

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Flashpoint of Regional Competition

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Abstract

A new World Order and new (re)alignments in inter-state relationships are taking place, where Pakistan is clearly tilting towards eastern camp with China in the lead. The tilt is through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), providing Pakistan with enormous opportunities to uplift its dilapidated economic condition and offering China with another opening in the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar Port in Balochistan. However, there are many challenges and obstacles that the state of Pakistan must deal with and overcome to turn the CPEC into a successful reality.

The CPEC offers Pakistan with abundant economic opportunities to ease out its financial distress and provides China with another opening in the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar Port. It promises to modernize Pakistan's infrastructure and improve its connectivity within the region and beyond from the Chinese province of Xinjiang to Middle East, Europe and Africa. Pakistan is obviously shifting from geostrategic considerations to geo-economic cooperation, focussing on strong relationship with major regional actors. On the contrary, since its inception in 2013, the CPEC has been the subject of intense international scrutiny and criticism. It is seen as a Chinese strategy to assert itself in international political arena, using Pakistan as its peripheral allied state.

This article is aimed at investigating both the internal and external challenges that Pakistan has been facing since launching of the CPEC—its economic lifeline. It discusses how the CPEC, and the Gwadar Port have impacted on the regional geopolitics. It underlines how the CPEC is becoming a flashpoint due to power tussle between big powers and adversely affecting Pakistan's security.

Keywords: Pakistan, China, BRI, CPEC, Gwadar Port, regional competition, geopolitics.

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in April 2013 as a flagship corridor under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It envisions transformational gains that

might turn Pakistan into an economic hub. It 'provides Pakistan such an opportunity to become an export-led economy, thereby in the long-term contributing to Pakistan's socioeconomic development' (Akhtar, 2022). Quite understandably, therefore, both the Chinese and Pakistani governments have been taking great interest in completion of projects under the CPEC and see it as a tremendous opportunity to advance their respective economic and strategic goals. The CPEC can potentially take Pakistan out of economic crunch and engage its bulging young population in an economic activity not ignoring its immense strategic prospects. Islamabad prioritizes geo-economic partnership and the CPEC provides the best opportunity to achieve it. Accordingly, Pakistan's new national security policy emphasizes on the importance of the CPEC.

The entire idea of the CPEC revolves around confluence of geo-economics and geo-politics. It is neither merely economic project nor is it designed to gain only political mileage; rather it aims at strategizing priorities in such a manner that maximizes economic returns. The understanding of geo-economics and its application has evolved over time. In the current international political spectrum, geopolitics implicitly pursues strategic and political goals rather than purely economic factors (Baru, 2012, p. 48). Although in US-led world order the globalization of economies has given impetus to trade and growth but it has simultaneously intensified the pursuit of power and promoted a conflictual competition to acquire maximum share (Leonard, 2015, p. 4). Similarly, there is a conflictual competition in this region that hosts two emerging economies, India and China. They both are aspiring for more powerful role both in regional and global affairs and, therefore, ambitiously expanding their area of influence and actively seeking new networks for trade. Their ingress through economic activity in their neighbourhoods serves their intrinsic strategic desires too (Leonard, 2015, p. 4).

China's transition from 'only' large economy to strategically and militarily strong state with an ambition to expand its area of influence by adopting BRI as a connectivity tool is a smart strategy. China has also accelerated its rapprochement through developing trade zones with countries around, challenging the existing international political order. The BRI is thus a geostrategic move to position itself in the region and expand its area of influence over the globe from Europe to Africa, including Asia. Its pursuit of power, however, has alerted the regional and global actors like India and the USA. The rising China has the potential to surpass the United States' global supremacy in economic, political and strategic affairs, which unquestionably has alarmed the existing superpower (Magnus, 2021; Khan M., 2016, p. 87).

Pakistan—a neighboring country to China lies at a position, where China, through BRI, is shaking the international politico-economic structure. The CPEC, which is a prominent feature of BRI, therefore is seen as an extension of Chinese strategy to expand its area of influence. The scholars like Garlick (2021), Adeney and Boni (2021), Taneja (2016) and Small (2015) see CPEC nothing more than Chinese strategic and military expansionist strategy, blaming Pakistan as a collaborator. They are not totally off the mark.

