
**CHINA PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR: PAKISTAN'S
GEOPOLITICAL STANDING BETWEEN THE US AND CHINA**

Dr Shabana Fayyaz

*Chairperson and Associate Professor, Defence and Strategic Studies Department
Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad
Email: sfayyaz@gau.edu.pk*

ABSTRACT

The present research study encapsulates Pakistan's geopolitical standing vis-à-vis the US and China with the commencement of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It also reflects upon the multi-dimensional aspects of the Pakistan's geo-strategic importance for both, by primarily focusing on security, economics and politics. Parallel to this, Pakistan's strategic perspective regarding the onset of CPEC and its initiatives to further solidify its relationship with China is highlighted. The impact of the initiation of CPEC upon the US – Pak equation is also deliberated. Theoretical prism of 'Complex Interdependence' put forth by Robert Koehane and Joseph Nye is employed to explain, how economic and social interactions pave way for the mutual security stakes across the board. One of the key inference is, overlapping and interconnectedness of the geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic theoretical ideas and practices are relevant at the global and regional level equally.

Keywords: CPEC, Geopolitics, Neoliberalism, Complex interdependence, Geo-economic

INTRODUCTION

In this globalized era, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor holds significant value in shaping geostrategic and geo-economics dynamics of Sino-Pak-relations by boosting trade, creating economic opportunities and cultural exchange between the two regions. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is based on the pillars of regional integration, connectivity, peace and a win-win model for all (Ministry of Planning - Islamabad, 2016). CPEC is one of the six-trade and infrastructure corridors proposed by China under One-Belt-One Road (OBOR) and have the total economic value of US\$21 trillion (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015). It is a geo-economic and geopolitical move by China to expand to its west-wards and connect to Eurasia heartland,

Africa, Middle East via land. It links 65 countries on three continents, while China shares borders with thirteen nations. So, in a way it compliments Good Neighbor Policy, as it expands trade, economic and infrastructure development cooperation (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015). At the same time, it has much wider canvas beyond its neighboring region. ‘Good Neighbor Policy’ is a strategy developed by the President Xi Jinping of China (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015), to promote interdependence, rather than competitive relationship with neighboring countries and the world by creating a regional hub.

The CPEC can also be visional within the framework of a neorealism or structural realism, a theory is commonly associated with the Waltz (1924-2013) which claims that in an anarchic self-help a system state must take care of their self-interests to ensure its survival (Waltz, 1990). According to neorealism, states are rational actors, hence, they carefully choose and devise means that best help them achieve their objectives. Similarly, Pakistan’s aim can be strategically related to the structural realism point of view, as it aims to improve its economy, security and embark on the route of becoming the next ‘Asian Tiger’ with the support of Chinese investment (which is reportedly \$46 bn. USD (Ahmar, 2015)). While on the other hand CPEC will help China to deal with its energy crisis by providing China with an alternative route through Pakistan and an easier trade access to the Middle East, it is predicted that the project will cut upto 12000 km route to the Middle East oil supplies (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015).

The present research study is divided into three inter-related parts. First part, explores Pakistan’s geopolitical and geo-economic location value and explores why it is important for China or the USA to assert its influence in the region. Moreover, the relative advantages and disadvantages of CPEC for Pakistan are also discussed. Also, how CPEC will strengthen and elevate Pakistan’s regional and international standing. Second part highlights the growing Pakistan- China relationship due to CPEC, while analyzing the significance CPEC for China in terms of international political influence, trade, regional connectivity. Third part underlines the impact of CPEC projects on Islamabad’s relations with the Washington DC, while also stressing upon how Pakistan is being caught up in the US-China competition for dominance in the region. The changing dynamics of the US

interactions with Pakistan coupled with the growing Indo-US relations in the backdrop of the Sino-Pak initiative are also analyzed side by side. Moreover, how China is postulating a threat to the ‘balance of power’ in the region, will also be critically assessed. This study incorporates the neoliberalism and complex interdependence school of thoughts to analyze the change in the global international economic market and how states are dependent on each other to tie in a win-win situation and mitigating the challenges of a fall out in market investments. The concluding section summarizes the multi-dimensional aspects of CPEC both as the regional and global economic and peace dividend. Also, that CPEC can be viewed in a positive light; as security and economic concerns are very integrated and complex in this global interdependent world.

