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GFP
GLOBAL FOREIGN
POLICIES REVIEW

ISSN-P : 2788-502X

ISSN-E : 2788-5038

VOL. IX ISSUE I, WINTER (MARCH-2026)

GFP

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW
HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

GLOBAL FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW (GFP)

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DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gfpr
DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX)
DOI (Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-I)

Double-blind Peer-review Research
Journal

www.gfprjournal.com

© Global Foreign Policy Review

Title: Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

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The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(CPEC)is one of the significant elements of the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is expected to enhance connectivity, trade, and economic integration within the territory of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The article examines the two aspects of CPEC, the geopolitical and economic ones, which evaluate the potential influence of CPEC on the change of the development pattern in Pakistan and the strategic role of China. In terms of the economy, CPEC will definitely modify the infrastructure in Pakistan, solve its long-term problems with energy crises, and stimulate industrial growth through special economic zones(SEZs).The paper emphasizes the fact that CPEC is not only an economic initiative, but it is also a strategic alliance that reinvents the balance of power in South Asia. CPEC highlights the interdependence, as it is complicated to separate and choose between economics and security in modern international relations.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC, China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Special Economic Zones (SEZs), South Asia, Indian Ocean

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Pages: 1-8

DOI:10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-I).01

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026\(IX-I\).01](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-I).01)

Article link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/economic-integration-and-geopolitical-implications-of-the-chinapakistan-economic-corridor-cpec>

Full-text Link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/economic-integration-and-geopolitical-implications-of-the-chinapakistan-economic-corridor-cpec>

Pdf link: <https://www.gssjournal.com/jadmin/Auther/31rvIolA2.pdf>

Global Foreign Policies Review

p-ISSN: [2788-502X](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr) e-ISSN: [2788-5038](https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr)

DOI(journal):10.31703/gfpr

Volume: IX (2026)

DOI (volume):10.31703/gfpr.2025(IX)

Issue: I Winter (March-2026)

DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gfpr.2025(IX-I)

Home Page

www.gfprjournal.com

Volume: IX (2026)

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue>

Issue: I-Winter (March-2026)

<https://www.gfprjournal.com/issue/9/1/2026>

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Citing this Article

Article Serial	01
Article Title	Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)
Authors	Muhammad Javed Ghulam Mustafa
DOI	10.31703/gsr.2026(XI-I).01
Pages	1–8
Year	2026
Volume	XI
Issue	I

Referencing & Citing Styles

APA	Javed, M., & Mustafa, G. (2026). Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , IX(I), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-I).01
CHICAGO	Javed, Muhammad, and Ghulam Mustafa. 2026. "Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> IX (I):1-8. doi: 10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-I).01.
HARVARD	JAVED, M. & MUSTAFA, G. 2026. Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , IX, 1-8.
MHRA	Javed, Muhammad, and Ghulam Mustafa. 2026. 'Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)', <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , IX: 1-8.
MLA	Javed, Muhammad, and Ghulam Mustafa. "Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (Cpec)." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> IX.I (2026): 1-8. Print.
OXFORD	Javed, Muhammad and Mustafa, Ghulam (2026), 'Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)', <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> , IX (I), 1-8.
TURABIAN	Javed, Muhammad and Ghulam Mustafa. "Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (Cpec)." <i>Global Foreign Policies Review</i> IX, no. I (2026): 1-8. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2026(IX-I).01 .

Economic Integration and Geopolitical Implications of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)



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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(CPEC)is one of the significant elements of the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is expected to enhance connectivity, trade, and economic integration within the territory of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The article examines the two aspects of CPEC, the geopolitical and economic ones, which evaluate the potential influence of CPEC on the change of the development pattern in Pakistan and the strategic role of China. In terms of the economy, CPEC will definitely modify the infrastructure in Pakistan, solve its long-term problems with energy crises, and stimulate industrial growth through special economic zones(SEZs).The paper emphasizes the fact that CPEC is not only an economic initiative, but it is also a strategic alliance that reinvents the balance of power in South Asia. CPEC highlights the interdependence, as it is complicated to separate and choose between economics and security in modern international relations.

