

WHY NOT CHINA AFGHANISTAN PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CAPEC) INSTEAD OF CHINA PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC)

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ABSTRACT

On 21st May 2025, China and Pakistan mutually decided to include Afghanistan in China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is, indeed, the most historic development in a sphere of regional connectivity augmented by stability in South Asia. This agreement pertaining to economic integration heralds the departure from mentalities of the British colonial era of 19th century and the Cold War of the 20th century during which Afghanistan was considered rather treated as a Buffer State. China catapulted this mindset and approached Afghanistan with respect, grace and honour deserved by any independent nation. There will be assured regional security, especially counter-terrorism measures between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The troika; China, Pakistan and Afghanistan stressed the necessity of combating foreign-sponsored terrorism against any one of them and ensure durable peace in the region. Another geopolitical advantage that Afghanistan would gain is its legitimised status as a responsible state on the global stage. This strategic move would consolidate Afghanistan's incorporation into the regional coherence, deeper economic collaboration with China and enhanced cooperation and coordination with Pakistan on security issues among which terrorism is a top priority matter. Amidst this scenario of China's growing influence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region, the United States (US) and its western allies' maneuvering would surely recede to the lowest level. This study focuses on strategic advantages secured by regional states after the incorporation of Afghanistan into China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Keywords: CPEC, Afghanistan, Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations, China-Afghanistan Relations.

INTRODUCTION

1. In May 2021, China and Afghanistan commenced jointly with the construction of a highly strategic road communication to link itself with Iran through Wakhan Corridor (Afghanistan) (A. U. Khan 2024). As geography of the region dictates, it will be the securest, fastest and the most reliable logistic route for China. Unambiguously, this project will enhance China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Although, the fast-deteriorating mutual trust between China

and Pakistan amidst the slow-paced progress on CPEC is the most despicable matter which none as a true Pakistani would ever concede (Kiani 2021). Despite the fact that Pakistan military and political leaderships have expressed their commitment and resolve to complete the project but their words do not commensurate with actions. It has prompted China to rethink its strategy with regard to CPEC (Ashraf 2025). The dubious behaviour of Pakistan's decision makers has repeatedly drawn the Chinese annoyance

among which the intolerable concern with regard to the killing of Chinese engineers and technicians is always on the headlines (Ramachandran, 2024). The general public has become critical of Government's inability to protect Chinese who are contributing in the development of Pakistan. There must not be any vagueness that CPEC will completely change the complexion of geo-politics of South Asia as a 'Game Changer' (Khan, et al. 2018). Pakistan will serve as the central state which will have an opportunity to establish a link with the continent of Africa in the south, central Asia including Russia in the north and Southeast Asia in the east. It is not a fairy tale that Pakistan will achieve access to the Pacific by road-link. Businessmen of Pakistan will have endless venues to trade their products which our ancestors had been doing through the Silk Road. However, there is a massive propaganda against CPEC by the United States led western and eastern Media to distort public opinion (Jamal 2020) (Correspondent 2019) (Shahid 2024).

2. Although, Pakistan has become a flashpoint between global powers (S. Khan 2022) but according to analysts, China is constructing three key projects which will strengthen its global position. One of which, rather the foremost is the Belt and Road venture through which the states situated at the fringes of the Pacific Ocean and the central Asian states will be connected to the African nations along the shores of the Indian Ocean. And, Pakistan will be the connecting geographical region (Gill 2019). There is a dire need to comprehend the grand-strategic importance of Pakistan; an imminent requirement which is drastically lacking among the decision-makers. There is none to disagree that Pakistan has been presented with a golden opportunity to trade with the east European states through CPEC (Tariq 2024). China has squarely surpassed the United States in the field of technological research, an aspect that proved to be the hallmark of the American superiority in the 20th century. Chinese are leading the most strategic fields of technology (Hurst 2023), especially artificial intelligence (Pooley 2025). Their advancement has already started impacting the global politics. In the meantime, President Xi Jinping has succeeded in

projecting China as a promising hope in the global sustainable development among poor nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. There must not be any equivocation that China has contributed substantially more than the United States and its rich allies in the global economic growth in the decade of 2013 – 2023 (S. Zhao 2025). They present a very strong case study to research the process based on which they alleviated poverty for 700 million people at home (Jiao 2024). Amidst this scenario in which Pakistan's response towards CPEC is unpredictable and, its progress is disappointing, the inclusion of Afghanistan is expected to be a sigh of relief for China because Afghanistan would prove to be a reliable partner (T. Khan 2025) (Mehsud 2025). On the other hand, India is also pursuing Taliban led Afghanistan for cordial relations. This is an encouraging development with regard to the regional security and stability (Rai 2025).

