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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**The Strategic Implications of CPEC for South Asian Geopolitics****Iqtadar Hussain Shah**

PhD Scholar, UK

Dr. Saeed Ahmed Butt (Corresponding Author)

Assistant Professor, Government College University, Lahore

saeedbutt@gcu.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a flagship project of its day and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most important geopolitical and geo-economic developments of the twenty first century in South Asia. CPEC is launched in 2015 and it is expected to link the western region of China (Xinjiang) with Gwadar port of Pakistan through infrastructure of roads, railways, energy projects, industrial zones and digital infrastructure. In addition to its economic aspects, CPEC has significant strategic implications related to regional power dynamics, security architecture, connectivity and great power competition in South Asia. This article explores strategic importance of CPEC and how it will shape the geopolitics in the region, including Pakistan-China relations, India's security fears, regional connectivity, and the role of external powers like United States. The study concludes that CPEC has changed Pakistan's geopolitical status, which has further enhanced strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China, intensified India-China-Pakistan rivalry and contributed to the reconfiguration of South Asian geopolitics. Based on scholarly literature, policy documents and strategic studies, the article concludes that CPEC provides unprecedented opportunities for economic integration and regional development, but also presents geopolitical challenges that could change the future strategic landscape of South Asia.

Keywords: CPEC, South Asian Geopolitics, China, Pakistan, Belt and Road Initiative, Gwadar Port, Regional Security, India-China Relations

1. Introduction:

The world has undergone a dramatic shift in geopolitical dynamics in 21st century, with rise of China, growing economic interdependence and the rise of new connectivity initiatives. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a key part of the developments which will define South Asian geopolitics. CPEC has been announced in presence of Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in April 2015 and is a plan of investment of more than \$62 billion to improve connectivity of China and Pakistan. CPEC consists of highways, railways, pipelines, energy projects, special economic zones (SEZs) and development of Gwadar Port. The corridor runs between Kashgar, in China's Xinjiang region and Gwadar, on the coast of the Arabian Sea in Pakistan. It is a flagship element of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's plans to build a new trade route from China to the Mediterranean. The strategic importance of CPEC goes beyond the development of infrastructure. It is a significant geopolitical initiative that can reshape the geopolitical landscape, boost China's influence in South Asia and fortify Pakistan's strategic position. At the same time, it has raised concerns about its security, sovereignty and regional influence issues among regional and global actors, including United States and India. As Ahmed puts it, CPEC is not only an economic corridor but also a geopolitical corridor that can change geopolitical landscape of South Asia

(Ahmad, 2020). In same vein, Wolf has similarly pointed out that CPEC will provide a catalyst for regional transformation by connecting economic development to strategic goals. (Wolf, 2019) This article explores the strategic implications of CPEC for the geopolitics of South Asia in terms of impact on regional security, economic integration, maritime competition and great power rivalry.

2. Literature Review:

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted considerable research on economic, geopolitical, security and strategic consequences of CPEC on South Asia. CPEC is now increasingly seen not just as an infrastructure project but also as a means of geo-economic connectivity, as a reflection of China's regional strategy, as a means of enhancing the strategic position of Pakistan, and as a means of increasing competition between China, Pakistan, India and other regional powers. Besides economic gains, its strategic value would also rely on security, governance, regional connectivity and China-India and China-US competition. A significant trend in research is to understand CPEC in context of China's BRI. Hussain and Jamali explain CPEC as a game-changing connectivity initiative that connects energy-rich Xinjiang territory in China with Gwadar Port in Pakistan via roads, energy infrastructure, pipelines and transportation systems. (Hussain, 2019) They say that corridor can have potential economic impact not just on China and Pakistan but also on Central and South Asian countries besides creating geopolitical tensions as some part of corridor is going through Kashmir region of dispute. This viewpoint will take analysis beyond an economic interpretation and introduce geoeconomics, idea that infrastructure, investment and trade can be used to achieve a wider set of strategic goals. CPEC has potential to enhance Pakistan's status as a connecting pin between China, Central Asia, South Asia and Middle East and Gwadar's strategic position puts even broader significance in Indian Ocean geopolitics. The other significant stream of literature is related to nature and scope of CPEC within framework of long history of China-Pakistan strategic partnership. According to Markey (2020), CPEC has now moved beyond initial stage of infrastructure and energy to a second stage in which emphasis is shifting to economic development, jobs and other trade. (Markey, 2020) Several potential benefits have been brought to light in literature regarding benefits of project for Pakistan, such as better connectivity within the country, increased energy potential, and opportunity to develop Gwadar as a regional transit and maritime hub. But academics do not want to consider CPEC as “game changer” without hesitation. Long-term strategic gains rely on transforming investments in infrastructure into industrialization, employment, and export expansion and sustainable regional trade in Pakistan. Just infrastructure is not enough to produce national power. India is a significant part of the geopolitical literature on CPEC. Indian opposition is linked more with issues of territorial disputes and China's increasing strategic engagement with Pakistan and in Indian Ocean. According to Hussain and Jamali, Kashmir issue has been cited as a significant obstacle in expansion of CPEC in India's opposition. (Hussain, 2019) The discussions in Gwadar are, therefore, viewed in a broader perspective of Chinese expansion in Indian Ocean. It is in this context that a security dilemma is created. While China and Pakistan emphasize development and connectivity aspect of CPEC, India might see it as a tool for Chinese strategic influence. The issue of Gwadar is very central as it is located at the centre and can be a gateway to sea. Its potential in providing a link between western China and markets abroad in Middle East and Africa has been cited in literature. Meanwhile, there are doubts about its commercial viability due to poor hinterland connectivity, security concerns, local political issues and lack of economic activity. The dual use nature of strategic infrastructure is shown in Gwadar, where a strategic investment could be used for commercial activities as well as create geopolitical and security consequences. CPEC has also