Keywords: *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Special Economic Zones (SEZs), South Asia, Indian Ocean*

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), an approximately \$62 billion initiative, was formalized around 2013-2014 as a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), under Xi Jinping's leadership, to connect China's western province of Xinjiang through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar Port. It aims at enhancing infrastructure (roadways, railways, and ports), energy production, special economic zones (SEZs), and enhancing trade (Ghaffar & Khan, 2024). On the Pakistani side, CPEC will help to reduce chronic energy shortages, the underdeveloped transportation network, regional imbalance (particularly in Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit-Baltistan), industrialization through SEZs, and the increase in foreign direct investment (Khan H. U. & Shan, 2022). China aims to secure shorter, more secure routes for trade and energy, linking its western regions, gain access to the Arabian Sea, and project influence in South and Central Asia.

Over time, CPEC has evolved in phases: initial “early harvest” energy projects and road connectivity; then expanding into SEZs, socio-economic development, and inward Chinese investment; also shifting from state-to-state arrangements to more commercial/PPP models. Governance structures (Joint Working Committees, Pakistani ministries + Chinese counterpart bodies) were set up to manage oversight, but challenges in coordination, transparency, cost overruns, environmental and social impacts and delays have emerged (Alvi, Karim, Khan, & Malik, 2024).



Economic & Infrastructural Progress: Achievements and Gaps:

Project Completion and Investment Flow

As of late 2022, about 28 projects under CPEC had been completed, costing approximately US\$18.8 billion, including 12 in the energy sector, 10 in infrastructure (roads, etc.), and 6 in socio-economic sectors. In geographic spread, these completed projects lie in Punjab (6), Sindh (7), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (2), Balochistan (6), Gilgit Baltistan (1), Azad Jammu & Kashmir (1), and Islamabad (5). Furthermore, nine SEZs had been agreed under CPEC (Allama Iqbal Industrial City, Rashakai SEZ, Dhabeji, Bostan, Mirpur AJK, ICT Model City Islamabad, Industrial Park Karachi, Mohmand Marble City (ex-FATA), Maqandass in Gilgit) by that point (National, [2025](#)).

A CSIS analysis (2023) estimated that of 122 announced projects, only about 32 had been completed an estimated US \$20 billion, and about 54 were either completed or under construction. When large projects such as Diamer-Bhasha Dam, Pakistan-Iran gas line, and Muzaffargarh Coal Power Project are removed (because shelved), the effective total funding stood nearer US\$67 billion rather than higher earlier estimates (Hillman, McCalpin, & Brock, [2020](#)).

Geographic and Sectoral Distribution

Projects under CPEC have been unevenly distributed across Pakistan's provinces. Punjab and Sindh, being more developed and having stronger institutional capacities, have achieved higher rates of project completion (Punjab and Sindh approaching 50 % of announced projects completed or under construction) compared with Balochistan and Gilgit Baltistan, which lag, especially in large infrastructure and SEZ development (Hillman, McCalpin, & Brock, [2020](#)). Furthermore, Energy projects were among the earlier 'harvest' phase and had relative success, easing power shortages in many parts of the country. Transport infrastructure (roads, highways) has also made visible progress. However, more ambitious sectors railways, SEZs, and industrial parks, have been delayed, scaled down, or have suffered setbacks due to land acquisition, funding, local resistance, governance hurdles, and security risks (Khan A. , [2025](#)).

Challenges in Implementation

Various studies note issues of cost overruns, delays, and incomplete alignment of projects with local needs. For example, in Balochistan, security risks, local grievances over environmental degradation, land rights, and perceived inequitable sharing of benefits have slowed implementation (Khetran, [2020](#)). Also, issues of debt burden have been raised, and the terms of financing, the debt servicing requirements, and foreign exchange implications have been criticized. There are also institutional capacity constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies that are involved in delays. All in all, economic and infrastructural successes are genuine and substantial, yet also not evenly distributed, particularly in frontier provinces and newer industries such as SEZs (Amir, [2018](#)).

Security Challenges and Threats

CPEC has significant implications for regional security, as the domestic and regional security challenges it generates both short- term and long term risks. These have both immediate and structural consequences.

Attacks on Chinese Nationals, Project Sites, and Security Incidents

According to the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) data on the attacks, shows that the most recent attack took place on October 14th, 2024, where at the very least 20 attacks involving Chinese nationals took place, with 20 being killed and 34 injured (Although not the only terrorist attack targeting Chinese nationals since 2021) (SATP, [2024](#)). These occurred across provinces: Sindh (8 attacks), Balochistan (4), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2). More broadly, since July 2007, 17-20 attacks directly targeting Chinese nationals in Pakistan have been recorded, with about 88 deaths (including Chinese, Pakistani security forces, civilians, and attackers) and dozens wounded. SATP's data up to December 31, 2024, showed 20 attacks, 88 deaths (19 Chinese nationals among them), and injuries (66 persons) in such incidents (Mohanty, [2025](#)). High-profile cases include the Dasu bus attack (July 2021) in Upper Kohistan (KP), where 13 people (including 9 Chinese nationals) died and 28 were injured (Times, [2021](#)).

