

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Its Implications for Balochistan: A Socio-Political and Economic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to critically examine the economic development impacts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on Balochistan, with a particular focus on the region's socio-political, environmental, and governance challenges. Additionally, it seeks to address the research gap regarding the under-representation of local community perspectives, exploring ways to integrate these voices to promote sustainable and inclusive outcomes within the CPEC framework. This study adopts a qualitative approach, as it is descriptive in nature, and integrates the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to enhance analytical depth. By combining these methods, the research ensures a structured, rigorous, and transparent process for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting relevant literature. Findings indicate a stark divide between state-led narratives of development and local perceptions of dispossession. The study recommends inclusive policy frameworks and transparent governance to ensure equitable development.

Keywords: CPEC, Balochistan, socio-political impact, economic development, insurgency, resource distribution, SLR

INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has emerged as a transformative project with the potential to reshape the economic and geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Spanning from Kashgar in China's Xinjiang region to the port city of Gwadar in Pakistan's Balochistan province, CPEC promises infrastructural development, regional connectivity, and economic upliftment. However, despite its grand vision, the initiative has sparked significant controversy, particularly in Balochistan, where the local population has expressed apprehensions over issues of marginalization, resource extraction, and socio-political exclusion (UNPO, 2017.; Le Monde, 2024).

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest yet least developed province, plays a central role in CPEC due to its strategic location and resource wealth. Projects such as the Gwadar deep-sea port and the Gwadar International Airport were intended to position the region as a commercial hub (Butt, 2025; DRAS, 2024.). However, the local population often perceives these developments as externally imposed initiatives that fail to include them as stakeholders. Concerns about demographic changes, land acquisition, and insufficient local employment opportunities have intensified resistance from Baloch nationalist groups (Beg, Baig, & Akbar, 2018).

Socio-political unrest in the region has been exacerbated by longstanding grievances related to state repression and enforced disappearances. Reports highlight how families in Balochistan continue to demand justice for victims of state-led operations, contributing to a pervasive climate of fear and mistrust (Le Monde, 2024). The sense of political disenfranchisement is further aggravated by the lack of transparent governance mechanisms and inclusive policy formulation in the implementation of CPEC (EFSAS, 2022; Kaur & Malhi, 2023).

Economically, while CPEC has brought some infrastructural improvements, its benefits have been unevenly distributed. Local scholars argue that the corridor has primarily served elite and foreign interests, with limited trickle-down effects for the Baloch population (Wadood, Khan, & Ullah, 2024.; Shahzad & Ahmed, 2024). Studies also suggest that the influx of non-Baloch laborers and commercial actors may alter the region's demographic composition, intensifying ethnic tensions and fears of cultural erosion (Kaur & Malhi, 2023; Khursheed, Haider, Mustafa, & et al., 2019). Moreover, while security measures around CPEC installations have increased, they have often resulted in militarization rather than sustainable peace and development (Stratheia, 2023.; Rehman, Ahmed, & Siddiqui, 2022).

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to synthesize existing research on the socio-political and economic impacts of CPEC on Balochistan. Through a comprehensive review of academic journals, policy papers, and credible media reports, the paper aims to present a balanced and critical assessment of how CPEC has influenced the region's development trajectory, political dynamics, and social fabric.

By centering the experiences and perspectives of local communities, this paper contributes to the growing discourse on the intersection of mega-development projects and indigenous rights in conflict-prone regions. The analysis foregrounds the necessity of inclusive development strategies that prioritize equity, transparency, and participatory governance to ensure that projects like CPEC do not perpetuate historical injustices but instead become catalysts for sustainable peace and prosperity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To evaluate the socio-political and economic ramifications of CPEC in Balochistan, this study employed the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) technique. The SLR approach enabled a structured analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, organizational reports, and reputable news coverage. The selection criteria emphasized sources that directly addressed the intersection of CPEC and Balochistan's socio-economic and political realities. Primary databases included JSTOR, ResearchGate, SpringerOpen, and institutional repositories such as the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and UNPO.