been linked to Kashmir issue and India-Pakistan security relationship. Meanwhile, opinions in literature are split as to whether CPEC is good for economy or a strategic dependency. Issues raised by critics are debt dependence and vulnerability of Pakistan, while Khan (et al.) question; “China is colonializing Pakistan” or “China is setting a debt trap” perceptions of CPEC. (Khan Z. G.-P., 2020) The literature has therefore come to emphasize the need for analysis to be conducted in terms of viability of project, financing options, governance, transparency, domestic political economy and overall economic context of Pakistan, rather than with a purely optimistic or pessimistic interpretation. This is the other dimension of domestic political economy of CPEC highlighted by recent studies. Institutional weaknesses, political divisions, lack of transparency, provincial tensions and inequitable benefit distribution are all important constraints on implementation (Samad, 2025). These concerns are especially relevant in Balochistan and Gwadar, where local concerns about employment, resources and participation in and socioeconomic development of CPEC could pose a threat to its strategic goals. Protecting infrastructure and Chinese personnel can be costlier in light of local grievances and insecurity. On the other hand, there is an optimistic thread, which focuses on prospect of regional integration through CPEC. According to Khan, Kamran and Jamal, CPEC will foster connectivity, cooperation and economic interactions among regional states. (Khan M. S., 2024) It might be able to link Pakistan to Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iran and world. With involvement of third countries in transportation corridors, energy projects, special economic zone and trade deals, CPEC could emerge as a multi-country project to offer a platform for regional economic integration. Studies on CPEC 2.0 are now becoming more and more common, with a view to industrialization, special economic zones, digital connectivity, agriculture, maritime expansion and economic integration in general. There is also growing evidence of increased competition with India and ongoing maritime-security issues. The developments regarding 2026 suggest a renewed push to improve CPEC and develop Gwadar as a regional connectivity hub and security is a major concern. While literature offers a significant amount of knowledge regarding economic, political and security aspects of CPEC, there is still a lack of knowledge. CPEC is analysed mostly in bilateral terms of China and Pakistan, while there is not as much systematic research conducted about its accumulative impacts on wider geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Current research is also often conducted independently on China, India and Pakistan and not on the basis of a comprehensive regional-security approach. Furthermore, attention paid has not been satisfactory to combined relationship between CPEC, Indo Pacific strategy, Gwadar, Kashmir and Afghanistan and alternative connectivity plans of India. The literature is thus split between two general readings; CPEC as a tool for regional economic integration and CPEC as a tool of strategic competition and Chinese influence. A more even balance is needed, where both dimensions are taken into account. In addition, earlier studies were mainly related to establishment of infrastructure, but CPEC's transformation into an industrial corridor, digitalization, maritime development, and increased regional role needs to be re-examined.

3. Theoretical Framework:

The study takes three complements approaches towards the strategic implications of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) namely Neorealism, Security Dilemma and Geoeconomics. These two approaches provide an understanding of changes in power dynamics, security rivalry, and economic linkages in South Asia as a result of CPEC. The main theoretical underpinning is Neorealism, specifically Kenneth Waltz's (1979) notion of the international system as anarchic and states' quest for survival through building capabilities and enhancing their position in the distribution of power. In this light, CPEC can be considered as a tool to enhance China's economic

and strategic potential, and the purpose of Pakistan is to boost its economic strength and strategic profile. Investment in infrastructure, energy, transportation and Gwadar Port by Chinese can boost connectivity with the Arabian sea and Indian ocean and could boost China's influence in the region. Meanwhile, India could view these developments as a shift in regional power dynamic in China and Pakistan's favour. The Security Dilemma, associated with Herz (1950), provides a second dimension. What one state does to improve security can be seen as an escalation by another and trigger countermeasures and more competition. Improvements in security can be seen by others as threat measures and then more competition. Rather than economic infrastructure, however, China and Pakistan are touting CPEC as an economic and connectivity development program, illustrating how economic infrastructure can be a source of strategic insecurity for India, given its concerns about route and China's increasing presence in the Indian Ocean. CPEC can thus play a part in "action-pinting" scenario between China, Pakistan and India. Third perspective, Geoeconomics, will be covering ways in which economic instruments can be used for geopolitical purposes. Nation power can be strengthened through infrastructure, investments, ports, energy networks and via trade corridors. CPEC is an example of such relationship since Gwadar, transportation projects, energy projects and industrial zones can enhance the connectivity of Pakistan and also improve China's reach to the regional markets and sea ports. These theories, taken together, conceptualize CPEC as a geoeconomic tool in a competitive regional security landscape, influenced by China-Pakistan cooperation, Indian strategic response, Kashmir issue, competition in Indian Ocean and great-power competition beyond.

4. Strategic Importance of Gwadar Port:

Since 1960s, China and Pakistan have been close strategic partners. They have been developing cooperation in fields of defense, diplomacy and economy. It was in early 2000s that concept of linking western China with the Arabian Sea shoreline of Pakistan was born. But it has picked up a lot of steam since 2013 launch of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In April 2015, China announced an investment package valued at some \$46 billion to be channeled into infrastructure and energy projects in Pakistan. The total amount of investments is projected to rise to more than \$62 billion. The key projects of CPEC are Gwadar Port Development, Road Infrastructure Projects, Railway Modernization Projects, Energy Projects, Special Economic Zones, and Digital Connectivity Projects. These projects are collectively working towards the vision of Pakistan as a regional connectivity hub. Gwadar Port is located in strategic architecture of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and has become one of key players in geopolitics of South Asian and Indian Ocean region. Gwadar is located on south-western coast of Balochistan, near entry points of Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, one of the most vital chokepoints of the world for energy transportation. Beyond its commercial importance, its geographical location lends significance to port, and makes it a point of contention between China, India, Gulf countries and other external players. For Pakistan, Gwadar's strategic location makes it an ideal port to leverage in the region due to its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and its potential as an energy and trade corridor between Indian Ocean and the resource-rich Central Asian and Middle East regions, according to Malik (Malik, 2012).

