

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC) ON REGIONAL SECURITY DYNAMICS

Muhammad Irfan Magray¹, Ghulam Nabi², Maria Faraz³, Talha⁴¹PhD Student, Alhamd Islamic University, Quetta Campus²College of Statistical Sciences, University of the Punjab³Department of Economics, Emerson University Multan⁴University of Makran¹magray06@gmail.com, ²gnabi.stat@pu.edu.pk, ³mariafaraz783@gmail.com, ⁴talha@uomp.edu.pkDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20354025>**Keywords**

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); Regional Security Dynamics; Gwadar Port; South Asian Geopolitics; Maritime Security; China-Pakistan Relations; Strategic Competition; Energy Security; Indian Ocean Region; Afghanistan Connectivity; Kashmir Conflict; Geoeconomics; Industrial Embeddedness; Belt and Road Strategy.

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Corresponding Author: *

Muhammad Irfan Magray

Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as the flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has evolved into a transformative geopolitical and geoeconomic framework reshaping the regional security environment of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region. This study critically examines the strategic implications of CPEC Phase II, which emphasizes industrial embeddedness, digital integration, maritime expansion, and military interoperability between China and Pakistan. The research highlights how the expansion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), energy infrastructure, Gwadar Port development, and Afghanistan's integration into regional trade networks have enhanced Pakistan's economic and strategic significance. Simultaneously, these developments have intensified regional competition, particularly with India, which perceives CPEC as a challenge to its sovereignty, maritime interests, and regional connectivity ambitions. The paper further explores the evolving maritime security dilemma in the Arabian Sea, the militarization of Gwadar, and the implications of Chinese naval access for regional balance of power dynamics. It also evaluates the strategic retreat of India's Chabahar initiative, the growing importance of Afghanistan as a geoeconomic pivot, and the broader responses of global actors, especially the United States and the Quad alliance. Additionally, the study assesses how CPEC has transformed the Kashmir dispute into a trilateral strategic issue involving China, Pakistan, and India. The findings suggest that while CPEC contributes to economic modernization, energy security, and regional connectivity, it simultaneously generates strategic dependencies, intensifies great-power competition, and introduces new maritime and territorial security challenges. Ultimately, CPEC represents both an engine of regional integration and a catalyst for geopolitical realignment in the emerging Asian security order.

1. INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emerged as the most consequential flagship

project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), evolving from a series of bilateral infrastructure agreements into a structural anchor for regional

geopolitics and security (Khan et al., 2024). By 2026, the corridor has transitioned from its foundational "Phase I," characterized by rapid infrastructure rollout, into a more complex "Phase II" defined by industrial embeddedness and strategic integration. This transition represents a shift in the nature of Sino-Pakistani relations, moving from a partnership of necessity to a deeply integrated industrial and military ecosystem that challenges the existing balance of power in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (Jamshed et al., 2021).

2. The Evolution of CPEC Phase II: From Connectivity to Industrial Embeddedness

The announcement on January 16, 2026, by Pakistan’s Board of Investment (BoI) regarding the expansion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) from 7 to 44 serves as the primary indicator of CPEC’s new strategic direction (Kuszevska & Nitza-Makowska, 2021). This expansion is not merely a numerical increase but reflects a deeper objective to localize Chinese manufacturing within Pakistan, thereby creating an "industrial ecosystem" that is increasingly difficult to unwind. This shift toward industrial embeddedness allows China to project longer-term influence over Pakistan’s manufacturing base, technological choices, and supply-chain orientation (Ismail et al., 2023).

