

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FROM CPEC FOR PAKISTAN

Mohd Aftab Siddiqui,
Associate professor of Political science,
SRK PG College Ferozabad
Affiliated to Dr B R Ambedkar University Agra

ABSTRACT

CPEC stands for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a project to connect Pakistan's deep-water port of Gwadar and the Chinese city Kashgar through pipelines, railway lines and highways. China initiated the project as a part of its broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This study aimed to identify and critically analyse Pakistan's various opportunities and challenges from CPEC. The project aims at developing infrastructure and acting as a catalyst to support the economic development of both countries, as well as opening new trade, transportation and business opportunities to other neighbouring countries such as India, Afghanistan and Iran. Other benefits identified in the study include improved infrastructure of Pakistan, Energy security, efficient connectivity between China and Pakistan leading to more investment opportunities, Skill development of Pakistani workers, promotion of tourism, agricultural development, regional stability at the border between China and Pakistan and the International standing of Pakistan. On the other hand, the challenges identified were the pressure of its timely execution within regional disputes and security concerns. Further, the Chinese government's lack of transparency and the project's undemocratic nature, regional economic and income disparity. The interference of Pakistan's military in the decision-making board, the political and regional instability and local communities that will be affected by the project. These issues must be addressed on a priority, essentially by Pakistan's government, for the project's successful implementation and long-term benefits.

Keywords: *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Gwadar Port, Ancient Silk route, Trade Deficit.*

INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a major project that aims to link the western region of China and the southern part of Pakistan. The links will be constructed through a network of railway lines, highways and pipelines. This corridor is a segment of China's larger belt and

Road Initiative (BRI) and works towards enhancing the trade and economic cooperation between China and Pakistan while also welcoming other countries to participate in business through the link (Khan & Khan, 2019).

Talking about the advantages of CPEC for Pakistan, this project is working towards building a stronger infrastructure and attracting new business opportunities by creating a network of roads, pipes and railway lines. Ali (2016) suggests that this will facilitate trade and investment, remote link regions, and help them enter major markets. Hussain (2017) also stated that this would help Pakistan overcome issues of an energy shortage, create job opportunities and improve overall transportation. The CPEC will also enhance the geopolitical position influence of Pakistan. Further, the author suggests that the project is expected to develop the county's infrastructure of industries and accommodation by helping them connect with global value chains. Overall, CPEC has great potential to enhance the economic landscape greatly and thus is highly beneficial for Pakistan.

However, several researchers argue that CPEC can bring new challenges to Pakistan. Discussing the challenges, Ali (2016) stated that one of the major issues is the burden of debt that Pakistan might have to handle for financing CPEC development, which might lead to fiscal weaknesses and inevitably depend upon Chinese financial support. Hameed (2018) also stated that CPEC might also increase regional disparities due to the concentration of investments in selected regions, such as Punjab. This will leave other areas behind and may lead to regional disputes. Moreover, the project also has negative environmental impacts on Pakistan's fragile ecosystem, such as in the Port area. Bhattacharjee (2015) also stated that this project could also force the social displacement of local communities.

Talking about its geopolitical influences, Hussain (2017) stated that this will worsen Pakistan-India and Pakistan-US relations, which will put pressure on Pakistan's security and strategic challenges and financial stability. According to Khan & Khan (2019), Pakistan needs huge financial aids in current scenario and consequently, it will rely heavily on Chinese financial aids through CPEC. Also, regional disputes can happen due to non-uniform development due to investments in the selected region. Regarding its environmental impacts, the project may adversely impact Pakistan's ecosystem, causing displacement of local communities. This study aims to use research from different fields to fill in these gaps and come up with a full picture of CPEC's opportunities and challenges for Pakistan.

AIM OF THE STUDY

This research aims to critically evaluate the impact of CPEC on Pakistan and identify the key opportunities and challenges that it may bring for Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the study by Baig et al. (2023), after COVID-19, poor countries are especially in need of the importance of stakeholder thinking, which needs sustainable solutions for other diseases and food security. China Pakistan Economic Corridor could serve as a model for cooperation in west-east or developed-underdeveloped food security through economic corridors. All participants recognised that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor had enviable and clearly beneficial benefits for food security, despite disparities in stakeholder interest, influence, and understanding. As the policy implications project, integrated reports from numerous ministries should be unidirectional for synergy and should take into account all stakeholders because ignoring any group will lead to a repetition of the past.

