

# CPEC: One Potentially Treacherous Road in China's Grand Plan?

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**Abstract:** The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is said to be the flagship project in China's grand vision of extending its reach across Europe, Africa and Asia. This article examines its implications for Pakistan, and the likelihood of China ultimately building a naval base at Gwadar to extend its military reach to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. The research also focuses on the project's impact on internal civil-military relations, the concerns of Pakistan's provinces, and whether CPEC will bring peace or confrontation to the region.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, China, Gwadar, One-Belt-One-Road plan, maritime strategy

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## 1. A Brief Explanation of OBOR and CPEC

As a key element of China's grand strategy to extend its reach over three continents – Asia, Europe and Africa – President Xi Jinping unveiled one of its most ambitious investment plans during a visit to Islamabad in April 2015. Known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and part of China's larger "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) plan to connect all three continents via maritime routes and rail links, it will be pumping US\$46 billion into Pakistan's economy through Chinese investments in infrastructure.

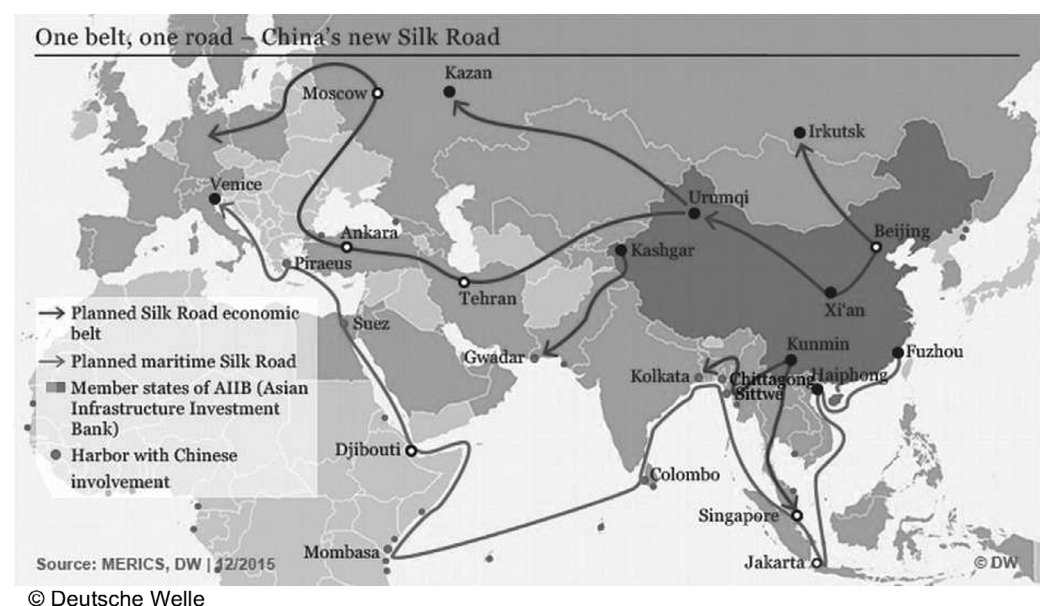
The leaderships of both countries have termed the project a "win-win" proposition. However, in some provinces of Pakistan and in other countries in the region, it is being looked at with suspicion. There are three possible routes being considered to connect Kashgar in China with Gwadar in Pakistan, two of which are not without internal controversy. All three also pass through Gilgit Baltistan, the northernmost administrative territory of Pakistan bordering China's Xinjiang province and situated in the disputed territory of Jammu & Kashmir, over which Pakistan and India have fought two wars.

The secretive nature of the negotiations leading up to the plan, as well as many of its details, has led to much speculation and controversy. The project is called an "economic corridor" but it is hard to overlook its strategic and political importance as well. China's OBOR plan put forth by its National Development and Reform Commission breaks down to essentially a land route (referred to as the Silk Road Economic Belt) and a sea route (the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road) (NDRC, 2015). One element is a route that cuts southward across South

Asia, giving China direct access to the Persian Gulf. It has thus negotiated with Pakistan for the right to a route that transects that country in exchange for investments in infrastructure and other key projects that will aid in Pakistan's development.

