***Journal of Religion & Society* (JR&S)**
Available Online:
https://islamicreligious.com/index.php/Journal/index
Print ISSN: 3006-1296Online ISSN: 3006-130X
Platform & Workflow by: Open Journal Systems

From Development to Securitization: How Terrorism Transformed CPEC and Pakistan China Relations (2015–2024)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how terrorism has reshaped the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and bilateral relations between 2015 and 2024. Using securitization theory, it adopts a qualitative case-study design and content analysis of secondary sources to explore attack patterns and policy responses. Findings reveal that repeated assaults on CPEC projects and Chinese nationals increased costs, delayed timelines, and institutionalized counterterrorism within the partnership's operational framework. Measures such as the Special Security Division, stricter movement protocols, and a security sub-group under the Joint Cooperation Committee illustrate how CPEC evolved from a development-first initiative into a security-governance model. Conceptually, the study frames terrorism as a "dual-force variable," simultaneously constraining economic progress while reinforcing strategic alignment through institutionalized security cooperation. By highlighting this dual effect, the article provides one of the first systematic analyses of terrorism's governance impact on CPEC and concludes that its long-term sustainability depends on balancing militarized protection with inclusive governance and community participation, offering insights for other Belt and Road corridors in fragile environment.

Keywords: *CPEC, Pakistan-China relations, terrorism, securitization theory, counterterrorism cooperation.*

Introduction

Launched in 2015 as the flagship of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was conceived as a transformative venture to modernize Pakistan's infrastructure, address chronic energy shortages and link trade routes from Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port (Iqbal and et al., 2024). Early narratives portrayed CPEC as a development-led initiative promising rapid implementation, industrial linkages and broad socio-economic gains, yet its implementation faced a volatile security environment (Nisar and et al., 2021).

Militant groups including the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP)

repeatedly targeted construction sites, convoys and Chinese personnel. High-profile attacks in Balochistan revealed a geographically dispersed and tactically adaptive threat (Malik and Jamil, 2023). These incidents escalated costs, delayed timelines and eroded diplomatic confidence (Khan and Ahmed, 2024).

Most existing scholars emphasizes terrorism as an economic drag raising risks, deterring investors and slowing development (Hassan and et al., 2023). However, CPEC illustrates an additional dimension: violence as a driver of securitization. Repeated attacks compelled Pakistan and China to reframe CPEC not merely as a development initiative but as a security concern requiring extraordinary measures (Mahmood and Askari, 2022).

The establishment of the Special Security Division, the imposition of stricter movement protocols and the creation of a dedicated security sub-group under the Joint Cooperation Committee exemplify how terrorism was elevated from a routine challenge to an existential threat that redefined governance (Rasool and Ahmed, 2024). This article explores how terrorism has reshaped China–Pakistan relations in general posing a perplexing question whether terrorism has merely slowed CPEC or fundamentally altered the nature of Pakistan–China cooperation (Shah, 2022).

Drawing on thematic analysis of incidents, policy documents, think-tank reports, media reports and secondary sources, this study highlights three interlinked pathways through:

1. Disruption of project timelines and costs (Ishaq and et al., 2024)
2. Impact on investor and public sentiment (Abb, 2023) and
3. Institutionalization of counterterrorism within bilateral cooperation (Yasir, 2024).

The article makes three contributions. First, it integrates economic, strategic and societal dimensions into a unified account of how terrorism reshapes priorities in mega-projects (Wuthnow, 2017). Second, it conceptualizes terrorism as a dual-force variable, simultaneously weakening developmental efficiency while reinforcing strategic alignment through securitized cooperation (Ma and Ma, 2022). Third, by situating CPEC within comparative BRI experiences in fragile contexts, it offers lessons for managing large-scale infrastructure under persistent insecurity (Basit, 2019).

The article contends that terrorism has redefined CPEC's operating logic, making securitization the central organizing principle necessary for continuity but costly for efficiency and inclusivity (Ahmad and et al., 2025). The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: in Section 2 a review of existing literature and theoretical framework is presented; Section 3 explains the research design and data; Section 4 presents consolidated findings on terrorism's economic, strategic and institutional effects; Section 5 discusses these findings through the lens of securitization theory; and Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations and future prospects. This twin-track approach balancing security imperatives with community engagement is proposed as essential for safeguarding CPEC's developmental promise alongside credible protection.