Khan et al. (2022) stated that the development of human resources, including programmes to enhance workers' skills and capacity, is one of the project's most important elements. Several training and development initiatives have been started under CPEC to raise the level of expertise of Pakistani workers in several industries, including infrastructure, energy, and agriculture. With the help of these programmes, workers' technical and vocational skills will be improved, and they will be better prepared to contribute to the modern economy. The project also includes attempts to increase academic cooperation and give Pakistani students financial aid to study abroad in China, both of which will enhance the standard of learning and research in Pakistan.

Akhtar et al. (2021) found that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) includes six land-based commercial and infrastructure corridors. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a huge development project, is presumably the most finished one. Pakistan views this as the beginning of a new era of connectedness and integration. This will have a significant impact on the economic prosperity of the region and Pakistanis' quality of life. According to the authors, the elder demographic; "mature," "well educated," or "respondents with a university education," is quite knowledgeable about CPEC. Younger people anticipate less social change and migration impact than older people, but older people anticipate greater economic and environmental benefits. There are several social, economic, scientific, organisational, environmental, and geopolitical issues associated with megaprojects, particularly those carried out in developing nations.

Ali (2020) said that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a significant component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, and is of interest to Pakistani and international scholars and policymakers (BRI). A collection of initiatives known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aims to develop industrial areas and communication and energy infrastructure. CPEC may exacerbate the region's political climate, particularly in South Asia, where it might exacerbate tensions between Pakistan and India since India views the project as a Chinese political and security endeavour. But, study has showed that there are a lot of large challenges that need to be solved before CPEC projects can be finished effectively. These difficulties include concerns about internal security, mistrust from other countries, the potential for sabotage, and governance issues. The Pakistani government must take action, such as creating a special force for the security of CPEC projects, to circumvent these issues.

According to the study by Ahmed (2019), from the first official diplomatic negotiations between the two nations in 1950, their relationship has evolved significantly. According to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) deal, China would spend \$62 billion in Pakistan. This has enhanced economic cooperation between the two nations and earned China the moniker of Pakistan's "all-weather friend." Beijing and Islamabad view the CPEC as a "game-changer" because of its significance for the global economy and politics. CPEC has been a cause of friction between Pakistan's federal and provincial administrations since its inception in 2015. This essay examines the impact of the CPEC on Pakistan's ambitions to establish a strong nation. CPEC has also provided Pakistan with a much-needed opportunity to resolve interprovincial and federal-provincial tensions through dialogue and compromises based on nation-building principles, according to the report.

Khurshid et al. (2018) stated that the Construction of energy facilities, including hydroelectric and coal-fired power plants, is part of the CPEC project, which would assist Pakistan in addressing its energy crisis and increasing energy security. Construction of energy projects, like coal-fired power plants and hydroelectric power stations, is one of the project's key elements. These projects will alleviate Pakistan's ongoing energy issue and offer energy security. Since there is now a serious lack of electricity in Pakistan, load shedding and frequent power outages negatively influence the nation's economy and the daily lives of its citizens.

According to Ullah et al. (2018), the construction of resorts, hotels, and recreational areas is planned as part of CPEC, which will aid in the expansion of Pakistan's tourism industry. To improve the infrastructure in popular tourist destinations in Pakistan like Gwadar, Gilgit-

Baltistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, several CPEC projects have been initiated. The tourist industry may grow to be a significant source of employment and revenue for the country. In addition to infrastructure development, CPEC also involves tourism-related initiatives for Pakistan, like advertising campaigns and cultural exchange programmes.

According to Khurshid (2018), the two countries must create a border security unit to oversee the exchange of all kinds of services, goods and people. There are stakeholders other than Pakistan and China, such as Iran, Afghanistan, Central Middle East, India and even USA. Pakistan's worsening economy is worrisome and could cause serious trouble to its international security if strict steps are not taken immediately. CPEC surely is a great opportunity for Pakistan to come out of its worsening situation and revive its falling economy. With the given circumstances, Pakistan has a great opportunity to welcome CPEC and take strategic steps to manage the challenges and risks coming with the project.