4.1. Gwadar as a Geostrategic Maritime Hub:

The geographical location is the primary source of strategic importance of Gwadar. The port sits on the shores of Arabian Sea and is relatively close to Persian Gulf and thus has potential to be important for maritime trade and energy transport. Rashid and Shirazi highlight significance of Gwadar's geographical position, which can link China, Pakistan, Central Asian, Middle East and other regional markets. They say there is potential in port to become an important regional

connectivity hub under CPEC. (Rashid, 2023) In geopolitical terms, Gwadar is thus more than a normal trade port. Can be used as a hub for both shipping and land transport. CPEC connects conceptually Gwadar with western regions of China via Karakoram Highway and other road, rail, energy and industrial infrastructure. This adds to importance of port in China's wider Belt and Road initiative (BRI) and its plan to create new connectivity corridors throughout Eurasia. Along with rise in importance of Indian Ocean is strategic significance of port. About 80% of world's trade by volume moves by sea and Indian Ocean has vital maritime trade links with East Asia, Middle East, Africa and Europe. The geographical position of Gwadar thus provides Pakistan with chance to enhance its maritime importance and possibly change its own profile to become a regional transit and logistics hub.

4.2. Gwadar and China's Strategic Interests:

The port of Gwadar holds special significance as it gives China another sea route route to western Indian Ocean. Energy and market access are crucial for China to maintain its economic growth. Chinese trade has several strategic chokepoints as it travels traditional routes via South China Sea, Strait of Malacca, Indian Ocean and then onward to Middle East. Thus, Gwadar can offer China more diversification for its energy and transport lines. Kardon, Kennedy and Dutton look at Gwadar in the context of China's wider notion of "strategic strongpoints" overseas. (Kardon, 2020) Their study shows that Chinese government and strategists consider some foreign commercial ports to be potentially valuable locations for China's broader maritime interests. However, they do make a clear distinction between commercial activities of these ports and presumption that they are synonymous with overseas military bases. This is important to distinguish Gwadar. It is not a foregone conclusion that the port will be China's naval base; it can be a strategic port in other contexts. Despite being more of a commercial than a military base, Gwadar can offer China advantages with respect to logistical, commercial and geopolitical considerations. It may be able to help ease trade, improve China's ties with Pakistan and boost China's economic footprint in western Indian Ocean.

4.3. Gwadar and Strait of Hormuz:

In addition to its strategic location, Gwadar is also located near Strait of Hormuz. The Strait serves as main sea route and is vital to shipping of oil and gas from Middle East. The geographical proximity of Gwadar with Strait of Hormuz is therefore considered as one of the main aspects of its strategic significance by Malik (Malik, 2012). Pakistan is close to this maritime chokepoint, so it has opportunities to build energy-related infrastructure and improve its energy security in terms of regional trade. The port will also be located close to major energy-producing countries of Gulf, which could further increase strategic significance of CPEC for China. The port could thus be an integral part of China's energy-security policy. However, it would be logical to argue that Gwadar will not supplant China's current sea-lanes. The effectiveness of corridor relies on transportation cost, infrastructure capacity, security, industrial production, port utilization and establishing commercially viable supply chains.

4.4. Gwadar and CPEC:

CPEC has given small coastal town of Gwadar a new look and new importance as a part of Pakistan's national connectivity policy. The port will be used as southern terminus of CPEC and will also be a link from Xinjiang region of China to Arabian Sea. According to Rashid and Shirazi (Rashid, 2023), Gwadar has significant potential as a hub for regional connectivity, as it can connect China with Central Asian nations and with maritime routes. The economic, energy and strategic dimensions of strategic significance of Gwadar in CPEC can therefore be understood as interconnected. Economic connectivity helps in trade linkage between Pakistan, China, Central

Asian and Middle East markets. Energy connectivity could enable access to energy-producing areas around the Persian Gulf. Strategic connectivity enhances China and Pak demands in Indian Ocean geopolitical space. More recent research corroborates this view of Gwadar as a regional economic gateway to South Asia, Central Asia, Gulf and Middle East.

4.5. Gwadar and India–China Competition:

The rivalry between Gwadar and India with China. Gwadar has also gained importance due to the strategic rivalry between India and China. India is wary of CPEC partly due to its northern route that runs through Indian territory and partly because CPEC enhances China's strategic relations with Pakistan. Gwadar thus becomes a component of broader rivalry for ports, infrastructure, maritime routes and regional connectivity. The development of Gwadar is especially important in light of development of Chabahar Port by India in Iran. The two ports are the subject of frequent comparisons as competing or complementary connectivity projects. Gwadar is gateway to Arabian Sea and Gulf for China and Pakistan, while Chabahar is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia for India. This competition is a reflection of the growing significance of geoeconomics in South Asia geopolitics. The ports and transportation corridors are no longer just pieces of the economic infrastructure; they may help to build national influence, offer alternative trade routes, build strategic partnerships and influence the distribution of power.

4.6. Gwadar and Regional Connectivity:

A major reason for strategic significance of Gwadar is its ability to link up landlocked Central Asian countries to world's sea trade. Afghanistan and Central Asian republics have no direct access to open seas, which in turn means that they are structurally dependent on their neighbours, particularly for international trade. If proper road, rail, customs and security facilities develop in Gwadar, it could be made an alternate maritime route. Similarly, Khan, Kamran and Jamal state that CPEC has important geopolitical implications in South Asia as connectivity can shape economic relations and strategic positioning of the region. (Khan M. S., 2024) Gwadar is at the heart of this possibility as it is maritime gateway to help regional overland networks to link with global shipping. Therefore, Gwadar can play a greater role of a gateway between South Asia, Central Asia, China and Middle East in near future. It will require political stability in region and joint efforts from regional countries for implementation of cross-border connectivity projects.

4.7. Security and Geopolitical Challenges:

However, Gwadar has significant security concerns even with its strategic value. Port and associated infrastructure risks to CPEC are associated with political instability in Balochistan, militant attacks, local grievances, and concerns about distribution of economic benefits. The challenges have direct geopolitical implications as attacks on Chinese projects and personnel can have an impact on China's investment appetite in project and introduce additional security expenses to CPEC. Political uncertainty, security threats and geopolitical tensions between China, India and United States are highlighted as key challenges for developing strategic potential in Gwadar. In addition to physical infrastructure, a range of political, social and economic factors must be taken into account for development of Gwadar including political stability, local involvement, good governance and security. This is especially important as a successful port needs an operational economic system. Roads and berths will not make Gwadar a big international hub unless it is accompanied by industrial production, warehousing, logistics, shipping services, financial institutions, qualified manpower, reliable electricity and water supply.

