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**CPEC Plus: Advancing Geo- Economic, Regional
Connectivity And Geo-Strategic Domains**

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Plus (CPEC Plus) represents a significant evolution of the original CPEC initiative, expanding its scope beyond bilateral cooperation to include broader regional integration. In addition, CPEC Plus is promoting inter-connectivity across Asia particularly China and South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East investing regions. New infrastructure like better roads, railway networks, better ports, and energy infrastructures have been provided by CPEC Plus for a stronger connected and competitive economy of the region. This connectivity is not only of transportation systems but also of digital, energy, and trade systems for acceleration and increasing transactions, thus engendering new development prospects for the region. The project aims to transform Pakistan into a trade hub by linking China's western provinces to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port, enabling access to the Middle East, Africa, and European markets. Simultaneously, it enhances China's energy and trade security by reducing reliance on vulnerable maritime routes like the Strait of Malacca. Moreover, CPEC Plus offers enormous potential for economic development, regional integration, and investment. Furthermore, CPEC Plus has elevated Pakistan's strategic position, making it central to China's regional ambitions and prompting new defense, intelligence, and diplomatic alignments. In conclusion, CPEC Plus is more than a transport initiative—it is a transformative mechanism fostering economic interdependence, geopolitical shifts, and the emergence of a new regional order.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan and the western part of China will benefit from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Afzal & Naseem, 2018). In terms of China-Pakistan relations, it reflects two significant trends: The two nations have the confidence to embark on such a significant project because of their long history of consistent economic cooperation over the last 60 years, as well as their shared goals for a successful and secure future for their respective populations. Three theoretical frameworks of international relations are used to analyze the political and strategic ramifications of the CPEC project. These include economic connection and importance regarding the flow of people, products, and services across state borders; regional cooperation and integration; and soft power as opposed to military force.

The CPEC, a massive project that began in 2013 and was finished in the contemporary era of South Asian nations, is seen as a game-changer. Its goal is to link Asia with Europe. The project's scope included creating 4 million employment and having a significant socioeconomic effect by investing in Pakistan's neighbor's energy and infrastructure. Pakistan hopes to improve

the economic status of its citizens through this massive project; the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which includes heavy industrial projects in these nations (Kousar et al., 2018), will not only boost employment but also strengthen bilateral ties to support future improvements in China-Pakistan socio-infrastructure conditions.

It is very important to mention that China-Pakistan relations have always been outstanding and model-like. The most significant turning point in the relationship among these all-weather pals occurred in 2015. The key to opening the door to the most significant economic activity in history is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which will begin in China and spread to the Middle East, Africa, and even certain thriving European markets. It is the most significant agreement ever reached between Pakistan and any other nation that guarantees significant economic disruption. In essence, this corridor is a component of the new globalization phase, when the economic collaboration between nations and regions determines the destiny of each economy. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has garnered international interest because of its significant economic and geo-strategic significance, and scholars from across the globe have differing views on this significant economic corridor (Younis et al., 2020).

GEO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF CPEC PLUS

The participation of other countries in the CPEC Plus is equally deep and transformative regarding trade, investment and the wider economies of Pakistan and China as well as the surrounding regions. For Pakistan, the scheme offers a strategic chance to improve its structure, propelled industrial development, and increased turnover within the region. Particularly the Gwadar Port under development puts Pakistan at a strategic point between Asia, Middle East and African market. Upgrading these ports would open many options for export and imports and help Pakistan enhance business manufacturing, agriculture, and service sectors. In the same way, investment from China through CPEC projects such as energy, transportation and communication is likely to energized Pakistan's laden economy and establish desolate energy links (Cheema, 2020).

In the case of China, CPEC Plus provides a crucial path for improving China's trade and energy security, specifically if one of the main aims of this Project is the ability to reach the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port. This direct trade corridor avoids conventional sea lanes under increasing aggressiveness from Indonesian militant groups, which pose a threat to the shipping industry, primarily through the Strait of Malacca, making it more secure for China's imports and exports. Concerning the advantages for China, these are such factors as immunity to potential blockage or threats, shipping cost savings, and expansion of access to central and south Asian markets. The CPEC Plus brings closer the desired connection of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative because it consolidates Chinese influence in the region and helps the Chinese businesses to develop their activities in foreign countries (Zhang, 2021).