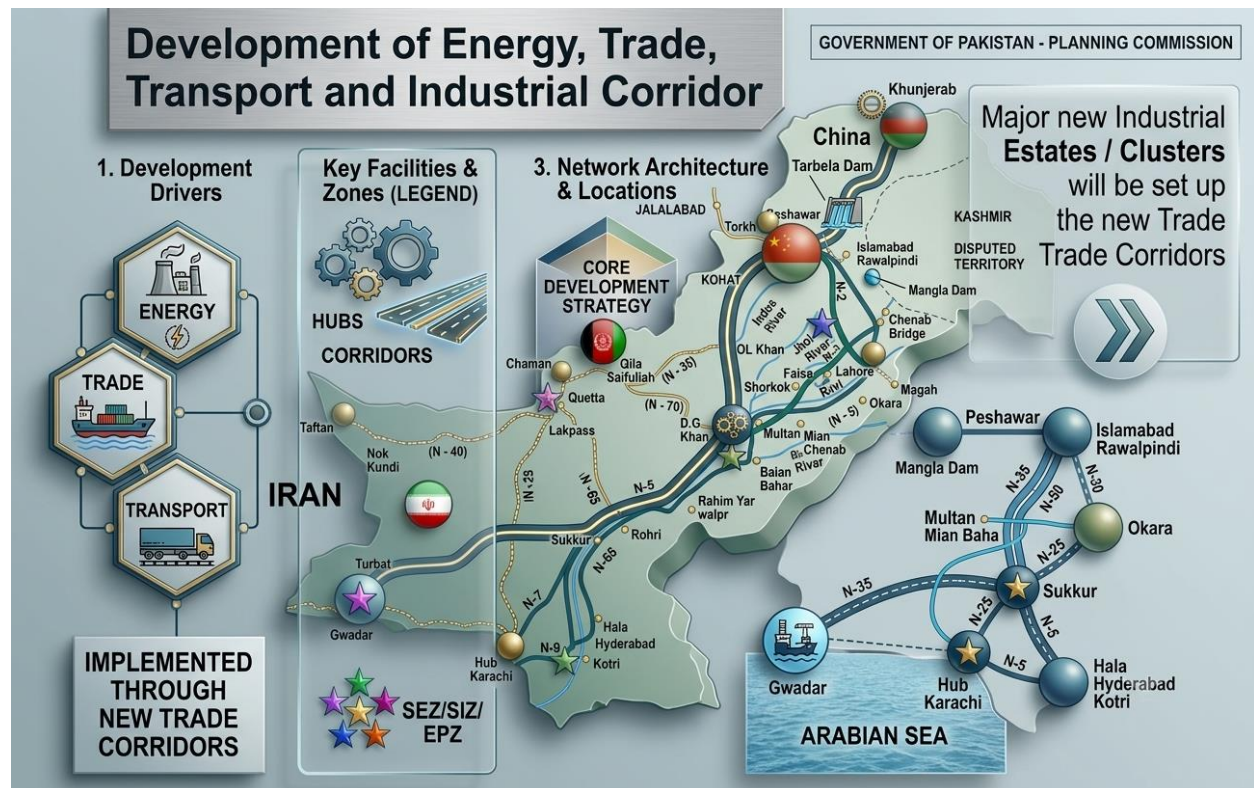


Figure 1: Geospatial Mapping of Trade Corridors, Industrial Clusters, and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC Framework.

The strategic logic underpinning CPEC 2.0 is captured in the "Uraan Pakistan" 5Es framework: Exports, E-Pakistan (digital economy), Equity and Empowerment, Energy and Infrastructure, and Environment (Ullah et al., 2024). By aligning CPEC with these national development goals,

Islamabad seeks to address structural weaknesses such as low export competitiveness and persistent foreign-exchange stress. For China, the relocation of industries into Pakistani SEZs—such as the Karachi Industrial Park and the Bostan Quetta Industrial Park (BQIP)—provides a mechanism to

bypass international tariffs and regulatory scrutiny while placing manufacturing closer to end markets

in Central Asia, Africa, and Europe (Shehzad et al., 2025).

Table 1: Key Industrial Targets and Frameworks in CPEC Phase II (2026)

CPEC Phase II Key Industrial Targets (2026)	Strategic Purpose	Associated Framework/Zone
Special Economic Zones (SEZs)	Relocation of 37 new industrial clusters.	Phase II Expansion / BoI 2026.
Uraan Pakistan (5Es)	Focus on digital governance and exports.	Pakistan National Growth Strategy.
Agro-Processing & Light Engineering	Strengthening regional value chains.	Socio-economic development projects.
Mining and Mineral Extraction	Access to critical raw materials.	Mineral Investment Forum 2026.
Digital Infrastructure	Data control and technological standards.	E-Pakistan / Digital Silk Road.

The institutionalization of these zones creates six overlapping forms of dependency for Pakistan: technological, standardized, supplier-based, financial, market-oriented, and human capital-driven (Bukhari et al., 2024). By adopting Chinese machinery, digital protocols, and vocational training curricula, Pakistan is effectively locking its industrial future into the Chinese technological orbit. This densification of ties has significant security implications, as projects involving EV assembly, solar value chains, and digital infrastructure are not strategically neutral but carry dual-use potential for defense-industrial applications (Ahmad & Malik, 2017).