4.8. Gwadar's Strategic Limitations:

The literature is also warning against exaggerating immediate strategic significance of Gwadar. Anwar and Hussain highlight underutilization as a crucial issue and stress the need to fully

capitalise on port's potential as an economic game changer. (Anwar, 2023) Likewise, in recent years, several factors point to fact that progress towards making Gwadar a fully developed regional connectivity hub is still being hampered by issues of security and local socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, one must also remember the strategic importance of Gwadar as a potential rather than a capability. While its position carries significant long-term geopolitical benefits, geographical location alone should not be considered a prerequisite for commercial success or strategic dominance.

5. Maritime Security Implications of CPEC:

The implications of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for maritime security are enormous, because southern end is in Gwadar Port in Arabian Sea, on shores of Persian Gulf. Thus, CPEC brings together two aspects of Chinese infrastructure development: land route to the continent and maritime route to Indian Ocean region. The corridor should therefore be viewed not only as an economic and transportation initiative, but also as a project with implications for naval strategy, energy security, protection of sea-lanes, port competition and regional power balance. In recent years, scholars have highlighted growing significance of China–Pakistan maritime partnership in Indian Ocean geopolitical landscape, especially in light of strategic nexus between CPEC and Gwadar, as well as China's interest in maritime affairs and Pakistan's naval power.

5.1. CPEC and Transformation of Pakistan's Maritime Strategy

The transformation of Pakistan's Maritime Strategy is in phase with CPEC. CPEC has spurred Pakistan to place more strategic emphasis on its maritime territory. Particularly, Pakistan's maritime security perceptions were greatly affected by the presence of Karachi and competition with India. The development of Gwadar will also give Pakistan an extra strategic and commercial hub in the west. Rahman, Kohsar and Ishaq state that Gwadar can play a strategic role in boosting maritime and economic security of Pakistan by enhancing maritime trade capacity and minimizing overreliance on Karachi. (Rahman Z. U., 2022) Gwadar, from a Pakistani perspective, can thus play a role in creating maritime resiliency. Multiple large ports help to decrease vulnerability stemming from too many activities in one place. This is especially important with regards to India-Pakistan tensions as Karachi is geopolitically nearer to India and may be susceptible to disruption during a military crisis. Thus, CPEC provides Pakistan with a chance to link up Maritime security with economic security. A better developed maritime industry, better port facilities, logistics facilities and more commercial shipping in Arabian Sea can improve capability of Pakistan to safeguard its oceanic interests and also help to make Arabian Sea more economically important.

5.2. Gwadar and China's Indian Ocean Strategy:

The maritime dimension of CPEC is even more relevant in eyes of Chinese. Gwadar is located in a strategic position in Pakistan and has been connected to China's western regions via CPEC, giving China a commercial port in the region. Gwadar could be a “strategic strongpoint”, the term used by Kardon, Kennedy and Dutton for “commercially oriented foreign ports that might also have wider strategic significance for China's maritime interests.” (Kardon, 2020) This does not necessarily imply that Gwadar is synonymous with Chinese naval base in the region. Instead, it is important because of potential of it giving logistical, commercial and diplomatic benefit. A thriving Gwadar would enable China to conduct more trade and increase access to western Indian Ocean. It might also help China to improve its ties with countries in Gulf, East Africa and South Asia. In recent years, literature has suggested that concept of strategic infrastructure is becoming more and more blurred in development of Gwadar. Ali for instance sees Gwadar as a key element in China's maritime strategy, and concludes that this might have consequences for China's access to Middle Eastern energy and its wider footprint in Indian Ocean. (Ali, 2025)

5.3. Energy Security and Maritime Chokepoints:

CPEC's maritime significance is closely associated with energy security. Arabian Sea connects to Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz is a vital point of passage for energy trade. Gwadar's geographical location makes it a potential hub for transporting and storing energy resources. The attraction that CPEC has for China is prospect of a trade and energy diversification from route of long sea voyages through Indian Ocean and Strait of Malacca. According to Rahman (et al), Gwadar can play a role in ensuring China's energy and maritime security by offering an alternate route for oil supply and access to markets of Central Asia and Europe. (Rahman Z. U., 2022) The strategic significance of this alternative route however should not be over-emphasized. Transportation of large chunks of energy through CPEC will be commercially viable, if infrastructure capacity, costs, pipeline development, security and economic efficiency of competing maritime routes are considered. Therefore, Gwadar must be viewed as strategic diversification and not as a direct competitor to China's maritime supply routes.

5.4. Sino-Indian Maritime Competition:

The security aspect of CPEC for sea is that it is playing to India-China strategic rivalry in Indian Ocean. India considers Indian Ocean to be a region of strategic significance, and is worried about China's growing presence in Indian Ocean. Gwadar has a more far-reaching significance than is related to China-Pakistan affairs. In Indian strategic discourse, development of Gwadar has been seen as a sign of the increasing Chinese presence in Indian Ocean region. CPEC has significant security implications for India, as it runs across areas of territorial concern for India and growing naval expansion of China and Pakistan in Indian Ocean, argue (Rahman, 2021). This is a classic situation of a security dilemma. For China and Pakistan, bolstering their maritime power could be a means to bolster their economies and protect their national security; for India, the same developments could be a sign of a new strategic encirclement. India can then bolster its naval power, maritime surveillance, maritime partnerships and strategic infrastructure, which could trigger additional Chinese and Pakistani responses. As such, CPEC can help to turn economic infrastructure into a naval competition enabler.