Rana (2020) said that being APT parties, the neighboring regions, including Central Asia, Iran, and even India, if they join this CPEC, will have significant economic gains from this infrastructure. These Central Asian states that have no direct access to the sea are the ones that

bear the most fruit from originating direct sea access to the world market through Pakistan's Gwadar Port. This link will help increase business and commerce in the regions, especially in countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or Turkmenistan. For Iran, it means improved regional trade corridors, which create a potential for increased economic interaction with China and Pakistan.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CPEC PLUS IN GLOBAL TRADE AND ECONOMIC NETWORKS

CPEC Plus is expected to be an essential link in the international trade and economic relations architectures that influence and integrate Asia with Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Being a project of the BRI of China, CPEC Plus not only enhances the network of the global trade system but also adds direct and efficient trade communication between China's western provinces and the Arabian Sea through Pakistan's Gwadar Port. This minimizes dependence on well-known sea corridors like the Strait of Malacca, making the option critical for world trade (Sultan & Mehmood, 2020).

CPEC Plus also provides better connectivity to the emerging markets in Central Asia, which has fertile ground with limited coastline and is a locked country. CPEC Plus helps to link these economies with global markets for essential exportable products such as oil, gas, and minerals. It makes the region a strategic partner in the global value chain (Hillman et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the constitution of CPEC Plus provides unbounded opportunities for international investment as it gives MNCs opportunities to enter new markets and acquire new resources. It leads to cooperation technology, finance, and infrastructural technology and enhances the movement of goods, capital, and services. In the end, the CPEC can transform the world economic map and bring about tariff structure work with their needed reorientation of Asian trade power and provide pathways for a new geography of economic understanding and cooperation (Hillman et al., 2021).

CPEC PLUS AND REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

INFRASTRUCTURE NETWORKS: ROADS, RAILWAYS, AND PORTS

Infrastructure also plays a significant role in economic development because it facilitates resource allocation across areas and establishes inter-sectoral links. By lowering transportation costs and promoting the dissemination of knowledge and technology, infrastructure makes it easier to distribute production components across the area and the industry. According to Wanat et al. (2018), developing infrastructure that links different sectors and regions increases intersectoral and interregional commerce, increasing spillover effects within the sector and the area. By fostering interregional connections via the easy movement of information, technology, and manufacturing forces, technology also helps emerging and established national areas converge (Wanat et al., 2018). For instance, labor mobility and investment relocation between areas are facilitated by transport networks. This accelerates structural change and economic development. As a result, building roads and bridges aids in the country's underdeveloped areas, catching up to the developed ones.

The rectangle Transport and Transit Accord (QTTA), signed in 1995, is a significant agreement related to the process of regional connectivity. The QTTA was signed by four nations—

Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan—to promote commerce and transportation between the members. In addition to avoiding Afghanistan, the deal offers a different route to Central Asia and supports initiatives to modernize commerce and transit routes. The road project is part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which seeks to provide China and the CARs access to Pakistani ports (McCartney, 2022).

THE ROLE OF GWADAR PORT IN REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

A flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan's Gwadar Port has enormous promise for linking full of resources Central Asia with densely populated South Asia. Gwadar Port may potentially significantly expand Pakistan's marine commerce capacity while lowering its reliance on Karachi Port, which is now the biggest (Zhu et al., 2019).

The direct and quick path to China, Central Asia, and Afghanistan, as well as the fact that it is safer from India than Karachi Port or Port Qasim, are the economic benefits and regional connections of Gwadar Port. Given that Gwadar Port is close to the Persian Gulf, which is used to carry oil to the rest of the globe, it will aid Pakistan's economic growth. Oil transport to the international sea routes may utilize Gwadar port shortly. Gwadar Port's wider regional interconnections seems to be on the rise, which will generally support stability in South Asia. In order to overcome its lack of energy resources, Pakistan is playing a crucial role in promoting commercial movements via Gwadar (Husnain, 2021).

Pakistan is steadily establishing itself as a major hub for regional connectivity, encouraging partnerships in vital areas including energy, shipping, tourism, and transportation. With its enormous geopolitical worth and crucial role in enabling Pakistan's regional influence, the port city of Gwadar significantly raises Pakistan's profile in this area (Husnain, 2021).

ENERGY CORRIDORS: PIPELINES, ELECTRICITY GRIDS, AND OIL ROUTES

Gwadar, Infrastructure, Energy, and Other Initiatives are the four main parts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), based on the Ministry of Development, Construction, and Improvements. Large-scale investments in transportation and energy would help Pakistan resolve its energy problem, fix its road construction shortage, and strengthen its financial system. Projects aimed at producing power will get a significant amount of funding under CPEC. The national grid will get 13,000 MW of power after CPEC's energy initiatives are finished (Khan, & Khan, 2019).