CPEC has been described by Chinese officials as OBOR's "flagship project." Foreign Minister Wang Yi has likened OBOR to a symphony involving and benefiting every country. "Construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the sweet melody of the symphony's first movement" (The Wall Street Journal, 2015). OBOR funding sources will include US\$50 billion from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and US\$40 billion from the Silk Road Fund, as well as investments from Chinese private and state firms. As announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Pakistan in April 2015, China plans to invest US\$46 billion in CPEC alone – the largest OBOR investment to date (The Wall Street Journal, 2014). Through the corridor, China plans to connect its troubled western province of Xinjiang with the most backward and strategically important province of Pakistan – Balochistan. Under the CPEC banner, extensive investments and loans

Figure 1:



are planned in Pakistan's transport, telecommunication and energy infrastructure:

**Table 1: Cost Allocation (in US\$ billion)**

Energy (select breakdown given below)	33
Coal 7560 MW	8.8
Wind 200 MW	0.5
Hydroelectric 1590 MW	4.2
Solar 1000 MW	1.7
Second Phase 6445 MW	9.5
Mining	9.0
Roads	5.9
Rail	3.7
Mass transit in Lahore	1.6
Gwadar Port	0.7
China-Pak Fiber Optics	0.4
Total	45.7

Source. *BMA Capital* (2015)

For transport, there are two road projects planned (US\$ 5.9 billion) and two rail projects (US\$ 3.69 billion). A key focus is the port of Gwadar – the terminus of the corridor – the potential ramifications of which are in question.

## 2. CPEC: More Than Just an Economic Corridor?

### *Why the Secrecy Shrouding CPEC?*

The Federal Minister for Planning and Development of Pakistan, Ahsan Iqbalhas, told the Pakistani Senate in no uncertain terms that the CPEC-Gwadar agreement is confidential and cannot be made public (Dawn, July 2016). Despite the fact that Gwadar Port is located in Balochistan province, there was never an opportunity to debate it in the Balochistan assembly, nor were any of the province's representatives taken on board. Nonetheless, the Chinese Overseas Ports Holding Company was given a lease on the port for 40 years in 2013, just a few months before the general election. "To date, the details of this mysterious deal – including agreement, tenure and operational modalities – remain undisclosed. Media houses have been instructed to report 'all-is-well' stories about the CPEC and ignore the very pertinent protests and demands," writes former Pakistani Senator Sanaullah Baloch (2016).

### *Is Gwadar Destined to Become a Naval Base?*

The Chinese idea of building a naval base in Gwadar is older than the vision of CPEC. After Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani returned from a four-day visit to China in May 2011, Defense Minister Ahmad Mukhtar said in a statement, "We would be... grateful to the Chinese government if a naval base is ... constructed at the site of Gwadar for Pakistan" (Reuters, 2011). In another statement, the Minister said, "We also asked the Chinese government to train our personnel on submarines," but Balochistan's Chief Minister then issued a statement saying he was "appalled by the federal government's decision to hand over Gwadar's operations to China since he was designated as Gwadar Port Authority chairman at a federal cabinet meeting" (The Express Tribune, 2011).

In 2015, the US Office of Naval Intelligence published a report on the Chinese Navy predicting: "In the next decade, China will complete its transition from a coastal navy to a navy capable of multiple missions around the world." Some US analysts worry that China is attempting to build a network of naval bases (a "string of pearls") across the Indian Ocean, thereby making it a global naval power (Foreign Policy, 2015).

In the former French colony of Djibouti in East Africa, China has already expanded its geopolitical reach by establishing its first naval hub there, which seems to confirm its ambitions. More recently, China announced an unprecedented deal that it would sell eight attack submarines to Pakistan for an estimated US\$5 billion (Hindustan Times, 2016). There seems little doubt that Pakistan is a lynchpin in China's foreign policy.

Discussing CPEC and the possibility of a Chinese naval base in Gwadar, Parag Khanna (2016, 242) points out that China has for 50 years been subsidizing the construction of the Karakoram Highway network. It follows the Indus River from Xinjiang Province as far south as Islamabad in Pakistan. The network is now being extended by way of the multi-billion-dollar CPEC, and will include railways and power stations that "specialized units of the Pakistani military have been designated to guard more carefully than they do the country's borders." This infrastructure will extend China's power to two oceans – the Pacific and the Indian. And once pipelines are constructed through Pakistan, Middle East energy will be able flow into China's rapidly growing western provinces. Khanna speculates that the port of Gwadar, not used in decades despite its strategic position, could become China's most reliable overseas naval base where attack submarines being built in nearby Karachi could be stationed. It is no surprise that former Chinese General Xiong Guangkhai summed up Pakistan's importance by referring to it as "China's Israel"

Andrew Small (2015, 1-2) also suggests that CPEC will facilitate the building of a naval base for China. He describes Pakistan as central to China's transition from regional to global power. Beijing's plan to connect the oil and gas fields of the Middle East to the great cities of East Asia hinges, in his view, upon Pakistan, and Gwadar will be crucial for China's launch as a naval power with access to the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.

