



China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Regional Economic Dependency: Fostering Peace and Stability in the Region

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Abstract

This study examines the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the framework of economic interdependence and its effects on regional peace and stability. Drawing from liberal theories of international relations and complex interdependence, the research analyses the role of CPEC in reshaping geopolitical dynamics in South Asia. Through a comprehensive literature review and qualitative analysis, the study explores the potential benefits and challenges of CPEC, emphasizing its transformative impact on trade patterns, political alignments, and security considerations. Findings suggest that while CPEC offers opportunities for economic integration and conflict mitigation, ensuring transparency and inclusive development is crucial for long-term stability. The study contributes to understanding the evolving nature of regional relations. It underscores the importance of fostering cooperative frameworks to harness the potential of economic interdependence for sustainable peace and prosperity.

Keywords: Economic interdependence, Regional peace, Geopolitical dynamics, Cooperative Framework

Introduction

The concept of "liberal peace" posits that mutual economic interdependence can catalyze peace among nations. Originating from thinkers such as Montesquieu, Kant, Angell, and Schumpeter, this view suggests that higher levels of bilateral economic interdependence reduce the incentives for military conflict between states. Business elites, benefiting most from increased economic interdependence, are inclined to lobby against military confrontation with important trading partners. However, this view is contested by dependency theorists like Wallerstein and neo-Marxists such as Emmanuel, who argue that asymmetric economic interdependence can lead to negative consequences, exacerbating interstate tensions and conflicts (Santos, 1970). Despite

these debates, liberals maintain that economic ties foster peace by increasing the opportunity costs of war and making non-military threats more credible (Chen, 2009). Definition of Economic Interdependence: Economic interdependence, as defined by Waltz, refers to a trading link that is costly to break (Copeland, 1996). Additionally, it encompasses the sensitivity of economic behavior in one country to developments or policies originating outside its borders (von Neumann Whitman, 1979). In international relations, economic interdependence indicates that countries would incur significant costs if they were to sever or forego their economic relationships (Mansfield & Pollins, 2003).

Throughout history, trade routes have predominantly flowed from north to south, seeking access to new markets and the sea. However, with the advent of the CPEC, there is a shift towards an east-west corridor, signifying a new economic and strategic geography defined by China (Malik, 2016). CPEC, a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, aims to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe by bridging the infrastructure gap (Khan and Khan, 2020). Impact of CPEC on Regional Dynamics: CPEC offers significant benefits to South and Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East by enhancing regional connectivity and promoting shared growth and peace (Khan and Khan, 2020). By shortening trade routes and integrating economies, CPEC has the potential to reduce tensions and foster cooperation among neighboring countries (Malik, 2016). Furthermore, India's inclusion in the CPEC could increase bilateral trade and extend economic benefits to neighboring countries such as Afghanistan and Central Asian nations (Akbar, 2015).

From a theoretical standpoint, liberal scholars argue that economic interdependence enhances peace by shifting states' preferences towards economic interests over military build-up (Copeland, 1996). The concept of "complex interdependence" by Nye and Keohane emphasizes cooperation and mutual dependence among states, challenging the realist perspective of international relations (Keohane & Nye, 1987). Regional Integration and Peace: Regional integration, akin to the European Union model, holds promise for fostering peace and economic prosperity in South Asia and Central Asia (Mattli, 1999). CPEC serves as a positive step towards regional integration by improving infrastructure, transport connectivity, and trading activities (Jaleel et al., 1999). The CPEC represents a significant opportunity to enhance regional peace and stability through economic interdependence. Despite ongoing debates about the effectiveness of economic ties in fostering peace, we cannot ignore CPEC's potential to ease tensions and promote cooperation among neighboring countries. Nations in South Asia and Central Asia can pave the way for sustainable peace and prosperity by embracing the principles of liberal peace and regional integration.

