

**Research Article**

National and transnational non-state actors: Strategic dimensions and regional security threats to CPEC

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ABSTRACT

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a 'flagship Project' of China's wide-ranging and most advanced scheme of development initiated under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The project ranges from investment to infrastructure development in various sectors with an investment of \$62 billion in Pakistan. However, the existential fact is that this project is not only restricted to economic growth and trade linkages. It has more strategic dimensions and arguably a strategic instrument in the hand of the Chinese to exponentially increase its influence from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. It is, undoubtedly, rapidly changing the regional apparatus in general and South Asia in Particular. This change on one side is creating space for multiple opportunities not only for Pakistan but at the same time offering bounties to regional countries, but on the other hand security threats and asymmetrical propaganda is on the rise against the CPEC. The most significant aspect which is being neglected in this scenario is the ever-increasing activities of non-state actors which are operating surreptitiously in Pakistan as well as its neighborhood. The presence of ISIS, Baloch insurgency, and TTP are a potential threat and their close nexus and support from inside and outside the country have substantially been proofed. Thus, the current research is divided into two parts. The first part argues that the CPEC project is no doubt a security-oriented, geopolitically, and strategically driven endeavor but predominantly linked with economic growth and regional connectivity. The second part deals with the potential threats to the CPEC posed by the national and transnational non-state actors.

Keywords: CPEC; China; Pakistan; Non-State Actors; Strategic Dimensions

1. INTRODUCTION

The geo-strategic and geo-political significance of Pakistan in global vis-à-vis in a regional context is inevitable for the great powers and for the neighboring countries of Pakistan. Central Asian Republics (CARs) on its northwest, which are called by the researchers as resource heaven, are full of mineral resources especially plenty of energy resources which are equally considered lifeline for technologically sufficient west and energy deficient east. Similarly, Pakistan shares its northern and eastern borders with China and India respectively. These are rising economic and military giants in the region who are persistently involved in a competition to dominate regional politics and become active

global players. It would not be wrong to argue that currently, the battleground of their competition is the Indian Ocean and Afghanistan. Both the countries (China-India) are also sternly trying to synchronize Tehran's politics in favor of their strategic objectives. In this scenario, Pakistan is cautiously looking at the developments in the region and endeavoring to secure its strategic interests without encompassing permanent enmity with any state. Furthermore, Pakistan is sandwiched between the most significant sea trade route the Strait of Malacca and the Persian Gulf. Pakistan's affinity to the Gulf States is also noteworthy (Ahmed, 2019).

It is also a bitter reality that in different phases Pakistan has been used by the world powers for advancing their agendas. Consequently, Pakistan experienced the ruthless menace of terrorism and cold-blooded religious extremism on its land. However, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in general and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in particular is a potential project inaugurated by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2015 which provides a golden opportunity to transform the country from a potential failed state into a hub of trade and investment in South Asian region. Arguably, China-Pakistan relations are exceptional in historical context, as in the time of crisis both the countries extended their political and diplomatic assistance to each other as per their capacity, nevertheless, CPEC is a flagship project that keeps the capacity to transform the faith of overall South Asian and Southeastern politics and balanced the strategic relations with an economic one.

CPEC is a multi-dimensional project that ranges from infrastructure development to the building of economic zones. Beijing will invest almost \$62 billion in various sectors as it is an important corridor of China's BRI. One of the vibrant parts of this project is the construction of Gawadr port in Balochistan and the materialization of its linkage with the Chinese province of Kashgar (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015).

Its strategic worth can be gauged by the fact that it will ensure an alternative and short route to access oil and energy supplies to China. Since the Chinese economy is expanding with each passing day and the pillar of its economy is a stable industrial base, therefore, Beijing is catering to its energy needs from the oil-rich Middle East. Although the route consists of the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea, it is a contested area by many regional countries i.e., China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. The presence of the US fleet in this region is a constant source of threat for China. Any kind of Sino-US escalation can lead to blockage of Strait of Malacca by the US and its regional allies which will be of devastating effects on the Chinese economy. Security pundits referred to it as the Malacca Dilemma and Beijing only can get rid of this situation by opting for CPEC as an alternative strategy.

