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## “Cpec As A Potential Strategic Game-Changer In Regional And Global Geopolitics: A Critical Analysis Of Security Challenges For Pakistan”

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### Abstract:

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI), can play a significant role in reshaping Pakistan's role in international affairs and can give a boost to China's Belt and Road initiative (BRI). The Globalization phenomenon makes the world a global village and states are now closer to each other. The cordial historical relations of China and Pakistan and its partnership for a stable economy and strategic partnership can bring development, peace, economic stability and can strengthen the strategic partnership of both countries. China and Pakistan are real stakeholders but this project has impacts that are not limited to both of these countries. This flagship project would have an impact on Central Asian States, Russia, Iran, India, and Afghanistan and it will bring more infrastructural development, economic revolution, and employment opportunity. The negative role of India and the US needs to be curbed to get all the blessings of CPEC. Moreover, it will bring the hostile states to sit at the table and resolve issues through peaceful methods to get the blessings of the flagship project. This study will focus on the security challenges and will spotlight the strategic significance of CPEC for Pakistan. Further, this research will comprehensively analyze the role of regional powers and how Pakistan can fulfill its national interests keeping in view the negative tactics adopted by hostile states. It will suggest the policy options and reforms for Pakistan. Moreover, his study will also analyze the other arrangements through which Pakistan can achieve the maximum advantages from CPEC and BRI.

## **Introduction:**

China and Pakistan have been enjoying closer diplomatic ties since 1951. Pakistan was among those countries who recognized China in 1950 and remained a firm ally of China during 1960s and early 1970s. China provided Pakistan with military, technical and economic assistance including transfer of nuclear equipment. Some experts believe the growing relations between United States and India is a cause of tension for Pakistan which further compel the later to foster its security bond with China. While some view that the resurgence of deadly attacks by Baloch separatists will increase concerns of China causing Beijing to move forward with the relationship in a more careful way (Zubacheva, 2016).

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is recently under construction at a cost of \$46 billion, plans to improve Pakistani infrastructure and strengthen the economic and political ties between China and Pakistan (Bilal, 2019). CPEC bears substantial economic and strategic benefits for both the countries (Gilani, 2020). The huge Chinese investment provides an opportunity for Pakistan to come out of the conflict trap. CPEC is boosting the economy of Pakistan through infrastructure development and energy projects, while making Pakistan a pivot for regional and global trade. Significant Chinese investments across all major sectors will provide Pakistan with the economic, business and employment opportunities, and Gross Domestic Product growth that is crucial for country's stability (Nadim, 2017). Besides beneficial for Pakistan, the project also offers strategic opportunity for Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan to carry their goods and achieve more competitiveness in regional and global markets (Khetran, 2015).

## **CPEC: A Potential Strategic game-changer**

The One Belt One Road initiative, also known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is seen as a game-changer not only for the peoples of China and Pakistan, but for the entire region (Brunner, 2013).

It will reduce geographical distances. Like other economic corridors, CPEC would connect the adjoining countries for commerce, trade and industrial development and lead to collective socio-economic progress. Besides huge economic investment, CPEC carries strategic asset as well, which could provide much needed balance against growing Indian military and economic influence in South and South West Asia. To China, CPEC will provide shortest possible trade route to Arabian Sea and Middle East (Rakisits, 2015). The project will provide immense economic and trade opportunities to regional states like Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan which will enhance their economies (Brunner, 2013).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will increase the number of commercial channels between China and other nations in the region (The Nation, 2020). China imports 60% of its oil from the Middle East, which is carried to the country via the costly and dangerous Malacca Strait route, which passes via the South China, East China, and Yellow Seas, where piracy is rampant (The Guardian, 2020). Energy transportation over the Strait of Malacca takes about 45 days, however it takes only 10 days if it is done through Gwadar port, which offers the best land and marine routes (Pakistan China Institute, 2015). As a result, the Gwadar-Xingjian route can be used to deliver energy instead of crossing the Malacca Straits, saving both money and time. It will let China to import energy and explore new markets in Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East for its products (Butt, 2017).