5.5. Implications for Pakistan–India Maritime Security:

Consequently, it can be deduced that there will be implications for Pakistan–India Maritime Security. In addition, CPEC also has an impact on maritime aspect of Pakistan-India rivalry. Gwadar's western position, as compared to Karachi, provides Pakistan with a western maritime outlet. This may help Pakistan to spread out maritime and commercial activities along its coastline. Meanwhile, strategic importance of Gwadar may make it an important factor in any future India-Pakistan crisis. However, if CPEC gains more significance in China's economic agenda then attacks or disruptions to Gwadar may have implications for China's strategic interests and may be termed as bilateral security crisis gone international. It is a chance opportunity and a vulnerability for Pakistan. More Chinese economic engagement can also help to provide strategic protection and diplomatic support, but it could also render critical infrastructure more strategic sensitive.

5.6. Naval Modernization and Maritime Power:

CPEC has also made an indirect contribution towards modernization of Pakistan's maritime capabilities. Increased maritime surveillance, coastal security, Intelligence and naval preparedness are needed to protect Gwadar and CPEC infrastructure, shipping routes and Chinese personnel. In context of sea-power theory, value of a port will depend in end, in part, on capacity of state to ensure the security of maritime routes and protection of commercial infrastructure. Pakistan's navy's modernization development is thus seen as an add-on to the economic goals of CPEC. But boosting a navy can also spur rivalries in the region. In case Pakistan gets support from China in

strengthening its naval forces and India is also gaining ground in its maritime capabilities, CPEC could be linked to a larger naval arms race in Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

5.7. Maritime Terrorism, Piracy, and Non-Traditional Security:

CPEC's effects on maritime security are not only related to roles of interstate competition. Non-traditional maritime threats like terrorism, sabotage, piracy, smuggling, etc. pose a threat to Gwadar and related infrastructure. The security of Chinese personnel and infrastructure has become more significant due to risks involved in attack on CPEC related targets, which can have an impact on economic and strategic partnership between China and Pakistan. The threat to maritime infrastructure is also growing, as many ports rely on digital systems. Information technologies are becoming increasingly interconnected and integral to port management, tracking of vessels, handling of cargo, navigation, and communications and logistics. Maritime cyber security research has shown that maritime systems including AIS, GNSS, ECDIS, radar, communications networks and other digital systems—can be susceptible to cyber attacks. (Caprolu, 2020) Thus, CPEC's maritime-security agenda should start to integrate cyber-security, rather than just naval defence.

5.8. Militarization versus Commercialization of Gwadar:

An important question is whether Gwadar is mainly to be considered as a commercial port or a possible strategic/military port. There is not enough evidence in literature to conclude port is a Chinese naval base. Specifically, Kardon (et al.) focus on Gwadar as a possible strategic Chinese strongpoint and they stress need to differentiate between military basing and commercial ownership and operation. (Kardon, 2020) However, strategic importance of commercial ports does not necessarily require official naval bases. Peacetime port facilities can offer logistic, maintenance, communication and access benefits and, in emergency situations, may gain in strategic value. This multi-facet nature is reason that Gwadar raises concerns in India and other regional actors. It is thus time to move on from rhetoric of whether or not Gwadar is and is not a naval base, and to concentrate more on potential for commercial infrastructure to create strategic options for states.

5.9. Wider Indian Ocean Security Architecture:

CPEC is also a factor in altering security architecture of Indian Ocean. With the corridor connecting BRI – China's continental route and its Maritime Silk Road and Pakistan is becoming more connected to China's wider network of connectivity. This applies to Gulf, East Africa, Central Asia and South Asia. The growing trend is thus not just a maritime partnership between China and Pakistan. It encompasses a broader network of ports, shipping routes, energy facilities, naval deployments, and strategic partnerships. Indian Ocean is therefore gaining importance as a field of competition between China, India, United States and states of the region. However, Abid and Nouman contend that China-Pakistan maritime partnership has implications for geopolitical landscape of Indian Ocean as CPEC and Gwadar are linked to the wider geopolitical dynamics in the region. (Abid, 2024)

6. CPEC and Pakistan's Geopolitical Position:

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is emerging as a pivotal geopolitical tool in reconfiguration of Pakistan's South Asian and broader Eurasian geopolitical landscape. CPEC is flagship project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of the Chinese government, which links China's Xinjiang region with Gwadar Port of Pakistan by building roads, energy projects, pipelines, telecommunications infrastructure, and industrial zones. The importance of this corridor is not just in terms of economic development, but it also presents opportunity to enhance Pakistan's connectivity, strategic partnerships, negotiating leverage, and influence in regional geopolitics.

According to recent research, CPEC can be a project, which can impact economic and strategic power position of Pakistan due to the geographical position, which China has in Arabian Sea and the Gulf.

6.1. Pakistan as Geostrategic Bridge:

Geographical advantage has been an important factor in geopolitical importance of Pakistan in past. It is located at crossroads of South Asia, Middle East, Central Asia and China and is bordering Arabian Sea. CPEC can turn this geographical location into geoeconomic influence as it will connect Pakistan's land to major regional markets and transportation networks. According to Rizvi, Khan and Elahi, CPEC offers Pakistan opportunities to extend cooperation beyond China with Russia and Central Asian Republics in various sectors such as energy, economy and security. (Rizvi, 2022) They also indicate that CPEC has given a push towards Pakistan broad-based Asian approach in foreign policy. Therefore, Pakistan can be transformed from a primarily strategically located state into a connectivity state where geographical location itself becomes an economic and diplomatic asset of the country. This change is especially significant in terms of Central Asian non-oceanic countries. Pakistan may be able to offer these states access to Arabian Sea via Gwadar. Likewise, China can also secure a short sea route to connect to Arabian Sea and Middle East via land. Khan and Bukhari note that CPEC provides a connection between China and Central, West and South Asia, and can be linked with the European markets. (Khan M. A., 2024)

6.2. Strengthening Pakistan–China Strategic Relations:

CPEC has immensely strengthened the economic aspect of the historic strategic partnership between Pakistan and China. The relationship was mostly linked with defense cooperation, diplomacy and mutual strategic interests before. Infrastructure, energy, investment, trade, industrialization and connectivity are the additional features added to this partnership by CPEC. This makes Pakistan's ties with China more solid and diversified, from a Pakistani standpoint. Chinese investment can be used in development of infrastructure and increase in energy capacity and Pakistan can give China geographical access to Arabian Sea. Hence relationship is becoming more and more strategic interdependent. According to Fatima, Amna and Saeed CPEC has potential to affect Pakistan's national power through its positive effects on economic and strategic capacities. (Fatima, 2024) They point out that importance of Pakistan's geographical location is that connectivity through Pakistan will give China access to markets of Gulf. This implies that CPEC can have potential to enhance Pakistan's geopolitical worth for China and Islamabad's negotiating strength in the region.