No doubt, the joint venture between the two neighboring countries has the potential to elevate the status of Pakistan both politically and economically but for China it is more strategic than economic. China's ingress through massive investment in the host country is a smart expansionist strategy, which satisfies its economic as well as strategic targets (Javaid U. , 2016, p. 262). It is strongly believed in Pakistan that China's investment for trade corridor with special attention to the Gwadar Port will be phenomenal in putting Pakistan on economic trajectory and further strengthen strategic relations between the two partners (Javaid & Javaid, 2016, p. 131). The financier of the CPEC—China aims not only to explore new markets through the CPEC but also expand its area of influence beyond Pakistan; and Gwadar Port—the jewel in the CPEC's crown is viewed more with the strategic lens than its economic significance and has remained the centre of strongest opposition both at home and abroad (Hillman, McCalpin, & Brock, 2020).

Despite its phenomenal benefits, there are few factors that are obstructing the CPEC completion such as 1)- political instability in Pakistan; 2)-delayed decision making in few projects, particularly ML1¹; 3)-bad governance and corruption 4)-resurgence of militancy; 5)-the COVID-19 pandemic (Rafiq, 2021). Among all, the new wave of militancy is the most worrisome issue both for Beijing and Islamabad as multiple attacks on the CPEC-related projects have not only slowed down the pace of the project but has upset the Chinese workers.

The Baloch militants along with other miscreants and religious militants are the main culprits. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) has conducted a series of attacks, including on i)- the Chinese Consulate located in Karachi in 2018, ii)-Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar on 11 May 2019, , iii)- Pakistan Stock Exchange (three Chinese companies at the time owned 40% of the

¹ Up-gradation and Doubling of Main train Line-1 (ML-1) from Karachi to Peshawar and Taxila to Havelian (1733 km). It is a huge project connecting larger cities from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Karachi Port in Sindh by laying of a new track with improved subgrade for 160 km/h. The project's outcome will be Increase in Speed from 65-105 km/h to 120-160 km/h. The project also includes rehabilitation and construction of major bridges within the route (<http://cpec.gov.pk/project-details/30>).

stakes) in 2020, iv)- A roadside IED bomb blast in Mat area of Dera Bugti, Balochistan in 2022, and v)- now the recent terrorist attack on security forces in Panjgur and Nushki districts in 2022. The assault lasted four days and left 20 militants and nine Pakistani soldiers dead. Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) and Baloch Nationalist Army (BNA) are also involved in militant attacks on LEAs, state infrastructure, CPEC projects, civilians, both Pakistani and Chinese (DW, 16 February 2022; Notezai, 2021; Dangwal, 2022; Baloch, 2022; *Geo News* 26 March 2022; Nihad, 2022; Hassan, 2020).

Chinese grand investment initiative

President Xi Jinping launched a large collection of development and investment initiatives—BRI in 2013, stretching from East Asia to Europe, significantly increasing China's economic and political influence (Chatzky & McBride, 2020). Through the BRI, China is acquiring both continental and oceanic prowess—a modernized version of the grand Silk Road². Inarguably, it is a very smart strategy to consume Chinese overgrown production capacity and maintain its economic activity, balanced in its favor and exploring new markets around the world (Javaid U. , 2016, p. 257).

China's BRI is a strategic move to attain a permanent road into Eurasia and dominant presence in its sea-based lines of supply. To make it a reality, China has engaged more than 60 countries, with a population of 4.4 billion people, building six economic corridors connecting China with other economies. They are: 1). China–Mongolia–Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC); 2). New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB); 3). China-Central Asia-Western Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC); 4). China–Indo–China Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC); 5). China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and 6). Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC) (Ghiassy and J Zhou 2017, p.2; OECD, 2018, p. 3; Javaid 2016, p. 256). China's presence at important ports like Hambantota, Djibouti and Gwadar offer it with maritime access in new ways that protects its supplies of natural resources and expands its outreach (Sloan, 2017, p. xiv). Inevitably, this has provided China a greater role both in regional

