

Evaluation of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and its Security Implications for India

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was conceived as a multidimensional development project under China's Belt and Road Initiative to connect the Gwadar Port of Pakistan to Kashgar region of China, aimed to reduce the travel time and dependency of China on Malacca Strait and provide easy access to the Arabian Sea. China's investment through CPEC is seen as a strategic move to maintain its regional hegemony, economic gains, and strategic alliance with Pakistan. The Pakistan-China relations have always had India as its central theme, with China trying to balance India in South Asia while Pakistan seeing China as a counterweight to India. India has opposed the CPEC project as it passes through Gilgit-Baltistan region,

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which is a disputed area and illegally occupied by Pakistan. Moreover, CPEC is facing numerous obstructions in Pakistan due to security issues, economic crisis, and frequent terror attacks on its infrastructures. The development of the CPEC through disputed territories will have security implications for India's territorial sovereignty. Issues that encompass India's territorial integrity significantly challenge its strategic, economic, and geopolitical interests in the region. India is, thus, not in agreement with the proposal of CPEC and must work out its own stratagem that would assist as a counterweight in the region.

Introduction

China and Pakistan signed a major agreement on 20 Apr 2015, to launch the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multi-billion-dollar project aimed at connecting Gwadar Port to Kashgar in western China.¹ The agreement was signed with an initial investment of USD 46 bn. Since then, the project has expanded to around USD 62 bn and has become a central element in the strategic relationship between the two countries.²

These developments have become a cause of concern, as there is a growing apprehension that this corridor is being developed for strategic gains to encircle India.³ However, both China and Pakistan rather claim that the alliance does not have any offensive intent, rather, it is driven by necessities of national interests in the form of energy security for China and socio-economic development for Pakistan. India has consistently opposed the projects in the so-called CPEC, which are in the Indian territory and illegally occupied by Pakistan.⁴ In Feb 2025, the Prime Minister of Pakistan reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to advancing the CPEC into its second phase, emphasising its role as a cornerstone of Pakistan's economic and regional connectivity.⁵

However, CPEC is facing numerous challenges and setbacks to its progress due to security concerns, economic crisis, insurgency and unrest in the Baluchistan region, internal politics, and terrorism inside Pakistan. Although, Islamabad has been working hard to refuse every extremist action and any form of terrorism, the problem with terrorism is still not declining in the country. There have been several attacks on Chinese engineers working in Pakistan, and



Map 1: CPEC Route from Kashgar to Gwadar

Source: Indian Defence Review

some of them even lost their lives.⁶ India needs to carefully monitor the developments around CPEC and its expansion, engage in diplomatic efforts to safeguard its interests and explore opportunities for collaboration and cooperation with regional partners to ensure a stable and prosperous South Asia. This article uses qualitative methods and delves into CPEC, its present status, strategic interest of China and Pakistan, security concerns for India and lastly, it offers a way forward and conclusion.

Understanding CPEC

The CPEC projects are broadly divided into energy, transport infrastructure, Gwadar, industrial cooperation/special economic zones, and social sector development. The 3,218 kms land corridor

will run from Kashgar to Gwadar and is expected to be completed by 2030. The CPEC is passing through Gilgit–Baltistan (GB) in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the disturbed region of Baluchistan. Out of USD 62 bn investments, nearly USD 33 bn is earmarked for energy projects, USD 11 bn is for transport infrastructure, and a little over an additional USD 18 bn is shared across various industrial and urban development projects.⁷ The most significant project within CPEC is Gwadar Port.⁸ Gwadar Port holds great importance as it offers China a shorter and more secure route for importing oil and goods, bypassing longer maritime routes like the Strait of Malacca. It is expected that Gwadar Port's development into an economic powerhouse will stabilise Pakistan's Baluchistan region and provide China access to the Arabian Sea. According to a Chinese media report, under CPEC Phase- (Ph) I China and Pakistan have completed 38 projects (USD 25.2 bn) and an additional 26 projects (USD 26.8 bn) are in the pipeline, with many included in CPEC Ph-II.⁹ A total of 63 projects were planned to be completed by 2030; however, till now only 38 projects have been completed, which is much behind schedule. The present status of major projects is as under:

Ser No	Gwadar Projects	Estimated Cost (USD mn)	Location	Status
1.	Gwadar Port and Free Zone	300	Gwadar	Ph-I Completed; Ph-II started in Jul 2001
2.	East Bay Expressway	179	Gwadar	Completed
3.	Pak China Friendship Hospital	100	Gwadar	Completed
4.	1.2 MGD Sea Water Desalination Plant	13	Gwadar	Completed
5.	Pak China Technical and Vocational Institute	10	Gwadar	Completed
6.	New Gwadar International Airport	230	Gwadar	Completed
7.	Fresh water treatment, water supply and distribution	INR 11.39 bn	Gwadar	Ph-I and II completed; Ph-III under progress

Ser No	Gwadar Projects	Estimated Cost (USD mn)	Location	Status
8.	Hoshab and Awaran (M-8)	INR 26 bn	146	Under progress
9.	Zhob Quetta (Kuchlak) (N-50)	INR 66.8 bn	305	Under Construction
10.	Reconstruction of the Karakoram Highway Ph-II (Havelian to Thakot)	1,315	120	Completed
11.	Multan-Sukkur Motorway(M-5)	2,889	392	Completed
12.	Hakla DI Khan Motorway	INR 122.2 bn	297	Completed
13.	Khuzdar-Basima Road N-30	INR 19.19 bn	106	Completed
14.	Orange Line (Lahore Metro)	1,626	27	Completed
15.	Upgradation of Karachi-Peshawar Line ML-1	6,806	173	In Planning
16.	Cross border OFC	44	820	Completed
17.	Pakistan Port Qasim PowerProject	1,912	1,320	Operational
18.	Thar Coal Power Project	995	660	Operational
19.	HUBCO Thar Coal Power Project	498	330	Operational
20.	Sahiwal Coal Power Project	1,912	1,320	Operational
21.	Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park	1,301	1,000	Phase I Completed 400MW
22.	Suki Kinari Hydropower Project	2,000	884	Operational
23.	Karot Hydropower Project	1,720	720	Operational
24.	China hub coal Power project, Hub Balochistan Company	1,912	1,320	Operational
25.	Gwadar coal power project	542	300	Under process

Ser No	Gwadar Projects	Estimated Cost (USD mn)	Location	Status
26.	UEP Windfarm, Jhimpri, Thatta	250	100	Operational
27.	Dawood wind power project, Thatta	113	50	Operational
28.	Sachal Windfarm, Thatta	134	50	Operational
29.	Matiari to Lahore Transmission Line	1,658	4,000	Operational
30.	Kohala Hydropower Project	2,400	1,124	In Planning
31.	Azad Pattan HydropowerProject	1,600	701	In Planning
32.	Three Gorges Second and Third Wind Power Project	150	100	Operational
33.	SSRL Thar Coal Block-I 7.8 mtpa and Power Plant (2×660MW) (Shanghai Electric)	1,912	1320	Operational
34.	HUBCO Thal Nova Thar Coal Power Project	498	330	Operational
35.	Rashakai Economic Zone, M-1, Nowshera	1,000	Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	
36.	Dhabeji Special Economic Zone	1,530	Thatta, Sindh	
37.	Allama Iqbal Industrial City, Faisalabad	3,217	Faisalabad, Punjab	
38.	Bostan Industrial Zone	1,000	District Pishin bordered with Quetta, Baluchistan	

Table: Status of Major Projects under CPEC¹⁰

It is also believed that instead of improving the economic condition of Pakistan, CPEC has drained its economy. Pakistan's debt is at its highest-ever level. The total public debt of Pakistan as of Mar 2025 has reached PKR 76,007 bn. The PKR 76,007 bn

figure includes PKR 51,518 bn of domestic debt and PKR 24,489 bn of external debt.¹¹ Islamabad is finding itself sinking deeper into a debt trap due to China's continued investments in Pakistan. While many projects under CPEC 1.0 are still pending, it is necessary to look at the future of CPEC 2.0 with debt-trap diplomacy of China in the background.