6.3. Pakistan's Strategic Autonomy and Foreign Policy:

CPEC also has implications for Pakistan's foreign-policy autonomy. In past, Pakistan's foreign policy has always been characterized by close ties with Western powers, especially United States, and strategic cooperation with China. CPEC enhances Chinese dimension in Pakistan's foreign policy framework and gives Islamabad more choices in foreign and economic policy. Rizvi et-al say that CPEC has offered Pakistan "new foreign policy options" and led to its growing tilt towards regional cooperation in Asia. (Rizvi, 2022) This does not imply that Pakistan has to end its ties with United States or any other western countries. On the contrary, CPEC could provide an opportunity to Pakistan to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, which involves keeping relations with various centers of power to serve itself maximum interests. This is especially true in a more multipolar international system. Pakistan has potential to leverage its China ties to push its bargaining, while keeping economic, diplomatic, security ties with United States, the Gulf states, Central Asian countries, Russia, Türkiye and other nations.

6.4. CPEC and Pakistan–India Geopolitical Competition:

CPEC has also had an impact on Pakistan's strategic ties with India. India's objection to CPEC is related to part of its claims to territories traversed by northern route of corridor. India sees a broader Chinese strategic and economic rise in Pakistan as a development which has implications for balance of power in the region. CPEC, therefore, has increasingly become in grip of ongoing competition between India and Pakistan. The corridor will enhance Pakistan's economic and strategic ties with China and at same time add to India's concerns regarding Chinese presence in its neighborhood. New research says CPEC has created strategic rivalry in South Asian region in terms of Gwadar, maritime security, Kashmir and regional connectivity. Realistically, this is a typical balance of power situation. Pakistan is looking to enhance its capacity via Chinese Economic and Strategic assistance and India is enhancing its capacity, maritime power, partnership building and alternative connectivity plans. So a project that is primarily understood as economic infrastructure can have significant security implications.

6.5. Gwadar and Pakistan's Maritime Geopolitical Importance:

Perhaps the most visible impact of CPEC on Pakistan geopolitical position is in Gwadar. Gwadar's location on the Arabian Sea gives Pakistan a western port on sea and may allow it to become a regional logistics and transit hub. The strategic importance of the port is located near Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. The completion of Gwadar would link Pakistan with energy markets of Gulf, Central Asian states, China and international shipping lines. It may then become more influential in geopolitics of Indian Ocean, in the process. Khan and Bukhari recognize that Gwadar is a crucial part of strategic significance of CPEC, especially due to its connectivity potential toward energy-producing areas and international markets. (Khan M. A., 2024) Gwadar's strategic significance, in turn, enhances Pakistan's geopolitical significance.

6.6. CPEC and Pakistan's Role in Central Asian Connectivity:

The first being role of CPEC in Central Asian Connectivity and second is the role of Pakistan in Central Asian Connectivity. CPEC also provides Pakistan with an opportunity to strengthen its relationship with Central Asia. Pakistan route to Arabian Sea is a potential attraction for landlocked countries in Central Asian Republics (CAR) as an alternate trade route. This may boost Pakistan's status as a gateway state. Better ties with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and other regional economies could make Pakistan more relevant in terms of economic and diplomatic ties. CPEC may, therefore, potentially link three traditionally separated geopolitical areas; South Asia, Central Asia and Middle East. Political stability in Afghanistan, development of railway infrastructure, customs cooperation, effective regional diplomacy and improved border infrastructure are all conditions necessary to realize this potential. Thus, geopolitical advantages of CPEC are inseparable from the promotion of stable regional environment by Pakistan.

6.7. European Union's Power and Geopolitics of Europe:

But whether CPEC can add to Pakistan's geopolitical standing will depend on whether infrastructure investment translates into economic power. Infrastructure is not necessarily geopolitical influence. Roads, ports, energy plants and industrial zones have to produce productive economic activities, exports, jobs and fiscal capacity. The literature thus contains both positive and pessimistic views. While developing the opportunities of CPEC Khan and Bukhari recognise economic, security and political challenges. (Khan M. A., 2024) The challenges of political, security, social, environmental and financial viability are also identified along with the potential impact of CPEC by Rehman, Ahmed and Siddiqui. (Rehman, 2022) This implies that the contribution of CPEC to Pakistan's geopolitical power should be seen as a capability conversion process.

6.8. CPEC and Regional Bargaining Power of Pakistan:

The other significant implication is that Pakistan can acquire more negotiating power in region. This would make neighbouring countries much more inclined to do business with Pakistan if Pakistan is successful in development of Gwadar, through transportation, industrial sectors and power generation. Connectivity can then be a diplomatic asset. States whose trade and transit rely on the Pakistani territory might have more vested interests in stability of Pakistan. This may provide Islamabad with more negotiating power in region. Meanwhile there are risks associated with relying on a single large partner. As Pakistan's economic ties with China continue to expand, there is a risk of over-dependency that could arise if investment in region is disproportionately based on one external power as it moves towards China and country's trade, financing and infrastructure becomes more concentrated in China. However, Khan et al. (2020) who have disputed simplistic "debt-trap" narrative about CPEC highlight need to critically analyse such claims instead of taking both positive and negative cues. (Khan, 2020) This debate, thus, is not just about positive or negative aspects of CPEC, but how to reap the maximum benefit while maintaining economic and strategic autonomy for Pakistan.