Historical Background

Launched in April 2015 by the governments of Pakistan and China, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was announced as the flagship of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to modernize Pakistan's infrastructure and enhance regional connectivity (Anwar and Atif, 2025). With an investment portfolio now estimated at over USD 60 billion, the corridor links Kashgar in Xinjiang to Gwadar Port through highways, energy projects and planned special economic zones (SEZs) (Gu, 2023). It promises Pakistan relief from chronic energy shortages, improved transport infrastructure and industrial growth, while giving China direct access to warm-water ports and a route beyond the Malacca Strait (Rasool and Ahmed, 2024). From the outset, however, CPEC operated in an insecure environment. Militant groups such as the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) attacked construction sites, convoys and Chinese personnel (Khan and Ahmed, 2024). Incidents including the 2021 Dasu bus bombing and the 2022 Karachi University attack showed that violence could extend well beyond traditional conflict zones (Hassan and et al., 2023), while in Baluchistan insurgents portrayed CPEC as exploitative and mobilized local grievance (Verma and et al., 2025). Pakistan responded by creating the Special Security Division and tightening protection measures, while China pressed for stronger guarantees through the Joint Cooperation Committee. These moves signaled the growing securitization of CPEC, transforming it from a purely development project into a hybrid framework where infrastructure delivery and counterterrorism coordination are intertwined (Yasir, 2024). This tension between promised transformation and persistent threat makes CPEC a key case for understanding how non-traditional security challenges reshape large-scale development ventures and the bilateral relations behind them (Khalid and et al., 2025).

Research Question

How has terrorism shaped the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Pakistan–China relations between 2015 and 2024, and what security implications does this hold for the partnership's future trajectory?

Research Objectives

I. To examine the impact of terrorism on CPEC's progress between 2015 and 2024 with respect to project delays, financial costs, investor confidence and diplomatic trust within Pakistan–China relations.

II. To analyze how counterterrorism measures and securitization have transformed CPEC's governance framework, and to propose policy directions for balancing security imperatives with inclusive development.

Problem Statement and Significance of Study

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), inaugurated in 2015, represents the deep strategic partnership between Pakistan and China aiming at modernizing infrastructure, stimulating economic growth and securing China's access to the Arabian Sea. Yet, despite this strategic promise, CPEC has faced a sustained campaign of terrorist violence directed at infrastructure, logistics and Chinese personnel. Separatist insurgents, jihadist organizations

and other non-state actors have treated the corridor as a high-value target, threatening project continuity, investor confidence and the broader diplomatic balance underpinning Pakistan–China cooperation. Analytically, most existing studies treat terrorism as an external disruptor of economic development, with limited attention to how persistent violence reshapes governance and bilateral coordination. The CPEC case shows that repeated attacks have compelled institutional adaptation: Pakistan has established specialized security forces, enhanced intelligence coordination, tightened operational protocols and created permanent mechanisms for joint management with China. While these measures safeguard continuity, they also generate concerns about efficiency, inclusivity and equitable benefit-sharing if local communities are insufficiently engaged. Practically, understanding these dynamics is vital for stabilizing project delivery without over-reliance on militarization. This research emphasizes integrating layered security with community participation, targeted social investment and transparent communication in high-risk areas. By identifying conditions under which CPEC can progress despite persistent threats, the study provides evidence-based guidance for managing flagship infrastructure in fragile environments and sustaining development-oriented Pakistan–China cooperation. Applying securitization theory, it frames terrorism as a "dual-force variable" that simultaneously constrains development and reinforces strategic alignment, offering a nuanced perspective on the intersection of security and economic development.

Literature Review

Existing studies on terrorism, development, and international cooperation provide partial insights into the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Most studies examine either economic disruption or geopolitical narratives, while paying scant attention to how sustained violence can simultaneously constrain development and strengthen bilateral security cooperation (Basit, 2019). CPEC presents a distinctive case highlighting that persistent attacks have not only delayed projects but also embedded securitization into corridor governance. We extend existing debates on terrorism, development, and strategic partnerships to examine their impact on managing infrastructure in fragile and conflict-affected environments (Gu, 2023).