3. Energy Security as a Catalyst for Strategic Stability

The energy sector has remained the most tangible pillar of CPEC’s success. As of 2026, completed projects worth over USD 15 billion have added 9,504 megawatts (MW) to Pakistan’s national grid (Hussain & Jamali, 2019). Pipeline projects valued at an additional USD 6.71 billion are expected to contribute another 3,544 MW, pushing the total CPEC-linked capacity beyond 13,000 MW. This expansion has fundamentally shifted Pakistan’s energy landscape from one of chronic crisis-driven load management to a state of predictable power availability, which is an essential precondition for industrial growth (Ismail & Husnain, 2022).

Table 2: Energy Sector Investment and Capacity Statistics (2026 Update)

Energy Sector Progress Under CPEC (2026 Update)	Status/Statistics	Strategic Implications
Total Completed Investment	>USD 15 Billion.	Macroeconomic stabilization.
Current Capacity Addition	9,504 MW.	Reduction in industrial downtime.
Pipeline Projects Value	USD 6.71 Billion.	Future grid resilience.
Diversified Mix	Coal, Hydel, Wind, Solar.	Resilience against fuel shocks.
Circular Debt Constraint	Rs 2.636 Trillion.	Threat to financial sustainability.

However, the strategic benefits of energy security are balanced against the massive financial

liabilities incurred. The circular debt in Pakistan’s power sector has reached Rs 2.636 trillion by early

2026, complicating the country’s relationship with international lenders like the IMF (Khan, 2022). The IMF-backed reforms now require greater transparency and closer monitoring of off-budget guarantees linked to Chinese projects, creating a point of friction for Islamabad as it seeks more investment while being constrained by debt management protocols. Despite these financial hurdles, the diversification of energy sources strengthens Pakistan’s resilience against global fuel supply shocks and long-term price volatility (Hussain et al., 2023).

4. Gwadar Port and the Maritime Security Dilemma

Gwadar Port serves as the "crown jewel" of CPEC and the primary logistical solution to China's "Malacca Dilemma". By providing a shorter trade route from the Arabian Sea to Western China—reducing the distance from 9,500 miles to 2,500

miles—Gwadar bypasses the vulnerable maritime chokepoints of Southeast Asia. By 2026, Gwadar has transitioned from a symbolic project to a functional urban hub, featuring a new international airport, desalination plants, and port-linked hospital facilities (Irfan et al., 2025). However, the port’s evolution has also led to its transformation into a "security-sensitive strategic hub". The increasing militarization of Gwadar is a direct response to a deteriorating security environment in Balochistan. In April 2026, the Baloch Liberation Army announced its newly formed naval wing, the "Hammal Maritime Defence Force," which conducted the region’s first significant maritime insurgent attack (Ullah et al., 2024). This development forces a change in the security calculus; land-based insurgency has now extended into the sea, requiring the Pakistan Navy to develop maritime counterinsurgency capabilities for which it is currently ill-equipped.

Table 3: Strategic Indicators and Defense Capabilities of Gwadar Port (2026)

Gwadar Port Strategic Indicators (2026)	Detail	Significance
Geographic Advantage	400 km East of Strait of Hormuz.	Monitoring of global oil SLOCs.
Distance to Kashgar	2,800 km (vs 4,500 km to Shanghai).	Western China logistics optimization.
Defense Infrastructure	Listening posts, military garrison, and air defense.	Power projection in Arabian Sea.
Security Threat	BLA Hammal Maritime Defence Force.	Emergence of maritime insurgency.
External Interest	USD 30B committed by UAE.	Regional commercial integration.

The presence of Chinese-built infrastructure and the potential for a formal Chinese naval base at Gwadar are viewed by India as a "serious threat" to its maritime interest (Javed & Ismail, 2021). India is particularly concerned about Gwadar’s dual-use potential, as the port’s facilities can accommodate large PLA Navy (PLAN) vessels, such as the Type 071 Landing Platform Dock and the Type 075 amphibious assault ship. This strategic footprint allows China to monitor Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) originating from the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, effectively

observing US and Indian naval movements in real-time (Hilali, 2019).