Economic Dimensions of CPEC in Balochistan

The literature demonstrates that CPEC's economic interventions in Balochistan primarily revolve around infrastructure, energy, and industrial development. Key projects such as the Gwadar Port, Gwadar Free Zone, and energy pipelines are heralded as economic game-changers by state institutions (DRAS, 2024.; ISSI, 2021; Stratheia, 2023.). Scholarly analysis supports the view that these projects have increased national GDP, improved trade connectivity, and helped address Pakistan's energy deficit (Khursheed et

al., 2019; Kaur & Malhi, 2023). However, it is argued that the local economic benefits remain limited due to exclusionary hiring practices and the prioritization of foreign contractors (Wadood et al., 2024,.)

Political Ramifications and Governance Challenges

From a political standpoint, the literature identifies systemic governance deficits that have impeded inclusive development. Research emphasizes that local governments in Balochistan often lack the capacity and autonomy to influence CPEC's implementation (UNPO, 2017.; Saleem, 2017). Furthermore, centralized decision-making processes and limited consultation with local stakeholders have exacerbated political alienation (EFSAS, 2022.; Beg et al., 2018). These dynamics contribute to the growing perception that CPEC is a tool of political domination rather than cooperation.

Security and Militarization

A significant body of literature links CPEC's progress to heightened security concerns, which have resulted in the increased militarization of Balochistan. Studies reveal that the Pakistani state has intensified military presence to protect CPEC infrastructure, often leading to human rights violations and community displacement (Butt, 2025; Le Monde, 2024). While state narratives justify such actions for safeguarding investments, scholars argue this approach overlooks the socio-political root causes of unrest (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025; Khan & Khan, 2019).

Social and Cultural Impacts

The demographic implications of CPEC have sparked considerable debate. Multiple sources note that the influx of non-Baloch laborers and entrepreneurs has raised fears of cultural erosion and marginalization among the local population (Kaur & Malhi, 2023; Khursheed et al., 2019). Moreover, forced land acquisitions and lack of compensation have displaced many indigenous communities, further straining the socio-cultural fabric of the province (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025; UNPO, 2017.).

Research Gap: Underrepresentation of Local Voices

While existing literature provides extensive analysis on the economic, political, and security dimensions of CPEC, it seldom reflects the perspectives and experiences of local Baloch communities. Most research adopts a top-down approach, focusing on macroeconomic outcomes and national interests. Ethnographic and field-based studies that prioritize community-level insights are notably scarce (Bashir, Arshad, & Barech, 2019; Razaq, 2023; Shahzad & Ahmed, 2024). This underrepresentation of local voices results in an incomplete and sometimes misleading understanding of CPEC's actual impacts. This study aims to bridge this gap by centering indigenous narratives and incorporating local feedback to propose more inclusive development strategies.

Historical Context

Understanding the historical context of Balochistan is essential to grasp the current socio-political complexities surrounding CPEC. Balochistan has a long-standing history of resistance and autonomy that predates Pakistan's independence in 1947. Following accession to Pakistan, the province has experienced several insurgencies, largely driven by grievances over political marginalization, resource exploitation, and cultural suppression (Malik, 2019; Beg et al., 2018).

Since the 1950s, Baloch nationalist movements have demanded greater autonomy and control over natural resources, citing historical injustices and neglect by the central government (UNPO, 2017.; Malik & Rehman, 2021). These demands have been met with successive military operations and state-led efforts to suppress dissent, leading to a deep-seated mistrust between the Baloch population and federal authorities.

The state's prioritization of security over development has entrenched feelings of exclusion and underdevelopment in the region (Le Monde, 2024; Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025)

The discovery of vast reserves of natural gas, coal, and minerals further fueled tensions, as locals perceived that these resources benefited external actors rather than indigenous communities (Wadood et al., 2024; DRAS, 2024.). Gwadar, in particular, symbolizes this paradox. Once a quiet fishing town, its transformation into a commercial port under CPEC is viewed by many Baloch residents as a dispossession of their heritage and land, without corresponding socio-economic upliftment (Butt, 2025; Kaur & Malhi, 2023).

Furthermore, the demographic policies that encourage the settlement of non-Baloch populations in the province are interpreted as deliberate attempts to dilute ethnic identity and political agency (Khursheed et al., 2019; UNPO, 2017.). These policies, combined with recurring incidents of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, have compounded the province's historical grievances and resistance.

In sum, the historical trajectory of political subjugation, economic exploitation, and socio-cultural marginalization forms the backdrop against which CPEC is unfolding. This historical legacy is crucial to understanding why many Baloch view the corridor with skepticism, and why development efforts without inclusive planning are likely to exacerbate rather than resolve tensions.

