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**BRIDGES AND BARRIERS: THE POLITICAL
AND SECURITY LANDSCAPE OF CPEC**

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Bridges and Barriers: The Political and Security Landscape of CPEC

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At the center of turmoil and conflicts in South Asia lies the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key initiative of China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). This ambitious project aims to extend China's capital, technology, and industrial capabilities while enhancing regional connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe through transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure.¹ The objectives of the BRI include facilitating trade, fostering policy coordination, ensuring unimpeded trade, promoting financial integration, and strengthening people-to-people connections.² As of 2023, China has signed over 150 memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with various countries.³

The most influential of all is CPEC. Officially announced in April 2015, this project encompasses 62 billion USD in investment and is a 3,000 km long economic corridor with a collection of highways, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, and a fiber optic network connecting China's Kashgar and Pakistan's Gwadar.⁴ CPEC has benefited Pakistan by strengthening transportation, generating electricity, and promoting industrial development.⁵ However, the project has suffered major pitfalls, especially regarding geopolitics and security.

The most prominent geopolitical issue of CPEC is its role in heightening tensions between Pakistan and India. India sees the project as a direct threat to its national security. First, CPEC currently runs through Gilgit-Baltistan in the Pakistan-administered Kashmir region, a highly contested area. Specifically, since 1947, there have been three wars and occasional outbreaks of violence on this border as India views

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¹ Nalanda Roy, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor - Is it the Road to the Future?", in *Great Potential, Many Pitfalls: Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative*, ed. Bijan Omrani (London: Routledge, 2021). Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Seattle, WA: The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017).

² Pradumna B. Rana and Xianbai Ji, *China's Belt and Road Initiative: Impacts on Asia and Policy Agenda* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

³ Toufic Sarriddine, "Shades of Red: Assessing China's Hegemony in the Belt and Road Initiative", *Journal of World-Systems Research* 29:2 (2023), 524-49.

⁴ Muhammad Nouman Ashraf Khan and Syed Mussawar Hussain Bukhari, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Benefits and Challenges for Pakistan", *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 5:2 (2024). 19-32.

⁵ Rana and Ji, *China's Belt and Road Initiative: Impacts on Asia and Policy Agenda*.

Pakistan as illegally occupying the area.⁶ Second, India views the Gwadar seaport as a component of the BRI's "string of pearls" strategy, which includes seaports in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. According to India, this strategy is China's method of containing India's power in the Indian Ocean, which India claims to be its natural sphere of influence.⁷ Although tensions between India and Pakistan/China have been present since 1947, CPEC seems to be heightening tensions as India has continued to increase its naval capacity and is seeking alliances such as the Quad (US, India, Japan, and Australia) to contain China's growing influence.⁸

Domestically, CPEC reinforces internal division between the central government and provinces regarding resource distribution and economic development. Consequently, violence, insurgency, and separatist movements have plagued Pakistan. A hotbed for these attacks is the Balochistan region, home to separatist groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF). Struggles for independence in Balochistan have been common since Pakistan annexed the region in 1947.⁹ The key interest in this region is that it is rich in natural resources, which is ironic considering it is Pakistan's poorest region, echoing the concept of the resource curse. Many Baloch activists claim that Islamabad has continuously exploited the Baloch people and their resources.

They consistently point out that while CPEC takes up 62% of land in Balochistan, the region only receives a meager 4.5% of the budget.¹⁰ Simultaneously, the Baloch express concern that they are becoming minorities in their homelands as projects displace families and mainly hire Punjabi and Chinese workers.¹¹ While some have turned to protest, others, such as the BLA, have chosen violence. Since 2020, terrorist-related incidents have been growing consistently. In 2020, there were 122 incidents, and in 2024, there have been 404. Overall, since 2000, there have been 7,133 terrorist-

⁶ Lindsay Maizland, "Kashmir: What to Know about the Disputed Region", *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7 August 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/kashmir-what-know-aboutdisputed-region>.

⁷ Umar Farooq, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Geo-Political Implications, Regional Constraints and Benefits of CPEC." *South Asian Studies (1026-678X)* 34:2 (2019), 599–609. Ashley S. Townshend, "Unraveling China's 'String of Pearls'", *Unraveling China's 'String of Pearls'*, *YaleGlobal*, 16 September 2011, [https://archive.yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/unraveling-chinas-string-pearls#:~:text=China%20has%20signed%20multimillion%20dollar%20aid%2C%20trade%](https://archive.yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/unraveling-chinas-string-pearls#:~:text=China%20has%20signed%20multimillion%20dollar%20aid%2C%20trade%20)

⁸ Ishfaq Ahmad Wani and Zahid Sultan, "The Geopolitics of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and India's Response", *Webology* 18:6 (2021), 5675-5682.

⁹ Mickey Kupecz, "Pakistan's Baloch Insurgency: History, Conflict Drivers, and Regional Implications", *The International Affairs Review*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/8er0x982v5pj129srhre98ex6u8v8n>

¹⁰ Khan and Bukhari, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Benefits and Challenges for Pakistan", 19-32. C. Christine Fair, "Lashkar-e-Tayyaba: China's Handmaid in Balochistan", *Hudson Institute*, 10 October 2022, <https://www.hudson.org/national-securitydefense/lashkar-e-tayyaba-china-s-handmaid-in-balochistan>.

¹¹ SATP, "Balochistan: Assessment- 2024", *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, 2024, <https://www.satp.org/terrorism-assessment/pakistan-balochistan>

related incidents in the region. As a result of this uptick in violence, the Pakistani government has created a task force to protect CPEC projects and exercised extremely restrictive/oppressive measures such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.¹² The Baloch Students Council claims that enforced disappearances are part of a political strategy to silence opposition and resistance.¹³ Compiling data from the SATP, roughly 174 Baloch allegedly forcibly disappeared in 2024 (as of November 1). Those who disappear are journalists, students, human rights activists, and political workers.

While not intended by China, CPEC has heightened tensions between Pakistan and India, fueled ethnic conflicts and insurgencies, and contributed to an unstable environment in South Asia. These challenges are hurdles that must be addressed. Leaders in China and Pakistan must prioritize equitable economic development, protect human rights, and resolve geopolitical disputes through diplomacy. The international community should pressure the Pakistani government to provide information about forcibly disappeared individuals and enhance human rights protections in Balochistan. Efforts should be made to foster dialogue and cooperation among China, India, and Pakistan to prevent the escalation of interstate conflicts. While the BRI has the potential to benefit the region, it also poses risks to stability. Thus, it is crucial that both China and Pakistan manage projects responsibly.

¹² SATP, "Balochistan: Assessment- 2024". Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, 77-78.

¹³ The Balochistan Post, "Balochistan: Baloch Students Demand Release of Suhail and Faseeh amid Enforced Disappearances", *The Balochistan Post*, 11 February 2024, <https://aninews.in/news/world/asia/balochistan-baloch-students-demand-release-of-suhail-and-faseeh-amid-enforced-disappearances20241102135432/>