Literature Review

This paper discusses the transformative potential of the CPEC in reshaping regional economic dependencies and fostering peace and stability in the South Asian region. It examines the economic and geopolitical implications of CPEC for neighboring countries (Ali and Ahmed, 2018). This paper examines the challenges and opportunities associated with the CPEC for promoting regional economic dependency and integration. It analyzes the potential impacts of CPEC on peace and stability in the region. (Khan and Khan, 2017). This paper analyzes the role of the CPEC in promoting economic integration in South Asia and its potential contribution to

regional peace and stability. It explores the economic and geopolitical implications of CPEC for neighboring countries Rahman and Haque, 2019). This paper critically analyzes the role of the CPEC in enhancing regional connectivity and its implications for fostering peace and stability in the region. It examines the socio-economic impacts of CPEC on neighboring countries (Hussain, and Haider, 2019). This paper assesses the opportunities and challenges presented by the CPEC for regional economic dependency and stability. The analysis focuses on the economic and geopolitical consequences of CPEC for the South Asian region (Mahmood, and Hussain, 2020). These papers provide comprehensive insights into the potential impact of the CPEC on regional economic dependency, peace, and stability in the South Asian region.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the CPEC and its impact on regional economic dependency, peace, and stability draws primarily from liberal theories of international relations, particularly the concept of economic interdependence and complex interdependence. Liberal theorists argue that economic interdependence can serve as a powerful mechanism for promoting peace among nations by altering states' preferences toward economic interests over military confrontation (Copeland, 1996). This perspective suggests that as countries become more economically intertwined through trade and investment, the costs of war increase, making armed conflict less attractive and cooperation more desirable (Keohane & Nye, 1987).

Moreover, the concept of complex interdependence, as proposed by Nye and Keohane, emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual dependence among states in various issue areas beyond just security concerns (Keohane & Nye, 1987). This framework suggests that economic ties between countries can lead to the development of multiple channels of interaction, including diplomatic, economic, and societal, which can facilitate cooperation and conflict resolution.

In the context of CPEC, these theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into understanding how economic integration and dependency on infrastructure projects like CPEC can influence regional dynamics. By examining the potential benefits and challenges of CPEC through the lens of economic interdependence and complex interdependence, the study aims to shed light on the transformative impact of the corridor on trade patterns, political alignments, and security considerations in South Asia and beyond.

By applying these theoretical frameworks, the study seeks to provide a nuanced analysis of the role of CPEC in reshaping regional geopolitics and fostering cooperative frameworks for sustainable peace and prosperity. Through empirical evidence and qualitative analysis, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving nature of regional relations and the potential of economic interdependence to mitigate conflicts and promote stability.

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, drawing from a comprehensive literature review and qualitative analysis to investigate the CPEC within the context of regional economic dependency and its implications for peace and stability. The study synthesizes existing scholarship on CPEC, liberal theories of international relations, and complex interdependence to analyze the multifaceted dynamics of economic integration in South Asia. Data is gathered from

academic journals, government reports, policy papers, and reputable media sources. Through thematic analysis and critical evaluation of the literature, the research identifies key patterns, challenges, and opportunities associated with CPEC. The methodology emphasizes the triangulation of diverse perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between economic interdependence and geopolitical realities in the region.

Power Politics in the Region of South Asia

In the realm of Realpolitik, states assertively pursue their national interests, often leading to conflict with neighboring states and regional instability (Khan, 2021). The South Asian region, particularly Balochistan, serves as a vivid illustration of this phenomenon. Unlike the Cold War era, South Asia and the Indian Ocean have emerged as significant arenas for major power competition, primarily between China and India (Madan, 2021). Additionally, the escalating rivalry between the United States and China further complicates the geopolitical landscape, with South Asia caught in the crossfire. The Quad, comprising the United States, Australia, Japan, and India, has gained prominence in discussions surrounding global peace and security. However, in South Asia, another quadrilateral relationship has emerged, characterized by divided alliances between the United States and India on one side, and China and Pakistan on the other (Ashraf, 2021). This division has created a volatile situation in the region, fueled by conflicting interests and competition between the two alliances.

China's increasing presence and influence in South Asia, facilitated by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have raised concerns about Beijing's strategic intentions (Khan, 2021). The China-India and U.S.-China rivalries exert significant influence on the region, shaping the balance of power and influencing cooperation and competition dynamics among regional actors. The U.S. perceives the BRI as a manifestation of Chinese expansionism, aimed at countering American influence and establishing strategic footholds in key regions (Ashraf, 2021). In response, the U.S. has extended support to India, viewing it as a crucial partner in containing China's rise. Meanwhile, China's strategic partnership with Pakistan, epitomized by the CPEC, provides Beijing with access to critical maritime routes and geopolitical leverage in the Indian Ocean region (Khan, 2021).