² The German Geographer, Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, first used the term 'Silk Road' because silk was one of the main products that travelled the full length of the route (Jabeen, Batool, & Dogar, 2012, p. 120). Under the BRI, there are two major connectivity roads: the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the ocean-going Maritime Silk Road (MSR).

and global economic and strategic affairs, thus transforming it into an amphibious power. Xiguang posits the whole objective of BRI in the following manner, he says that

The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltics); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-century Maritime Silk Road is designed to pass from China's coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China's coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other. (Xiguang, 2016, p. 2)

In contrast to Chinese statements, an American consulting firm 'Booz Allen Hamilton' referred Chinese connectivity plan to 'string of pearls' (Hali, 2016, p. 56). According to Pehrson, a Lieutenant Colonel in the US Air Force, the string of pearls is China's expanding geopolitical influence and is manifested in the following ways: 1) improved access to ports and airfields; and 2) the development of special diplomatic relationships. 3) modernize military forces that extend from the South China Sea to the Arabian Gulf (Pehrson, 2006, p. v).

Nevertheless, the BRI has significant economic and strategic benefits to offer to the host countries, which have limited financial resources like Pakistan. Since CPEC is the subject of discussion of this article, the next section will discuss the opportunities and challenges that the CPEC can offer to Pakistan—an overpopulated country, deficient in funds and ambitiously seeking investment to engage its people in positive economic activity. The ensuing paragraphs will also examine the criticism both by international and local actors, who see it as China's strategic expansion and a debt trap for Pakistan ignoring its benefits to the country.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

The CPEC is a 3,000 km long trade connectivity route consisting of highways, railways, and pipelines largely termed as BRI's flagship project with an immense economic potential and geo-political significance (Bhardwaj, 2017, p. 10; Khan M., 2016, p.86). The CPEC is one of the connecting dots in BRI's string, which connects the underdeveloped western province—Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China to the south-western tip of Pakistan in Balochistan, at Gwadar Port³ (Khan M. , 2016, p. 88). The CPEC, which began as a US\$ 45

³ Gwadar is the southern tip of the Balochistan province and a passage to Arabian Sea. It is about 533 km from Karachi, 120 km from the Iranian border and 380 km northeast of the nearest point in Oman across the Arabian Sea. Gwadar port is a naturally hammerhead shaped harbour closest to Strait of Hormuz (Malik, 2016, p. 119).

billion project has grown to over US\$62 billion, with a further increase following the signing of new agreements between Beijing and Islamabad during Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to China at the inaugural session of Winter Olympics 2022. The CPEC is an opening of opportunities in terms of jobs, better infrastructure, foreign investment and chances for Pakistan to be a 'regional commercial hub' (Javaid U. , 2016, p. 258) or as Balachandran says:

CPEC is a multifaceted connectivity, investment and trade initiative which includes expansion of rail and road networks, energy generation projects, port development, fibre-optic cables networks and industrial cooperation. (Balachandran, 2017, p. 283)

The CPEC is an essential feature that ensures success of the BRI and its strategic importance particularly of the Gwadar Port lies in providing China an alternative route, which can keep its trading route functional in case there is a blockade in the South China Sea at Strait of Malacca (Wen & Saleem, 2021, p. 677). It has the capacity to become a model corridor in inter-regional connectivity and presents itself as a persuasive goal forwarding the BRI real objective. The trade route through the CPEC cuts down the transportation time and cost from Chinese factories to the markets of Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In India's *National Security: Annual Review 2015–16*, which is a collection of topics that focuses on India's security matters, CPEC is analysed as a central topic. Wherein, Balachandran (2016) has stated that:

A ship takes just one day from Dubai to reach Gwadar, whereas it might take about two weeks to reach Shanghai. It also cuts costs as per container cost from the UAE to Pakistan are about \$250, while the same could be up to \$1,500 for China. On completion, the distance of goods transported from Urumqi in Xinjiang to Dubai via the Gwadar Port will be 5,772 km, with reduction in distance by 11,061 km as compared to the old route via Shanghai. And the distance from Urumqi to London will be vastly cut by 10,884 km. This will make Gwadar a primary gate-way for trade between China and Middle East and Europe as well as making Xinjiang a transit hub for China. (Balachandran, 2017, p. 284)