According to Hameed (2018), since early times, the initiatives of developing the infrastructure of Pakistan have been mainly concerned with the process of nation-building. But their attempts to create a homogeneous space, the central state of Pakistan, which Punjab dominates, always creates fractured spaces that cause their people to have personal regionalist goals. CPEC has also focused on developing and implementing regionalist policies by assuming an unequal share of the project to Punjab while maintaining the secrecy and non-democracy of the project's planning. CPEC offers a chance for the military to increase its control of the decision-making process in the state. The Pakistan army has therefore shown interest in playing a formal role in the CPEC project's execution. This process was supported by the security concerns of Beijing and its war against the militants of Uighur. Hence, the author suggests that CPEC can only enhance the power and control of the Pakistan army if there is a solid local or international challenge to this method.

According to Hussain (2017), economic corridors are a great way to interconnect countries and collectively develop in many ways. These corridors facilitate investment opportunities and hence grow the economy of both countries. The CPEC project between Pakistan and China aims at linking Gwadar and Kashgar and will allow China to easily access the oil-rich Middle Eastern regions, such as Saudi Arabia, as well as the Arabian sea. Therefore, the project is envisioned to benefit China, Pakistan, and other close countries such as India, Iran and Afghanistan.

According to Ahmed & Mustafa (2016), under the CPEC, numerous initiatives have been started to enhance irrigation systems, water management, and the development of

contemporary farming methods. These initiatives seek to enhance Pakistan's agriculture, which significantly contributes to the nation's economy in terms of quality and productivity. The expansion of agriculture under CPEC is anticipated to increase agricultural output, which will enhance food security, boost exports, and create jobs in the sector. Additionally, the CPEC includes programmes to support agricultural research and training to enhance farmer skills and broaden the adoption of contemporary farming practices across the nation.

According to Ali (2016), CPEC can begin large-scale socioeconomic development in Pakistan if it comes into effect as per the plans. It has the potential to pave the way for regional connectivity of economy and trade. It will also facilitate integration between the region of Central, south and East Asia. CPEC will therefore establish a regional economic integration and will help in resolving the political differences by allowing a better environment of economic cooperation. However, the author also suggests some threats, such as political controversy in Pakistan regarding their route's selection in different regions, degrading security measures and the situation in Afghanistan, which can potentially affect Pakistan and the lack of reliability and trust within certain states of Pakistan. The CPEC will bring economic platforms for Pakistan; however, both countries may have to devise strategic solutions to address issues about international security, internal political unrest and civic unrest.

According to Haq & Farooq (2016), China has little to no interest in interfering with Pakistan's power distribution and control structure. Therefore, these imbalances can be further exacerbated due to CPEC. China is more interested in preserving stability among the political entities in its bilateral relations. This can be understood from its no strings attached policy of aid, no intention to interfere with internal issues and respecting the sovereignty of all territories. However, China's national interests in its foreign policies need to be more transparent, which are often seen as deviating from its non-intervention principles. This can be seen in China's absolute intolerance towards its regionalist ambitions. Due to this problem, it is highly unlikely that China will respond respectfully towards regional elites. Therefore, CPEC has the potential to maintain the status quo of power distribution in Pakistan only when there is national or international criticism against the negative effects of CPEC in its states.

According to Butt & Butt (2015), for CPEC to be successful, Pakistan's government must consider all the stakeholders, such as the people living near the corridor and local governments. Further, political instability, civic unrest and regional extremism cause hindrances in infrastructural works and will certainly affect the CPEC project. Pakistan has identified and

realised these problems and is now taking steps to deal with the issues, such as chasing down militant organisations. Pakistani Government have decided to establish a security regime with an army division for the protection of CPEC from security dangers. Pakistan is already a country with different ethnicities, so promoting diversity is not a challenge, which will help in minimising racial discrimination and bigotry. The efforts can further reach out to educational reforms to unite all these efforts in the future. Beijing can help Pakistan deal with many of its issues, such as handling its falling economy, terrorism, religious extremism and poverty.