China-Pakistan Strategic Alliance

China and Pakistan have long enjoyed close diplomatic and military relations, often described as an 'Ironclad Friendship'. CPEC is considered to achieve strategic purposes for both Pakistan and China, besides the narrated economic goals. China said CPEC would continue since it benefits everyone and would not endanger Indian interests. Although not affecting India's national interests, CPEC may strain China-Pakistan-India relations.¹² Besides its main role as a channel for inflow of resources, the corridor may become the medium for spreading China's military belligerence to the region.¹³ CPEC links China to the Gwadar port in the Gulf of Oman and provides it a direct access to the Arabian Sea. This will subsequently increase the Chinese naval activities close to the Indian water, making a stronger Pak-China naval nexus. Further, the CPEC, which is passing through PoK and GB, would see a surge in People's Liberation Army presence, aimed at providing security to Chinese engineers and workers. This aspect establishes Pakistan's grip on the disputed territory and offers a 'Safe Cover' from Indian counterstrikes in response to cross-border terrorism.¹⁴

In the area of defence, Pakistan has ordered many advanced weapons and equipment of Chinese origin, including the VT4 Main Battle Tank, SH-15 self-propelled howitzer, frigates, JF-17 fighter jets, etc.¹⁵ During Operation Sindoor, China provided critical military and strategic support to Pakistan. This assistance encompassed advanced weaponry like PL-15E missile, JF-17 fired Chinese CM-401 hypersonic missiles, Chinese-made CH-4 drones, HongQi (HQ)-9 and HQ 16 systems, besides intelligence sharing.¹⁶ Recently, China has offered to sell new military equipment to Pakistan, including 40 5th generation Shenyang J-35 stealth aircraft with PL-17 missiles, after Pakistan's brief military conflict with India from 07 to 10 May 2025.¹⁷