Significance of the Study

3. Presumptuously, within the context of China Pakistan 'flinching' relations, China (Grossman 2025), direly looking for a formidable alternative rather downgrading Pakistan on the basis of its unpredictable responses influenced by the US and its western and eastern allies (Staikou 2024) (Yousaf 2024), offered 100% tariff-free access to the Taliban administered Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to its huge construction, energy and consumer sectors (Cash 2024), despite the fact that China declined formal recognition of the present regime but according to Chinese officials' unofficial circles the Afghan Taliban leadership is far more reliable and trustworthy than Pakistan's oligarchs' rule (Seerat 2024). Afghanistan's unexplored resources, especially the enormous deposits of lithium, copper, and iron, are highly valuable to Chinese industries (Shah 2024) which are being viewed as limitless opportunities to bolster its technological ventures and economy through partnership (Blumental, Purdy and Bassetti 2022). Chinese companies; the Metallurgical Corp of China, is already in Afghanistan eyeing large-scale copper mining projects (S. H. Ali 2023). China's moves related Afghanistan have succeeded in aligning broader

strategy of integrating resource-rich nation into its grand politico-economic orbit (Hunter and Ginn 2025). In this particular case, Pakistan must not ignore President Xi Jinping's latest commitment to exempt goods from import duties from "the least developed countries that have diplomatic relations with China (Correspondent 2015) (Khalid and Rashid 2021). So, taking the full advantage, the Afghan government has expressed interest in becoming a part of Xi's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative and joining the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Omarkhail and Zahid 2025). Analysts are critical of security risks coupled with the geopolitical implications of deepening ties with the present Afghan regime but, this geo-strategic engagement is supporting Pakistan and China to solidify its influence in the region. China Afghanistan Pakistan Economic Corridor will surely serve as a guarantor of peace in the region (Muhammad 2025) (Masood 2025). This move will cripple the role of non-state actors in the region (Islami 2025).

4. The concept of a China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CAPEC) shows more reliable and well-concreted promise for promoting regional cooperation based on common economic, social, and religious interests, making it a strong substitute for CPEC (Zhang 2022). As a crucial link to Central Asia, Afghanistan is being suggested to be included in CAPEC's trilateral framework, which opens up new opportunities for trade, energy, and interaction between cultures, in contrast to CPEC's exclusive concentration on China-Pakistan relations. The CAPEC pathway facilitates a connection founded on shared principles and global objectives by utilizing the ancient and Islamic ties that bind Pakistan to its neighbors in Central Asia (Rauf 2021). China has the economic might and geopolitical perspective to serve as a bridge, fostering accessibility, resolving conflicts, and guaranteeing fair financial gains for all parties involved. By using CAPEC to strengthen its regional alliances, Pakistan can lessen its dependency on a major power, open up unexplored financial markets, and promote equitable development, paving the way for long-

term stability and wealth in the area (S. M. Ali 2020).

Framing the Research Question(s) for the Study

5. The research being conducted is crucial because it examines how the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CAPEC) can alter macroeconomic assumptions and geographic patterns. By looking at a different approach to the current CPEC structure, the paper highlights the geopolitical benefits of including Afghanistan and Central Asia in Pakistan's economic alliances (Chandran 2017). Among countries with an overwhelming proportion of Muslims, it emphasizes how common religious, cultural, and historical characteristics can be used to promote unity and cooperation. In addition, it highlights China's strategic role as an economic facilitator and intermediary, highlighting its capacity to balance opposing goals, offer assistance with technology, and guarantee equitable growth (Atkinson 2024). China has acquired the capacity to tackle urgent global challenges by providing an illustration that extends the possibilities for trade, lessens reliance on sole nations, and unleashes the unrealized potential of Central Asia's resources. China offers an opportunity for Pakistan's future financial sustainability and demographic security while also adding to the larger conversation on sustaining regional connection, fostering prosperity, security, and mutually beneficial relationships in South and Central Asia (M. Ali 2018).

Research Question(s)

6. Weigh the pros and cons of China Afghanistan Pakistan Economic Corridor (CAPEC) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) especially in terms of economics and geopolitical in order to draw the comparison between two for the purpose of their prioritisation.

7. Under the fast-changing geo-political environment in the regions; South Asia, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, which project is more lucrative for the people of China, Afghanistan and Pakistan; CPEC or CAPEC.