According to Abid & Ashfaq (2015), developing the Gwadar port and using it as the business hub for export/import business will cause inequality of income as compared to other regions. To rectify this issue's impact on CPEC, Pakistani Government has to deal with such inequalities in the future by reducing the disparity. For this, they can build smaller industrial units and develop the infrastructure in the far regions of Balochistan. As China is one of the strongest economic powers, it has decided to take responsibility for the successful execution of the CPEC project. For China, CPEC will become a zone of economic trading. The author further suggests that the sectors responsible for planning and development of the project should research ways to monitor different affairs to identify the impact of any scheme of development. Also, regional government entities such as the government of Balochistan must ensure that the locals also get the benefits of CPEC and that all their basic problems, such as water, electricity and education, are facilitated for them. The project should also offer employment in the local communities for local economic growth.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

The CPEC is a large-scale infrastructure and economic development project for both China and Pakistan. It also aims to offer business and trade opportunities to other countries. The project has great potential to bring significant economic benefits but can also bring several challenges and risks. Understanding the opportunities and challenges will help policymakers and stakeholders to draft better policies based on facts. According to Islam & Cansu (2020), CPEC has various impacts, such as environmental, geopolitical, social and economic. This study took a holistic approach to examining and understanding the broad global and regional geopolitical implications of CPEC on Pakistan and discussed factors such as China's strategic interests too, along with the impact on regional stability and regional security of Pakistan. The study also aimed at identifying how this project will affect social life in Pakistan, including its impacts on human rights, cultural heritage and local communities. Talking about the economic impacts, this research aimed at

identifying and analysing the key economic impact on both Pakistan and China, including its potential to boost the economy, improve infrastructure and create jobs.

Several opportunities for Pakistan were identified in the study, such as a boost to the economy, development of infrastructure such as roads, railway networks and industries, better energy security to deal with the ongoing energy crisis, better connectivity to travel between Pakistan and China, investments and industrialisation, development of employable skills among Pakistani people, promotion of tourism due to better connectivity and improvement international profile of Pakistan among the world. Further, the study revealed that various challenges could compromise these opportunities. Some of the various challenges identified in the study are the issues of border security and timely execution, lack of transparency in CPEC policies and objectives of China, interference of Pakistani Military, internal regional disputes within Pakistan, interference of internal militant and terrorist groups, the regional income disparity and economic development disparity within Pakistan. These challenges and their mitigation strategies are discussed below in detail:

THE ISSUES OF BORDER SECURITY AND TIMELY EXECUTION

CPEC surely is a great way for socioeconomic development for China, Pakistan, and other neighbouring countries. It will establish the link for trade and regional economic connectivity between Central, South and East Asia, because of which will lead to the development of an economic community in the regions under its influence. However, to make the most out of it, its timely execution is one of the most crucial factors. Other important factors highlighted by the author were the issues of trust deficiency among regional states, political controversy in Pakistan regarding the route's selection for CPEC, effective solutions to security threats and a change in the attitude of trade relations between India and Pakistan. CPEC is highly critical for China's energy security goals, but it is bound to suffer from internal instability, political and civil issues, regional security and the activities/interference of the Pakistan Army in the decision-making board (Rathore et al. 2020).

THE LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND INTERFERENCE OF PAKISTAN MILITARY

The aim of Pakistan to create homogeneously and uniform spaces in its country has always been compromised by Punjab regions, as it always has been a hub of local disputes, and people there tend to have personal beliefs and regional policies that are not streamlined with the national goals. Stressing the Pakistani military interference with the CPEC project, the author stated that the

military could use the project as a chance to expand its influence and control over the decision-making for the states affected. Over the years, its rigorous infiltration into Pakistan's politics, economy and society has helped them create an important presence in the states (Ashraf et al. 2018).

Since CPEC also lacks transparency and secrecy, it has facilitated an opportunity for the Pakistani military to push for a role in its decision-making board. It is highly common around the world to use the name of security to justify secrecy, censorship and lack of transparency. The same technique is being pushed into the CPEC project, making the project extremely unequal and undemocratic. China is interested in protecting its bilateral relations as its international actions don't reflect its policies and promises (Ishaque, 2016). Therefore, an international reaction is critical to criticise these negative activities and influences on Pakistan to keep it in check with its original objectives.

INTERNAL REGIONAL DISPUTES AND LOCAL MILITANT ORGANISATIONS

Economic corridors such as the CPEC project are great strategies to interlink countries and facilitate fast economic development. The CPEC project also aims for the same, especially when Pakistan's economic condition is worsening critically. This will allow Pakistan to revive its economic power and bring infrastructure to support better living standards for its people. As for China, the corridor will allow their easy reach to the middle eastern regions and the Arabian Sea (Ahmad et al. 2018). The trade opportunities extend beyond China and Pakistan to the middle-eastern countries, India, Afghanistan and Iran.