### *Could Gwadar Accommodate a Naval Base?*

The Director General of Gwadar Port Authority, Munir Ahmed Jan, was questioned by the author about the layout of expansion plans in November, 2016. He said,

"[t]he control of Gwadar port has been given to (COPHC) for 40 years. Now it is up to COPHC to develop, run and expand the work related to the port. It has around 100 employees, most of them Chinese."

He further added,

"Gwadar is a deep natural seaport with an area of 640,000 square meters. Phase-1 has been completed, which is equipped with three 50,000-DWT multi-purpose berths. The total length of the pier is 602 meters, but in Phase-2 it is envisioned that the total length will be expanded to 1,600 meters. The work on this will begin soon. The navigation channel is 4.7 kilometers. The depth of outer channel is 14.5 meters."

He went on to explain that the Chinese are also developing free zones in the city. The first is 70 acres in Mulla Band, which is very close to the port. Residents have been shifted to a new town in Gwadar. A free zone is being developed in Mulla Band, which will include living areas, display centers and a five-star hotel. Free zones will be expanded over 2,281 acres, according to the agreement. The future development area will be 120,210 square miles.

Munir Ahmed, a senior official in the port, also pointed out,

"[t]he Chinese are building Pakistan's largest airport in Gwadar. It will be able to accommodate the landing of an A-380 Airbus, which no other Pakistani airport can. As of November 2016, 175 ships have arrived at Gwadar Port. A total of 6.32 million tons have been handled there. On 12 November, a convoy of 125 trucks from Kashgar in China reached Gwadar. Goods from 66 trucks were loaded onto two ships and were sent on to international markets."

It should be mentioned that the Pakistan Navy and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy of China began their fourth joint exercise on 17 November 2016. According to Chinese Naval Force Flotilla Commander, Senior Captain Chi Qingtao,

"[t]he [fourth] exercise will help improve the naval capability of both countries to protect Gwadar port activities while providing a safe and conducive environment for the movement of merchant ships from there" (Hasan, 2016).

Most of the projects pertaining to CPEC in Balochistan are based in Gwadar. There are sixteen projects in Balochistan, but thirteen of them are in Gwadar. It shows that there is nothing planned for Balochistan, but only there is Gwadar with its strategic importance which would ultimately be used for strategic purposes like a naval base.

**Table2:**

**CPEC projects involving Gwadar.**

- Gwadar Power Plant
- Gwadar-Nawabshah LNG Terminal and Pipeline
- Gwadar Eastbay Expressways I and II
- Gwadar New International Airport
- Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan
- Expansion of Multi-purpose Terminal including Breakwater & Dredging
- Wastewater Treatment Plants for Gwadar City
- Gwadar Primary School
- Gwadar Hospital Upgradation
- Gwadar Technical & Vocational College
- Fresh Water Supply
- Gwadar Free Zone

Source: "Details of CPEC Projects by Chinese Embassy," *Pak China News*, 5 Oct. 2016

Brigadier Shahzad Iftikhar Bhatti, in charge of Gwadar's security force said that

"efforts are underway to make Gwadar a safe city and new resident cards [will] be issued to citizens of [the] port city." (Daily Balochistan Express, 2016).

This means that others wishing to enter the city will be issued visiting cards upon presentation of their National Identity Cards at one of the new Army check-points set up around the perimeter of the city. Columnist Umair Javed observes:

"Gwadar is, in practice, a federalized [under the federal government] and an increasingly globalized [under the Chinese government] area. Its day-to-day control rests with the military and the Chinese companies operating its port" (Javed, 2016).

The reality is that the city is essentially turning into a military zone.

Events and reporting strongly suggest that CPEC will be an economic corridor that will include a naval base in Balochistan for China. And from this strategic port, China would be able to send shipments to international markets and import oil and other resources from the Middle East and other parts of the world. As a naval base, Gwadar Port would allow China to protect its trading ships, while expanding its influence and reach to the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

### 3. CPEC's Broader Implications

#### *Pakistan's Civilian-Military Clash Over Control*

For over half of its 67 years of independence, Pakistan has been ruled by a powerful military. After the 2013 elections, Pakistan saw the first transition to civilian government, but the military still has a great influence over the country's internal and external policies. An inevitable power game has arisen out of the critical importance of CPEC to the country, and has brought the civilian-military leadership to severe clashes. Referring to Pakistan's civilian-military differences over CPEC, Victor Gao, a former Chinese foreign ministry official, said, "[o]n the Pakistan side there is uncertainty about which entity wants to take leadership or ownership of the corridor projects" (Financial Times, 2016). The PML-N, Pakistan's ruling party, seems reluctant to share control of the project, which could be used as a trump card in the 2018 elections (Ghumman, Dawn, 2016).