With the exception of the services industry, the slight contribution of investments in the energy economy to the communications sector is lower than that of investments in roads and telecommunications. The effects of investments in gas and electricity distribution is most elastic in manufacturing (0.13) compared to the overall economy (0.09), whilst the agriculture (0.04) and professional services (0.05) sectors have relatively low elasticities. In a similar vein, the industry has a larger correlation of road and communications development (0.22) than both the service sector (0.03) and agriculture (0.14) (Javid, 2019).

CPEC is a group of projects that includes energy initiatives, telecommunications, and transportation infrastructure (road and railway). The undertaking will also include the installation of pipelines to convey oil and natural gas. Furnace oil has replaced gas in Pakistan's

energy sector in recent years. As a result, the cost of producing power rose significantly due to a firm reliance on foreign furnace oil rather than cheap indigenous gas. Gas was responsible for 48.5% of the total electrical output in 2003, while furnace oil was responsible for 15.7%. The percentage of power generated from gas decreased to 25% of total output, while the percentage from oil increased to 40% (Caineng et al., 2018).

ENHANCING TRADE ROUTES: CENTRAL ASIA, SOUTH ASIA, AND BEYOND

Linking the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar. Due to their location "at an intersection of energy trafficking route whereby 70% of the global petroleum transport passes... ports that have substantial mineral assets in Balochistan and Iran," the two terminals are strategically significant.⁸⁸ Iran and Pakistan both understand that their financial goals cannot be held prisoner by geopolitical any longer. Gwadar and Chabahar stand to gain from encouraging the Central Asian nations to sell electricity via these ports if Iran and Pakistan work together. Iran has said that it wants to "join Chabahar and Gwadar, and then across that link Gwadar to our whole railroad structure, from Iran to the North Corridor, beyond Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, additionally beyond Azerbaijan, Russia, and finally to Turkey." Given that the two ports are just 72 kilometers apart, Pakistan ought to accept this Iranian proposal and go forward with linking them (Guo et al., 2019).

Pakistan's stance to Middle Eastern nations is one of the key pillars of its foreign policy. Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two bulwarks of the Muslim world, have traditionally been balanced. Despite the long-simmering Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its expanding geopolitical and economic partnership with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has recently begun its mediation efforts to ease tensions amongst the two nations in addition to patching up its differences with Iran. However, because of its reliance on not less than one bloc, Pakistan's poor economic character makes it difficult for it to arbitrate disputes in the Middle East. However, it is anticipated that Pakistan's increasing economic influence would lessen its reliance on Saudi Arabia by 2030, allowing it more flexibility to avoid the Tehran-Riyadh conflict (Saleem & Bukhari, 2022).

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY: THE FUTURE OF CROSS-BORDER COMMUNICATION

It is worth noting that importance of digital is as important as physical connectivity for improving people-to-people connectivity, trade liberalization, and boosting multilateral cooperation. While the physical connectivity under CPEC is advancing, the attention is gradually moving from conventional modes of connectivity to the IT connectivity, because, as is well understood, information flow is the key for modern economy. The advancement in new generation internet services – broadband networks and digital platforms will ensure real-time interaction among countries and social demographics of the CPEC connected regions (Saoud, M. (2019).

Thanks to digital connectivity there will also be an enhanced trade and investment through market access the provision of which will be cheap and hassle free hence enhancing supply chain. Further, digital platforms will enhance the country's regional e-commerce market, contribute to the creation of new businesses, and introduce expanded market horizons for

domestic companies. On that line, CPEC can improve communication infrastructures to establish the region as ripe for innovative development, tech firms, knowledge exchange, as well as technological collaborations (Zhong et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the digital part of CPEC will be crucial in mitigating issues of regional working and providing all deprived regions with e-education, e-healthcare, and e-governance. However, issues such as cybersecurity, data or information privacy, and data or information literacy have to be met in order to support the sustainable development of networked connectivity. Therefore, it is possible to notice that digital connection is not only an economic enabler, but also as a regional cooperation enabler (Aminullah et al., 2024).

CPEC PLUS AS A TOOL FOR CHINA'S GEO-STRATEGY IN ASIA

CPEC Plus is one of the cornerstone mechanisms through which China exercises control over the region and the world. Regarding the BRI, CPEC Plus offered China a strategic architectural design to enhance its influence in the political economy in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle Eastern region. This connectivity initiative aims to enhance the flow of goods and services and serves China's agenda of enhancing diplomatic relations with contiguous countries in the region (Ng et al., 2018).