The CPEC is not just a road network spread over the country, rather it is an umbrella of various plans and strategies that addresses Pakistan's fundamental socioeconomic and political issues (Wen & Saleem, 2021, p. 677). During a media interaction, and in a response to author's question, Prof. Javaid Iqbal⁴ stated, 'CPEC is a nation building project and a cohesive bond to integrate the diverse ethnic groups in Pakistan into one civic nation'. Similarly, scholars like Khan S. (2021), Ahmed (2019) and Khan M. (2016) suggest that the CPEC will not only improve peoples' living standards, but will better state-society connect and mend Pakistan's socio-political fault lines. They argue that economic uplift will engage people in constructive

⁴ Prof. Javaid Iqbal, Vice Chairman, University of Balochistan on 21.09.2017

activities through numerous employable opportunities and thus minimize the risk of their inclination towards paid destructive activities: extremism and militancy.

On its completion, the CPEC will bring phenomenal economic transformation to underdeveloped areas of Pakistan – Balochistan, KP, and Gilgit Baltistan. The Gwadar Port located at the mouth of the Arabian Sea and merely 460 km away from Karachi. The port provides both China and Pakistan with a strategic footing in the Indian Ocean. Its proximity to the Straits of Hormuz—one of the busiest trade routes, with forty percent of oil trade passing through it, makes it geo-strategically very important to world powers (Pant and Mehta 2018, p.663; Mazhar et al. 2012, p.117). Its significance stems from its geographic location, which is at the crossroads of international trade routes, connecting Asia to Europe and Africa via the shortest possible route –Strait of Hormuz (Khan S. , 2021, p. 73). Describing its geopolitical importance and its outreach in the region, Sloan (2017, p. 211) has quoted the remarks of the President of Pakistan, General Pervaiz Musharraf at the ground-breaking ceremony of Gwadar port in 2002:

If we see this whole region, it is like a funnel. The top of the funnel is this wide area of Central Asia and also China's western region. And this funnel gets narrowed on through Afghanistan and Pakistan and the end of this funnel is Gwadar port. So this funnel, futuristically, is the economic funnel of this whole region (Sloan 2017, p. 211).

Gwadar Port gives China a vantage point on the west side of the (Indian Ocean Region – IOR) as well as a seaport to Pakistan away from Indian shores. The CPEC might have promising outcomes for China and Pakistan, but it has irked regional and global actors who are apprehensive of China's westward expansion with the help of Pakistan (Javaid 2016, p. 262). The CPEC is perceived as one of the Chinese extensions and strategic manifestations *vis-a-vis* the USA and regional emerging power—India (Fingar, 2016, p. 3). China's economic rise has not only bolstered Chinese prowess in international political and strategic matters but has also shaken the status quo. The existing power paradigm wherein the USA is in lead strongly resists China's expansionist desires. Washington sees BRI as Chinese expansionist desire—a quid pro quo against 'the US extended outposts and pressure points on China from the east, south and west' (Clegg, 2009, p. 34), challenging status quo, wherein America is the only superpower. Exponential growth has raised China's status in international political arena, and China has become an economic giant that could potentially surpass the United States which currently is the only superpower (Magnus, 2021). It is not surprising that the United States' worldwide dominance is contingent on its strategic handling of Beijing. Smaller states like Pakistan,

Djibouti and Sri Lanka are perceived as China's partners helping it to fulfil its strategic goals. Following the Cold War Model, the powerful states are not engaged in direct confrontation rather the smaller states are targeted. In this scenario, where the CPEC is seen as an extension and support to the China's strategy to dominate global affairs, there is a counter strategy to contain it. The transition of power in favour of China is strongly contested and confronted. Power transition inarguably has always brought conflicts and tensions. Strong states in their pursuit for a powerful, dominating, and authoritative role, impact international politics in a way that transcend local power balances. They do not fight each other in conventional manner rather orchestrate a scenario that disturbs the local power balance either through dissenters or a third state. The entire CPEC and especially the Gwadar Port is a place where the interests of many international strong actors have either converged or diverged. The latter proposition has impacted Pakistan's internal security paradigm.