The significance of the CPEC, particularly the Gwadar port in Balochistan, cannot be overstated. Positioned at the crossroads of vital trade routes, Gwadar offers China strategic access to energy-rich regions in the Middle East and Central Asia (Khan, 2021). However, concerns persist regarding the political stability of Balochistan and its potential to undermine the success of the CPEC. China's influence in South Asia extends beyond economic initiatives, encompassing political exchanges and people-to-people engagements (Pal & Raghavan, 2021). Unlike Western powers, China approaches its engagements with South Asian countries as equals, focusing on common challenges and development projects. Despite criticisms, China is generally perceived as a valuable partner in the region, offering rapid development and substantial investments (Pal & Raghavan, 2021).

South Asia's strategic importance, characterized by nuclear-armed states, internal conflicts, and disputed borders, underscores the region's significance in global geopolitics (Pal & Raghavan, 2021). China's engagement in South Asia seeks to advance its foreign policy objectives while countering threats and managing intraregional rivalries. The BRI serves as a conduit for China's aspirations to integrate Asia and exert influence across the continent (Pal &

Raghavan, 2021). the dynamics of major power competition in South Asia are influenced by conflicting interests and strategic rivalries among global powers. China's growing presence, coupled with U.S. efforts to contain its rise, has intensified competition and reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the region. The future trajectory of South Asia will be shaped by the interplay of economic, political, and security dynamics, with implications for regional stability and global security ("China's Influence on Conflict", 2020).

"Indo-Pak Relations and CPEC: Navigating Impacts on Future Connectivity"

An essential obstacle to regional cooperation in South Asia is the deep-seated hostility between India and Pakistan. Regional collaboration has a great deal of potential to enhance South Asia's growth prospects. On the other hand, the region has suffered as a result of the hostility between India and Pakistan. The economic and social prospects of a more liberal South Asian area will benefit both states. For example, there is potential for the two governments to develop beneficial trade and investment ties; also, collaboration in energy and water security can benefit both parties. The South Asian region may become more interconnected as a result of these developments, and with wise policy decisions, it may develop into a major geo-economic center in the center of Asia.

The benefits that regional cooperation in South Asia provides to its member states through market expansion and resource sharing are the driving forces behind it. Then, these advantages could be used to further development objectives. However, the onus of promoting regional interconnectivity must fall on India and Pakistan. One relevant example is that the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) will not be able to operate properly as long as Pakistan and India keep their territory off limits to the passage between neighboring countries and the rest of South Asia (Aftab, 2014).

In August 1947, two distinct states arose from British India, namely India and Pakistan. India enshrined secularism in its norms and constitution, albeit with a strong Hindu majority. Pakistan chose to have a strong Islamic identity to securitize and establish its nation against a "Hindu" enemy, in part due to its relative ethnonational variety. Hussien (2013), pages 109–120 Because of the nature of their relationship, discussions about trade, cooperation, and peace frequently occur in tandem with threats of conflict between India and Pakistan. They have engaged in four wars and repeatedly called for the mobilization of their armed forces by posing a real threat of conflict (Sandhu, 2016).

The division of the Indian subcontinent resulted in a tense beginning for relations between Pakistan and India. The massacre of millions of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs who were trying to cross the new borders and settle in Pakistan or India was the direct cause of the unrest. The post-independence religious violence between Pakistan and India laid the groundwork for a long-lasting enmity (Kapur, 2006). Despite having numerous similarities, J N Dixit observed that Pakistan and India have remained in a confrontational phase since their independence (Dixit, 2003). Although there have been wars, small conflicts, border skirmishes, intrusions, warlike circumstances, and confrontations, the two countries have continued to work together to find alternative ways to address their differences notwithstanding the wars (Jaffrelot, 2004). However, it remains debatable whether these initiatives were only partially or completely successful (Malik, 2019).

Pakistan and India engaged in a conflict over the disputed region of Kashmir soon after their split. Maharaja Hari Singh was a Hindu monarch who governed a state where the majority of the population was Muslim. Disregarding the opinions of the vast majority of people and the conditions for state accession established on October 26, 1947, the Maharaja announced his wish to align with India. The result was a rebellion. The Pakistani tribesmen collaborated with the indigenous Kashmiris in the tumultuous endeavor to liberate Kashmir from Indian governance. India sent its conventional military forces to establish and maintain control over the situation. In response to the escalating upheaval, the Pakistani government faced mounting demand to intervene. Consequently, in May 1948, it deployed troops (Jaffrelot, 2004). The initial confrontation between Pakistan and India regarding Kashmir resulted from it. The United Nations intervened and successfully prevented the crisis from escalating into a conflict. However, Kashmir remained divided between the two regions, under the supervision of Pakistan and India. Both states asserted their responsibility for initiating the conflict and demanded sovereignty over the whole Kashmir area. Meanwhile, both countries endorsed a United Nations resolution that advocated for a referendum to ascertain the final status of Kashmir. However, following the signing of a military pact between Pakistan and the US in May 1956, India chose not to conduct the referendum (Ziring, 2019).