PAKISTAN’S GEO-ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE

Pakistan is strategically located at the junction of three different regions – South, Southwest and Central Asia- in Asia, which has a great political, economic and strategic location. This part of the Indian sub-continent has always held a critical position for the great powers including Great Britain, USA and the former USSR (Rose, 1981:50). Geopolitically, Pakistan joined the US led regional defence pacts in 1950s to contain USSR. Its geostrategic position was further elevated during the USSR invasion of Afghanistan as a close ally of the USA. Similarly, after the events of 9/11 Pakistan’s geopolitical significance grew manifold. Moreover, the commencement of CPEC in 2013 has placed Pakistan’s geostrategic location in further spotlight.

Geopolitics is defined as the method of studying foreign policy to explore how a country’s geographical location determines its politics, political economy and securities, thus demonstrating geographical locations are highly important in the study of international relations (Scholvin, 2016). While, Geo-strategy uses resources, material and non-material including manpower, military capabilities, nuclear weapons, economy, trade to achieve geo-political goals, showcasing both strategies complement each other’s functioning. Presently, we are in an era where geo-economics and geopolitics are overlapping and contain the same ideas as territory, development and security (Sparke, 2017). Geo-economics is generally

thought of as impact of economic policies, trade relations and economic integration on the geopolitics and vice versa. More specifically, it is how geopolitics and security competition among states affect regional integration and trade. It can be deduced that, geo-economics and geopolitics complement each other. Pakistan's geopolitical and geostrategic location is of great value to the United States as Pakistan is strategically located in the neighborhood of Russia and China, hence, "any alliance among world powers enhances its significance" (Defence, 2013).

Geostrategic means the importance of a country or a region as by virtue of its geographical location hence, giving Pakistan the advantage to fully utilize its well-placed strategic location. Stephen Cohn describes this importance "while history has been unkind with Pakistan, its geography has been its greatest benefit" (Defence, 2013).

Pakistan's geo-economic importance can be highlighted by the fact that it provides an easy access to the warm waters. Pakistan also provides the superpowers a gateway to oil and energy resources, by its close proximity with the Middle East (Defence, 2013). Therefore, in this energy scarce world Pakistan is well placed geo-strategically and geo-politically, thus, attracting the interest of the key world players. It can be stated that the US' key interest lies in Pakistan with containing the spread of terrorism which serves the national interest of both the regions (Iqbal, 2017), leading to the integration of the US security and business concerns with Pakistan. As the functioning of economies rests on geopolitical security, therefore, entanglement between geopolitics and geo-economics becomes vital in this globalized world. Thus, it can be stated that the political stability of Pakistan is of great importance to the US, China and the rest of the world due to the complexity of globalization. CPEC entangles features of geopolitics, geo-economics and geostrategic. CPEC focuses on how Pakistan's strategic location can become a hub of trade by providing China's western-province Xinjiang a linkage through road and sea with the Middle East and the Arabian Sea, and then with the rest of the world and simultaneously giving China a new access to sea which is free of the politics of the South China Sea (Cowen and Smith, 2009). Hence, it can be observed that the main reason for Chinese investment in Pakistan is due to Pakistan's key strategic location and economic potential. The

preceding discussion illustrates to what extent Pakistan's geostrategic and geopolitical position is integral for security and stability for both the US and China.