Since the distance between Gawadar and Kashgar is only 1500 Km it roundly cut off the route of energy supply by 12000 Km by bypassing the Strait of Malacca and opting for the route of Strait of Hormuz (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). Undoubtedly, the timely and successful completion of CPEC will bring tantamount benefits for both Pakistan and China. By deploying equipped military in Gawdar China will extend its strategic influence not only in the Indian Ocean but keep eyes on the activities of the US and her allies in the Asian Pacific too (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). Further, it is undeniable fact that Pakistan could capitalize on its

unique geo-strategic position, yet the pathetic condition of the Pakistani economy restricted its domestic and foreign policy directions in its historical discourse. CPEC will not only support the feeble economy of Pakistan but give impetus to all those sectors which are known to be the base of economic progress in any country. It will transform Pakistan into a center of trade and investment. By infrastructure development and through motorways and rail networks western, eastern and central parts will be connected (Ahmar, 2015)

Pakistan and China have a history of mutual trust and being free from border clashes, CPEC is a key that will further open the door for deepening relations and interdependence between two neighbors. Strategically Gawadar will connect China, the Middle East and Africa. Along with it, the project will integrate the whole region which will ensure the welfare and bring prosperity for the people of this part of the world (Sial, 2014). Gwadar Port is the centerpiece of the entire corridor, as argued earlier that it is positioned in proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, the passageway for 20% of the global oil supplies. Its construction was completed in 2016 and by October trade cargo from Kashgar entered Pakistan and reached safely to Gwadar port, this was the first-ever CPEC operation conducted (Asif, 2018).

The most important challenge which is connected with CPEC is the issue of its security. For this purpose, Pakistan's law enforcement agencies (LEA) have deployed personnel from Special Forces whose prime responsibility is to protect Chinese nationals working under this project (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). However, the wave of violent terrorist attacks is on the rise. In May 2019, Gawadar's Pearl continental Hotel was stormed by a gunman which cause the death of five people and many were critically wounded. The responsibility was claimed by Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA). Immediately after three days of Gwadar's incident, two more terrorist attacks were launched. This indicates that threats from non-state actors are serious and challenging for LEA in the upcoming days (Hashim, 2019).

2. CPEC: REGIONAL AND ECONOMIC CONNECTIVITY

Chinese President Xi Jinping coined the idea of One Belt One Road, (OBOR) intending to reconstruct the ancient Silk Road which connects three continents encompassing Asia, Africa and Europe, while around sixty countries fall under it. These continents will be linked up by the construction of roads and comprehensive rail networks. As soon as the project is complete China will be the hub of global trade and business activities. Silk Road integrates east with the west which will enhance people-to-people connection and sharing of ideas. It means that through this project diversified nationalism in different parts of the world will be integrated which leads to mutual understanding and interdependency that ultimately will ensure peace and progress. OBOR is divided into two parts. First deals with the revival of the Silk Road and secondly to explore and construct 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (A. Ali, 2019).

Inclusivity in the nature of this project makes it open to other countries. Although Iran did not formally declare as part of CPEC but recently inked 25 years strategic partnership deal through which China will invest \$400 billion in different sectors ranging from telecommunication to the industrial sector and banking. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has also

rendered willingness and ready to invest in the project. In this framework, the geo-strategic location of Pakistan is unique which connects the Middle East with South Asia and introduces land-locked CARs to newer markets. As times go on, Pakistan's economy will become more trade-oriented which will bring stability for the state and prosperity for the people. Moreover, this project is not only a game-changer for Pakistan but the entire region will plunk the fruits from CPEC (Ali, 2019).

3. CHANGING FACETS OF SECURITY THREATS

Regional politics is continuously changing in the borderland. Security situation in Afghanistan has become a challenge for the security apparatus of Pakistan. Although, on July 2021 the Chinese state councilor and foreign minister Wang Yi met with the visiting Afghan delegates under the leadership of Abdul Ghani Bradar in Tianjin to settle down shared objectives under CPEC, yet unless Taliban get de jure recognition from outside the world the level engagement will be at the lowest ebb. Arguably, that Afghan imbroglio has a direct spillover effect in Pakistan. The backbone of CPEC is Gawadar that is located in the province of Balochistan. It shares a border with Afghanistan, therefore any insurgency in borderland as well as in Balochisn will consequently adversely affect CPEC vis-à-vis BRI (Munir, 2019). The existential fact must not be overlooked that unpredictable and unstable security regional security milieu is a source of sporadic incidents and gives a boost to national and transnational non-state actors to further complicate already deplorable security conditions in Pakistan in general and its impact on CPEC in particular. Therefore, close examination of these threats and their assessment is inevitable.