The Shangla-District/Khyber Pakhtunkhwa attack in 2024: a suicide bombing hit a bus carrying Chinese engineers to the Dasu Dam, killing five Chinese nationals and their Pakistani driver (Bacha, [2024](#)). Gwadar, in Baluchistan, has also seen attacks on convoys of Chinese engineers a suicide attack targeting Chinese workers on the Gwadar Expressway in August 2021, killing or injuring Chinese nationals (Dawn, [2021](#)).

Nature and Actors of Threats

The threats come from multiple actors: Baloch separatist groups (notably BLA's Majeed Brigade), militant Islamist groups (including TTP), and occasionally Sindhi nationalist outfits. Their motives include protests over resource distribution, ethnic marginalization, and environmental harm, suspicion about Chinese control over local land, perceived demographic changes, and local political exclusion. Some threats are maritime or related to sea security, too risky to shipping, port security, piracy, and vulnerability in sea lanes that connect Gwadar to the Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean (Wani, [2021](#)).

State & Private Security Responses

In response, Pakistan has deployed a large security personnel to protect Chinese nationals and CPEC infrastructure. 15000 security personnel were reported to be deployed, including under a Special Security Division (SSD) and the Maritime Security Force (MSF), for projects directly associated with CPEC (as well as related infrastructure) (Mansoor, [2025](#)). There has also been institutional cooperation between Pakistan's security/intelligence agencies and their Chinese counterparts. Agreements on compensation (for Chinese nationals in case of attacks) have been discussed. Interior Ministry briefings have emphasized "security as a top priority" and formation of core groups to coordinate protection of Chinese nationals. In one briefing (Dec 2024), officials stated that some 20,000 Chinese nationals are in Pakistan connected to CPEC or related projects, and their protection is formally being overseen.

Implications for Regional Security and Geopolitics

CPEC is not merely a bilateral development project; its implications ripple across South Asia, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Central Asia, and beyond.

Balance of Power and Strategic Competition

The corridor increases China's influence in South Asia via physical infrastructure connecting its western regions to the Arabian Sea, which has long been of strategic interest. The IOR becomes more central to China's naval and trade strategy with potential for dual-use facilities, which worries India, the US, and other regional powers. CPEC accelerates militarisation of the IOR as China must protect its investments, and India adjusts its strategies correspondingly (Khizar, [2023](#)).

Security Spillovers and Cross-Border Risks

Insecure borders with Afghanistan and Iran, terrorist havens, and international terrorist groups are threats not only to Pakistan but also to the stability of the region. As an example, the weak points of the project to TTP or Baloch militants have greater implications, potentially involving China in counter-terrorism through the territory of Pakistan, or urgent cooperation with the neighbours. Any violent act against Chinese engineers has the potential to create diplomatic tensions or security crises. (Diab, [2025](#)).

Economic Interdependence and Regional Integration

CPEC has the potential to deepen trade routes connecting Pakistan with Central Asia, Iran, the Middle East, and possibly Afghanistan, increasing economic interdependence and enhancing regional connectivity. Improved infrastructure (roads, ports, rail) could enable alternative trade corridors, reduce dependence on longer sea routes, and contribute to regional growth. However, security disruptions, delays, and political resistance risk undermining those potentials (Iqbal, Raza, & Qadir, [2024](#)).

Influence on Foreign Policy Alignments

CPEC has shaped and been shaped by foreign policy choices: China's outreach and investments, Pakistan's alignment with China under Xi's era have become more pronounced; meanwhile, India, the US, and others view CPEC as part of a larger geopolitical rivalry. This has led to greater strategic concern (including naval deployments in the IOR, port development in adversarial or third countries) and potential for diplomatic tensions. Studies (e.g., *Shifting Power Dynamics*, 2025) highlight that CPEC raises sovereignty concerns in neighboring states and contributes to the strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific region (Manhas & G, 2025).