5. India’s Strategic Recalibration and the Chabahar Retreat

India’s primary counter-strategy to CPEC has historically centered on the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran, intended as a bypass to Pakistan for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, by early 2026, this strategy has suffered a significant "multilayer strategic failure". On September 29, 2025, the United States withdrew its 2018 sanctions waiver for Chabahar

as part of a renewed "maximum pressure campaign" against Iran (Muhammad et al., 2026). Despite a brief transitional waiver valid until April 26, 2026, India adopted a cautious approach to avoid secondary sanctions, leading to a decreased physical presence at the port and the withdrawal

of funds. This retreat has placed the Chabahar project on "strategic hold," diminishing the immediate competition between the two ports and leaving Gwadar as the primary functional gateway for regional trade involving landlocked Central Asian Republics (Hilali, 2019).

Table 4: Comparative Status of Gwadar and Chabahar Ports (2026)

Maritime Competition: Gwadar vs. Chabahar (2026)	Gwadar Port	Chabahar Port
Primary Sponsor	China (Sustained investment).	India (Operational retreat).
US Policy Status	Not under direct US sanctions.	Waiver withdrawn in Sept 2025.
Regional Connectivity	Expanding into Afghanistan/CARs.	Project on strategic hold.
Strategic Resilience	Supported by CPEC/BRI framework.	Isolated from major trade frameworks.

This recalibration in the North Arabian Sea has significant implications for India's "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy, which seeks to counterbalance China's "String of Pearls" (Faisal, 2018). With Chabahar on hold, India has intensified its "Neighborhood First" and "Act East" policies, while also strengthening its participation in the Quad (Australia, India, Japan, US) to enhance maritime domain awareness and security. However, the loss of a direct land route to Central Asia via Iran remains a significant gap in India's regional connectivity architecture (Khan et al., 2024).

6. Afghanistan as the New Geoeconomic Pivot

One of the most significant developments in 2026 is the expansion of CPEC into Afghanistan, with Kandahar emerging as the primary economic and logistical node for this extension (us Sahar & TARIQ, 2026). Beijing has recalibrated its engagement strategy to reflect internal Taliban power dynamics, identifying the Kandahar leadership as the ultimate authority over mining sustainability and route security. The Spin Boldak-Chaman axis has been reclassified as a major access route, reorienting Afghanistan's trade southward toward the Arabian Sea (Latif et al., 2026).

Table 5: Afghan-CPEC Economic and Infrastructure Connectivity Benchmarks (2025-2026)

Afghan-CPEC Connectivity Benchmarks (2025-2026)	Detail/Status
Trade Volume (2025)	Nearly USD 14 Billion.
Kandahar-to-Sea Route	Operational; 2nd vessel at Gwadar June 2025.
Marble Exports	Shah Wali Kot axis functional (USD 6.2M).
Railway Feasibility	Monitoring Kandahar-Herat benchmarks.
Chinese Investment	USD 540M for oil and mining.

This southward shift is driven by the fact that traditional routes through Afghanistan have become unreliable due to persistent security risks and unpredictable border closures. Pakistan has effectively activated alternative westward trade corridors via China and Iran to access Central

Asia, signaling that it no longer views Afghanistan as the *primary* gateway (Jing et al., 2026). However, the outbreak of open hostilities on February 26, 2026—when Pakistan launched airstrikes on TTP sites in Nangarhar and Paktia—highlights the fragility of this integration. The subsequent

breakdown in trilateral dialogue between Beijing, Islamabad, and Kabul demonstrates the limits of China’s economic incentives in preventing conflict between its regional partners (Tariq, 2026).

7. Naval Modernization and Joint Operational Interoperability

The China-Pakistan defense partnership has reached a high level of sophistication,

characterized by the joint development of advanced weapon systems and frequent maritime exercises. In 2026, the Pakistan Navy is set to commission the first of eight Hangor-class submarines, built in cooperation with China. These units, based on the Chinese Type 039B design, provide greater attack capabilities and stealth, strengthening Pakistan’s maritime defense and its ability to maintain a regional balance of power (Turk, 2026).

Table 6: Key Modernization Assets and Maritime Security Units (2026)

Naval Modernization Assets (2026)	Type/Design	Capability Impact
Hangor-class Submarines	Type 039B (Chinese-led)	Stealth and anti-access/area denial.
Type 054A/P Frigates	Tughril-class (Chinese-built)	Advanced air defense and surveillance.
Sea Guardians Drills	Joint Naval Exercise series	Complex tactical maneuvering and strikes.
Task Force-88	Special Maritime Unit	Protection of Gwadar and CPEC SLOCs.
P282 SMASH Missile	Anti-ship Ballistic Missile	Deterrence against carrier strike groups.