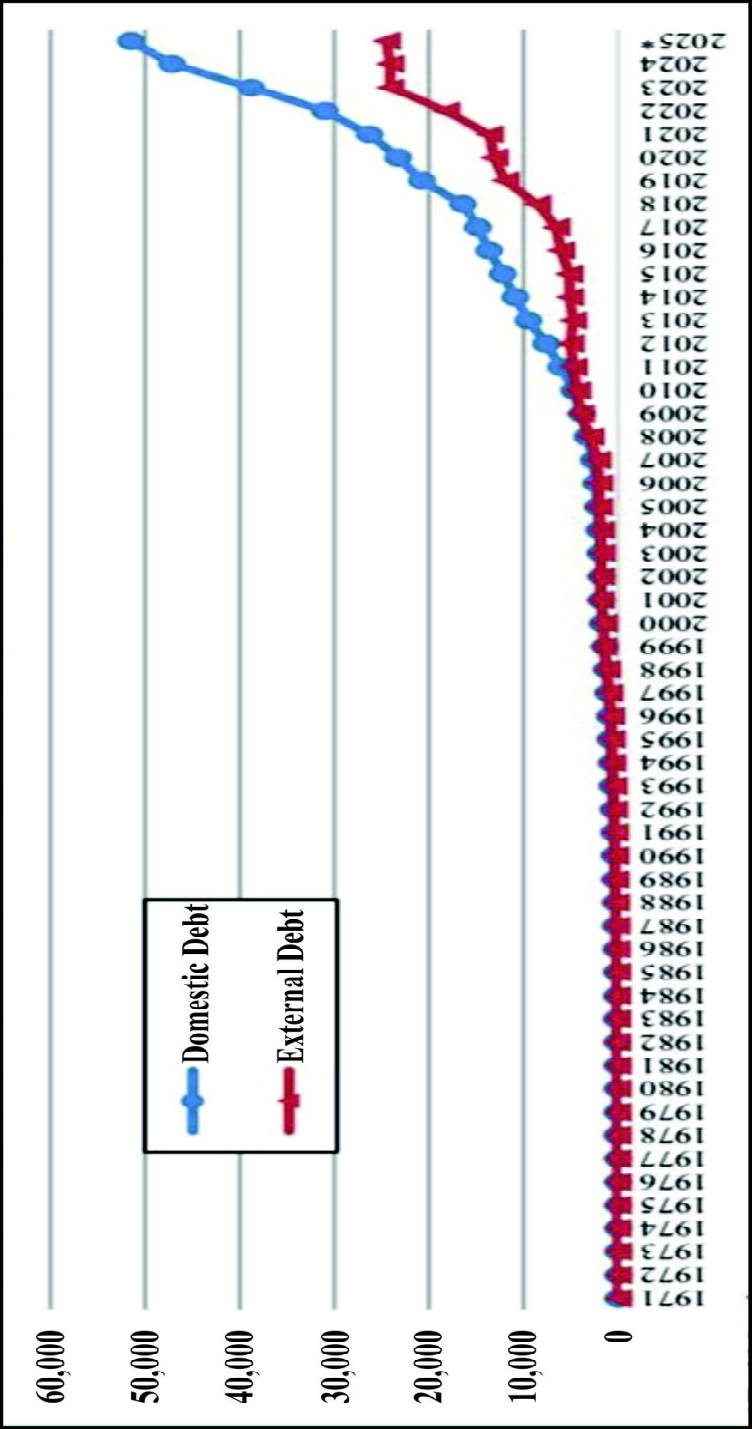


Figure: Pakistan's Domestic and External Debt

Source: Mettis Global Economic Survey

In a strategic move to back Pakistan, China has fast-tracked the construction of a major dam project there just weeks after India suspended the Indus Waters Treaty in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack. The state-run China Energy Engineering Corporation has been developing the Mohmand Hydropower Project in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province since 2019. Originally scheduled for completion in 2026, the project is now being accelerated.¹⁸ However, the relationship between China and Pakistan has seen strain in the recent past due to increasing security threats to CPEC and its infrastructure as well as Chinese nationals. High-profile incidents, such as the 26 Mar attack on Chinese engineers in Shangla, a 2021 Dasu bus attack that killed nine Chinese engineers, and a 2022 attack on Karachi University's Confucius Institute, have underscored the vulnerability of Chinese citizens working in Pakistan.¹⁹ The Baloch Liberation Army opposes CPEC projects, arguing that the Chinese exploit local resources without benefiting the region's indigenous population. The groups have targeted CPEC infrastructure, which has upset China. It has begun to put pressure on Pakistan to resolve this issue. As a result, Pakistan has undertaken a campaign of aggression and oppression to protect CPEC.²⁰ These challenges in Pak-China relations could prompt Beijing to recalibrate its South Asia strategy. China may not overlook Pakistan completely; however, the ongoing security issues could push Beijing to expand its regional relationships, with other partners like Afghanistan to diversify its economic goals and protect its interests in the region.

Security Implications for India

The CPEC passes through GB, which is an administrative province of Pakistan; however, it is not a constitutional part of Pakistan. The GB region is covered by nearly 72,971 sq kms and shares a boundary with China, India, Kazakhstan, and Afghanistan. The geographical location makes GB strategically significant²¹ and helps fulfil China's long-term objective of accessing the region's natural resources. China's growing military capabilities, defence modernisation, and increasing role as a development and security partner to Pakistan and other states in India's neighbourhood concerns New Delhi.²² China and Pakistan are becoming closer in many areas of cooperation and have formed geostrategic and military alliances. The region of Kashmir, including GB is seen as

the physical 'Umbilical Cord' linking Pakistan and China²³, hence, it is the most critical part for the CPEC.