Security Dilemmas and Arms/Risk Escalation

Because of security threats to CPEC, Pakistan must invest in substantial security infrastructure. China, too, is increasingly involved in thinking through security guarantees. This may lead to arms/force escalation in contested or sensitive regions (e.g., enhanced policing, paramilitary or potentially military presence near route corridors, Gwadar Port, maritime security) (Shaikh, Arain, & Deedar Hussain Khatti, 2025). Also, there's a risk of CPEC projects being used for dual-use (military) ends, which leads adversaries to see them as strategic threats. The possible arms race or enhanced naval/militia presence in the IOR as a reaction to China's increased stake via CPEC.

Governance, Policy Responses, and Chinese Strategy:

Pakistani Governance and Local Engagement

The Pakistani government has attempted various policy measures to mitigate risks: forming core security groups, increasing budgetary allocations for security instituting compensation frameworks for harmed Chinese personnel, negotiating land acquisition, attempting to involve local communities, etc. Yet, governance remains uneven: transparency issues, corruption, bureaucratic delays, political instability (shifts in government), provincial vs federal frictions, and local capacity remain challenges (Mansoor, 2025). In Balochistan especially, local grievances over marginalization, environmental harm, lack of employment and resource sharing have caused resistance, and are exploited by separatist groups. These not only impede project implementation but also generate security blowback (Khetran, 2020).

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Chinese Strategy: Investment, Risk Management, Security Demands

China's approach has shown sensitivity to risk: insistence on agreed security for its nationals, sometimes pushing for involvement of Chinese private security contractors, safeguarding their engineers, etc.; adjusting the pace of investment to security realities; using bilateral diplomatic pressure to extract assurances (e.g., from Pakistani authorities on protection of Chinese nationals after major attacks). China also has shown willingness to finance, but under more cautious terms, for phases of CPEC where risk is manageable. Some projects have been delayed or shelved when local governance or security risks are deemed too high.

Legal, Constitutional, and Institutional Issues

Some of the legal aspects are the ownership of the land and how to acquire land, the constitutional status of such regions as Gilgit-Baltistan, conflict of jurisdictions between the provinces and the federal government, compliance with environmental law, and regulation. Among the institutional issues are the coordination between ministries, role clarity, monitoring, transparency and audit, open communication with the public, and stakeholder involvement. Avoidance of these satisfactorily compromises security and legitimacy (Diab, 2025).

Implications for Regional Security During 2009-2025 under Xi Jinping's Era

Putting together economic/infrastructural progress and security challenges yields several implications for regional security in the Xi Jinping era.

1. Enhanced Sino-Pakistani Strategic Cooperation: Pakistan and China have become more tied by the interdependent nature of their economic relationship through CPEC; under the Xi regime, China has become more involved (financial as well as strategic) in Pakistan. This enhances Pakistan's association

with China in the Chinese world approach and offers China a proactive place in the Arabian Sea (Gwadar), which has a power projection (military, naval, and soft-power) (Manhas & G, [2025](#)).