Despite these advancements, there are significant limits to China-Pakistan military interoperability (Uddin & Jun, 2026). Pakistan’s "hybrid arsenal" includes Western platforms such as the F-16 and Saab 2000 Erieye, which operate on Link 16 data links and avionics standards that are technically incompatible with Chinese protocols. This lack of full operational interoperability prevents the two militaries from achieving the level of integration seen in alliances like NATO. Furthermore, Beijing has historically preferred strategic ambiguity over a formal defense pact to avoid binding treaty obligations (Aminjonov, 2026).

8. The US Response and the Global Maritime Action Plan

The United States has shifted its foreign policy from engagement to strategic competition, viewing CPEC and the broader BRI as a multifaceted strategic threat. Washington’s response includes the promotion of alternative infrastructure frameworks such as the "Build Back Better World" (B3W), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), and the "Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment" (PGII) (Mujaddid & Bukhari, 2026).



Figure 1: Adaptive Risk Management and Action Plan Framework for Ocean Conservation

In early 2026, the US Department of Defense released the "Maritime Action Plan," which emphasizes leveraging allied investment to rebuild US shipbuilding capacity and counter China's surging fleet. Experts suggest that the US should utilize its partnerships with naval allies—including South Korea, Italy, Canada, Sweden, and the UK—to model existing frameworks and supplement domestic shipbuilding labor (Javed et al., 2026). This strategic shift is driven by the reality that US shipbuilding capacity is currently a tiny fraction of China's, with the US Navy fielding 293 ships compared to the 2023 goal of 381.

The sudden movement of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet out of its Bahrain headquarters on February 25, 2026, serves as a stark reminder of the region's volatility. This "spreading" of the fleet was a defensive maneuver to reduce vulnerability to Iranian ballistic missile strikes, reflecting a pattern where US assets must remain in "blue water" to stay outside the immediate "kill zone" of coastal batteries (Qayum et al., 2026). For China and Pakistan, this US presence is viewed as a threat to their maritime commercial interests, prompting

them to further deepen their security cooperation in the Indian Ocean.

9. Impact on the Kashmir Dispute and Gilgit-Baltistan

CPEC has fundamentally altered the Kashmir conflict, transforming it from a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan into a trilateral security problem. Gilgit-Baltistan, a disputed territory claimed by India but controlled by Pakistan, is the "northern gateway" for CPEC. The investment in SEZs and infrastructure in this region complicates the territorial dispute, as India views third-party participation in CPEC as illegitimate and a violation of its sovereignty (Park, 2026).

China's stance on Kashmir has evolved from neutrality to that of an active stakeholder interested in assisting the settlement of the conflict to protect its vast foreign assets (Mehmood, 2026). The improving economic and strategic capabilities of Pakistan through CPEC have altered the regional power equilibrium, allowing Pakistan to build a stronger military presence in the disputed

area. However, the project also faces internal opposition; groups like the UKPNP (United Kashmir People's National Party) have called for the peaceful resolution of the conflict and for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan to have a larger role in decision-making processes regarding CPEC (UKPNP, n.d.) (Abbas et al., 2026).

Conclusion

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has evolved beyond a conventional infrastructure initiative into a multidimensional strategic framework influencing regional geopolitics, economic integration, and security dynamics across South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region. The transition from infrastructure connectivity to industrial and strategic embeddedness under CPEC Phase II demonstrates China's long-term commitment to establishing Pakistan as a critical node within the Belt and Road Initiative. Through expanded SEZs, energy investments, digital infrastructure, and maritime development, CPEC has significantly strengthened Pakistan's economic capacity and strategic relevance. However, the corridor has also intensified regional rivalries and security concerns. Gwadar Port's growing strategic importance, combined with increasing Chinese naval influence, has heightened India's perception of encirclement and accelerated regional maritime competition. The weakening of India's Chabahar strategy and the integration of Afghanistan into CPEC-linked trade routes further reinforce the corridor's geopolitical significance. At the same time, emerging threats such as maritime insurgency in Balochistan, debt sustainability concerns, and instability along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border continue to challenge the long-term viability of the project. The study concludes that CPEC functions simultaneously as a platform for regional economic cooperation and a driver of strategic realignment. While it offers substantial opportunities for trade expansion, energy security, and regional connectivity, it also deepens geopolitical polarization among major regional and global powers, including China, India, and the United States. Therefore, the future success of CPEC will depend not only on economic sustainability and institutional transparency but

also on the ability of regional actors to manage security dilemmas, promote inclusive development, and prevent the corridor from becoming a source of prolonged geopolitical confrontation.

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