4. SECURITY DILEMMA IN AFGHANISTAN

New realities are taking place in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops. Afghanistan is now under the complete control of Taliban. Twenty years of a long war in Afghanistan equally affected Pakistan. The violent wave of terrorism in Pakistan deeply affected the state and society. The rise of Taliban is being seen from a different lens. Some political analysts argue that the current generation of Taliban which they referred to "Taliban-II" are different in terms of their approach towards neighboring countries and the world at large. Statements from their top brass are encouraging towards human rights and women's status. Moreover, they intent to form a consensus-based national government in which the representation of every community and ethnicity could be ensured. These are positive omen but till now restricted to lip services.

Another group of security pundits is evaluating the scenario with a gloomy picture. Taliban consists of different groups with different approaches and mindsets. These Talban who are at the forefront and giving positive signs while behind the scene local leadership is pursuing the same policies adopted during Taliban first reign (1996-2000). In Herat, a local clergy associated with the Taliban reportedly stopped girls from entering the university campus. Such incidents have also been reported in some other areas. Similarly, there have been many cases of revenge attacks on people associated with the former administration despite the general amnesty announced by the Taliban leadership (Dwan, 2019).

If Taliban government fails to earn international legitimacy civil war will be an outcome. Afghanistan once again will turn to be a safe haven for different national and transnational terrorist groups. Such kind of depressed scenario will be a firm barrier in way of CPEC. Balochistan which is an important province in terms of CPEC success shares a long border with Afghanistan. Different national and sectarian groups are in full swing in their operational activities. Thus, such kind of militant and insurgent movements in Balochistan can take momentum from instable Afghanistan.

5. ISIS: A RECURRING THREAT

ISIS has become an existential threat in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Amidst the US-Taliban dialogue, the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP) has increased its terrorist activities. ISKP launched its operations in Afghanistan in 2015. The group not only targeted foreign troops but vehemently targeted Taliban and the Afghan populace. Since 2015, ISKP claimed around 100 violent attacks against the common people. In addition to this, more than 250 armed clashes with the security forces have taken place and the fight against the Taliban on the battlefield is continued (CSIS, 2018). On 8th October 2021, ISLK claimed responsibility through its telegram channel for a bomb blast in Shia Mosque in Kunduz province. It was the worst attack in which more than a dozen Shias who were offering Friday prayer have died. (aljazeera. 2021). It would not be out of context to argue that one of the leading factors of peace negotiation between the US and Taliban was the presence of ISLK.

Security managers of Pakistan are deeply concerned about the possible linkages between ISKP and TTP. Reports have confirmed that behind the kidnapping and killing of two Chinese from Balochistan ISKP is allegedly involved. It indicates the intentions of the group against CPEC. ISKP highlights the atrocities committed by China against the Uyghur's Muslims of Xinjiang province. Apart from this, targeting CPEC project contributes to the glorification of the group before the world. Such kind of horrific incidents receives maximum media coverage which is highly beneficial for the perpetrators in order to protect its strong image in face of its defeat in Syria.

It is worth mentioning here to point out ISKP close nexus with local militant outfits (Mahmood, 2019). In July 2018, a suicide bomber blew himself up in the rally of Balochistan Awami Party. It was an ever deadly attack in which 149 people were died and more than 186 people were badly injured. Responsibility claimed by ISKP and the name of a bomber was Hafeez Nawaz of Abbottabad. Further, in 2017 Chinese couple was kidnapped and later on beheaded by ISKP which alarmed the Chinese and Pakistani authorities. China, subsequently, imposed a ban on free traveling to Pakistan. Keeping in view the volatile situation and threat to Chinese workers and different projects of CPEC, Pakistan deployed a Special Security Group (SSG) comprising nine army battalions and six civil wings (Amir, 2018).

There is no conflict of opinion that security and stability are closely tied up with Pakistan. It is the reason that Islamabad is always one step forward to bring peace in the region as stability is key to Pakistan's economic development. Doha Peace Deal became possible exclusively because of Pakistan's sincere efforts and Zalmay Khalilzad duly acknowledged

it. A decades-long war against terrorism and transnational non-state Actors extremely shook the state and society of Pakistan. Though after 2015 some semblance of stability can be observed but the struggle against miscreants is continued. In this complex security milieu, CPEC is a golden opportunity for Pakistan. This project will not only boost up the ailing economy of Pakistan but will further strengthen its security indicators (Kiran, 2009).

