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## **Regional Security Threats to CPEC: A Strategic Overview**

### **Abstract**

*CPEC is a multi-billion project aimed at regional connectivity, improving Pakistan's economy and turning Gwadar into a trade hub of this region. Various countries have shown interests in becoming part of CPEC and reaping its benefits. However, the mega project faces huge strategic and security challenges. The changing dynamic of South Asia is particularly concerning for the security of CPEC. The region is witnessing the rise of Islamic State in Afghanistan, Baloch insurgency in Balochistan and India's hostility towards Pakistan in general and CPEC in particular. For a past couple of years, these threats have begun to materialize, in 2018 a suicide attack in Mastung killed 149 people. The responsibility of the attack was claimed by Islamic State. While this year Baloch insurgents stormed PC hotel in Gwadar, resulting in the death of five people. These events indicate the need for swift action and planning on part of both China and Pakistan.*

### **Introduction**

Pakistan is positioned among the most critical geo strategic and geopolitical locations in the entire region. On one hand, it serves as the pathway to the resource haven Central Asia and on the other a neighbor to India and China, two potential world powers, along with Iran and Afghanistan on the western border and Arabian sea on the South. Moreover, 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).

Pakistan is surrounded by significant world powers, advancing their own agendas in the international stage. While Pakistan for the past decade has battled with terrorism and instability, the idea of CPEC presented itself as a golden opportunity to transform the country from a potential failed state to a hub of trade and investment in South Asian region. Dubbed as a game changer for Pakistan, CPEC entered its fifth year in 2019 after its official initiation in 2015. China and Pakistan have always enjoyed exceptional strategic and diplomatic relations, yet CPEC transformed a purely strategic relation to an economic one. CPEC is a massive investment of \$62 billion dollars in infrastructure and energy sectors in Pakistan. It is a component of One Belt One Road (OBOR) (Abid & Ashfaq 2015). It aims to connect Gwadar in Balochistan to Kashgar in China. CPEC's strategic importance lies in the simple proposition that it aims to provide China with an alternative route to access oil and energy supplies. China's energy needs are mostly catered by the oil rich middle east, though the route consists of the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a contested area claimed

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by China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. US fleets enjoy a constant presence in this region. In any case of escalation, the US and her allies can block the Strait of Malacca and hence completely paralyzing the Chinese economy. This is referred to as the Malacca Dilemma, to be rid of this scenario CPEC is a primary tool for the Chinese. Through CPEC China will access its supplies through Gwadar via the Strait of Hormuz directly completely bypassing the Strait of Malacca (Tunningley 2017). The distance of Gwadar to Kashgar is only 1500 km furthermore it will cut the route of energy supplies by 12,000 kilometers (Abid and Ashfaq 2015). CPEC's successful completion would result in tremendous economic benefits for China as well as Pakistan. China will be able to deploy its own military in Gwadar port and as a result, expand influence in the Asia Pacific region (Abid and Ashfaq 2015). Pakistan's frail economy and instability has always hindered it from capitalizing on its unique geostrategic position. This mega investment will not only support the weakened economy but also transform it into a hub for regional trade. Moreover the main alignments Western, Eastern and Central consist of connecting infrastructures such as roads and motorways. The alignments by their design would bring connectivity and enhanced infrastructure (Ahmar 2015). CPEC is a tool for further deepening of ties between the two neighbours economic and strategic after construction Gwadar will connect China, Middle East and Africa with each other. Along with benefits to these two countries, CPEC will also contribute to the welfare and prosperity of the entire region and pave the way for regional integration (Sial 2014). Gwadar Port is the centerpiece of the entire corridor, as discussed earlier it is positioned in proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, the passageway for 20% of the global oil supplies. Its construction completed in 2016 and by the month of October trade cargo from Kashgar entered Pakistan and reached safely to Gwadar port, this was the first ever CPEC operation conducted (Asif 2018). To ensure the security of the entire project and Chinese nationals in particular the Pakistan Army has devised a 10,000 man special force (Abid and Ashfaq 2015). In a recent event, gunmen stormed Gwadar's Pearl Continental Hotel and as a result, five people including the gunmen were killed. This situation raises grave concerns about the security of the corridor. Moreover, within three days of the Gwadar incident, two more terrorist incidents occurred. This signals the major challenges Pakistan will face in the upcoming days (Hashim 2019).