ADVANTAGES OF CPEC

CPEC is said to be a 'Game changer' for Pakistan and has the potential to uplift Pakistan's economy with investment in the energy sector, infrastructure which will in return improve the movement of goods and services across the region, and will lead to an increase in FDI and industrial development in Pakistan (Rafi, Khan and Aslam, 2016). Although Pakistan is blessed with a great strategic location, its geopolitics has engulfed Pakistan in security issues, infrastructure, degradation and energy shortage hindering its development. Hence, with CPEC, Pakistan's strategic perspective is to strengthen its ties with China and to enhance its strategic importance by acting as an important key player for regional trade as CPEC has the capability for serving "as the driver for trade and economic integration between China, Pakistan, Iran, India, Afghanistan and the Central Asian States" (Ali, 2016:2-3), while also developing its economy.

CPEC itself is a huge opportunity for Pakistan. Pakistan is an agrarian based economy and is currently suffering from energy short-fall. Moreover, terrorism and civil conflict has also adversely affected economy and led to political instability. Thus, the influx of Chinese investment through CPEC is viewed as a huge opportunity for Pakistan to build its economy and to emerge as a key player in the region. CPEC will also boost FDI in Pakistan which has said to have increased with Chinese investment of more than \$55.5 billion (Kiani, 2016).

UAE is also looking towards more FDI in Pakistan due to expansion of Pakistani economy and revival of investor confidence (Aftab, 2016). Iran has also expressed interest in joining the CPEC-projects, while Pakistan has invited other Central Asian countries to become part of the CPEC-related projects (Aftab, 2016). Till this date CPEC has brought around \$24.5 billion foreign direct investment along with creating almost 2.5 lac jobs of which 1.5 are Pakistanis (Abrar, 2023), one of the fundamental aspects of Pakistan's foreign policy is regional connectivity (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015) through CPEC. Pakistan aims to elevate its geostrategic position by emerging as a key

player in geopolitics- as “CPEC will link Middle East, Africa and UAE on the South-West, Central Asia and EU in the north, and China in the East of Pakistan” (Aftab, 2016), leading towards more ‘complex interdependence’ (Koehane, 1989). This will in turn ensure more economic integration and trade liberalization globally leading towards a win-win model and not a zero-sum game. This can be envisioned within the lines of the liberal paradigm which actively promotes economic integration and free trade (Sterling-Folker, 2006).

Moreover, accordingly neo liberalist states are individualistic and are primarily interested in their own absolute gains in terms of economy, politics or security. Neo liberalism believes in a laissez-faire economic philosophy advocating for free markets & trade and minimum interference from the state institutions (Kesztyus, 2018). Hence, building their narrative on the non-zero-sum game that states can benefit by the virtues of international cooperation. Thus, Pakistan’s absolute gain due to the onset of CPEC can be examined by the fact: “SBP’s latest figures indicated that FDI inflow of \$149.6 million in May, 2023 compared to \$121.6m in April 2023 and \$141.2m in May 2022” (Iqbal, 2023). The volume should be appreciated in the context of the fact that Pakistan has gone through a huge chunk of depreciating economy and complex political instability specifically in the last year. In the first ten months of fiscal year 2022-23 Pakistan received a total of \$170.1 million foreign direct investment of which 29.7% i.e. \$347.6 million was Chinese investment (Pakistan Today, 2023).

These factors have led to an increase in investment in Pakistan. It is often argued that China’s keen interest in Pakistan is due to its geostrategic location (Rafi, Khan and Aslam, 2016). Hence, it is imperative for Pakistan to realize its geostrategic potential, as Pakistan is giving China the access to Indian Ocean through its Gwadar Port (located in Balochistan Province), which is the most important part of the project (Rakisits, 2015). Thus, taking CPEC in terms of absolute gains and it can be deduced that Pakistan views this project in maximizing its absolute gain (for example, it is predicted that Chinese investment will boost Pakistan’s GDP by over 15% (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015). According to neoliberal institutionalism when nations focus on their individual absolute gains, result is cooperation between states and

as long as it serves the interest of the state in terms of economic welfare, the state is indifferent regarding the gains of the other state (Powell, 1991).