Terrorism as a developmental constraint is well documented. It undermines investor confidence, disrupts supply chains, and diverts state resources toward security (Muhammad, Baig, and Alam, 2023). Insurgents often target large infrastructure as symbols of state authority and foreign involvement (Sprick, 2022). Evidence from Africa and the Middle East shows that recurrent attacks escalate insurance costs, delay construction, and discourage investment (Basit & Ahmed, 2021). Scholars identify three main pathways through which terrorism affects development: (1) direct destruction of assets and personnel; (2) indirect financial burdens from heightened security expenditures and reputational risk; and (3) governance challenges through weakened institutional capacity and public trust (Qureshi & Alam, 2025). In Pakistan, studies confirm terrorism's negative impact on GDP growth and

foreign direct investment (Malik and Jamil, 2023). Yet most analyses treat terrorism as an external economic shock, overlooking institutional adaptation (Anwar and Atif, 2025).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate a broader pattern of vulnerability. Extremist groups have attacked Chinese-financed pipelines, ports, and railways in Central Asia and East Africa, revealing the fragility of development ventures in unstable environments (Yawar, 2024). Although framed as an economic program, BRI's sustainability increasingly hinges on local stability (Rasool & Ahmed, 2024). China has responded by inserting protective clauses into contracts, recalibrating investments, and enhancing host-country coordination features of a wider trend toward "securitized globalization," in which economic expansion is tied to security mechanisms (Ortiz & Ortiz-Gonzalez, 2025). CPEC stands out within this trend: the scale and intensity of attacks, including the Karachi University bombing, have disrupted timelines and directly tested the resilience of the Pakistan–China partnership (Khan and Ahmed, 2024).

The bilateral relationship, often described as an "all-weather friendship," has historically rested on strategic trust and defense cooperation (Campbell and et al., 2024). The launch of CPEC in 2015 elevated the partnership by embedding economic cooperation into the strategic framework (Khan and Mushtaq, 2023). For Pakistan, it promised infrastructure modernization and economic recovery; for China, it offered trade diversification and secure access to the Arabian Sea (Wolf, 2016). Yet repeated terrorist attacks against Chinese nationals and assets have complicated this trajectory. Some scholars argue that these incidents strain diplomatic trust and undermine Pakistan's credibility as a security guarantor (Qazi and et al., 2020), while others contend that they have reinforced cooperation by prompting institutionalized counterterrorism mechanisms and long-term security arrangements (Ahmed and Baloch, 2024). This terrorism as both irritant and catalyst lie at the heart of debates over CPEC's evolution from a development-centered initiative to a security-driven partnership.

Local socio-political dynamics further shape this securitization. In Baluchistan, long-standing grievances over marginalization, uneven resource distribution, and exclusion from decision-making have fueled resentment toward mega-projects (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023). Groups such as the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF) frame CPEC as exploitative, serving Chinese investors and Pakistani elites while marginalizing local communities. Grassroots responses are mixed: some welcome infrastructure improvements, while others resent militarization and lack of consultation (Basit & Ahmed, 2021). Comparative studies of separatist insurgencies confirm that development without inclusivity often intensifies rather than resolves conflict (Aman and Yaseen, 2025).

Across these strands, three deficits are evident: (1) while terrorism's economic costs are well documented, its role in reshaping bilateral governance is underexplored; (2) systematic consolidation of CPEC-specific incidents and policy responses remains limited; and (3) existing studies rarely acknowledge terrorism's paradoxical role undermining development while simultaneously deepening Pakistan–China cooperation through institutionalized security mechanisms. Addressing these gaps, this study conceptualizes terrorism as a dual-

force variable, a phenomenon that constrains economic progress yet catalyzes deeper strategic alignment and applies securitization theory to illuminate how persistent violence reorders priorities in mega-projects.

Methodology

This research adopts an exploratory qualitative case-study design focused on CPEC between 2015 and 2024 with a focus on patterns of violence, economic impacts, stakeholder perceptions, and institutional countermeasures. The study relies on secondary sources: official government documents and communiqués, think-tank reports, media archives, and incident datasets. Data were consolidated in a database recording year, location, attack type, claimed perpetrators, and immediate impacts; a complementary dataset compiled institutional responses, policies, and public statements. This methodological approach allows the study to apply securitization theory to concrete incident-level evidence and institutional responses. Analytical rigor was ensured through triangulation across diverse sources and explicit attention to reporting biases and undercounting.