**3157 | Dr. Waseem Ullah                      “Cpec As A Potential Strategic Game-Changer In Regional And Global Geopolitics: A Critical Analysis Of Security Challenges For Pakistan”**

The prime internal challenge of China is the east-west development gap between its advanced eastern region and backward western region of Xinjiang (Curran, 2016). CPEC will bring more economic activities in the North-western Xinjiang province and will enable China to execute its Western Development Strategy (WDS). The province of Xinjiang is adjacent to Pakistan. The CPEC will take this less-developed part of China to the warm waters of Arabian Sea. It will enable China to counter the expanding influence of US in Asia (Butt, 2017).

CPEC can be a beacon of hope for a country like Pakistan which faces economic and security challenges since its inception (Ahmed, 2014). Under the CPEC project, new coal-fired power plants will be built which would provide electricity to Pakistan (Gilani, 2020). Former PM Nawaz Sharif while addressing the inaugural session of the CPEC Summit and Expo at Pak-China Friendship Centre in Islamabad, on August 29, 2016 said that the CPEC will tackle Pakistan's energy crisis as projects worth \$35 billion have been envisioned in Pakistan in the energy sector (Business Standard, 2016). It will provide Pakistan with a golden opportunity to stabilize its economy and strengthen its ties with its neighbors by making Gwadar a hub for trade (The Express Tribune, 2020). It will provide a remedy for all its socio-economic problems by improving the living standard of people. The establishment of Special Economic Zones in Punjab, Gilgit-Baltistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, and Sindh will advance the infrastructure (CPEC official website, 2021).

### **Impacts on Central Asian States**

The deep bond between China and Pakistan, as illustrated most recently by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, has played significant role in Asia's geopolitics (Newsweek Pakistan, 2015).

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, five new republics emerged in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Central Asia is significant for a variety of reasons. Natural resources such as petroleum, natural gas, coal, and iron abound in Central Asia, which shares borders with both Russia and China (Zaki, 2014). Central Asia's prominence has grown significantly as a result of China's and Russia's quest for natural resources (Khetran, 2015).

The fact that the CARs are landlocked countries has been a major impediment to their economic progress (Pakistantoday, 2020). Because they don't have access to warm waters, their trade and transportation is limited to land routes. As a result, they have a lower per capita GDP than those with access to the ocean. Central Asian countries have attempted to reach regional markets through China, India, Pakistan, and West Asian countries in recent decades. They also want to expand their markets to the west by way of the Indian Ocean. As a result, the CPEC will serve as a gateway for landlocked CARs to strengthen their trading ties with the rest of the world (Faisal, 2019). The CPEC will encourage regional economic development in this way (Fingar, 2016). China and Pakistan are both interested in Central Asian countries because they are wealthy in natural resources, especially enormous energy reserves. Interdependence in trade and transportation on a bilateral and international basis is so likely to reduce conflict and improve regional connectivity and integration (Khetran, 2015).

### **Impacts on Russia**

Russia and Pakistan have never been on the same page since cold war era but they have greatly amended their bilateral ties during 2015 and 2016 (Lim, 2017). Both the countries share strategic interests as they want to resolve the Afghanistan conundrum. India is not happy on the closer economic cooperation between Moscow and Islamabad and is a strong opponent of CPEC. The Indian concerns will not stop Russia to support the project (Maqsood, 2017). Russian Ambassador to Pakistan Alexey Y Dedov, while giving interview to Radia Pakistan on December 17, 2016, stated that his country is working on a similar project Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). He added that Pakistan and Russia are cooperating in different areas and Russia aims to finalize the Pakistan's North-South gas pipeline project as soon as possible (Mourdoukoutas, 2017). He strongly supported the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and termed it crucial for Pakistan's economic development and regional integration (Dawn, 2016).