Literature Review

8. The most preeminent geopolitical structure for the prevalent international affairs is the world power competition between three competitive but rivalrous states; China, Russia and the United States. The decades of extensive collaboration and cooperation, finally proved futile. The geostrategic compulsions have these nations into aspiring competition since the advent of 21st century. In this context, 'the China Shock' has unnerved its competitors especially the United States (Pearson, Rithmire and Tsai 2022). China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) which is popularly known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has posed a significant threat to its competitors (M. Zhao 2021). Although, China introduced it as a comprehensive development plan with the sole objective of fostering connectivity, commerce, and investment among all countries which geographically constituted various segments of the Silk Road but the United States and some of its allies especially India considers this project as an existential threat to their national security coupled with the reduction of their influence in their respective areas of influence (Ingleson and Brewster 2018). This scenario has converted Pakistan into a global battlefield for the big powers' competition between the United States and China (S. M. Ali 2020). It is crucially important to learn that Pakistan's geographic location is one of the most strategic for the BRI which comprises two fundamental segments; the ancient Silk Road on land-based infrastructure while the other segment is the Maritime Silk Road; both ensuring connectivity by land and sea respectively (Cao and Alon 2020) (Hassan 2022). This gigantic project has sparked significant debate among the western world which has become the most fundamental cause of evolving a new world order by exerting an impact on the global economy. Anti-China faction brand BRI as another plan to contemplate the Chinese complexion of neo-colonialism and geopolitical rivalry (Jamal 2020) (Mareya, Mareya and Mareya 2024). However, there exists unprecedented support by experts who view it as altogether a new paradigm for global collaboration leading to prosperity and public welfare (Michael 2021). This

literature review specifically examines the pros and cons of CAPEC which has shown more prowess and opportunities than CPEC whose progress has been stalled, predominantly due to the US interference (Elmali 2024). In this regard, there are piles of material which depict CPEC as an anti-state project which would lead Pakistan to be colonized by China; a prediction that China has vehemently brushed aside (Oberhauser 2024). But, side by side, Afghanistan sailed better than Pakistan (Pantucci and Waziri 2022).

9. In modern geopolitics, the idea of economic corridors as catalysts for local growth and integration is now extensively researched. The revolutionary advantages of projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the crown jewel of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is emphasized by scholars. Studies on CPEC emphasize how it will improve Pakistan's unique prosperity, safety of electricity, and construction (Khursheed, et al. 2019). The opposition, however, raise issues with low participation for local players, environmental effects, and longevity of loan. By including Afghanistan being a vital connection to Central Asia, the concept of a China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CAPEC), on the other hand, offers a more comprehensive viewpoint (Ali and Khan 2024). The body of research on Afghanistan's advantageous location emphasizes how it may link South Asia with resource-rich Central Asia, promoting business and power exchange. Because of its common Islamic background with Pakistan and Central Asia, scholars also emphasize Afghanistan's function as an intersection of culture and religion.

10. A further significant topic in the research is China's role as an economic facilitator. According to research on China's diplomatic approach, its economic strength and impartiality can assist in balancing conflicting national interests. The capacity of China to collaborate with a variety of regional actors is demonstrated by its effectiveness in establishing alliances via funding for infrastructure, such as in Central Asian countries. The research also lists obstacles to the execution of CAPEC, such as Afghanistan's turmoil in politics, safety issues, and the

requirement for international trust-building. According to research, a multilateral strategy is needed to handle these problems, utilizing Pakistan's pivotal role in trade between the regions, Afghanistan's strategic location, and China's diplomacy. All things considered, the corpus of available research offers a basis for examining CAPEC's viability as an open-ended substitute for CPEC, highlighting the significance of strategic collaboration, common cultural principles, and economic reliance in promoting regional connection.

Theoretical Framework

11. This study's foundations are found in the theories of regional cohesion, which emphasizes economic ties for stability, and interrelationship which emphasizes how interaction fosters reciprocal advantages. It combines the theories of geopolitics and economics, emphasizing China's mediating impact and Afghanistan's strategic position as an entry point to Central Asia, with the theory of sustainable development, which promotes equitable growth and environmental sustainability. These ideas combine to offer a framework for examining CAPEC's potential as a sustainable and inclusive substitute for CPEC that addresses geopolitical issues and fosters regional connectivity.