CPEC and international irk

If the CPEC is the model corridor among six economic corridors, the Gwadar Port is the jewel in the CPEC's crown. In addition to economic benefits, the corridor has strategic significance that has pushed it into the spotlight of geopolitics. It goes without saying that it will be extremely valuable in the future for both Pakistan and China's defence. Gwadar Port serves as a hawk eye for Pakistani military forces, allowing continuous maritime traffic surveillance. Needless to mention that the Gwadar Port is providing China not only an alternate trade route but also expand its sphere of influence through its strategic presence at the crossroads of Europe, Central Asia, Middle East and Africa. The power shift in favor of China through the CPEC and particularly the Gwadar Port has many underlying dangerous forces and persistent tensions for Pakistan.

Let us now discuss the challenges that Pakistan is facing while heading towards the completion of the CPEC. The internal security has become the formidable task, particularly in Balochistan—the home of the Gwadar Port. Both China and Pakistan are cognizant of the external and internal apprehensions about the CPEC and making every possible effort to engage all actors positively. In addition to challenging Washington's existing super power stature, the political analysts like Garlick (2021), and Small (2015) view Chinese investment in building the corridor as a strategic move to counter India in the region. According to Indian policymakers and observers, the CPEC is China's strategy to encircle India, and Pakistan is only a partner in

the scheme (Shafqat & Shahid, 2020, p. 1). Indian concern over the CPEC route is not only limited to the recognition of a disputed territory as an international border (Khan M. , 2016, p. 94) but also is the military training and transfer of military technology to Pakistan Army within the disputed area of Jammu and Kashmir under the control of Pakistan (Kumar, 2017, p. 79). In 2014, India formally registered its protest over the CPEC's route⁵ and summoned Chinese ambassador prior to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's official visit to China (Khan M. 2016, p.94; Kumar 2017, p.79; Hali 2016, p.54).

In the current international scenario, China stands stronger in its relative military and economic power, followed by Russia, EU, Brazil and India resulting into 'transactional and occasionally confrontational' relationship with the existing superpower—the USA (Stavridis, 2018). Washington sees the CPEC as China's strategy to achieve domination in South Asia with the help of Pakistan—a step towards dismantling the US global leadership model (Fingar, 2016, p. 2). With deep interests and increased stakes in the region, the United States is hesitant to surrender its current predominance particularly its maritime supremacy in the oceans. Therefore, America has formed alliances with key regional players such as India, Japan, Indonesia, and Singapore to prevent China from increasing its influence and adopted a China containment policy (Einhorn and Sidhu 2017, p. 3; Hali, 2016, p. 57). Washington's policy makers have been working on containing China's rise since long. The grand strategy in 21st century was designed to safeguard American interests in the global affairs and the Pivot to Asia policy during Obama's regime was part of it. It was not the only policy but a prelude to many such policies in later years that were meant to contain China. America's strategic alliance with India and formation of QUAD and AUKUS in the Indo Pacific regions are the continuity of China Containment policies.

The region, where the CPEC is in making have two major alliances: China & Pakistan and the USA & India. Pakistan, however, due to its economic crisis, political instability and internal fault lines, is the weakest of all. In the following paragraphs, the broad spectrum of the quadrilateral relationship amongst these four actors, is explored. The discussion will also look into intricate geopolitics wherein the Indo-US alliance is aiming for containment of China and consequently creating serious security concerns for Pakistan (Shafqat & Shahid, 2020, p. 5; Khan M. 2016, p. 87). India is willingly capitalizing on band wagoning the US' China