In September 1965, a further dispute arose regarding the region of Kashmir. The setting of the second conflict differed slightly from that of the first war. China was victorious over India in 1962. Pakistan bolstered its defensive capabilities and emerged victorious against India in the 1965 Rann of Kutch battle after acquiring military weapons manufactured in the West. Meanwhile, other factors were contributing to the increasing instability in Kashmir. Following the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964, a void in political leadership emerged in India, prompting Pakistani authorities to participate in a final attempt to gain control of Kashmir. After the Indian army crossed the international boundary on September 6, 1965, the two nations quickly became involved in a significant confrontation. The valiant Pakistani military and the timely engagement of the international community in facilitating a ceasefire ensured a successful outcome (Malik, 2019).

After only achieving a truce in its first two conflicts with Pakistan and losing the Indo-Sino war in 1962, India's victory in 1971 became significant, indicating that it was moving towards becoming a regional superpower. Tensions escalated when the East Pakistani Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, commonly known as Mujib, secured victory in the national elections in December 1970. However, West Pakistani parties, notably the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), refused to relinquish control, leading to heightened tensions. In March 1971, the Pakistan Army intervened to suppress the growing nationalist sentiment in the east. To quell Bengali factions, it enlisted support from both non-Bengalis and local pro-Pakistan Bengalis, including members of the Islamic organization Jamaat-e-Islami. As violence escalated throughout the summer, a significant influx of refugees entered Indian territory. Using this as justification, New Delhi launched a military intervention in early December 1971 (Zakaria, 2019).

Pakistan lost the war and its eastern wing was lost for good. As if that weren't enough, India took over 90,000 soldiers prisoner of war (PoW). After the Pakistan People's Party won a majority in the 1970 elections in West Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took control.¹¹ Bhutto and India reached a consensus to establish normal ties when they formally endorsed the Simla

Accord in 1972. But in 1974, India detonated its first nuclear weapon, setting the region on a course to acquire the ability to produce nuclear weapons. Other than this, ties between Pakistan and India were quiet for the remainder of the 1970s (Zaidi, 2017). Pakistan was additionally warned in 1984 that India was preparing an assault on its nuclear facility in Kahuta, which is close to Islamabad. There were rumors that Israel or the government in Kabul, which was ruled by the erstwhile Soviet Union, may assist India in carrying out its evil plans. But the Americans intervened to save the day, telling Islamabad that the information regarding Israel's involvement was untrue. Pakistan will view such an attack as an act of hostility, India was also informed (Sattar, 2007).

As a major state negotiates its withdrawal from Afghanistan, India creates unrest in Kashmir. The 1980s saw a turning point in global events that resulted in the Taliban's ascent, the Afghan civil war, and a significant insurgency in Kashmir (Rafiq, 2019). India blamed Pakistan because it was unable to control Kashmir. According to Chari et al. (2009), "trading accusations and threats, India and Pakistan spent February, March, and April of 1990 seemingly preparing for war" reflected the prevailing tensions between the two nations in this regard. The US decided to return to normalcy after recognizing the danger to the stability of the region. In the 1990s, Pakistan-India ties were dominated by the Kashmir issue. Pakistan accused India of violating human rights, and India retaliated by saying that Islamist groups were invading Kashmir and causing unrest. The Kargil War in 1999 marked the conclusion of the 1990s. But before Kargil, the two sides had openly shown their nuclear capabilities with a series of nuclear tests in 1998, which added a deadly dynamic to an already tense relationship (Sajjad, 2019). The attack occurred on December 13, 2001, while Indian lawmakers were debating a corruption investigation about purchases made during the Kargil War¹⁸. Even though it was thwarted and all five of the terrorists were murdered, it caused an unending avalanche of rage. Prime Minister Vajpayee declared, "We accept the challenge" and referred to it as a warning to the entire nation in a speech to the people ("Suicide Attack", 2001). L K Advani, a prominent Indian politician, implicated Pakistan, asserting that the "mentors" of the groups involved attempted to assassinate India's entire political leadership and advocated for Indian reprisal. India attributed the attack to Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed (Symond, 2001).