Research Methodology

12. The foremost aspect of this study on China, Afghanistan and Pakistan collaboration is 'pragmatist paradigm'; a research methodology which explores and subsequently prioritises multifaceted practical operational functions followed by workable solutions to real-time predicaments, focusing on flexible approaches to address the concise research question. The study advocates the practicality and operability over theoretical functions. Based on the aforementioned aspect, it amalgamates the quantitative and qualitative approaches during the process of research. It is the Mixed-Method research methodology in which, on one side, the quantitative type of research eliminates biases,

remains emotionally detached and uninvolved with objects of study rather empirically justify the states hypotheses while on the other side, the qualitative type of research is value bound which dictates that it is impractical to differentiate comprehensively causes and their impact. Within the domain of Mixed Method research methodology, the 'Convergent Strategy' has been applied in which qualitative and quantitative data / details are collected, collated and subsequently evaluated concurrently and independently. This particular strategy has been applied with different, but complimentary data / details in order to explore better solutions to the research problem / question. Although, both strands of the research; qualitative and quantitative will be implemented separately but the emphasis on them will be equal / balanced, concurrent and integrated aimed at seeking correct interpretations to make practicable conclusions.

China in Afghanistan

13. Since the Taliban's overthrow in 2001, China's involvement in Afghanistan has increased dramatically, moving from a limited to a more active position, especially in the political and economic spheres (Kumar and Ramachandran 2024). China has avoided getting directly involved in security matters, preferring to utilize diplomacy and significant financial support to promote peace (Group 2024). With accords like the Comprehensive Cooperative Partnership Agreement and the Sino-Afghan Economic Committee in place to strengthen economic cooperation, China has emerged as a significant trading partner (Zhou, Su and Yuan 2022) (Wieringen and Claustre 2023). In addition, China has taken advantage of Afghanistan's abundant mineral resources, winning the \$3 billion auction for the copper field in Aynak (Neukirchen and Katchinoff 2010).

14. In terms of politics, China has helped to facilitate peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government. President Xi Jinping highlighted China's support for a comprehensive Afghan-led peace process in 2019 as part of a number of peace initiatives, including the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination

Mechanism (QCCM) and track-two dialogues, demonstrating China's continued dedication to peace in the region. China's interest in Afghanistan also stems from concerns about transnational terrorism (Murtazashvili 2022), possible dangers to its Xinjiang province, and the regional instability affecting its broader goals, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Afghanistan's strategic location is important for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in connecting Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia through the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Afghanistan could act as a key link in this project, with discussions ongoing about its integration into CPEC, which could improve regional connectivity.

15. However, there are currently no formal agreements or information about the possible expansion of CPEC to Afghanistan. Because of their tense relations and hesitancy, Kabul and Islamabad's involvement is still unclear. Additional talks between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are necessary to determine Afghanistan's future participation in CPEC, although the prospects are unclear until the specifics are worked out.

Strategic Advantages of Extending CPEC to Afghanistan

16. All three nations stand to gain greatly from Afghanistan's involvement in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), especially in terms of trade, economic growth, and connectivity. Afghanistan will benefit from serving as a crucial link between the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, strengthening its position as a bridge and hub for trade between these two regions. Afghanistan may experience much-needed stability as a result of CPEC integration, which would also strengthen its economy, lessen its dependency on foreign aid, and create jobs locally through foreign investment. Afghanistan would gain from better infrastructure, such as simpler and less expensive access to the port of Gwadar, which would open up routes to the Indian Ocean (Safi and Alizada

2018). Through CPEC, the nation's undeveloped natural resources, valued at an estimated \$3 trillion, could also be utilized, leading to additional economic expansion. Afghanistan's membership to the greater Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) network would increase its markets, enabling economic prospects with China, Central Asia, South Asia, and portions of Europe. Although China has already obtained several contracts for projects like the Aynak copper mine, these have been delayed due to security concerns and corruption. China's long-term investment and stability in these projects would be enhanced by CPEC's participation (Rehman, Ahmed and Siddiqui 2022).

17. Additionally, CPEC may be a means of resolving the tense bilateral ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan (Ghaffar and Khan 2024). Through cooperation and the resolution of issues like border control and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, the project may increase interdependence between the two countries. CPEC's extension to Afghanistan may lessen illicit commerce and promote legitimate trade, which would be advantageous to both nations and advance regional peace. However, Afghanistan's participation in CPEC is hampered by political and strategic conflicts, especially between Pakistan and India. Complexity is increased by India's objection, which stems from its worries over Pakistan's involvement. However, with Afghanistan acting as a neutral platform for trade and collaboration, its involvement may result in better Indo-Pakistani ties. Through trilateral discussions and infrastructure projects along the Pak-Afghan border, China is promoting collaboration between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and itself. The project would become a regional endeavor and increase economic and security interdependence if Afghanistan joined CPEC. Joint security initiatives could result from this, preventing terrorism and maintaining regional stability. By allaying worries about militant organizations operating out of Afghanistan, a stable Afghanistan would lessen the potential of cross-border terrorism, which would be advantageous to China and Pakistan (Rubin 2024).