⁵ India's claim is that it is routed through the disputed territory of Kashmir- Gilgit-Baltistan

containment strategy as it helps to settle its old scores with Pakistan. Any favorable economic, strategic, or military environment for Pakistan is viewed as a loss to India, which must be avoided at all costs. Secondly, India sees China as the only competitor in the region which can overshadow Indian economic, strategic and military strength. Xiaoping suggests that the growing overlap between India's strategic backyard and China's strategic periphery are the ideal recipe for increased interaction, competition, and friction in Southern Asia (Xiaoping, 2018). The main irritant for India is the strategic partnership between China and Pakistan (Einhorn & Sidhu, 2017, p.5; Raghvan, 2016, p. 82). It is, therefore, India has funded an Iranian port less than 80 miles away from Gwadar port at Chabahar to counter China's presence in the westward IOR through the Gwadar Port (Javaid 2016, p. 263). China, on the other hand, has agreed to invest \$400 billion in Iran over the next 25 years (Fassihi & Myers, 2021). Both the Gwadar and Chabahar Ports in IOR are built for uninterrupted supply of fuel to keep operational the factories in China and India. The location of both ports with closest proximity to Strait of Hormuz adds up to their significance. 'Strait of Hormuz—a chokepoint⁶ between the Gulf and the open ocean'⁷ (Johny, 2019) connects the Middle East and CARs with South Asian region (Balachandran 2017, p.284; Murtha, 2011, p. 8). Gwadar with its natural deep-sea harbour can hold the largest mother ships—a prominent feature of any seaport outperforms the Chabhar Port's significance. Owing to its location, Gwadar Port has achieved global prominence and has become a 'geopolitical pivot' (Vlad, Josan, & Vlasceanu, 2010, p. 119). Besides providing another eye to monitor maritime traffic or sea-lines of communications in the IOR to China and Pakistan, it also ensures the security of energy supply—a key feature in power politics (Javaid 2016, pp.261-266).

Divergence of interests and its impact on Pakistan

As stated above, the China-Pakistan joint venture is not welcomed in Washington and New Delhi. The conflicting nature of the quadrilateral relationship between the two alliances: Indo-US and Sino-Pak with contradictory objectives have transformed the CPEC into a regional

⁶ 'According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, a record 18.5 million barrels a day of oil passed through the Strait in 2016, a 9% jump on the previous year. Besides oil, nearly all exported liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar, the world's second largest LNG exporter, passes through the Strait of Hormuz. If the Strait is closed or if the flow of oil and gas is disrupted, it would have serious impact on global energy stability and thereby on the world's economy' (Johny 2019).

⁷ 'With Iran on its northern coast and the UAE and an Omani enclave on the south, the Strait, at its narrowest point, has a width of 34 km. The Strait opens to the Gulf of Oman, which is connected to the Arabian Sea. A third of crude oil exports transported via ships pass through the Strait, which makes it the world's most important oil artery' (Johny 2019).

flashpoint (Einhorn and Sidhu 2017, p.5; Ahmad, 2017, p. 90; Sood, 2017, p. 228). The entire region is engulfed in a tumultuous and aggressive political environment, designed to destabilize the opponent.

Pakistan is in a difficult situation due to its strategic location sandwiched between the two emerging (economic and military) powers. All relevant actors are vying for a commanding position in this region, wherein Pakistan is caught between the expansionist and containment policies. The confrontational and competitive (geo)politics in this region took a steady shift when the US military established its bases in Afghanistan in the name of Global War on Terror, which prompted China to increase and broaden its outreach. In a bid to offset American influence in the region, China announced the construction of a series of mega projects in Balochistan, including the development of a seaport in Gwadar. The investment was meant to expand its economic outreach and to make its presence felt closer to American base camp. After the initiation of BRI and its westward extension through the CPEC, previously announced mega projects in Balochistan became part of the corridor.