Another feature of CPEC Plus is that it can enable China to advance its access to the sea, primarily through Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea, which will be a significant style for China. This route avoids major bottlenecks like the Strait of Malacca and helps increase China's energy import security from the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. It also offers a safer route for Chinese goods to the global markets, thus minimizing risks associated with the sea routes owned by competitors, particularly the United States and India (Yetgin & Yilmaz, 2022).

In addition, CPEC Plus expands China's economic influence in Central Asia, where most of the countries are important from an energy perspective and close to Russia. Most importantly, CPEC Plus links Xinjiang, one of the less developed Chinese regions, to these resource-rich countries, thus improving China's control over Central Asia and mitigating the impact of the West, especially regarding Russia's influence there. (Hussain & Rao, 2020).

CPEC Plus has also enabled China to have more significant economic influence through its political and economic outreach and exercise soft power by funding infrastructural development projects that generate significant economic interdependence. The long-term benefits of CPEC Plus include ensuring that China is embraced as a critical security and economic power in the region and Asia well into the future.

PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN REGIONAL SECURITY AND DEFENSE

As mentioned earlier, Pakistan is in the middle and core of the Centre's security and defense mechanism and has strategic significance in the CPEC Plus initiative. Pakistan occupies a strategic position; the country is at the center of the South Asia-Central Asia power map and the South Asia-Middle East trade power map in the context of CPEC Plus. The vulnerable geographic position of the country to regional and global power players, as well as the unstable regions, make it an ideal partner for the sound and sustainable future of CPEC Plus (Ahmad, 2020).

The only thing that resonated from a defense perspective was that Pakistan's military would play a focal role in protecting the infrastructure and investment that defines CPEC Plus. Being the focal Gwadar port and transport link roads and rail network of China, Pakistan, and neighboring countries, it is highly imperative to safeguard these projects. The Pakistani armed forces have been expected to patrol the important transport assets for protection against terrorism, insurgency, and other threats that may disrupt the economic viability of these transport nodes through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation region (Tanner, 2019). This includes counter-militant operations in the Balochistan province, where Gwadar is situated, and protection of Chinese human assets and infrastructure (Tanner, 2019).

Moreover, successful completion of the CPEC is of critical importance to China because the CPEC is meant to cater to the various geo-strategic interest of China. The initial and the paramount Chinese concern is to lessen the cost of transportation of the essential imports/exports through the direct connection of its western territory to the Indian sea. The table given below has some brief information regarding the difference between the estimated cost of transportation of containers i.e. between the traditional trade routes undertaken by China and the cost undertaken via the proposed CPEC routes.

TABLE 1: DIFFERENCE IN TRANSPORTATION COST PER CONTAINER – NORMAL ROUTE VS. CPEC ROUTE

Trade Destination	Hosting State	Normal Cost/Container	Freight Cost Through CPEC	Saving in Cost	Saving Percentage
Jeddah Port	Saudi Arabia	\$3,517	\$2,060	\$1,457	41.43%
Salalah Port	Oman	\$3,417	\$1,560	\$1,857	54.35%
Rotterdam Port	Netherlands	\$4,117	\$2,760	\$1,357	32.96%
La Havre Port	France	\$4,117	\$2,760	\$1,357	32.96%
Hamburg Port	Germany	\$4,117	\$2,760	\$1,357	32.96%
Shuwaikh Port	Kuwait	\$3,517	\$2,060	\$1,457	41.43%

Source: Alam, Baig & Muhammad (2023)

In addition, the table given below contains a little brief regarding the difference between estimated transportation/travel time i.e. through the routes regularly used by China and estimated/anticipated time via the proposed CPEC routes.

TABLE 2: DIFFERENCE IN DELIVERY TIME – NORMAL ROUTE VS. CPEC ROUTE

Trade Destination	Hosting State	Normal Delivery (Days)	Delivery Time Through CPEC (Days)	Time Saved (Days)	Saving Percentage
Salalah Port	Oman	27	7	20	74.07%
Shuwaikh Port	Kuwait	32	8	24	75.00%

Jeddah Port	Saudi Arabia	33	12	21	63.64%
Hamburg Port	Germany	50	29	21	42.00%
Rotterdam Port	Netherlands	49	28	21	42.86%
La Havre Port	France	48	27	21	43.75%

Source: Alam, Baig & Muhammad (2023)

GEO-STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF MARITIME VS. LAND-BASED ROUTES

Transport connectivity within the CPEC Plus framework of the geopolitical importance of the sea and land routes shows that connectivity remains central to security and economic prospects in the region. Maritime routes and terrestrial connections are indispensable to the development of CPEC Plus, although they have different roles in meeting the project's needs and serving different goals and objectives.