In late November 2008, Mumbai, India's financial hub was struck by a horrific terrorist attack. Over three days, gunmen laid siege to luxury hotels in a wealthy area, killing over 170 people. This event, often referred to as "26/11," deeply scarred India, mirroring the national trauma of America's 9/11 (Lalwani & Haegeland, 2018). Ajmal Amir Kasab was the sole assailant who was apprehended alive. He was connected to the Pakistan-based militant organization Lashkar-e-Taiba through evidence. In response, India halted peace talks with Pakistan and took other assertive measures, but stopped short of full-blown conflict. Bilateral relations between the two countries remain strained to this day (Sajjad, 2019).

The 2014 elections marked a significant shift in Pak-India relations with the ascension of Narendra Modi, a staunch advocate of Hindutva and implicated in the Gujarat Muslim riots. His tenure coincided with heightened tensions, particularly evident in clashes along the Line of Control (LoC) and Working Boundary. The Uri Incident on September 18, 2016, where militants attacked an Indian military facility, resulting in the deaths of approximately 19 soldiers, served as a catalyst. India asserted it conducted "surgical strikes" across the LoC on September 29, 2016, targeting alleged militant infrastructure, a claim Pakistan vehemently denied. This event

intensified artillery exchanges between the two nations. In February 2019, tensions peaked when India conducted airstrikes on Pakistani territory, escalating the conflict significantly. India claimed the strikes targeted a Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) training camp in Balakot. Pakistan countered, stating its jets repelled the Indian planes and refuted reports of casualties. Following India's Balakot operation, Pakistan vowed a robust response, recalling the downing of an Indian fighter jet by the Pakistan Air Force and the capture of its pilot, Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman, in 2019 (Syed, 2021).

The historical trajectory of Pak-India relations unfolds along two distinct paths: one marked by recurrent tensions and conflicts, and the other characterized by periodic attempts at peace dialogues. Despite the contentious nature of their relationship, both nations have demonstrated maturity by engaging in dialogue, either through their own initiatives or with the assistance of third-party mediation. Pakistan and India have frequently pursued bilateral efforts to address their longstanding issues. While some of these endeavors have yielded positive outcomes, particularly in minor disputes, they have often fallen short of resolving major issues such as the Kashmir conflict. One noteworthy milestone in bilateral engagement was the Nehru-Liaquat Pact of 1950. This agreement, the first successful example of direct dialogue, aimed to address issues related to religious minorities post-partition, demonstrating a commitment to safeguarding minority rights (Sajjad, 2019). A significant bilateral initiative to tackle the Kashmir dispute occurred between December 1962 and May 1963. During this period, the respective foreign ministers, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Swaran Singh, engaged in six rounds of intensive talks focused on finding a resolution to the central issue of Kashmir. Despite these efforts, the process did not culminate in success, as both sides failed to reach a consensus on a formula for resolving the Kashmir conflict (Sattar, Foreign Policy, 272.).

Following the 1971 war, Pakistan and India embarked on a gradual path towards normalizing their relations. A significant step in this direction occurred in July 1972 when Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistani President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto convened in the picturesque Indian hill station of Shimla. There, they inked the Shimla Agreement, stipulating the return of over 90,000 Pakistani personnel and captured territory in the west by India. Moreover, the agreement emphasized resolving differences through peaceful bilateral negotiations. Subsequently, in 1976, diplomatic and trade relations were re-established between the two nations. During the 1990s, Track II diplomacy gained prominence as an alternative avenue for dialogue. Various tracks within this diplomatic framework emerged, with the Neemrana Process, initiated in 1991, being a prominent example that continues to this day. However, the positive momentum built over the decades suffered setbacks due to escalating tensions triggered firstly by nuclear tests conducted by both countries in 1998 and secondly by the Kargil War of 1999.

The Agra Summit, a significant bilateral endeavor, took place between Pervez Musharraf and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The groundwork for this high-level meeting, held on July 15-16, 2001, was laid by an article penned by Vajpayee earlier that year, expressing a willingness to address the Kashmir issue. During the Agra Summit, the discussions were primarily confined to detailed one-on-one interactions between the two leaders, each accompanied by a single note-taker (Noorani, 2002). Regrettably, despite nearing an agreement on issuing a joint declaration, India withdrew its support at the eleventh hour (Sattar, Foreign Policy, 236-238). The Agra Summit encompassed a comprehensive process where all pertinent issues between the two nations were

divided into eight groups, each assigned to different experts for prolonged discussions aimed at finding solutions. However, after more than five years of extensive efforts, the process was halted following the Mumbai attacks in July 2008. Despite the promise generated by the Composite Dialogue, a single catastrophic incident proved sufficient to derail it, underscoring the fragility of progress in the face of such challenges (Chari et al., 2009).