Theoretical Framework: Securitization Theory

This study uses Securitization Theory to analyze how terrorism has been framed as an existential threat to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), legitimizing extraordinary protection measures beyond routine development management. Developed by the Copenhagen School (Babar and Umar ,2024), the theory explains how actors present an issue as a threat, gain audience acceptance and justify exceptional responses. Applied to CPEC (2015–2024), this lens reveals how attacks by groups such as the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and led Pakistani and Chinese leaders to publicly label terrorism as "sabotage against CPEC" and to embed counterterrorism mechanisms Special Security Division, movement protocols and a security sub-group under the Joint Cooperation Committee. Building on this framework, the study introduces its original concept of terrorism as a "dual-force variable," showing that securitization both diverts resources from development and reinforces strategic alignment. This approach moves the analysis beyond incident reporting to demonstrate how persistent violence can reshape the governance logic of mega-projects.

Conceptualization of Terrorism

For this study, terrorism is defined contextually and functionally that refers to the organized use or threat of violence by non-state armed groups with the intent to create fear and coerce political or strategic outcomes. Within this research, terrorism is examined specifically in relation to activities that directly or indirectly target CPEC infrastructure, Chinese and Pakistani personnel, or the broader Pakistan–China relationship. This definition reflects two key considerations. First, it recognizes terrorism not only as a security threat but also as a strategic tool used by militant groups to disrupt state-led development initiatives. Second, it situates terrorism within the CPEC environment, where violence seeks both to undermine bilateral cooperation and to project resistance to perceived exclusion and exploitation.

Framing terrorism in this way provides conceptual clarity and links the phenomenon to the study's core question on CPEC's securitization.

Key Findings

This section analyses how terrorism redefined the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by triggering a process of securitization that altered bilateral cooperation across economic, strategic and security dimensions. Drawing on consolidated incident data, official statements and policy records, the findings show how violent attacks were framed as existential threats, legitimizing extraordinary countermeasures that reshaped the governance of CPEC.

Terrorist Attacks Targetting CPEC

From 2015 to 2024, CPEC projects faced a sustained campaign of violence through roadside bombs, ambushes, suicide attacks and armed assaults carried out by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Table 1: Major Terrorist Attacks on CPEC (2015–2024)

Year	Location	Type of Attack	Group Involved	Impact on CPEC
2015–16	Baluchistan, KP	Roadside IEDs, ambushes	BLA, TTP	Early delays; increased costs
2017–18	Gwadar, Makran belt	Targeted shootings, attacks on workers	BLF	Heightened insecurity in Gwadar; local community fear
2019–20	Gwadar, Makran	Coordinated armed assaults	BLA	Disruption of Gwadar projects
2021	Dasu, KP	Bus bombing targeting engineers	TTP	Suspension of hydropower project; diplomatic strain
2022	Karachi Univ.	Female suicide bombing at Confucius Institute	BLA	Halted cultural exchanges; intensified security
2023–24	Gwadar, Coastal Hwy	Complex assaults, suicide bombings	BLA, ISKP	Investor hesitation: Gwadar branded insecure

Source: *Compiled by the author from Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) reports, Dawn archives, and Xinhua News Agency (2015–2024).*

The trajectory of attacks demonstrates an escalation from early construction-site disruptions (2015–16) to coordinated assaults on flagship projects and Chinese nationals (2021–22). High-profile incidents such as the Dasu bus bombing and the Karachi University suicide attack generated both material losses and reputational damage. Pakistani officials repeatedly condemned these acts as "sabotage against CPEC" (Jahanzaib and Ahmed, 2024) while

Chinese representatives stated that "such terrorist acts will never derail CPEC cooperation" (Issn and Issn, 2025), framing terrorism as a shared existential threat precisely the process Securitization Theory describes.

Economic Costs

The cumulative effect of terrorism increased security spending, delayed project timelines and discouraged private investment, producing a shift from a purely economic to a risk-adapted governance model.

Table 2: Estimated Economic Losses due to Terrorism (2015–2024)

Year	No. of Attacks	Estimated Financial Loss (Million USD)
2015	1	$10m
2019	1	$15m
2021	3	$120m
2022	1	$30m
2023	1	$5m
2024	3	$100m

Source: Compiled by the author from PICSS, South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), and Dawn archives (2015–2024).