However, Pakistan has a long history of continuously running regional disputes and challenges related to law and order, like in Balochistan (Wen & Saleem, 2021). The author suggests that such issues are very sensitive and must be handled with a properly planned approach. As for Pakistan, the country's government must track down all the growing militant organisations and put an end to them to support positive society building. There are other issues, such as terrorism, religious disputes, poverty and lack of electricity, which must be handled mutually by Pakistan and China for the successful execution of CPEC. In the end, the author stated that Pakistan has identified and understood these requirements and is already taking appropriate measures to sustain CPEC.

THE REGIONAL DISPARITY IN INCOME AND DEVELOPMENT

CPEC's immediate results will be reflected in the development of Gwadar port which will become an international hub or centre for facilitating business and trade. These businesses and trades will bring significant changes and improvement in the landscape of the province of Balochistan and the entire of Pakistan. However, the author stresses the income disparity factor, which will arise due to the unequal development and cash flows in the Balochistan Gwadar port regions and the rest of the regions (Rathore et al. 2020). To deal with this challenge, a great strategic move for the Pakistani Government is to develop small industries dispersed strategically in the other regions not benefited by CPEC. This will facilitate a more even and fair distribution of infrastructure and social and economic development. The responsibility to build the corridor has been undertaken by China, as the corridor is also an integral part of China's economic development. Overall, the author highlighted the need to develop policies to consider the socioeconomic impact of CPEC on the local communities, which can be further strengthened by close monitoring of the process and results (Wen & Saleem, 2021). The most basic needs that must be met are building a safe and healthy lifestyle for the local communities under the influence of CPEC, such as providing education, electricity, clean water and healthcare.

DISCUSSION

There are various gaps in the current studies regarding how CPEC will influence China and Pakistan's economy and overall development. First, the impact of CPEC on the environment and social life still needs to be investigated further as it is still unexplored, such as habitat loss, air and water pollution, disruption in the ecosystem & climate change. Second is the impact on local communities, such as the people living in and around the Gwadar Port area, so that appropriate solutions can be devised and implemented. Third, even if the project aims at the economic development of Pakistan and China, the economic benefits must be critically evaluated beyond infrastructural developments. This includes its actual potential to generate employment opportunities, technological development of Pakistan, value addition to its supply chain and sustainability (Bhattacharjee, 2015). Fourth, there is also a need to evaluate the impact of the project on Pakistan's security and political dynamics, especially its relations with India and U.S.

CONCLUSION

The CPEC has a wide range of benefits and challenges for all countries affected by it. Given the worsening economic situation of Pakistan, CPEC can emerge as a saviour of the country, but at the same time, its weak and vulnerable state also opens the door for various potential threats to

its national security and political power distribution. Therefore, the CPEC has been criticised for its various impacts on the geopolitics of Pakistan and China, Pakistan's natural environment and local communities, debt and security concerns. Despite all the challenges, CPEC is a significant project that can bring incredible benefits if executed properly. The developments of CPEC directly and negatively impacts the relations of Pakistan and India to extreme levels. Further, the research suggests that the strategic impacts of CPEC should be addressed. The name of security has been used to defend arbitrary actions of the state, and lack of censorship and transparency, making the planning and execution of CPEC undemocratic and unfair. CPEC has the potential to strengthen the geopolitical influence and economic development, which can be seen as a threat by other countries, particularly in India and U.S. This can also be due to its long-term history of breeding terrorism. Thus, the entity which will be most affected due to CPEC is; Pakistan. Its success depends upon its ability to solve problems, such as maintaining transparency in its decisions and goals to avoid any dominance and interference of Pakistan's military, taking a sustainable construction approach and developing the local communities.

However, there are also certain limitations to the available studies/data on which this study is based, which may compromise the results. CPEC is a large and complex project which is still in its evolutionary phase. Due to the ever-changing business environment around the world, several uncertainties can influence its results/benefits. Thus, it is difficult to predict its implications for Pakistan accurately. CPEC is a long-term goal which may take even decades to complete. Therefore, understanding its impacts on both countries may take a similar amount of time. This is also due to the fast-changing economic environment around the world. The CPEC connects two countries-China and Pakistan. Due to its potential opportunities and challenges, it is a politically sensitive project. Thus, the research may need help finding factual and financial data. Since the study is based on currently available research data and personally disclosed facts and figures by the CPEC itself, the research may need to find comprehensive and reliable data on the project and its financing.

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