Also, CPEC aims to improve education, health and stability in the region. It will help Pakistan in dealing with the problems of poverty, unemployment, infrastructure and inequities of undeveloped provinces (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015). Lastly, CPEC will also ensure support for Pakistan by China on an international level, due to the growing economic integration.

CHALLENGES

CPEC offers Pakistan a huge opportunity to embark on a journey towards regional connectivity, however, it also exposes Pakistan towards several challenges. These challenges can be identified as external and internal. The biggest internal challenge faced by Pakistan is the issue of security and stability coupled with administrative issues (corruption and nepotism), which needs to be dealt with effectively for the successful implementation of the project (Ahmar, 2015).

Although the construction of the corridor has been defined as pivotal for Pakistan's geostrategic position, this paradigm shift is of a huge concern to India, Israel and the US. "For India, CPEC is a thorn in its paw" (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015:151), as CPEC possesses a huge threat to India and the US submarines in the Indian Ocean due to the rising political and economic influence of China via Pakistan and it also brings Pakistan among the key players. Also, "the recent India-Iran-Afghanistan agreement to develop a trade route from Chabahar to Central Asia has been portrayed by Indian commentators as having changed the historical 'Great Game' for control of the connection between South and Central Asia through Afghanistan. It has been claimed that the agreement will end India's 'isolation' from Central Asia and Pakistan's 'stranglehold' over Afghanistan and create a 'new security paradigm' and a 'geopolitical shift'" (Akram, 2016) placing Pakistan in a very critical position due to mounting tensions with its next-door neighbor. India also has major concerns that the presence of China via Gwadar port will not only affect the maritime balance but also 'disrupt the US-Indo cooperation' (Malik and Akbar, 2021).

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administrative issues (corruption and nepotism), which needs to be dealt with effectively for the successful implementation of the project (Ahmar, 2015). Along with this, Pakistan is concerned that India will keep on trying to disrupt the CPEC to counter the regional and global rise of China and the situation of Afghanistan in post- US withdrawal also poses a huge challenge for both China and Pakistan respectively. Pakistan has already seen the negative spillover effect of instability in Afghanistan (Malik and Akbar, 2021).

EVOLVING BONDS THROUGH CPEC

Sino-Pak friendship rests on the pillar of strong friendship, trust and bilateral trade. Pakistan was amongst the first countries to recognize Communist China, despite maintaining a strong alliance with the West. Pakistan also played the role of a 'bridge state' between the US and China from 1969 to 1971 (Ahmar, 2015). Hence, CPEC represents a great leap forward in Sino-Pak relations. President Xi Jinping along with the President of Pakistan have agreed to strengthen the bond of friendship and cooperation through CPEC.

The significance of CPEC rests on the fact that it is a win-win model for both nations and rest of the world, as CPEC is a major loop in China's One-Belt Road initiative and aims to connect landlocked countries, and benefit West, Central and South Asia (Ahmar, 2015:36).

Hence, due to the vast advantages of this project, it can be projected in parallel with the neo-liberal institutions that formal institutions (for example, like Pak-China friendship center) set norms and values and rule-making through which states seek to maximize their relative gain, as formal institutions make cooperation easier, making CPEC essential towards greater economic integration in the region (Sterling-Folker, 2006). Also, due to the presence of mutual interest, as CPEC is based on the geostrategic interest of both sides that will gain from the cooperation which is a corner stone of neoliberal perspective (Keohane, 1989).

That is, the concept of 'complex interdependence' is applicable here as said by Robert Keohane that complex interdependence binds states to ensure peace, stability, and cooperation. As CPEC will entail the concept of social and cultural globalism which is the movement of ideas, information, and people (Keohane & Nye, 2000). Hence, it

promises to instill shared ideas and values further strengthening their ties. However, according to some of the western quarters, spread of Chinese ideas and norms can impact the US influence in Pakistan and may strain Pak-US relationship.