Losses peaked in 2021 and 2024 with financial shocks exceeding $100 million each. Hydropower and transport projects were suspended or slowed, insurance premiums rose, and smaller investors withdrew. This pattern illustrates how securitization, though essential for continuity, imposed heavy opportunity costs on development.

Strategic Shifts

Terrorism fundamentally altered the course of CPEC, transforming it from a development-driven vision into a securitized framework of cooperation. The establishment of the Special Security Division (SSD) with 15,000 troops illustrates how economic connectivity projects were redefined through the prism of counterterrorism. While this institutionalization of security reassured China of Pakistan's commitment, it also reflected a structural dependency where development was increasingly tied to military protection. From a critical perspective, this shift raises questions about whether CPEC can be sustained as a primarily economic corridor or if it risks becoming a security-first arrangement. Moreover, China's deeper engagement through intelligence sharing and its demand for stronger guarantees exposed an asymmetry in the partnership, where Pakistan bore the burden of countering domestic militancy while China secured strategic leverage. Joint diplomatic statements consistently projected resilience and unity, but their recurring emphasis on security signaled the normalization of terrorism as a central determinant of bilateral relations. This securitization, while necessary for protecting projects and personnel, also narrows the broader development narrative of CPEC, making it vulnerable to both regional instability and the credibility of Pakistan's internal security assurances.

Counterterrorism Response

Pakistan and China institutionalized layered counterterrorism measures combining force deployment, intelligence sharing and diplomatic coordination. The two states have held joint counterterror exercises, the last of them being the Warrior-VIII exercise that was a coordination exercise in which the Pakistan Army troops and the Western Theater Command of China participated. These drills were not only to enhance response capacity but to act as a warning of determination in case of any threat to CPEC and the Chinese staff. At the domestic level, Pakistan incorporated CPEC-related security into national counter-terror systems during the so-called Radd-ul-Fasaad operation, dedicated to breaking down militant cells, and the newly proclaimed Azm-e-Istehkam program, which was meant to combat increased cross-border militancy and rejuvenated cells, including those based in Afghanistan. Targeted actions in Baluchistan and increased surveillance and movement-control facilities, like Safe City infrastructure, were implemented to restrict the movement of insurgents in the regions around major CPEC routes and facilities. Combined, these actions show that security cooperation in the area surrounding CPEC has changed the protection provisions based on stand-alone protection provisions to a multi-layered security posture integrating military preparedness, intelligence gathering, and coordinated operational planning. This growing counterterrorism instrument is indicative of an acknowledgement of a mutual reliance upon the long-term stability of CPEC not merely in terms of the ability to protect physical locations, but also in terms of the systematic undermining of networks and environments in which recurrent offensive strikes can be executed.

Table 3: Pakistan China Counterterrorism Measures

Category	Measure	Outcome
Security Forces	Creation of SSD	Dedicated protection but stretched army capacity
Intelligence	Joint monitoring and early-warning systems	Prevented some attacks; improved trust
Policy & SOPs	Convoy protocols, restricted zones	Reduced exposure but slowed logistics
Institutional	Security Sub-Group under JCC	Permanent CT dialogue
Diplomacy	High-level CT dialogues	Reinforced bilateral confidence

Source: Compiled by the author from Ministry of Planning & Development (GoP), PICSS, and Xinhua reports (2015–2024).

These arrangements for SSD protection, joint monitoring systems, convoy protocols and permanent CT dialogue under the JCC reflect the normalization of extraordinary measures within CPEC governance. They also show how securitization creates durable institutions that outlive individual incidents.

Terrorist Groups Targeting CPEC

CPEC projects have been repeatedly targeted by diverse militant groups, each driven by distinct motivations but united in viewing the corridor as a symbolic and strategic target.

Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) and Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF): Nationalist insurgents opposing what they perceive as exploitation and exclusion of Baloch communities (Verma and et al., 2025). Both groups have staged repeated attacks in Gwadar, Turbat, and Karachi. The BLA claimed responsibility for the 2018 assault on the Chinese Consulate and the 2022 suicide bombing at Karachi University's Confucius Institute. Following these incidents, Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned them as "an assault on Pakistan's sovereignty and friendship with China," while Chinese Consul General Li Bijian reiterated that "such terrorist acts will never derail CPEC cooperation."