6.9. CPEC and Emerging Multipolar Order:

It is important to appreciate the geopolitical significance of CPEC in context of shift towards a multipolar world order. China's emergence has ushered in new economic and strategic power centres and Pakistan is trying to position itself within this new world. CPEC bolsters Pakistan's ties with China's BRI and could link Islamabad with a larger Asian economic network. It also could help strengthen ties with Russia, Central Asian nations, Iran and Gulf nations. Rizvi highlight specifically potential for further cooperation with China, Russia and Central Asian states. (Rizvi, 2022) Accordingly, CPEC can help Pakistan make the shift from being a predominantly South Asian strategic player to being a wider Eurasian connectivity player.

7. Impact on South Asian Regional Connectivity:

South Asian Regional Connectivity and its impact TheChina –Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could play a significant role in transforming regional connectivity in South Asia, connecting South Asian transportation, energy, maritime and digital infrastructure with China and possibly Central Asian, Afghan, Iranian and broader Middle East. CPEC is one of the most important projects of China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) and is not just a bi-lateral project between China & Pakistan, rather it has a much wider impact on connectivity of road, rail, port, energy, industrial and telecommunication infrastructure. While political reservations and geopolitical competition are obstacles, CPEC can enhance South-South connectivity, especially in logistics, infrastructure and telecommunications, as well as trade and people to people connectivity, between South and Central Asia, Qaddos and Waheeda (Qaddos, 2023) state.

7.1. CPEC as a Connectivity Corridor:

The primary contribution of CPEC towards regional connectivity is the potential to stimulate landlocked and resource rich Central Asia and link with Arabian sea via Pakistan. Geographical location of Pakistan is another significant advantage for CPEC as Gwadar end of route offers maritime access while northern part of CPEC is linked to China and Karakoram area. Rashid and Shirazi regard Gwadar as development friendly due to its geographical location and linkage with CPEC, which can turn it into a hub of regional connectivity. (Rashid, 2023) Their focus is on the fact that port might help to connect China and Pakistan to a broader network of regional countries and markets. In this context, CPEC can make Pakistan a region's transit and connectivity hub. The connectivity potential is not restricted to the movement of goods. Better transportation links can

promote tourism, movement of labour, cultural exchange, investment and cross-border commerce. Thus, CPEC can be instrumental for both physical integration and socioeconomic integration. An important regional implication of CPEC is that it will bridge historical divide between South Asia and Central Asia. Central Asian states have huge energy and mineral reserves, but are landlocked and South Asian states have huge consumer markets, and a presence at the Indian Ocean. According to Qaddos and Waheeda, CPEC has potential to enhance economic and cultural ties among South and Central Asia, while boosting volume of trade and development of infrastructure and telecommunications. (Qaddos, 2023) This is in line with assertion that CPEC might get to be a physical link between two complementary economies. World Bank has also conducted an analysis of Khyber Pass Economic Corridor, which shows overall potential for connectivity between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. The project is part of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) routes to be established to connect Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Arabian Sea. KPEC is different from CPEC but it complements connectivity vision for region around Pakistan. Gwadar is hub of the region's connectivity potential under the CPEC as it could facilitate sea-bound connectivity for countries which do not have direct access to sea. Given its strategic position in Arabian Sea, it can assume an importance for states of Central Asia, Afghanistan, western China and other economies of region. The location and linkage of Gwadar to Kashgar through CPEC shows that it could serve as a trade hub for Pakistan and its neighboring countries. (Rashid, 2023) The strategic value of this function is the opportunity to create multimodal connectivity, where various road, rail, port, energy and logistics networks are combined. With its proper development, Gwadar can thus be a complement to Karachi and Port Qasim, and provide Pakistan with multiple gateways for maritime trade. It may also offer alternate lines of trade and lessen over-dependency on traditional lines of transportation in the area.

7.2. CPEC and Afghanistan:

Afghanistan is located at a strategic crossroads between Pakistan and Central Asia, and therefore is critical for development of trade between these regions. CPEC may offer Afghanistan opportunity to open Pakistani seaports and markets to the world, and Pakistan to use Afghanistan as a gateway to Central Asian markets as well. This will help foster a mutually beneficial relationship between trade, connectivity and stability in region. This is now a more significant geopolitical prospect, given growing economic ties between China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. During 2026, China and Pakistan restated their support for more intensive China–Afghanistan dialogue and emphasized that CPEC and Gwadar will be developed as a hub for regional connectivity. This means that in future CPEC may not only be bilateral but also include the involvement of third countries.

7.3. CPEC and Regional Trade:

CPEC has potential to significantly lessen the transportation expenses and optimize the regional trade flows by providing contemporary roads, ports, logistical centers and industrial infrastructure. Improved connectivity can shorten time needed to transport goods from producers to consumers, which will help to boost competitiveness of regional economies. Landlocked Central Asian economies are especially sensitive to international trade with potential benefits of such trade particularly significant. The ports of Pakistan may offer an alternative link to world's maritime economies. But simply being physically connected is not enough for increased trade. It is also necessary to have efficient customs procedures, border management, security, harmonized regulations, efficient logistics and political stability. The impact of CPEC on region must therefore

be interpreted as regional connectivity both through infrastructure connectivity and institutional connectivity.

7.4. Energy Connectivity:

Another key aspect of the impact of CPEC on the region is energy connectivity. The energy demand of South Asia is high and energy resources are abundant in Central Asia and Middle East. CPEC may have a significant role in increasing interaction between these complementary regions. Energy infrastructure linked with CPEC could help build up Pakistan's energy infrastructure, as well as promoting greater regional energy integration. Furthermore, in the long-term, Pakistan may be able to function as an energy transit hub between central Asia, the Middle East and South Asian energy markets due to its geographical position. The connectivity might also help to foster regional interdependence. The more economically integrated states are, the more they have an incentive to preserve political stability and peaceful relations.