CPEC is an integral part of China's One-Belt-One Road plan and has international strategic importance as Gwadar port plays a pivotal role in connecting China through the warm waters. This is related to a larger Chinese effort to expand its economic and political influence in Asia and beyond, known, as "President Xi Jinping looks forward to connect China once again with Caspian region and European states on one hand and South Asia and Middle East on the other" (Rafi, Khan and Aslam, 2016:4). Hence, the success of CPEC and a strong alliance with Pakistan is integral for China's vision of geostrategic connectivity and reshaping the trade routes.

The main reason why CPEC is crucial for China is because Beijing aims to foster a mutually vibrant economic and geo-political regional interface with South Asia and balance the Western as well as the Indian influence in the region (Ahmar, 2015). "China is beginning to view Pakistan as a place to showcase its ability to project soft power as well" (Hussain, 2016a). For China's OBOR initiative, Pakistan is a strategic location and acts as a geographical hub between Central and South Asia. Moreover, the US administration under Obama has taken proactive steps towards the containment of China by increasing its military presence in the South China Sea region and strengthening its ties with Japan and Taiwan as well as rejecting China's claim over the strategic seas in the Asia-Pacific (Salik, 2014). "The recent decision by the international tribunal against China over the South China Sea case has further build up pressure on China to explore for alternative secure ways to transport it goods and energy requirements from the Gulf region" (Ali, 2015:3).

Thus, the creation and development of Gwadar Port is the most integral part of the puzzle for China to exert its geopolitical influence, it is also commonly said that Gwadar port holds immense political, strategic and economic benefits for China. Firstly, Gwadar will provide China a shorter trading route with the Middle East and less developed part of the Persian Gulf via the Arabian Sea by saving almost 7580 miles and more than 10,000 miles from Western China to

Middle East as well as saving huge fuel and energy costs, while shipping cheap oil via Gwadar and also make China less vulnerable to the 'Malacca Dilemma' as the Strait of Malacca is becoming a contested territory (Rafi, Khan and Aslam, 2016). The proposed construction of the oil pipeline from Gwadar to Kashgar, has the capacity of carrying one million barrels of oil per day to support China's increasing energy demand (Abid and Ashfaq, 2015). It is also essential to highlight that, due to CPEC, China will be able to enter the Indian Ocean via Pakistan's 'Gwadar Port', and it is often stated that this is the biggest advantage of China. As China will be able to acquire a strong strategic and economic hold in the Indian Ocean effectively making China a 'two-ocean power' which is a direct threat to India as well as to the US, will definitely lead to a change in distribution of power in the region, by balancing the Western influence.

Hence, it can be observed China aims to create regionalism in Asia which is perceived as a direct challenge to the US hegemonic leadership, as CPEC is a clear depiction of 'Asian Regionalism' as it projects a common Asian identity, values and with the creation of a regional trading block that expresses a particular identity and shapes collective action within a geographical region. As China is creating massive interlinked economic markets in Asia and Middle East specifically, it will not only boost the economy of the local countries but also strengthen the Chinese economic growth through Chinese exports (Hassan, 2020). From the above argument it can be deduced that China's engagement with Pakistan is multi-layered: geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic dynamics. Hence, Pakistan should be best prepared to be an economic powerhouse through materializing CPEC.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN-USA RELATIONS

Pakistan has enjoyed a strong diplomatic relationship with the United States during the cold war and even after the United States' invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan has played a pivotal role along with the US in the 'war on terror'. However, due to Islamabad's growing ties with Beijing due to CPEC, ties with the Washington are once again troubled (Krepon, 2016). "The US considers CPEC as an underlying challenge to its hegemony and in direct contest with the

balance of power it has maintained until now” (Hussain, 2016:125-138). The US believes that Chinese increasing presence in Asia is a part of China’s grand strategy aimed at security and military gains which has been carefully crafted in China’s economic aims, which is a direct challenge to the US dominance in the region.