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP): An Islamist insurgent group targeting the Pakistani state and its foreign partners. The group claimed responsibility for the 2021 Dasu bus attack that killed nine Chinese engineers. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi described it as a "deliberate act of sabotage against CPEC," and Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian emphasized that "the safety of Chinese personnel is a red line that must be safeguarded."

A transnational jihadist faction that frames CPEC as an "un-Islamic alliance." Though less frequent, ISKP attacks have sought to internationalize its profile, such as a 2021 assault on a CPEC security convoy. Foreign Office Spokesperson Asim Iftikhar Ahmed linked such violence to "external actors exploiting local vulnerabilities," while Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reaffirmed Beijing's firm support for Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts.

Despite ideological differences, these groups converge in their hostility to CPEC, employing tactics such as IEDs, suicide bombings, and coordinated assaults. Official statements from both Pakistan and China highlight a consistent resolve to protect the corridor, framing terrorism as a shared threat that reinforces bilateral security cooperation. Together, these statements illustrate the speech acts at the heart of Securitization Theory: political leaders publicly designating terrorism as an existential threat to legitimize extraordinary protection measures.

Stakeholder Perceptions

Local communities remain divided. While some welcome employment and infrastructure, many particularly in Baluchistan resent exclusion from decision-making and militarization of development zones, which insurgents exploit to sustain their narrative of resistance. Pakistani media frame CPEC as both a "game changer" and a "security challenge," while Chinese outlets stress resilience and solidarity. International media highlights either security fragility or development potential. These perceptions shape the corridor's legitimacy and echo the theory's insight that securitization can generate both reassurance and alienation.

Comparative Perspective

The securitization of CPEC reflects broader vulnerabilities faced by Chinese projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but with far greater intensity. In Central Asia, extremist groups have threatened oil and gas pipelines, while in East Africa, Al-Shabaab temporarily disrupted Chinese-funded ports and railways. In these cases, violence has remained sporadic. By contrast, in Pakistan terrorism has become a structural factor rather than an episodic

disruption. Persistent and geographically dispersed militant attacks compelled both states to embed security mechanisms directly into the governance of CPEC. Unlike other BRI regions where security risks are managed as contingencies, in Pakistan they constitute the foundation of cooperation. This comparison underscores a critical reality: terrorism universally undermines Chinese overseas investments, but in Pakistan it has fundamentally redefined a development initiative into a security-dependent partnership**.** The CPEC experience illustrates how local militancy shapes not only project delivery but also the strategic logic of global infrastructure initiatives.

Table 4. Summary Indicators of Terrorism's Impact on CPEC (2015–2024)

Indicator	Evidence / Scale	Implications for CPEC Governance
Terrorist Attacks	> 20 recorded incidents directly targeting CPEC projects, Chinese engineers, and security convoys	Persistent violence framed as an existential threat, legitimizing extraordinary security measures
Casualties	59 deaths (19 Chinese nationals, 32 Pakistani security personnel/workers, 8 civilians)	Human cost intensified bilateral resolve to enhance protection and compensation mechanisms
Injuries	> 110 people injured across incidents	Long-term psychological and economic costs in project areas; heightened insurance and welfare needs
Financial Losses	Direct damages ≈ USD 280 million, including delays to road, energy and hydropower projects	Economic disruption triggered stronger investor-state risk-sharing and security clauses
Security Expenditure	> USD 200 million allocated for SSD and paramilitary deployments	Shift from development budget to security spending, embedding militarization into project finance
Project Delays	Several energy/infrastructure projects delayed 6–18 months	Demonstrates how securitization safeguards continuity but erodes efficiency
Chinese Evacuations	Temporary suspension/relocation of Chinese workers after high-profile attacks (e.g., Dasu, 2021)	Shows direct link between attack severity and operational continuity

Diplomatic Responses	> 15 joint Pakistan–China statements reaffirming commitment to CPEC despite security threats	Speech acts reinforcing securitization narrative and bilateral unity
Counterterrorism Institutionalization	Security Sub-Group under JCC and specialized coordination cells permanently embedded	Institutionalized CT cooperation becomes a defining feature of CPEC governance
Insurance & Investor Confidence	Higher insurance premiums for Chinese companies and noticeable dip in FDI inflows during peak violence years	Illustrates how extraordinary measures cannot fully offset investor risk perceptions
Regional Security Dimension	Cross-border involvement of TTP, ISKP and Baloch separatists linking domestic militancy with regional instability	Elevates CPEC from a domestic security issue to a regional security concern, reinforcing securitization logic