Since 1947, Pakistan-India relations have experienced numerous fluctuations, marked by periods of conflict followed by attempts at negotiation. Despite this, the transition from a desire for peaceful coexistence to enduring peace and cooperation has remained elusive (Sajjad, 2019). Many scholars believe that the CPEC presents an opportunity for fostering peace, as trade interdependence has the potential to alleviate tensions between rival states. The future of peace and development in South Asia hinges significantly on the relationship between India and Pakistan. A cordial rapport between the two nations holds the promise of fostering peace, prosperity, and economic growth across the entire region. Unfortunately, India, a notable absence in the CPEC project, opposes its construction. Given India's historical border disputes with both China and Pakistan, its reservations about CPEC are understandable. India perceives the project as part of China's expansionist agenda in the Indo-Pacific region, aiming to establish a strategic foothold over India in South Asia (Sibal, 2014).

Persistent bilateral tensions, including ongoing border disputes, remain unresolved between India and Pakistan. India's apprehensions regarding the China-Pakistan relationship stem from its perception that it is aimed at containing India. Territorial clashes involving India, China, and Pakistan have further exacerbated these suspicions, particularly concerning the CPEC, which traverses disputed territory. India has raised objections to the construction of the CPEC through Gilgit-Baltistan, expressing concerns about its passage through contested areas. However, China and Pakistan have dismissed Indian grievances and continue to advance the corridor (Ali et al., 2019). Additionally, India is wary of the substantial Chinese investment in Pakistan, particularly in strategic areas. China's assistance to Pakistan in plutonium production at the Kyushu reactor and the sale of eight submarines to Pakistan, valued at around \$5 billion, have heightened India's concerns about Beijing's growing influence in the region.

Destiny of CPEC Depends on the Regional Peace

War is not merely an event; it's an entire economy. Countries like the US have historically profited from war, leaving behind devastation and destruction. With US troops withdrawing from Afghanistan, the country's future remains uncertain. This signifies a potential abandonment of Afghanistan, leading to its inevitable fall to the Taliban. While critics predict a civil war, there's a critical aspect many overlook: the US's failure to tie troop withdrawal to sustainable peace. As China rises as an economic superpower, the war economy becomes obsolete. China's BRI introduces a new dimension where growth, development, stability, and peace are envisioned for every nation. Afghanistan, long exploited by past superpowers for its geopolitical location and resources, has suffered from a war economy that served the interests of powerful nations.

The recent G7 meeting in June 2021 aimed to develop strategies countering China's BRI, underscoring its significance (Wadud, 2021). President Biden used the occasion to reassert US leadership among the world's democracies and advance transatlantic cooperation. Notably, the summit announced a global infrastructure plan, offering an substitute to China's BRI by providing financing for infrastructure projects (Bartlett, 2021). The G7 has introduced the Build

Back Better World (B3W) program as a substitute to China's Belt and Road program (BRI) for enhancing infrastructure in nations with lower and middle incomes. (Holland & Faulconbridge, 2021). Led by the US, the initiative seeks to address the significant infrastructure needs of developing countries by catalyzing private sector funding for quality infrastructure.

However, the US's investment in India as a counterbalance to China's influence has not yielded the expected results. Consequently, the US may resort to alternative means, including instigating instability through a civil war to counter the BRI, potentially sabotaging projects like the CPEC, and increasing pressure on Pakistan's economy. Peace has become a valuable commodity in the region, with initiatives like the BRI and CPEC relying on stability in Afghanistan for their success. While Afghanistan's internal dynamics remain complex, with influential warlords and a diverse Taliban, peace is now being offered and sought after instead of war. China, known for its positive contributions to other countries' economies and development, will strive for peace in the region to foster growth and prosperity. Similarly, Pakistan, under Prime Minister Imran Khan's leadership, has consistently advocated for peace in Afghanistan and offered partnerships to ensure stability. Together, China and Pakistan can play a pivotal role in achieving peace in the region, leaving the US's long-held desire to fuel its war economy using Afghanistan in limbo (Wadud, 2021).