The other emerging regional power: India felt threatened by China's expansionism, but Pakistan's potential progress was more worrisome. In a bid to offset China's westward outreach through Gwadar Port and to maintain its presence on the western side of the Indian Ocean, India has adopted multipronged strategy. It is extensively funding mega projects in Iran and Afghanistan (Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2018, p.2; Javaid 2016, p.263) and manoeuvring the internal fault lines of Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan. The new surge of violence in Balochistan has strong evidence of Indian involvement (Khan S. , 2021, p. 144). Pakistan with its internal fault lines is an easy target for India keeping in mind its previous successful experience—the secession of Bangladesh. India is the fervent strong supporter of an independent Balochistan and is willing to provide political, diplomatic, and medical assistance to Baloch separatists. On 15 August 2016, during his speech commemorating India's (Indian) Independence Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly acknowledged India's participation in the formation of Bangladesh and promised to do it again in Balochistan (Khan S. 2021, p. 163; Shukla, 2018, p. 159; Khetran, 2017, p. 112; Brewster, 2016). David Brewster of the Lowy Institute, Australia sees this 'asymmetric strategy of threatening to support Pakistan separatists' more of a warning to China. For Pakistani authorities it was clearly an 'infringement on Pakistani sovereignty, confirming their long-standing claims that India had been supporting insurgencies in Balochistan and elsewhere in Pakistan' (Brewster, 2016).

The arrest of an Indian spy, Kulbushan Yadev alias Hussein Patel from Chaman, Balochistan, revealed India's political and diplomatic official stance on its involvements in Balochistan. Yadev was arrested by Pakistani law enforcement agents within three hours of his border crossing from Iran (*Dawn*, 17 July 2019). Yadev's confessional statement vindicates Pakistan's apprehension about Indian involvement in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan. Yadev's assignment was to disrupt CPEC and its related projects specifically the Gwadar Port (*Dawn*, 17 July 2019; *Abbtakk* 22 June 2017).

India has been using Afghan soil by sheltering militant elements and allowing their proliferation around and across the border, working as a militancy transit corridor to adjacent areas (Khan S. , 2021, p. 159), however, after the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan, and Taliban coming into power, both India and the USA have to rescind from their position, which is pulling Pakistan more into vortex of power politics. All four actors are actively seeking more influential and powerful role in IOR to safeguard their economic, strategic, and security interests. The emerging prominence and potential energy corridor have forced the competitor(s) to create a situation that can diminish the potential gains from the CPEC and its signature project—the Gwadar Port (Einhorn and Sidhu 2017, p.5; Sood 2017, p.221). The convergence of interests at one point—the Gwadar Port in Balochistan, has accelerated maritime competition, and it highlights the Indian Ocean's importance not only in regional but global affairs. The resurgence of militancy in Balochistan, repeated attacks on Chinese skilled labour and damaging the state infrastructure allude towards the efforts to sabotage the CPEC project—a counter strategy to suppress the Chinese influence in the region and create a security situation in Pakistan.

Balochistan has become a quagmire due to regional power politics. The intense environ to curtail Chinese influence and its imminent hold on the region through the CPEC embroiled Balochistan in a rash of violence and a proxy battleground (Noraiee, 2020, p. 81; (Dunne, 2006 , p. v). Balochistan has become a battleground where all forces are pitched against one another due to its underlying fault lines (Iqbal 2012, p.91). A tumultuous, restive, and unstable or independent Balochistan serves those who are more concerned with China's containment. Despite enormous economic and strategic benefits to Pakistan, it continues to struggle with internal fault lines and security challenges due to militancy in Balochistan—best strategy to contain China's westward expansion through Pakistan.

Conclusion

China is keen to complete the CPEC successfully not only to showcase it as a model project of BRI but also to impress other partners across the globe by its prowess. Its successful completion is, however, contingent upon removing obstacles created by its competitors. Pakistan, the host country of the CPEC, is a place riddled with hurdles. The newly developed Indo-US alliance is a double-edged weapon, designed to contain China and dominate Pakistan. Pakistan, with its political instability, weak economy, internal fault lines and Baloch separatist movement supported by India, is in the most vulnerable position. Its geostrategic location has pushed it into vortex of power politics. The bounties of the project cannot be achieved unless there is political stability, peace, improved law and order throughout Pakistan. But in view of power tussle between China and the USA for a dominant position in global affairs, this seems to be a far cry.

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