Source: *Compiled by the author from Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), Ministry of Planning & Development (GoP),* Dawn *archives, and* Xinhua News Agency *(2015–2024).*

Presenting the indicators in this format highlights how terrorism has not merely disrupted CPEC at the margins but redefined its operating environment. Each metric corresponds to a specific aspect of the securitization process described by theory: political leaders and institutions framed repeated attacks as existential threats, which legitimized extraordinary deployments (SSD, JCC security sub-group), shifted financial allocations from development to security, and normalized bilateral counterterrorism mechanisms. The table thus complements the narrative findings by showing, in one view, the dual effect of terrorism under the lens of Securitization Theory continuity of the corridor ensured, but at the cost of efficiency, inclusivity and diversified investment.

The evidence presented demonstrates that terrorism did not simply interrupt CPEC's progress but fundamentally transformed its operating logic. Under sustained attacks, Pakistan and China progressively framed the corridor as an existentially threatened asset, legitimizing extraordinary security deployments, joint monitoring mechanisms and institutionalized counterterrorism coordination. This process captured by Securitization Theory shifted CPEC from a development-led initiative to a security-embedded partnership in which continuity is achieved through layered protection but at the cost of efficiency, inclusivity and investor diversity. Interpreting the data through this lens moves the analysis beyond descriptive incident reporting to show how non-traditional security threats reshape governance and bilateral cooperation. Terrorism emerges not only as a disruptor of economic projects but also as a catalyst for institutional innovation and tighter Pakistan–China security alignment.

Situating these findings within broader debates on the Belt and Road Initiative and development in fragile environments highlights CPEC as a paradigmatic case of how large-scale infrastructure becomes securitized under persistent violence clarifying both the opportunities and the constraints of such a transformation.

Discussion

The findings indicate that terrorism has not merely disrupted CPEC but fundamentally reshaped its governance by triggering a process of securitization. Persistent attacks imposed both direct and indirect costs including financial losses, project delays, heightened insurance premiums, and reputational damage that undermined the original development-oriented rationale of the corridor. High-profile incidents such as the Dasu bus bombing and the Karachi University attack forced the temporary suspension or evacuation of Chinese personnel, highlighting limits in state protective capacity and signaling risks to investors. Simultaneously, the threat environment drove institutional innovation: the deployment of the Special Security Division, the creation of a security sub-group under the Joint Cooperation Committee, and enhanced intelligence coordination embedded counterterrorism within the partnership's operational framework. Framed as existential threats, repeated attacks legitimized extraordinary measures and normalized bilateral security exchanges, demonstrating terrorism's dual role in constraining economic progress while catalyzing deeper strategic alignment. However, militarized protection and restricted movement protocols created a legitimacy deficit by alienating local communities, particularly in Baluchistan, where insurgent groups portrayed CPEC as externally imposed and exclusionary. Structural asymmetries between Pakistan and China intensified these dynamics, with Pakistan bearing operational costs while China exercised influence through investment and diplomatic leverage, and external regional factors, including Afghanistan-related spillovers, heightened insecurity. Overall, CPEC illustrates how terrorism can simultaneously undermine developmental efficiency and reinforce strategic cooperation, but reliance solely on securitization is unsustainable; balancing security measures with inclusive political-economic strategies such as local participation, transparent benefit-sharing, and social investment is essential to restore the corridor's developmental promise and mitigate the cycle of violence.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The study shows that CPEC's evolution under sustained terrorism marks a structural transformation rather than a passing disruption, and therefore its future cannot be secured by traditional security responses alone. The evidence indicates that securitization has become a permanent organizing principle of the corridor, yet its developmental promise can only be preserved if extraordinary protection is embedded within transparent and participatory governance. This calls for joint security civilian oversight bodies that include local representation, so that protection is matched by accountability and community buy-in. Findings on local grievances in Baluchistan highlight the need for targeted employment schemes and benefit-sharing clauses within CPEC projects to turn securitized zones into