### **CPEC –Regional and Economic Integration initiative**

One Belt One Road is the pet project of Chinese President Xi Jinping. OBOR aims to revive the ancient silk road spans around three continents encompassing Asia, Africa and Europe, while around sixty countries fall under it. Its purpose is to connect these continents via building roads and rail links. This mega project once completed will put China at the centre of global trade. Silk road served as the link between east and west enabling exchange of ideas, same way OBOR aims at integrating different nations of the world together. There are two portions of One Belt One Road Initiative, first is the Silk Road Economic Belt and the second one is 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road. CPEC is the flagship project of One Belt One Road (A. Ali 2015)

CPEC lies at the centerpiece of the entire OBOR initiative, it consists of roads, railways and pipelines along with various other infrastructure projects. CPEC would connect Kashgar to Gwader hence connecting Pakistan and China together

(Abid and Ashfaq 2015) .CPEC is an inclusive project, meaning other regional countries are welcomed to join in. Iran had already shown interest in the project along with Afghanistan while Saudi Arabia recently announced investment. The geostrategic location of Pakistan makes it as an ideal candidate to resume the role of regional trade hub.It connects middle east with south Asia ,moreover the landlocked Central Asian Republics will if included will also have access to newer markets.Once access to these markets Pakistan's economy can become more trade oriented.Hence CPEC really is a game changer for not only Pakistan but the entire region as well (Ali 2015).

### **Regional Situation**

In this particular paper our focus would remain on the security threats caused by major regional events, specifically the changing security dynamics of Afghanistan, India's opposition to the corridor and the rise in Baloch insurgency. It is significant to understand that instability in Afghanistan would have a spillover effect in Pakistan. Balochistan is the pivotal point of CPEC and it shares border with Afghanistan. Hence any insurgency in the country can easily engulf Balochistan and put the entire project in jeopardy (Munir 2019).

Let us examine the critical security situation of the South Asian region and its impact on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor.

### **Security Situation in Afghanistan**

As of 2019 the Afghan war has become USA's longest running war. In the last few years after the NATO withdrew their combat forces in 2015 the security situation has deteriorated.Taliban have emerged stronger than ever and the Afghan security forces and allied forces are somewhat unable to sustain the charge and control. According to Special Instructor General for Afghan Reconstruction (Sigar) as of 2018 the Afghan government controlled only 53.8% of the total Afghan districts, 12.3% are under the Taliban control and in the remaining 33.9% the fighting for control is going on between the government and the insurgents.Afghan security forces continue to face heavy losses since 2014 around 45,000 security personnel have died.It shows the unsustainability of Afghan forces to handle the security situation, while the number of Afghan security forces is the lowest since its NATO withdrawal (Norland 2019). Meanwhile, the USA tired of the long war has doubled its efforts for a political settlement of the problem. White House appointed Zalme Khalilzad as the special US envoy to lead the peace process, various meetings between the US delegate and Taliban representatives have taken place. Efforts to settle the Afghan issue are going on but the security situation has worsened. Last year alone 22,487 violent incidents were reported while 13805 armed engagements were noted between the forces and the insurgents (UN Security Council 2019).

### **Rise of ISIS**

Amidst the peace talks and the heightened violence, another actor has risen in Afghanistan namely Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) .Whose presence is not only a threat to the Taliban and the allied forces but the country's neighbors as well as regional powers.Islamic State's began operations in Afghanistan in the year 2015,and since then its presence has grown. ISKP has conducted around 100

violent incidents against the general population as well as around 250 armed clashes with the security forces. Moreover, the clashes between Taliban and ISKP to assume control over territory continue. Since 2017 a total of 207 armed clashes between the two groups were noted (CSIS 2018). One of the factors that have compelled the US and Taliban to negotiate a peace deal is the threat of IS. If the groups gain more control in Afghanistan, it can effectively destabilize the neighboring Central Asian Republics, Pakistan, Iran, and even Russia.

For Pakistan, the implications of unrest are even greater. It played a significant role in supporting the peace negotiations, and Pakistan's role was acknowledged by Zalmay Khalilzad (The News 2019). Pakistan's security and stability were always tied to the situation in Afghanistan, whether it's the aftermath of Soviet invasion or the US war on terror. Pakistan battled extreme militancy and terrorism since 2007. It was only since 2015 that some semblance of stability prevailed in the country. Anti-Pakistan elements operating from Afghanistan played a major role in destabilizing the country (Kiran 2009). A stable security situation is directly related to economic development; in the last few years, Pakistan's economy underwent a drastic downfall. CPEC emerged as a golden opportunity to transform the ailing economy. The current situation in Afghanistan presents a threat to the project (Ali 2019). Pakistan and China invited Afghanistan to become a part of CPEC, since its inclusion would be beneficial to the whole region and most of all to Afghanistan (Daily Times 2019). The trilateral dialogue between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China was held in 2018, and Afghanistan's potential role in CPEC was reaffirmed. It was termed as a connection among the regions of South and Central Asia. Some commentators suggest that it is the ideal time to engage Afghanistan in the project since the chances of a peaceful political settlement are greater than ever (Masood 2019). However, the worsened security situation and uncertainty is a major hurdle in the path of Afghanistan's inception into CPEC. Pakistan has grave concerns about the link between the ISKP and Pakistani Taliban (Ali 2019).

