that enhance transparency, accountability, and provincial participation in CPEC decision-making. Parliamentary oversight should be expanded, and provincial governments must be given meaningful roles in route selection, project monitoring, and revenue distribution (Iqbal, 2020; Shahzad & Sunawar, 2024). Without such inclusion, grievances in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan will persist, feeding insurgency and resistance.

#### ***2. Address Local Grievances through Social Investment***

Beyond physical infrastructure, CPEC must deliver visible socio-economic benefits to local communities. This requires robust policies on employment quotas for local workers, transparent compensation for land acquisition, and reinvestment of revenues into education, healthcare, and environmental protection (Isran, Siddiki, Kumar, & Zaidi, 2019; Saleem *et al.*, 2023). Local ownership of projects is essential to transform perceptions of CPEC from an imposed initiative to a shared opportunity.

#### ***3. Balance Security with Development***

While military protection of CPEC infrastructure remains necessary, it should not dominate governance structures. A balanced approach requires integrating civilian institutions into security planning, fostering community-level policing, and promoting interfaith dialogue to counter sectarian tensions (Wolf, 2016; Safdar, 2024). By reducing over-reliance on coercion, Pakistan can build a more sustainable security architecture that addresses root causes rather than symptoms.

#### ***4. Enhance Regional Diplomacy***

Pakistan and China must adopt proactive diplomacy to mitigate external threats. Engaging India directly on CPEC may remain politically unfeasible, but parallel efforts to reduce cross-border tensions could lower risks of sabotage. Dialogue with Afghanistan's ruling authorities is essential to curb militant sanctuaries, while outreach to Gulf states and Iran can minimize



competitive port dynamics (Hussain *et al.*, 2024; Mansab & Hussain, 2023). By embedding CPEC within broader frameworks of regional cooperation, Pakistan and China can dilute the zero-sum logic currently surrounding the project.

#### *5. Integrate Climate Resilience and Sustainability*

CPEC planning must incorporate climate adaptation strategies. Infrastructure should be designed to withstand extreme weather, while energy portfolios must prioritize renewable sources over coal to reduce environmental insecurity (Khalid, Ahmad, & Ullah, 2022; Bao *et al.*, 2024). By aligning CPEC with global sustainability norms, Pakistan and China can bolster its legitimacy and long-term viability.

#### *6. Foster Academic and Policy Research*

Finally, bridging the research gaps identified earlier is essential. Comparative studies of other corridors, subnational case studies, and interdisciplinary approaches can generate knowledge that informs more effective policy (Preiser, Cilliers, & Human, 2021; Elliott & Timulak, 2021). Collaborative research involving Pakistani, Chinese, and international scholars should be promoted to deepen understanding of CPEC's evolving security landscape.

### **8.2 Final Reflections**

CPEC is more than an infrastructure project; it is a prism through which to view the intersection of development, security, and geopolitics in South Asia. Its success or failure will reverberate beyond Pakistan and China, shaping regional alignments, global trade, and the trajectory of BRI itself. The corridor's fragility lies not in technical execution but in the unresolved security dilemmas and governance deficits that accompany it.

For Pakistan, embracing inclusive governance and equitable development is the only sustainable path forward. For China, balancing economic ambition with security engagement will define its role as a global power. For the region, fostering cooperation rather than competition is the key to unlocking CPEC's potential as a genuine corridor of prosperity.

In this sense, CPEC's ultimate fate will hinge less on the laying of roads and pipelines than on the ability of stakeholders to navigate the complex interplay of local grievances, national ambitions, and global rivalries. Whether it emerges as a transformative engine of development or a flashpoint of insecurity remains contingent on choices yet to be made.



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