genuine development hubs. At the bilateral level, the asymmetry revealed in counterterrorism costs suggests negotiating more balanced responsibility-sharing with China linking security commitments to expanded social investment and clearer cost-sharing for protection measures. Regionally, cross-border militancy and hybrid threats underscore that CPEC's security is embedded in wider dynamics, requiring enhanced intelligence cooperation and proactive diplomacy rather than reactive crisis management. Finally, transparent incident reporting and independent post-incident reviews would strengthen domestic and international confidence in Pakistan's capacity to protect foreign personnel and critical infrastructure. Together these measures translate the study's central insight into action: securitization is now enduring, but its long-term costs can be mitigated by aligning counterterrorism with inclusivity, equitable burden-sharing and regional engagement allowing CPEC to remain both a strategic anchor and a developmental engine under persistent insecurity.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed how sustained terrorism has transformed the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from its initial framing as a flagship development corridor into a security-embedded partnership. By tracing incident patterns between 2015 and 2024 and examining institutional responses, the study demonstrated that repeated attacks did far more than slow construction schedules or raise costs: they compelled Pakistan and China to normalize extraordinary security practices, creating dedicated forces, joint intelligence platforms and a permanent security sub-group under the Joint Cooperation Committee. CPEC thus exemplifies how a mega-project's governance architecture can be reconstituted under conditions of chronic insecurity. Theoretically, the study applied Securitization Theory to show how violent threats were publicly framed as existential dangers, legitimizing extraordinary measures outside routine development management. Within this lens, the paper advanced the concept of terrorism as a "dual force" factor simultaneously constraining economic liberalization and deepening strategic alignment. This reframing contributes to wider debates on the development of terrorism nexus by demonstrating that insecurity can operate not only as a destabilizing force but also as a driver of institutional and strategic adaptation when host and investor states perceive common stakes. Practically, the findings indicate that securitization has become a structural feature of CPEC rather than a temporary safeguard. While this embedded security has ensured continuity, overreliance on militarized protection risks eroding inclusivity and legitimacy, particularly in areas such as Baluchistan where grievances are long-standing. The study underscores the necessity of a twin-track approach that complements credible security with transparent governance, equitable benefit-sharing and sustained community engagement. Without this balance, the corridor risks consolidating as a security-first arrangement with limited developmental pay-off. Regionally, the research highlights that CPEC's viability depends as much on proactive diplomacy and cross-border intelligence cooperation as on domestic counterterrorism. Spillover from Afghanistan, external support to anti-CPEC groups and competing regional narratives show that the corridor is not merely a bilateral undertaking but a test case for the Belt and Road

Initiative in fragile environments. Managing these external dynamics will be critical for sustaining investor confidence and preserving Pakistan's credibility as a security provider. In sum, CPEC's first decade illustrates a complex transformation: terrorism weakened its developmental efficiency yet reinforced the strategic depth of the Pakistan–China partnership by embedding security into its core. The resilience of the corridor now hinges on whether policymakers can move beyond reactive securitization to integrate protection with inclusive development. Achieving this balance would allow CPEC to recover its original vision as both an economic engine and a strategic anchor demonstrating that even under persistent insecurity, large-scale infrastructure can remain viable when security and governance are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive.

Prospects

The evidence presented in this study suggests that securitization has moved from being a crisis response to becoming the organizing principle of CPEC. Over the next two to three decades this trajectory is likely to harden: joint counterterrorism mechanisms, intelligence-sharing platforms and specialized protection forces may evolve into permanent, formalized institutions with broader mandates extending to cyber defense, hybrid-threat monitoring and regional risk management. This entrenchment will make security an enduring pillar of Pakistan–China cooperation, but its sustainability will depend on whether extraordinary measures can be embedded within transparent, participatory governance rather than remaining a purely militarized framework. The next phase of CPEC thus offers a critical opportunity to evaluate whether securitization, once institutionalized, can also be democratized through civilian oversight and clear benefit-sharing mechanisms. At the same time, the findings highlight that inclusive development is no longer a peripheral goal but a strategic necessity. Without visible socio-economic dividends in high-risk districts particularly Baluchistan CPEC risks consolidating as a security-first enclave vulnerable to recurring unrest and reputational damage. Over the coming decades, Pakistan and China will have to link security guarantees to targeted employment, local equity stakes and participatory decision-making, while expanding regional diplomacy to address cross-border militancy and hybrid warfare challenges. If this balance is achieved, CPEC could move from being a reactive case of securitized development to a model of resilient, security-aware cooperation that sustains investor confidence and offers lessons for other Belt and Road corridors in fragile environments.

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