According to reports, ISKP was responsible for the kidnapping and killing of two Chinese workers from Balochistan. This clearly indicates that the threat of ISKP is a reality. The motivations behind the group's violent opposition to CPEC are varying. First is the issue of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China, who were branded as oppressors of Muslims by the Islamic State. Second is the grand nature of the project itself; any terrorist activity perpetrated would gather maximum media coverage, which is highly beneficial for the perpetrators in order to project their strong image in the face of their defeat in Syria. The Islamic State has conducted terrorist incidents with the aid of local militant groups in Pakistan (Mahmood 2019). A suicide bombing carried out in Mastung district of Balochistan was dubbed as the worst terrorist incident in the history of the province. 149 people died and 186 were injured. The Islamic State announced that it was behind the attack; moreover, in 2017 a Chinese couple was kidnapped and later executed by the Islamic State. This alarmed the Chinese and Pakistani authorities. As a result, free travel of Chinese citizens without security escort was restricted. To ensure the protection of Chinese workers and the various CPEC projects, Pakistan formed the Special Security Division (SSG) comprising nine army battalions and six civil wings (Amir, 2018).

## **India's Hegemonic Design against CPEC**

CPEC's true potential can only be realized when all the regional actors are involved in the project. India is a rising economy, its inception into CPEC would be beneficial to all parties involved. India unfortunately is blinded by its opposition to the project to even contemplate its advantages (Abid and Ashfaq 2015). From its inception Indians remained hostile to the idea and their argument for it lies in the route that passes through Gilgit Baltistan. It is a contested territory between the two neighbors. India claims it as its own territory occupied by Pakistan. India's official stand revolves around the assertion that CPEC is a violation of its territorial integrity (Pundit 2018). India is taking all traditional and nontraditional means to disrupt the project, as evident by the capture of Indian spy Kalbhushan Yadhav. Pakistan accuses India of funding and sponsoring the Baloch insurgency as well. In an unprecedented move in 2016 Indian Prime Minister during independence day speech condemned Pakistan's role in Balochistan (Amir, Adnan 2018). More over India is concerned about China's naval access to Indian Ocean that indicates at the "String of Pearls" strategy (A. Ali 2015). All these facts indicate towards India growing disdain for the project.

In another unprecedented move the US Defense Secretary James Matiss reaffirmed India's claim that CPEC passes through a disputed region (Iqbal 2017). In the aftermath of this statement, propaganda against CPEC intensified in the western media. This statement supports Indian position though Pakistan and China have paid no heed to US sentiments. These statements are meant to disregard and challenge the legitimacy of the mega project. Even after such efforts a number of countries have expressed their wish to join the project including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Central Asian Republics. This has forced India to use Baloch insurgency as its proxy to destabilize the province and ultimately sabotage CPEC (Amir & Adnan, 2018).

## **Kashmir insurgency**

Kashmir issue is the root cause of all rivalry between India and Pakistan. For past seven decades the two neighbors quarreled over it while the people of Kashmir endured the human rights violations by various Indian regimes. In 2016 Kashmir dispute intensified when Burhan Wani was murdered by the Indian Forces. This current insurgency is actually an extension of the instability that started after Wani's death. The Pulwama incident signals that Kashmiri youth is looking at other options in their struggle against Kashmiri rule. Moreover the spillover effect of this attack lead to a standoff between Pakistan and India. India claimed killing of terrorists in Balakot strike while Pakistan downed an Indian fighter jet and captured the pilot. China took a neutral stand in the entire situation while using back door diplomacy to lower the tensions. During these hostilities the Pakistan Stock Market fell by 4 pc in during seventeen trading sessions (Hussain 2019). Pakistan's airspace was closed immediately after 26<sup>th</sup> February which resulted in disruptions of around 300 international flights (Iqbal, Airspace curbs after Indo-Pak skirmishes affecting hundreds of flights 2019). This scenario shows that any escalation over Kashmir can have a spillover effect and it can potentially effect CPEC. According to Pakistan's National Security Advisor India can join CPEC only at the condition of resolving Kashmir issue (Qamar 2017).

## **Water Dispute between India and Pakistan**

Another brewing conflict between the two countries is the water dispute. The issue was settled in the 1960s by the World Bank and both nations signed the Indus Water Treaty. Under the treaty Sutlej, Beas and Ravi were given to India while Indus, Jhelum and Chenab were allocated to Pakistan. India is building hydro power projects on Jhelum and Chenab rivers. India is building a number of dams on these rivers which is a cause of major concern for Pakistan. It is dependent on these three rivers to fulfill its water demands. Pakistan is under the threat of major water insecurity, since after Pulwama an Indian minister said that they would cease water supply to Pakistan in order to teach it a lesson (Salik 2017). This shows the complex nature of issues in South Asia and the many fronts Pakistan is currently engaged in. In the midst of all this CPEC serves as a light at the end of the tunnel.