Because of domestic security concerns, measures have been instituted – like the 21<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment (establishing military courts) and the formation of the National Action Plan (a 20-point action plan/crackdown against terrorists) – that have expanded the military's power over the civilian government regarding control of CPEC (Wolf, 2016). This obviously weakens the Prime Minister's position. And so, a year after the CPEC agreement, there are still no agreed-upon terms of reference between the civilian leadership and the military that would govern the workings of the Special Security Divisions (SSD) which will provide security to the Chinese workers (Syed, Dawn, 2016). Giving full control of the SSD to the military would leave the civilian government with no say in CPEC.

#### *No National Consensus*

Impacts of CPEC can already be seen creeping across Pakistan, affecting its federating units (provinces) and calling into question the democratic rights of the federating unit. The 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment says that power has been devolved to provinces, but it is not being implemented in letter and spirit. In an op-ed entitled *Making the Most of CPEC*, Muhammad Amir Rana said, "The political government cannot do without consensus among stakeholders, especially on national issues" (Rana, 2016). But those in power are doing just that. The leader of Pakistan Tehrik Insaf, the party in power in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, has criticized

the Prime Minister for ignoring the less-privileged provinces in the decisions regarding CPEC. Using the occasion of the inauguration of a CPEC project, the Prime Minister labeled all those who kept questioning him as “terrorists” (Dawn, May 2016). Labeling dissenters as terrorists sets a bad precedent of suppressing freedom of speech, as well as an example of dictatorial politics that weaken the spirit of federation.

Lawmakers from Pakistan's Senate have expressed their apprehensions by calling CPEC another East India Company, referring to the British progenitor of colonial rule on the subcontinent. Senator Tahir Mashhadi stated: “Another East India Company is in the offing; national interests are not being protected. We are proud of the friendship between Pakistan and China, but the interests of the state should come first” (Raza, Syed Irfan, Dawn, 18 Oct. 2016). Another action that stung the federation was when the Chairman of the Senate Committee on CPEC announced that all committee members would go on a three-city tour of China where Chinese officials would be expected to allay their concerns (Rana, 2016). One might argue that in a democratic country a legislator need not travel to another country to learn the art of consensus-building on local issues. Consensus must come from within the country itself. In a recent visit to Balochistan, Pakistan's President warned the Baloch people to speak “carefully” about CPEC (The News on Sunday, 2016).

Instead of making such statements, the head of state and the head of government would be advised to develop a national consensus through open debate on CPEC, ensuring transparency and taking every political party on board. Not achieving national consensus would have far-reaching impacts on democracy and the Pakistani federation.

#### *Provincial Grievances*

Balochistan, with 5 per cent of the country's total population and 50 per cent of its land and seacoast, and KPK are the least-developed provinces of Pakistan. According to the latest United Nations Development Program report, 71 per cent of those in Balochistan live in multi-dimensional poverty (poor health, lack of education, very low income, and disempowerment); in KPK, the number is 49 per cent (UNDP, 2016). Even though they are in need of the benefits, both marginalized provinces are very suspicious of CPEC's promises and the impacts on them. In both Balochistan and KPK provinces the view of CPEC as Punjab-centered is prevalent, as most of the energy and infrastructure projects will be established in Punjab and Sindh.

Furthermore, in Balochistan, it is often being viewed as a plot by the federal government to turn the majority (Baloch) into a minority, and to exclude them from job opportunities. Former Senator Sana Baloch writes that the Gwadar Security Taskforce has been established for the protection of Chinese workers, without one job being offered to Balochs (The News on Sunday, 2016). Baloch political parties have held seminars and public talks on CPEC because they are of the opinion that they are being excluded from the benefits of the project. Akhtar Mengal, Former Chief Minister of Balochistan, has said that CPEC is “offering nothing to Balochistan in economic terms except an influx of population (Shahid, 2015). Despite tall claims, thus far no initiative has been taken by the federal government to address the grievances of the Baloch.

#### *Control over Mineral Resources*

With the implementation of CPEC, China will essentially control, because of its advanced technologies which Pakistan lacks. Pakistan's province richest in mineral resources. Balochistan has the fifth largest unexploited copper and gold reserves in the world (The National, 2014). The Saindak copper-and-gold-mining project in Chagi has been over 50-percent controlled by a Chinese firm since 2002 (Daily Times, 2013).