### **Impacts on Afghanistan**

Afghanistan's neighbours and the entire region rely on peace and stability. The situation in Afghanistan is still unpredictable and insecure more than a decade after the US invasion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Afghanistan is the most direct route to China, Pakistan, and Central Asia for trade and transit (Dhaka, 2014). Trade between the CARs and Pakistan and China via Afghanistan will save both time and money. Afghanistan is extremely important in terms of regional connectivity. Afghanistan's internal political environment and security difficulties have proven to be a stumbling hurdle. Internal instability and the return of the Taliban have plagued the country since NATO soldiers withdrew. Afghanistan's economy can be stabilised by providing chances for trade and development. Afghanistan has a wealth of natural resources, but they are largely unexplored, and no development projects are in the works. It is also rich in minerals such as copper and iron ores, although these are not exported because they are still in the exploring stage. In 2015, Afghanistan's exports to Pakistan and India accounted for 72 percent of the country's overall exports. China and the Afghan government inked a \$2 billion deal for the exploration of Mes Aynak (a site in Afghanistan's Logar region), the world's second largest copper deposit, but it was put on hold due to security concerns. Due to militancy and security concerns, Afghanistan has lost a lot of investors. Because of Afghanistan's geostrategic importance, China has promoted security cooperation and support to the country. China is also an important player in the Afghan-Taliban peace talks (Khetran, 2015).

The shortest route for Pakistan to Central Asia is Afghanistan. But due to uncertain security situation, Pakistan must avail other options. One option for Pakistan to reach Central Asia is through Xinjiang in western China. But potential insurgencies from the Uighurs made the route a secondary option for Pakistan (The Economist, 2020). So the strategic importance of Afghanistan cannot be ignored. Gwadar Port, which is located on the southwestern coast of Balochistan is a part of CPEC developmental projects. The port connects Pakistan with south Asia, Central Asia, Iran and China all of which have abundance of natural resource. This port can play vital role in regional economic connectivity and integration (Khetran, 2015).

### **Impacts on Iran and Gulf States**

The CPEC has huge implications for Iran and other Gulf States. CPEC would provide Iran an easy access to the east (Huasheng, 2016). The welcoming attitude of oil rich nation to CPEC is remarkable. The corridor will give Iran's oil accessibility to global markets which will

definitely effect oil prices globally. (Nazar, 2015). Gwadar port is lying on north of the Arabian Sea. It can be considered as a potential challenge to Iran and the Gulf states. Trade in the region has been conducted primarily via ports of Dubai and Chabahar substantially. The construction of Gwadar Port will directly impact the trade traffic of other ports (Kiani, 2016). It will greatly benefit China as its western regions are far from the Indian Ocean (Masood, 2019). Some geopolitical experts believe that China's economic and military presence in Gwadar Port will clearly help the country and Pakistan, to counter growing strategic design of the United States and India. (Khetran, 2015)

The construction of the liquid natural gas (LNG) terminal at Gwadar and the 700 km long pipelines to import LNG from China will be a blessing for Iran. It will also increase the scope of trade and transportation in the region. (Butt, 2017) Iranian Ambassador Seyyed Mohammed Ali Hosseini while giving a lecture on 'Pak-Iran Peace and Security Cooperation' at the Islamabad Policy Institute (IPI) on 30 January, 2020 said that Pakistan and Iran must strengthen bilateral trade and economic cooperation to bypass American sanctions. He expressed his desire to become a part of CPEC (Dawn, 2020).

### **Analysis of Security Challenges**

Pakistan faces many issues like economic instability, terrorism, extremism, poor governance, foreign involvement and insurgency in Balochistan (Hartogs, 2016). Dr. Luan Jianzhang, Vice Director General of the Policy Research Office at the International Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, believes that political instability, security issues, and administrative issues are some of the major obstacles to the completion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Abid, 2020).

### **Security Concerns**

The most apparent challenge to CPEC is that of Security. The security of CPEC is extremely important for both China and Pakistan (Shah, 2015). The CPEC passes via the most under-developed province of Balochistan as well as Kashmir. Baloch nationalist view the project as "an occupation of Baloch territory". Construction was started on western route on priority base to convince the people that they are not excluded. (Calabrese, 2016) The CPEC will link Gwadar and Kashgar. China is making five economic zones to reduce the threat of nationalist movements of the Uighurs. Similar is expected of insurgency in Balochistan. The main objective is to defend the CPEC routes (Ibrar, 2016). The foremost challenge to CPEC is the resurgence of Taliban in FATA and western parts of Pakistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups operating in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa constitute a security danger to this development project. The building of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is jeopardised by militancy (Ibrar, 2016).