It is worth mentioning that CPEC provides China and Pakistan a direct sea link, avoiding the major choke points, including the Strait of Malacca, that have been insecurities in the past. As an important port for directly accessing the Arabian Sea coupled with a main artery to connect China with the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, Gwadar further lionizes inter-connectivity. This is equally important for China regarding the stability of energy supply and better efficiency of exports. Besides being a trade center within the CPEC Plus framework, Gwadar serves another purpose: a transit terminal for energy resources – specifically, oil and gas, which the Middle Eastern and African states sell to China.

On the other hand, landlocked routes, such as roads and railways, have better connectivity options than potentially volatile sea lanes connecting China to Pakistan and Central Asia. The overland routes under CPEC Plus are regarded as essential for linking the landlocked Central Asian nations to otherwise instead of making them more economically viable and geopolitically essential. These land corridors passing through China's Xinjiang province and running up to Pakistan's Gwadar Port offer fresh connectivity to countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, apart from connecting Chinese western development quadrants (Adibelli et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, maritime and land-based modes are not opposing, although the latter offers particular strategic benefits. Instead, they integrate into the CPEC Plus division, where both parties contribute to general connectivity and security. In this context, maritime transport is more applicable for mass and large-volume transport. In contrast, transport corridors on the ground are more secure, efficient, and diversified transport means, especially for commodities that are not readily suited for transport by sea. The integration of these routes enhances the regional economic system and the delivery of goods, energy, and resources within Asia and other continents (Rodrigue, 2020).

GEO-STRATEGY AND REGIONAL ALLIANCES: CHINA, PAKISTAN, AND BEYOND

CPEC Plus transcends two countries' regional interests by impacting the region's strategic partnerships and security (da Costa Cadilhe, 2023). CPEC deepens the strategic cooperation

between China and Pakistan and becomes a strategic pivot in the overall structure of the Asian continent. This alliance gives both sides a counterweight to regional opponents, especially India, and makes both sides become critical stakeholders of the regional security architecture. For Pakistan, CPEC Plus means economic cooperation and military and diplomatic 關 support needed for the country. It strengthens Pakistan's position against India in China amid defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint military exercises. The element of military cooperation here, along with the economic investment, composes the strategic value of Pakistan in the region.

Furthermore, CPEC Plus involves possibilities to redesign the gravity of regional relations based on new economic incentives for neighbors like Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asian states. Using Gwadar's port and improving this regional connectivity link, these nations can further consolidate their relationship with China and Pakistan region with better integration and security ties. Finally, 'CPEC Plus' is a geostrategization, a geostrategic means to enhance relations between China and Pakistan while, at the same time, promoting the formation of a regionalism club for secured economic and political development (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018).

CONCLUSION

As an essential component of the Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC Plus is an important infrastructural and transportation project that connects China, Pakistan, and other regions but also an essential basis and path to promote regional cooperation and development, regional economic integration and stability. CPEC Plus gives China direct access to the Arabian Sea, and it avoids the most important maritime choke points; thus, it is a much safer and more effective trade route. These have ramifications for international commerce in energy and manufacturing and for China's place in Asia. Regarding Pakistan, CPEC Plus raises its position as a key connecting transit point between China, the Central Asian states, and the Middle East to create an advantageous export platform through Gwadar Port for Pakistan and further increase Pakistan-China cooperation (Amna, 2024). The advantages for countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia are also apparent, which are access to international market and trade and a better economical outlook.

The CPEC Plus has excellent potential as a continuum to long term cooperation in the region. With the development of the initiative, more regional partners, such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, will improve connectivity and provide a diversified and more robust economic community. By enhancing bilateral and multilateral relations and building more efficient infrastructure, CPEC Plus may help to establish a successful new Asian structure. Still, continuous diplomatic processes, proper management, and Orientation to Sustainable Development would be needed to reach this vision. CPEC Plu's success will be contingent upon its capacity to contain the risk areas, including security, political, and economic risks, while enshrining economic parity for the CPEC Plus countries that undergo development.

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