## **Social Issues of the Region**

South Asian region is home to a quarter of the world's population and second only to Africa in terms of poverty (Yusuf 2017). The region unfortunately is marred with various issues that indicate a lack of investment on the human capital. Poverty, illiteracy, corruption, human rights violations and population growth are some of the major issues faced by these countries (Soherwardi 2004). Even countries achieving exceptional economic development are unable to address these issues such as Bangladesh and India. These issues are multifaceted and only with cooperation and collaboration can these issues be solved. South Asian region is collectively facing these issues and only collective mechanism could solve these. China on the other hand has alleviated around 55.64 million people from the poverty line since 2016 (the Borgen project 2018). This region can utilize and learn from China's experiences and free the region of poverty. CPEC is the ideal platform to address these concerns. Once all nations become part of CPEC, they can collaborate and look for innovative ways to solve these social issues.

## **Baloch Insurgency**

Insurgency in Balochistan has its roots in the accession of the princely state of Kalat. In 1948 it became a part of Balochistan province which insurgents claim was forceful and illegitimate. There have been five periods of Baloch insurgencies, the current insurgency aims the succession of Balochistan from Pakistan (Amir, Adnan 2018). Keeping CPEC in context the instability in Balochistan poses an existential threat to the mega project. In May this year three terror incidents occurred signaling the upcoming security challenges for Pakistan and China. Baloch separatists in particular the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) consider CPEC an effort to extract and control the natural resources of Pakistan. The other significant insurgent groups are Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) based mainly in the Makran Coast and Lashkar e Balochistan (LB) based in the south west of Balochistan (Jaleel 2017). Separatists are involved in killings and abductions of Pakistani and Chinese workers. China is perceived as an occupying force that is exploiting and depriving the Baloch of their own natural resources (International Crises Group 2018). The most notable attack against China took place in November 2018. BLA gunmen entered the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, killing two Pakistani security personnel. Before this the insurgents focused in Balochistan and targeted only Chinese citizens and workers along with Pakistan security

personnel (Sufouglu 2018). Pakistan has taken measures to ensure the stability in Balochistan in particular Gwadar. According to reports the city resembles a military cantonment. Despite this in the past few months insurgency in Balochistan has intensified, in April 2019 insurgents killed 14 bus passengers in Ormara, 11 of whom were security personnel. In the month of May insurgents stormed Pearl Continental hotel in Gwadar. This is an indication that Baloch insurgents possess the ability to instill serious damage to CPEC. (Noutezai 2019). This attack was a major blow for Pakistani authorities who claimed that security situation has improved. Pakistan's reputation as a tourist destination also suffered a severe hit. Questions about the security of CPEC and the security forces capacity to address these threats. Any violent attack at Gwadar dry port can potentially freeze the entire project. It would prove disastrous, till now the death tolls in violent incidents targeting Chinese were small. A larger death toll can also halt the entire progress (Ahmed 2019). Balochistan's stability is detrimental in completion and function of CPEC. Over time it was noted that security measures alone will not address the insurgency. People of Balochistan have certain genuine grievances that Pakistan needs to address. Along with military, political solution must also be on the table. In various instances insurgents have laid down their arms before the state. However these events have proven to be insignificant in the bigger scheme of things. The main actors are BLA, BLF and Baloch Republic Party, headed by Brahmdagh Bugti, son of slain Akbar Bugti.

### **Conclusion**

The strategic importance of CPEC is tremendous and so are the threats posed to it. The challenges surrounding CPEC are immense which are only beginning to manifest. Baloch insurgency escalated this year and they have openly challenged not only the state of Pakistan but China as well. There exists a realization among both neighbors about the gravity of the situation. The question is how can these threats be mitigated before CPEC becomes fully operational. A single incident can freeze the entire project and foreign investors would lose their confidence. Pakistan has invested in the security by establishing the Special Security Group to ensure the safety of the corridor but Pakistan needs to focus on improving intelligence sharing as well. The foreign hands behind sponsorship of the Baloch separatists need to be figured out as well, this nexus must be destroyed in order to contain the separatist threat. The other major threat is the rise of Islamic State in Afghanistan. In this regard the current negotiations are a vital step. Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan would mitigate the IS threat since their presence is unacceptable for the Taliban as well. Pakistan needs to facilitate the peace process. Timely completion of all projects needs to be ensured, delay would only give the insurgents more time to plan and act. All three eastern, western and central alignment needs to be completed so in case of a terrorists activity the entire project won't freeze over and the alternative route can be used to carry out the activities.

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