7.5. CPEC and India: Connectivity vs Competition:

The biggest hurdle in way of CPEC's possible role in South Asian connectivity is the rivalry between India and Pakistan on strategic front. The Indian objection to CPEC is due to parts which cross Indian claimed areas. Indian concerns about China's increasing economic and strategic presence in Pakistan have not been lost on its gaze. The geopolitical tensions reduce chance for CPEC to truly be an inclusive South Asian connectivity project. This rivalry can be seen in behavior of Gwadar versus Chabahar. India has been investing in Iran's Chabahar Port as a gateway to Afghanistan and central Asia without using Pakistani territory. Therefore, CPEC and Chabahar may be seen as competing and complementary connectivity projects. According to Qaddos and Waheeda, India's investment in Chabahar and worry about Gwadar has helped to create geopolitical competition over regional connectivity. (Qaddos, 2023) The question is whether South Asia connectivity will evolve as a competitive network of rival corridors or complementary network of corridors serving different markets.

7.6. CPEC and the Regional Economic Integration:

There is growing literature which has linked CPEC with concept of regional economic integration. Mahmood believes that potential of BRI related connectivity programs, such as CPEC, lies in promotion of integration process between South Asia and Central Asia, due to complementary economic resources and needs of these two regions. (Mahmood, 2025) South Asia has big and fertile consumer markets, manpower, increasing demand for energy and infrastructure. Central Asia, on the other hand, possesses significant energy and mineral resources on limited scale. Meanwhile, Central Asia has only limited direct access to maritime trade, but it has significant energy and mineral resources. These two complementary economic systems could potentially be linked by CPEC. But regional integration is not only about transport. Requires political cooperation, trade agreements, customs harmonization, investment protection, financial connectivity and stable diplomatic relations. Thus, CPEC is a stepping stone to regional integration, but not the only one.

7.7. Digital and Communication Connectivity:

The connectivity aspects of CPEC are also being extended beyond the physical. Digital connectivity such as telecommunications, information networks, data infrastructure and digital commerce is a key component of modern economic corridors. This dimension has the potential to promote, cross-border, business, financial transactions, education, tourism and exchange of information. It could also play a role in development of digital economic networks between Pakistan and China and other regional countries. The idea of regional connectivity should be

extended to physical, energy, digital, financial and human connectivity in addition to roads and ports.

7.8. Emerging Regional Connectivity Architecture:

CPEC now appears to be one of many and complex regional connectivity projects. Multi-layered connectivity architecture from its interaction with CAREC, China's BRI, Pakistan's connectivity with Central Asia, Afghanistan's trade routes, Gwadar, Chabahar, and possibly other Eurasian trade routes. This development may have two implications. For one thing, there may be a greater sense of geopolitical competition as China, India, Iran, Russia and other players seek to influence regional trade corridors. Secondly, complementary corridors could develop over time resulting in a wider Eurasian transport network. The move towards latter has been noted in China-Pakistan effort to make Gwadar a regional connectivity hub and the discussion of third parties.

8. Conclusion:

The potential of CPEC to change landscape of connectivity of South Asia through an integrated network of transport, trade, energy and communication is immense. Perhaps its greatest impact has been in sense that it can break geographical divide between South Asia and Central Asia. However, connectivity is not necessarily 'cooperative'. What makes trade possible can also be a tool in geopolitical competition. Regional connectivity is tied to power politics as evident from India's worries over CPEC, development of Chabahar, instability in Afghanistan and China-India strategic rivalry. As such, long-term effects of CPEC should not be evaluated simply based on number of roads, ports or projects built, but considering whether these assets create ongoing cross-border trade, economic interdependence and institutional cooperation along the region. In event of CPEC's success in drawing third country investment and connecting with supplementary corridors, it could play a role in more intermingled South and Central Asia. But if geopolitical rivalry prevails, the region could well go its own way and become a collection of regional free trade zones instead of an integrated regional network. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a major geopolitical and geoeconomic development in modern-day South Asia. CPEC has increased the geopolitical value of Pakistan, improved infrastructure, strengthened energy security, and strengthened strategic relations with China in the case of Pakistan. Corridor gives China an opportunity to access Arabian Sea, diversifies trade and energy routes, and increases its influence in South Asia and Indian Ocean Region. The project, however, also increases strategic pressure in form of competition with an India, which sees CPEC as a threat to its regional ambitions and security interests. The strategic partnership between China and Pakistan has been boosted, China's regional presence has been enhanced, and the calculations of major powers like India and United States have been affected by CPEC. CPEC has helped in reshaping South Asian geopolitics by strengthening strategic partnership between China and Pakistan, enhancing China's presence in the region, and influencing calculations of major powers like India and United States. At the same time, corridor has become a flagship example of geoeconomic statecraft, providing a model for thinking about the ways in which infrastructure and connectivity can be used for geopolitical ends. Gwadar Port is strategically significant as it serves as an intersection of maritime trade, energy security, CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative and the geopolitical competition among South Asian countries. It is located close to Strait of Hormuz making it significant for energy and maritime security and closer to CPEC, which will give China an alternate route to Strait of Hormuz and thus enhance Pakistan's position as a regional connectivity hub. The port's importance is consequently both economic, strategic, geopolitical and maritime. Gwadar has potential to boost connectivity, maritime trade and geopolitical importance for Pakistan. It is an important point of western connectivity for China and presence in Indian Ocean. However, its development is a cause of

concern for India due to its expected influence in Pakistan and Arabian Sea. Gwadar has, therefore, become a vital part of South Asia's changing strategic dynamics. Gwadar's strategic value is not just that of its port infrastructure, but of its connectivity in a broader network of roads, energy infrastructure, trade routes, industrial hubs, geopolitical engagement. The potential of its role in the geopolitics of South Asia will hinge on the success of Pakistan and China in exploiting this geographical connectivity to create sustainable routes for economic and commercial purposes and in resolving security related issues, local grievances and geopolitical rivalry in the region. Though the opportunities are significant, there are also a number of challenges, such as security threats, political instability in region, and worries about economic sustainability. The final outcome of CPEC will hinge on capacity of the stakeholders in the region to deal with these challenges and tap into potential areas of cooperation and development. Long term, CPEC could alter geopolitical landscape in South Asia by creating connectivity, integration and changing power dynamics in the region. The impact it will have on future direction of South Asian geopolitics will depend on whether it is a force for cooperation or strategic rivalry.

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