Participation of Afghanistan in CPEC is a key option by which war-torn country can be reconstructed. Beijing, for the sake of its investment, will not only ensure its support to the incumbent government but tries to link up with CARs via Afghanistan. The current Taliban government fully recognize the Chinese support to their government, therefore they have given positive signals about the possible involvement in CPEC (Masood, 2019). Further, the argument keeps the place that ISIK in Afghanistan can only formidably be encountered by the Taliban. If the group is not defeated it can become a perennial source of threat for neighboring countries as well as for the global world.

6. SINO-INDO RIVALRY: IMPLICATION ON CPEC

India is the fastest-growing economy in the world. Participation of India in CPEC will turn the faith of the whole region. But unfortunately, Delhi's trepidations about the project are illogical and even contemplate its advantages (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). The hostile claim of India about the possible routes of CPEC via Gilgit Baltistan is controversial. India argues that Pakistan has illegally occupied these areas and any investment and infrastructure development by the Chinese companies is a violation of international law (Pundit, 2018).

India is adopting all kinds of symmetrical and asymmetrical strategies to disrupt CPEC. Indian spy Kalbhoshan Yadav's activities in this context are evident. The allegation of Pakistan on India about its support to separatists' elements in Balochistan is correct to a great extent (Amir, Adnan 2018). Moreover, India is deeply afraid of Beijing's growing influence in the Indian Ocean. Delhi argues that CPEC is the offshoot of the Chinese "String of Pearl Strategy" (A. Ali, 2015). All these facts indicate India's growing disdain for the project.

7. SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES TO THE REGION

South Asia is facing multiple political, economic and social challenges. It is home to a quarter of the world's population and second only to Africa in terms of poverty. Poverty, illiteracy, corruption, human rights violations and population growth are deep-rooted and common challenges which the South Asian region is facing. India and Bangladesh are gaining exceptional growth rate but even they are unable to address the issues unanimously. It needs cooperation and collaboration at a massive level among the South Asian countries. In this context, study of Chinese model will be advantageous as Beijing has alleviated around 55.64 million people from the poverty line since 2016 (the Borgen project 2018). In present scenario, CPEC can provide a platform by which all the nations especially south Asian countries can collaborate and decisively address the socio-economic and political issues.

8. BALOCH INSURGENCY: A PERENNIAL THREAT TO CPEC

Since the independence of Pakistan, the province of Balochistan is experiencing a major challenge of insurgency from its own Baloch people. It has roots in the accession of the princely state of Kalat which became part of Balochistan in 1948. Baloch insurgents claim that the state of Kalat was forcefully acceded by Pakistan which is illegal. From 1948 to date, in different phases, the insurgents' movement was started by different Baloch groups. At present, the aim of insurgency by various outfits is the succession from Pakistan and the establishment of 'Greater Balochistan' (Amir, Adnan 2018). These types of developments are adversely affecting the projects going on in Balochistan under CPEC. Nationalists non-state actors i.e., Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) justify its endeavors by demanding full control of the natural resources of Balochistan. Moreover, the other separatist group Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) is mainly based in Makran coast and Lashkar-e-Balochistan (LB) area of operation is southwest of Balochistan (Jaleel, 2017). Similarly, Jhalwan Tigers (JT) and Balochistan Republican Army (BRA) are equally involved in intense fighting against Pakistan.