CPEC: A Road to Peace

In South Asia, the quest for regional cooperation has been hindered by weak economies, political fragmentation, socio-religious divisions, and longstanding conflicts, particularly between Pakistan and India. To foster greater collaboration and economic integration, the concept of Economic Corridors (EC) has emerged as a prominent feature of foreign policy strategies. One of the most notable examples is the CPEC (Wolf, 2016). CPEC is not merely viewed as a significant Chinese investment in Pakistan's economy; it holds broader strategic significance with the potential to unite regional countries in mutually beneficial economic relationships, thereby promoting peace. By reviving and expanding the ancient Silk Road, CPEC offers economic alternatives to Pakistan and other regional nations, reducing their reliance on maritime trade routes controlled by the US.

The 3,000-km-long CPEC connects China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar Port through highways, railways, and pipelines, extending beyond Pakistan to link 64 countries under China's 'One Belt One Road' vision. Gwadar, located near the Persian Gulf, serves as a crucial entry point to CPEC, fostering close naval cooperation between Pakistan and China. On the other end, Xinjiang, bordering multiple Eurasian nations, is emerging as a key hub for China-Europe cargo trains. CPEC's historical roots trace back to Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin's 1950s plan to build rail bridges between Xinjiang and Central Asia. Under the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, China accelerated this plan, enhancing connectivity with Central Asia and incorporating Pakistan into its broader vision. The potential of CPEC extends beyond Pakistan and China, with Iran expressing interest in enhancing cooperation through the corridor. The development of Chabahar Port in Iran, linked to Gwadar, signifies growing regional connectivity. Afghanistan, termed the 'Heart of Asia' by China, stands to benefit from CPEC's land routes, facilitating trade and connectivity.

India's participation in CPEC could re-establish land routes to Central Asia, fostering economic ties and regional integration. However, India's involvement is contingent upon

abandoning activities aimed at disrupting CPEC, as suggested by Pakistan's invitation and subsequent Chinese endorsement. CPEC has the transformative potential to unlock economic opportunities and foster peace in a region marred by conflicts, terrorism, and geopolitical tensions. By promoting economic interdependence and regional integration, CPEC offers a pathway to address longstanding issues and promote stability. In conclusion, the CPEC represents a pivotal moment in Asian history, transcending national boundaries to promote commerce, trade, and peace. By addressing security concerns, and economic disparities, and fostering functional cooperation, CPEC can reshape the geopolitical landscape of South Asia for the better (Muhammad et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2018).

CPEC Can Contribute to Pakistan's Soft Power

In the realm of foreign policy projection, the traditional reliance on hard power has been gradually complemented by the emergence of "soft power" in the post-Cold War era. Soft power, a term coined by American political scientist Joseph Nye in the late 1980s, denotes a nation's capacity to sway others through attraction and persuasion, as opposed to coercion. In contrast to hard power, which relies on military prowess or economic inducements, soft power accentuates the favorable aspects of a nation's culture, values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2004). In parallel with the rise of soft power, the concept of "public diplomacy" has gained prominence as a means to supplement traditional diplomacy by engaging with foreign audiences through various channels such as educational exchange programs, cultural events, and media outreach. Public diplomacy aims to enhance a country's image and advance its national interests by fostering understanding and building relationships with individuals and organizations abroad (Snow, 2009).

Despite possessing a rich historical and cultural heritage, Pakistan has faced challenges in projecting a positive image on the global stage. In the aftermath of events like 9/11, negative perceptions have overshadowed Pakistan's numerous positives. However, the country holds significant potential to leverage its soft power assets to improve its international standing. Pakistan's diverse cultural heritage, historical landmarks, and natural beauty offer abundant opportunities for soft power projection. From the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley to the majestic peaks of the Himalayas, Pakistan boasts a wealth of attractions that can appeal to global audiences. Additionally, the country's achievements in sports, arts, and academia contribute to its soft power repertoire.

Pakistan's advantageous geographic position at the crossroads of Central, South, and West Asia positions it as a pivotal regional center for economic activities and connectivity. Initiatives like the CPEC further enhance Pakistan's economic potential and attractiveness to foreign investors. To harness its soft power potential effectively, Pakistan must prioritize efforts to promote its cultural heritage, economic opportunities, and achievements on the global stage. This entails proactive engagement with international audiences through diplomatic channels, media campaigns, and cultural exchanges. By showcasing its strengths and addressing misconceptions, Pakistan can build a more positive and impactful image in the international community. In conclusion, soft power and public diplomacy offer valuable tools for Pakistan to counter negative perceptions and enhance its global influence. By strategically leveraging its cultural, economic, and strategic assets, Pakistan can cultivate stronger international partnerships and foster greater understanding and cooperation on the world stage.