Although the US has not directly opposed CPEC openly, but it is aggressively following the policy to contain China, especially on the commercial front. Hence, it can be argued that the rise of China and the threat it poses to the US hegemony, along with the onset of CPEC being a part of OBOR initiative, has indirectly led Pakistan being involved in the US-China rivalry, thus leaving a strain on US-Pak relations. China aims to counter the United States dominance in the region, making it essential to unravel that whether the US is against CPEC, more so importantly since Pakistan has always been a close ally of the US (Siddiqi, 2016). CPEC can be viewed in the larger context of ‘balance of power’ model that states that national security is enhanced when military and material capability is distributed evenly between great powers so that no one state can dominate other, in this case China balancing the US influence.

In 2016, the U.S investors pulled \$71.9 million out of Pakistan, showcasing the US discontentment with Pakistan’s growing relations with China (Siddiqi, 2016). “Some U.S. foreign policy experts based at the Wilson Centre have been predicting an imminent ‘downgrade’ in U.S relations with Pakistan, and an ‘upgrade’ in relations with India” (Siddiqi, 2016) as India is one of the major player in the geostrategic region. The signing of the ‘Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)’ is an essential part of the American strategy to contain China, which has been spreading its influence across Asia. Also, the US aims to “deploy 60 per cent of its surface ships in the Indo-Pacific in the near future” (Iqbal, 2016) in response to China’s growing influence. “The fact that the CPEC gives China access to the Indian Ocean is India’s biggest fear, it feels Pakistan and China have become a joint threat and their aim is to encircle and contain India” (Siddiqi, 2016). Thus, projecting how the ‘balance of power’ is being altered due to the growing Chinese influence in Asia which is a direct challenge to US hegemonic leadership. “There is a mind-set on China’s part that there is a need to stabilize their western periphery and

that the best means to do so are economic,” says Andrew Small, senior asia fellow at the German Marshall Fund, a trans-Atlantic think tank” (Hussain, 2016). Thus, CPEC in a wider context postulates how the world order is changing from unipolar to bipolar or multipolar which is a direct challenge to the US hegemonic leadership. This can be directly correlated to the realist paradigm as the US aims to curtail the spread of China. As realism predicts, if China’s influence continues to grow it will be a direct threat to the Western ideology and it will challenge the distribution of power (Baylis and Smith, 2005).

Albeit, it is important to recognize that US still holds the key in Asia and will continue to hold it by ‘promoting economic growth, balancing the status quo vis-à-vis China and sustaining its power in the region (Abbasi, 2020). This has further strained the Pak-US relationship. Hence, it’s up to Pakistan as to how it tries to strike a balance between the US and China and make the most out of this opportunity. Lastly, CPEC challenges the US influence over Pakistan’s foreign policy which has primarily been dominated by the US, but now due to CPEC, China will start playing a pivotal role in the making of Pakistan’s foreign policy.

CONCLUSION

CPEC holds critical geo-economic and geo-strategic value for both China and Pakistan respectively. Pakistan needs to harness this opportunity as CPEC can rejuvenate its deteriorating economy. Given Pakistan’s critical geostrategic position, Pakistan must carefully craft its strategic and economic interests and simultaneously balance its relationship between the United States and China, “without upsetting the apple cart” (Siddiqi, 2016). In this scenario, Pakistan can embrace a major part in South Asia to balance superpowers rivalries, while also taking the maximum advantage of its position. Christine Lagarde from the IMF recently said, “This is an important time a moment of opportunity for Pakistan – a country undergoing an economic transformation that can place it well among the ranks of emerging market economies” (Siddiqi, 2016). Henceforth, Pakistan should utilize its geopolitical situation carefully. Also, given the nature of this globalized world where economies, security concerns are interlinked, bringing peace and stability can improve not only Pakistan’s security

situation but also decrease the threat for the US and China.

Lastly, given the geostrategic importance of CPEC it should be seen through the lens of peace and prosperity as CPEC has the ability to foster economic integration between South, Central, West and East Asia. Such an economic integration of CPEC can be viewed within the framework of trade liberalization which may result in resolving the political differences through free trade between South Asia mainly India, Pakistan, China, making Asia the hub of trade and development.

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