#### *Consequences of Securing CPEC*

Balochistan has for decades been the hub of insurgent movements. “We consider the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as... an occupation of Baluch territory,” said rebel spokesman Miran Baluch, a member of the Baluchistan Liberation Front, adding “its fighters would attack anyone working on the project. Thousands of Baluch families have been forced to flee the area where the CPEC route is planned [due to fighting between the military and local militants]. [The] Baluch [people] will not tolerate such projects on their land” (Reuters, 2016).

An unnamed security official told journalist Zahid Gishkori: “We are going for a four-layer plan for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), integrated with a new security policy and an estimated 32,000 security personnel, including Policemen, Frontier Corps, Rangers and Army men, will guard over 14,321 Chinese workers engaged in some 210 small and mega projects in Pakistan.” This means there will be two-and-a-half security personnel to protect every Chinese national (Gishkori, 2015).

According to Pakistani officials, “[a]part from security on land, the government has also taken relevant initiative through the maritime security agency to protect the coast as well as through the Pakistan Air Force (Khan, Dawn, 2016). Not only will Pakistan's navy and army be providing security for CPEC, but in an unanticipated meeting with Pakistan's President, the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission said they will supply comprehensive satellite services to monitor CPEC and address its security concerns (Raza, Syed Irfan, Dawn, 19 Oct. 2016).

#### *CPEC's Impact on the Region*

The aim of CPEC is to boost Pakistan's economy. But improved economic development could also result in increased spending on Pakistan's military and aggravate the existing arms race with India (Wagner, 2016, p. 2). Despite having Most-Favored Nation (MFN) status, Pakistan's bilateral trade with India was US\$2.6 billion in 2015-16, which represented only 0.4 per cent of India's overall (The Hindu, 2016).

For China, CPEC is a move to increase engagement with Pakistan. China is suspicious of India's growth and no longer feels it has the luxury to be disdainful. But it also has a counterweight in the form of Pakistan. If the US were going to smooth the path for India's rise, Pakistan would be the means for China to curtail it.

Statements coming from top Pakistani civil-military leadership blame regional countries for trying to sabotage the project. In a seminar held in Gwadar, Pakistani Army Chief of Staff General Raheel Shareef accused India's Research & Analysis Wing of being “actively involved” in destabilising the country, including attempts to sabotage CPEC (Ahmad, Hindustan Times, 2016). Intelligence Bureau Chief Aftab Sultan told parliamentarians



that Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security and local militants were opposed to CPEC and were making every effort to derail the key project (Dawn, Oct. 2016).

Now that CPEC is underway, India, Iran and Afghanistan recently signed a tripartite agreement to turn the Iranian port of Chabahar into a transit hub bypassing Pakistan, which had been the only route for war-stricken Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean (Al Jazeera, 2016). It seems that Pakistan's increasing isolation in the region is making it easy for China to deal with the country on its own terms. And as tensions mount, the Chinese have also jumped into the war of words. The China Institute of Contemporary International Relations has warned India that China will have to "get involved" if any Indian "plot" disrupts the US\$46-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in restive Balochistan (IANS, Hindustan Times, 2016).

The US also sees CPEC as a countermove by China to President Obama's pivot to Asia. Increased investment in Pakistan specifically, as well as in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, has the US concerned that China has designs on all of South Asia. Admiral Gary Roughead, a former US chief of naval operations now at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, told the Foreign Policy magazine: "You have a bit of a maritime Great Game going on in the Indian Ocean that will involve us, it will involve India, and it will involve, of course, China." Adding to that, he said, "I think we have to watch it and look at it with eyes wide open" (Foreign Policy, 2015).

#### 4. Gwadar's Strategic Implications?

Through CPEC, China will have land-access to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, saving time and billions in costs for transport of goods while importing such natural resources as oil from Middle East avoiding a long sea route. It will also offer to China the opportunity to exploit resources present in Balochistan. Additionally, the project has a strategic and geopolitical dimension. It serves the Chinese goal to contain India through Pakistan, as well as to ensure that India is kept off balance. The Chinese presence in Gwadar and increasing support for Pakistan (63 per cent of its arms are being imported from China) is definitely sending signals to Delhi (Sethi, Hindustan Times, 2016).

Alliances are shifting – Pakistan's growing isolation in the region and its tilt toward China giving it full access to the strategic Balochistan coast is one of a number of moves and counter moves in the region that may trigger armed conflict if they continue. It is imperative that any economic project undertaken bring regional integrity rather than widen the gap between nations. But CPEC seems to be a contradiction of the notion of regional integration.



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