Key Findings

- **Paradigm Shift:** The introduction of the CPEC marks a significant paradigm shift in the politics and economics of South Asia, moving away from traditional realist-oriented approaches towards a more interconnected and economically driven framework.
- **Modernization Catalyst:** CPEC serves as a catalyst for modernization in the region, driven by economic dependence and regional integration, offering opportunities for economic growth, infrastructure development, and enhanced connectivity.
- **Misconceptions:** Despite misconceptions that CPEC solely benefits Pakistan and China, the project has far-reaching implications for the entire South Asian region, as well as Central Asia and the Middle East, with the potential to reshape social, political, and economic dynamics.
- **Source of Peace and Prosperity:** CPEC is viewed as a source of peace, prosperity, and conflict resolution in the region, provided there is transparency, quality assurance, and inclusive development strategies implemented throughout its execution.
- **Strengthening Regional Integration:** The post-CPEC era holds promise for strengthening regional integration, fostering greater cooperation, and addressing shared challenges such as militancy, terrorism, and conflicts through collaborative efforts.
- **Recommendations for Success:** To maximize the benefits of CPEC and ensure its long-term success, recommendations include enhancing transparency, prioritizing quality, fostering inclusive development, strengthening institutional capacity, promoting dialogue and cooperation, prioritizing environmental sustainability, addressing security concerns, building resilience to external shocks, and promoting multilateralism.

Overall, CPEC represents a transformative opportunity for the region, with the potential to usher in a new era of economic prosperity, connectivity, and stability, provided that key challenges are addressed and recommendations are implemented effectively.

Conclusion

For a significant duration, the politics of South Asian states has predominantly adhered to a realist-oriented approach, characterized by parochial politics, arms races, and a security-centric mindset, with limited room for liberalism and addressing regional and domestic challenges. However, the introduction of the CPEC as a component of the BRI heralds a new era of modernization in the region, driven by economic interdependence and regional integration. CPEC holds immense potential for fostering economic growth, enhancing regional connectivity, and promoting peace and prosperity. Despite misconceptions suggesting that CPEC primarily benefits Pakistan and China, this transformative project is poised to reshape the social, political, and economic landscape not only in South Asia and Central Asia but also in the Middle East.

CPEC stands as a catalyst for peace, prosperity, and conflict resolution in the region, provided there is transparency and a commitment to quality in its implementation. Moving forward, the post-CPEC era holds promise for further strengthening regional integration and fostering greater cooperation, ultimately leading to the eradication of militancy, terrorism, and conflicts in the region.



Recommendations

- **Enhance Transparency:** Ensuring transparency in all aspects of CPEC projects, including financing, procurement, and implementation, is essential to build trust among stakeholders and maximize the project's benefits.
- **Focus on Quality:** Emphasize quality standards in infrastructure development under CPEC to ensure long-term sustainability and mitigate concerns regarding substandard construction.
- **Foster Inclusive Development:** Prioritize inclusive development strategies that benefit local communities and address socio-economic disparities, thereby garnering widespread support for CPEC initiatives.
- **Strengthen Institutional Capacity:** Build institutional capacity at both national and regional levels to effectively manage and oversee CPEC projects, ensuring efficient coordination among stakeholders and timely resolution of issues.
- **Promote Dialogue and Cooperation:** Facilitate regular dialogue and cooperation among participating countries to address shared challenges, build mutual trust, and promote win-win outcomes for all stakeholders involved in CPEC.
- **Employ Soft Power:** Enhance comprehension and collaboration among nations involved in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through cultural exchanges, educational initiatives, and interpersonal interactions.
- **Environmental Sustainability:** Prioritize environmental sustainability in CPEC projects by incorporating eco-friendly technologies, conducting comprehensive environmental impact assessments, and implementing mitigation measures to minimize ecological damage.
- **Address Security Concerns:** Develop robust security protocols and mechanisms to safeguard CPEC infrastructure and personnel, thereby mitigating security risks and ensuring the uninterrupted progress of projects.
- **Build Resilience to External Shocks:** Strengthen resilience to external shocks, such as geopolitical tensions or economic downturns, by diversifying the scope of CPEC projects and promoting economic diversification in participating countries.
- **Promote Multilateralism:** Advocate for greater multilateral cooperation and engagement among countries in the region to harness the full potential of CPEC as a platform for peace, stability, and shared prosperity.

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