Strategic Hurdles to Extending CPEC to Afghanistan

18. There are many advantages and disadvantages to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's (CPEC) expansion into Afghanistan. One of the biggest challenges is Afghanistan's continuous instability, which is made worse by organizations like the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Peace and the possibility of regional initiatives like CPEC are seriously threatened by the existence of ISKP, which works against both the Taliban and the Afghan government. Stabilizing the area and guaranteeing the security needed for the extension of CPEC depend on a political agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government. Bilateral collaboration has been hampered by tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which include border conflicts, terrorism, and Afghan refugees. In order to build a partnership based on mutual benefit, especially in terms of trade and economic growth through initiatives, both countries must put aside their historical grievances. In this regard, China is playing a very positive role and, has succeeded in normalizing Pakistan-Afghanistan relations for the common good of both nations.

The Indian Factor

19. India has been adamantly against the CPEC, saying it infringes on its sovereignty over the area of disputed Kashmir (News 2024). Afghanistan must avoid making the project dependent on India's participation in order to maintain a balance between its relations with Pakistan and India. Instead of escalating Indo-Pakistani tensions, any attempt to include Afghanistan in CPEC should be impartial and centered on regional prosperity. Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan has decreased as a result of its expanding trade relations with India, especially through alternate channels like the Chabahar port and air freight corridors. Along with a decline in commerce via conventional routes, this change underscores Afghanistan's changing geopolitical position and the necessity for Pakistan to modify its border policy. Afghanistan might become a major regional commercial hub if it joins CPEC, offering access

to international markets, infrastructure development, and economic growth. This would foster regional stability by fostering interdependence among China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Since Afghanistan is a vital part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China is eager to incorporate it in CPEC. The precise structure of the initiative, including its terms and path, is still unknown, nevertheless. China would gain more economic clout and improve regional connections with Afghanistan's involvement, especially in terms of trade lines to Central Asia (Tahir and Hussain 2021).

20. Pakistan and Afghanistan must collaborate on common objectives like enhancing infrastructure, trade, and security through CPEC. With both nations gaining from increased connection and economic expansion, this collaboration may ease tensions and promote regional peace over the long run. In conclusion, even if Afghanistan's participation in CPEC has enormous potential for regional growth, issues including political reconciliation, security, and rivalries between nations need to be handled. Overcoming these challenges and guaranteeing the project's success requires a neutral position, strategic cooperation, and a dedication to peace and economic cooperation.

Recommendations

21. China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan must create distinct political, strategic, and economic frameworks within a trilateral structure for the CPEC to successfully expand to Afghanistan. To evaluate the initiative's viability, pinpoint possible obstacles, and decide on the most effective implementation strategy, this partnership necessitates an active discussion at all governmental, non-governmental, and academic levels. The project's future parameters should not be established until the three nations have agreed on its details. Cooperation, coordination, and communication must be given top priority by the three countries. The rapprochement between Pakistan and Afghanistan is a crucial element that can be accomplished by continued bilateral and trilateral talks, the implementation of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Action Plan for Peace and

Solidarity (APAPPS), and actions aimed at fostering confidence. In order to promote this collaboration, trade restrictions must be eliminated, and the transit trade agreement ought to be brought back to life. In order to deter terrorism and allow lawful travel across the Durand Line, effective border administration is crucial. Both nations must eradicate militants' safe havens, foster cross-cultural interactions, and advance peace in Afghanistan.

22. China and Pakistan must keep up their support for the peace process in Afghanistan and exert pressure on the Taliban to engage in talks. Additionally, both nations ought to encourage investment, trade, and political stability in Afghanistan. A regional strategy including all three nations and surrounding states is required to combat the threat posed by ISKP. This concerted effort will guarantee the success of CPEC's development into Afghanistan and contribute to regional security.

Conclusion

23. China's positive role is destined to establish lasting peace and harmony in the region along with strengthening the economies of South Asia nations. Pakistan's partnership with China and Afghanistan has opened numerous opportunities for its people. Their trilateral relations would surely grow from politico-diplomatic to full-fledged strategic and economic relations. There are innumerable venues lie ahead for Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. In the meantime, prospering peace and harmony in South Asia has always been a top priority objective of China without which there can never be Belt and Road Initiative.

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