### **Insurgency in Balochistan**

China has concerns about the challenges to CPEC from the very beginning. The southern Pakistani province of Balochistan is home to various insurgents who are seeking independence. (Notezai, 2019) There are many extremist groups from Xinjiang to Gwadar, which include East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Lashkar e-Jhangvi, Daesh, Balochistan Liberation Front. All of these groups are trying to create obstacles this mega project (Riaz & Fernald, 2020). Internal security situation in Pakistan has

been improved due to various military operation against terrorist organization. But the security arena still poses alarming challenge to secure the execution of CPEC development projects (Shabana & Malik, 2019).

### **The Afghan Factor**

The recent critical situation in Afghanistan poses a threat to Chinese interests in the region especially the multi-billion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in Pakistan. Beijing desires to expand CPEC to the neighboring countries of Pakistan including Afghanistan. But the uncertain situation in Afghanistan are of great anxiety (Notezai, 2021). The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Afghan Taliban enjoy intimate relationship. The US-Taliban peace deal encouraged TTP to carry out attacks inside Pakistan. Analysts observe that TTP will hinder the progress of CPEC project in FATA and adjoining districts. Following US withdrawal, the TTP and other insurgent elements prompted their terrorist activities to show that they are still active (Notezai, 2021).

### **Challenges at diplomatic front**

Challenges at diplomatic front cannot be ignored. India claim Gilgit Baltistan as a part of disputed territory which poses a huge challenge to CPEC (Yiwei, 2018). The United States concerns over growing Chinese presence in the region cannot be excluded. The United States, which is a major source of Pakistan's economic and security aid is anxious about Chinese presence in Gwadar Port which is a direct challenge to its interests (Tiezzi, 2014) Islamabad must involve United States and other countries to protect the project from adverse results (Shabana & Malik, 2019).

### **India's Hegemonic Designs**

The geostrategic location of India and its external policy towards the regional countries have always been based on domination (Yiwei, 2018). Its policy towards Pakistan and China have always been provocative. The Indian desires of regional hegemony have caused several territorial disputes with China. The India's friend United States has voiced deep concerns over the construction of CPEC (Raza, 2021). The blatant Indian involvement is of huge concern. Several countries consider CPEC as a strategic threat to their military and economic interests. Clear evidences have been found that Indian intelligence agency RAW has set up a special cell to destroy CPEC in Pakistan (Ibrar, 2016).

India consider CPEC illegal as it runs through the disputed territory of Kashmir. Pakistan has substantial evidences of Indian involvement in Baluchistan (Raza, 2021). CPEC is a cause of annoyance for India. They are hammering out new strategies to create hurdles for CPEC (Abid, 2020).

### **Iran and Gulf States**

Gwadar is seen as a rising challenger port in the region by Gulf states and Iran. They are concerned that the Port will encroach on economic and trade activities that are currently restricted to Dubai and Chabahar. They also fear that Gwadar would become as big as Hong Kong or Singapore. In terms of the development of Gwadar Port, the interests of different countries are diverse. For the United States and India, China's presence near the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is a major strategic concern (Husain, 2018). They are concerned that their

interests in the Middle East and Central Asian Republics (CARs) are under risk (Khetran, 2015).

### **Cause of worry for UAE**

UAE is not happy with the idea of CPEC. The construction of Gwadar port will directly affect Dubai port. It will deprive UAE 70% of its business (Kiani, 2019). Pakistan's refusal to send its forces to help UAE and Saudi Arabia against Houthi rebels in Yemen caused UAE to search for new strategic partners (Kugelman, 2015). Here India is an obvious option for UAE which will threaten Pakistan. (Butt, 2017)

### **Conclusion**

It is obvious from the above discussion that the CPEC multibillion mega project promises economic, strategic and political gains for Pakistan. It will elevate Pakistan's economy and infrastructure. The project will help the country in dealing with the problem of unemployment and inequalities of undeveloped provinces. It carries potential economic benefits for China. Besides Pakistan and China, it will deeply impact regional connectivity and integration. But the geographic location of Pakistan and changing scenario in the neighboring country Afghanistan poses some risks and challenges to this mega project. There are reliable evidences that India is working hard to obstruct the construction of CPEC. The state of Pakistan must find the reasons behind hurdles to CPEC and solve them on priority bases. The government must carry developmental programs to overcome the grievances of the People. The government must bring the Baloch insurgents to the negotiating table and assure them that The CPEC is not a threat but a blessing which promises better economic prospects for them.

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