2. **Militarization and Security Burden:** The internal security burden of the country has intensified significantly to guard Chinese assets, nationals, and infrastructure. This is nothing in terms of costs (financial, political, and human), and there is a threat of security requirements to prevail over other internal priorities (e.g., human rights, development, and provincial autonomy) (Shaikh, Arain, & Deedar Hussain Khatti, [2025](#)).
3. **Cross-Border & Regional Security Spillover:** The situation in Afghanistan can become instable, and militant safe havens, as well as border insecurity can impact CPEC. To illustrate, violence on Afghan soil or border wars poses a threat to corridors linked to Afghanistan or Central Asia and this could undermine the prospects of making long-range connectivity outside Pakistan.
4. **Strategic Rivalry Dynamics:** CPEC (particularly in the divides of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and Gwadar) is observed as a sovereign and strategic problem by India; it has led to diplomatic eruptions, and also feared possible encroachment into Indian geopolitical space. The increasing Sino-Pakistani corridor is seen by the U.S. and other powers in the context of greater competition in the Indo-Pacific, having implications for alliances and expectations on regional policy.
5. **Security Risks Feeding Economic Risks:** Locally based economic threats (jobs, revenue, local development) may create local discontent, which then becomes a security risk. Risks are aggravated by debt issues, time lag, and inequitable benefit sharing. Protest can also be caused by environmental degradation and conflict.
6. **Maritime Security Necessity:** Gwadar Port, sea lanes, and naval presence within the IOR have increased in importance. The necessity to provide maritime security (in the form of preventing sabotage, piracy, and regional naval rivalry) is included in the regional security architecture.
7. **Domestic Political Stability as Security Factor:** A change in the government of Pakistan, instability, politicization of CPEC, and corruption or failure to involve provincial governments in CPEC destroy legitimacy and hence security, therefore compromising the feasibility of CPEC (Khan A. , [2025](#)).
8. **Empowering the Local Integration:** Making local communities (Balochistan, KP, GB, in particular) have actual benefits: jobs, revenue share, and environmental protection. More inclusive grievance system, compensation, and land acquisition.
9. **Improved Intelligence and Counter-terror Cooperation:** Among Pakistan, China, and the neighbours (or Afghanistan in particular), to minimise cross-border militants' safe havens, and preclude attacks. Joint patrol, intelligence sharing, and possibly joint border security.
10. **Governance and Control:** Improve institutional transparency of CPEC projects, open contracting, public audits, environmental and social impact assessment; providing provincial governments with more roles.
11. **Clarifications of the law:** Resolve constitutional uncertainties (e.g., Gilgit-Baltistan status), establish jurisdiction over SEZs, foreign security providers, land law, etc.
12. **Balanced Infrastructure Development:** It is better to focus on high-impact connectivity (roads, rail) in all the provinces, not only in the central areas; make sure the SEZs are feasible (infrastructure, power, logistics) before significant investment (Times, [2021](#)).
13. **Resource Mobilization & Financial Sustainability:** Mobilize debt risks, be financially viable, have returns; can increase public-private partnership, use blended finance; do adequate financial planning, not to strain on foreign currency.
14. **Maritime and Port Security Improvements:** Due to the increased significance of Gwadar, invest in navy/patrol forces, coastal defense, and port infrastructure that is resistant to sabotage (SATP, [2024](#)).

Recommendations

Positive Continuation and Growth

Provided that security threats may be handled, local complaints resolved, and the government enhanced, CPEC may have a wider reach: complete SEZs, new rail connections, expansion to the Central Asian region and Afghanistan, whereby Pakistan turns into a trade hub in the region, and will have positive spillovers to regional peace and collaboration.

Delays, Rationalizing, Militancy

In case of attacks, local resistance grows, projects may be delayed or reduced; Chinese investors may seek increased security, slow investment; doubt may increase; the role of CPEC as a strategic corridor may suffer.

Strategic Re-balancing

In this case, the outside players (India, U.S., regional powers) can find ways to back countermeasures; Pakistan can seek to multiplex its ties; China can offer more demands (even a security-related dependency) on additional investment; or initiatives can be shifted towards more security-conscious design.

Security measures

- The huge and rough topography (Balochistan plateau, mountainous Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, remote regions along the borders) complicates and makes security logistics challenging.
- These are intelligence gaps: it was hard to detect militants early enough, infiltrate terrorist groups and cross-border havens (particularly Afghanistan).
- Local perceptions: in cases where local communities do not feel involved or harmed by CPEC projects (acquiring land, environmental harm, joblessness), this creates resentment, which can create fuel for insurgency or sabotage.
- The diversion of resources to ensure protection of infrastructure is costly in terms of financial and operational costs, which may otherwise be spent on other security requirements.
- The sovereignty, legal, and logistical problems are created by the Chinese insistence on their special security, or the direct participation (however, there have been requests/demands).

Conclusion

CPEC is among the defining projects of the President Xi Jinping regime in China-Pakistan relations. It sums up the economic, infrastructural, diplomatic, and security aspects, and the consequences of regional security are far-reaching. The real improvements for the economy so far, power, roads, and certain SEZs, are uneven in geographies and sectors. At the same time, the security issues, militant attacks, the local opposition, the state, and the institutional deficiencies are the threats to not only CPEC but also the domestic integrity of Pakistan and the Chinese strategic interests. In the future, the interactions between economic success and security provision will be pivotal. To realize its potential as a strategic and economic corridor, Pakistan needs to resolve the local protests, improve governance, and offer security in a manner that does not foster countermeasures. In the case of China, the issue of striking a balance between strategic interests and reputational risk and real security expenses will be important. To the region, CPEC has the potential to bring new connectivity, trade, and peace, given that it is well managed.

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