India is aware of the threat emanating from the development of CPEC infrastructure inside the disputed area. Upgrading the Karakoram Highway imposes a high-security threat to India's border security; the highway was constructed through territory illegally ceded to China by Pakistan.²⁴ In fact, the former Indian Minister of External Affairs, Late Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee stated that the development of the Karakoram Highway has serious strategic implications for the region, notwithstanding the illegality of the construction.²⁵ India, thus, has a valid reason to oppose CPEC to safeguard its national interest. These projects consist of many national security elements, which are a cause of concern to the sovereignty and security of the nation.²⁶ The presence of the Chinese military in PoK's GB region, ostensibly to repair and upgrade the Karakoram Highway, has enormous implications for Indian security.²⁷ Considering the overall strategic scenario, any conflict in the future may well develop into a joint, two-front offensive, with Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) becoming the centre of gravity. China is India's near neighbour, and both countries in the Asian region would benefit more from finding ways to cooperate rather than escalating their issues.

Way Forward

India must formulate a robust strategy—leveraging diplomatic, economic, and defence instruments—to counter the deepening Pakistan–China partnership in the region under CPEC. Diplomatically, New Delhi must raise concerns at various international platforms regarding illegal construction of CPEC through disputed territories, which is in violation of India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. India must workout alternatives to CPEC to get trade access to Central Asia and Europe. For example, India is developing the strategically important Chabahar Port in Iran to secure direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia—bypassing Pakistan—and is advancing the International North–South Transport Corridor, a multimodal transportation route connecting India, Iran, Russia, Central Asia, and Europe. India's Act East Policy is in the right direction to improve trade and commerce between the Association of South-East Asian Nations' countries and reduce dependency on China. As per the projections,

India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2025 was likely to be USD 4,187.03 bn, which will be marginally higher than the GDP of Japan at USD 4,186.43 bn. Thus, in all probability, India will be the fourth largest economy of the world in 2025 after the United States, China, and Germany.²⁸

India also needs to fast track infrastructure development projects to connect the border areas, specially the J&K region. On 06 Jun 2025, Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi visited J&K and inaugurated several key infrastructure projects worth INR 46,000 cr to boost road and rail connectivity across the union territory including the Anji Bridge, India's first cable-stayed rail bridge.²⁹ On similar lines, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, on 07 May 2025, launched 50 strategic infrastructure projects across six border states, including 30 bridges and 17 roads to strengthen India's defence preparedness.³⁰ Lastly, India needs to have a robust defence industry to support the current and future defense and military requirement across the land, naval, aerospace, and electronic systems domains. India needs to emerge as a key global leader in defence production and manufacturing. During Operation Sindoor, indigenously manufactured weapon system like Pinaka Multi-barrel Rocket Launcher, BrahMos Supersonic Cruise Missile, Akash played a crucial role and gained global recognition and confidence in Indian weapon systems.

Conclusion

The CPEC is a major concern for India as it seeks to protect its territory from Chinese encroachment. The corridor could further integrate the northern areas into Pakistan and entrench its control there. The Chinese presence may even become a permanent feature, creating the possibility of future claims by China to strategically important areas of GB. This would complicate any resolution of the Kashmir dispute for years and pose a continuing security concern for India. Moreover, given the Chinese presence in both GB and at Gwadar, this region could become increasingly unstable owing to the conflicting interests of China, Pakistan, and India. New Delhi today stands at a strategic crossroads and must devise a suitable response by increasing diplomatic and economic engagement with countries that have not endorsed CPEC; accelerating indigenous defence production to enhance self-reliance; and fast-tracking border-area infrastructure projects to achieve last-mile connectivity.

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