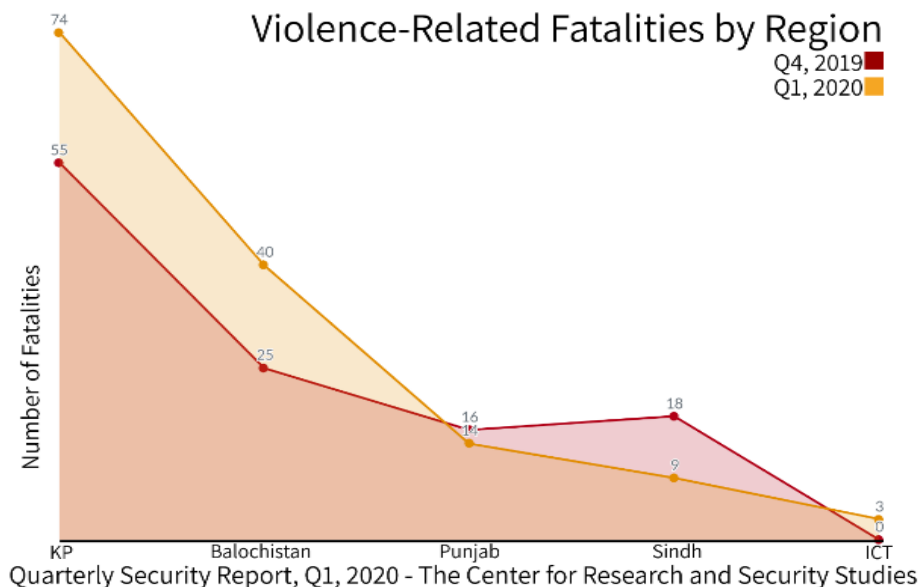


Fig. 1. Shows the number of fatalities took place in 2019-20 in the four provinces of Pakistan relating to CPEC project.

These organizations are fighting against the Pakistani government for an independent Balochi province. These insurgent groups are involved in target killings and abduction of Pakistani and Chinese nationals especially those who are working in different projects of CPEC. It is perceived by the groups that Chinese and Punjabis are occupying the natural resources of Balochistan (International Crises Group, 2018). In November 2018, BLA gunman entered the Chinese consulate and shot dead two Pakistani security personnel. Before this attack, the organization's activities were confined only in Balochistan and were involved in attacks on Chinese workers and Pakistani security forces. (Sufouglu, 2018). There is no difference of opinion that security forces are trying to ensure maximum security to the CPEC especially Gawadar. Although the security of Gawadar city has beefed up despite this

intensity of terrorist attacks is multiplying. In April 2019 insurgents killed 14 bus passengers in Ormara, 11 of whom were security personnel. In May insurgents stormed Pearl Continental hotel in Gwadar. These brutal activities give a reflection of insurgents' ability to attack at will without any fear. This situation may cause a serious threat to CPEC projects in Balochistan (Noutezai, 2019).

Such kinds of events are also tarnishing Pakistan's image in the world at large. Pakistan is a world tourist's destination. However, tourism is only possible when a degree of satisfaction is ensured peaceful environment. It should not be forgotten that the death toll of chinses workers in Balochistan is under control, yet if ant major and infuriated terrorist attack takes place on Gawadar dry port it may halt overall or rollback the whole CPEC project which will undoubtedly be detrimental for the economy as well as to the reputation of Pakistan (Ahmed, 2019). It is also a consensus among the policymakers and experts that security measures will not solely work which could ensure enduring stability in the province. Baloch people have some genuine grievances which should be addressed by the government on priorities basis. Along with the military, the political approach can be proved permanent and long-lasting. In history, instances can be quoted in which insurgents laid down their arms and joined the mainstream political struggle.

9. CONCLUSION

With great power comes great responsibility, but great power also attracts envy, anger and enemies. China has become a key player in the global political arena especially by its advanced project (OBOR). CPEC is an important corridor of BRI which is undoubtedly become a game-changer at least for the ailing economy of Pakistan. However, CPEC is surrounded by many existential security threats ranging from ethnic-separatists organizations of Sindh and Balochistan to national and transnational Jihadi outfits. The former group argues that China is neocolonial power usurping its resources with the assistance of their primary adversary i.e., the state of Pakistan. Moreover, Islamist militant groups highlight the brutalities of Chinese forces against Uyghur's Muslims of Xinjiang region. In this context, igniting speeches of Mufti Abuzar Al-Burmi should be a matter of concern for both China and Pakistan. In the video message "Let's Disturb China" he calls for strenuous struggle against China by the Taliban after giving daunting defeat to the US in Afghanistan. This kind of approach is also motivating Indonesian Jihadi organizations and ultranationalists in Central Asia. Apart from this, Nikki Asia report regarding possibly shifting away Gawadar port to Karachi port by investing \$3.5 billion because of the precarious security situation in Balochistan is not a positive omen for the province. Saudi Arabia has already expressed concerns and pressing to establish a \$10 billion oil refinery in Karachi rather than in Gawadar. Thus, it is high time for the policy-makers and security managers of both the countries (China & Pakistan) to understand the complexities attached to the CPEC and chalk out a comprehensive plan of security arrangements by keeping in view the threats emanating from within and outside.

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