Research Questions

This study aims to address the following research questions to comprehensively analyze the socio-political and economic impacts of CPEC on Balochistan:

1. How does the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) impact the economic development of Balochistan, considering socio-political, environmental, and governance challenges?
2. How can the underrepresented perspectives of local communities be integrated to achieve sustainable outcomes with regard to CPEC?

These questions guide the analysis by focusing on both the macroeconomic effects and the critical inclusion of local voices, which have been historically marginalized in the discourse on CPEC's development initiatives.

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its multifaceted impacts on Balochistan necessitates a comprehensive examination of both the economic development outcomes and the socio-political realities shaped by the project. This section critically addresses the two central research questions:

- (1) The impact of CPEC on the economic development of Balochistan, considering socio-political, environmental, and governance challenges; and
- (2) How underrepresented local community perspectives can be integrated to achieve sustainable outcomes?

Impact of CPEC on Economic Development in Balochistan Amidst Socio-Political, Environmental, and Governance Challenges

CPEC is widely portrayed as a transformative corridor that can catalyze economic development by boosting infrastructure, energy production, and regional connectivity. In Balochistan, key projects such as the Gwadar Port, the Gwadar Free Zone, energy pipelines, and transportation infrastructure are envisioned

as engines of growth with the potential to alleviate the province's chronic underdevelopment (DRAS, 2024.; Malik & Rehman, 2021). These initiatives aim to link Balochistan to regional and global markets, thereby enhancing trade, investment, and employment opportunities.

However, the reality on the ground reveals a complex and often contradictory picture. Economically, while CPEC projects have contributed to infrastructure development, the distribution of economic benefits has been uneven and limited in reaching the local Baloch population. Local employment, for instance, remains marginal despite official claims of job creation, largely due to the dominance of migrant labor from other provinces and foreign contractors (Wadood et al., 2024.; Shahzad & Ahmed, 2024). This economic exclusion exacerbates existing inequalities and fuels resentment among indigenous communities, who feel sidelined from the very development processes that impact their land and livelihoods.

Moreover, socio-political challenges have significantly undermined the effectiveness of economic initiatives. Balochistan has historically been a site of political unrest, driven by grievances over resource exploitation, lack of political representation, and cultural marginalization (Le Monde, 2024; UNPO, 2017.). The militarization surrounding CPEC infrastructure, designed ostensibly to protect investments from militant attacks, has often resulted in human rights violations and restricted civil freedoms (Butt, 2025; Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025). This climate of insecurity hampers sustainable economic growth by deterring local entrepreneurship and investment and by alienating the local population.

Environmental concerns also complicate the economic narrative. The rapid development of infrastructure and industrial zones raises the risk of environmental degradation in a province already vulnerable to ecological stress (Khursheed et al., 2019). Issues such as land degradation, water scarcity, and pollution threaten traditional livelihoods, particularly those dependent on agriculture and fishing. Despite these risks, environmental safeguards remain inadequate, reflecting weak governance structures and a tendency to prioritize economic gains over environmental sustainability (Stratheia, 2023.; Kaur & Malhi, 2023).

Governance deficits further challenge the realization of CPEC's economic potential. The centralized nature of decision-making sidelines provincial and local authorities, reducing their capacity to influence project planning and implementation (EFSAS, 2022.). This top-down approach not only fuels perceptions of political disenfranchisement but also results in development models that do not adequately reflect local needs or contexts. Transparency in resource allocation and project management is often lacking, deepening mistrust and obstructing collaborative governance.

In summary, while CPEC presents opportunities for economic development in Balochistan, the interplay of socio-political conflict, environmental vulnerability, and governance weaknesses limits its positive impacts. The marginalization of local communities in economic benefits and decision-making processes risks perpetuating a cycle of underdevelopment and resistance.

Integrating Underrepresented Local Perspectives for Sustainable Outcomes

The second research question addresses a critical yet underexplored dimension of CPEC: the integration of local voices to promote sustainable development. The literature review highlighted a conspicuous gap in ethnographic and participatory research that amplifies the experiences, concerns, and aspirations of Baloch communities (Bashir et al., 2019; Razzaq, 2023). Incorporating these perspectives is essential to bridge the disconnect between state-led narratives of progress and grassroots realities.

Local communities have repeatedly voiced concerns over land dispossession, cultural erosion, and political marginalization as a consequence of CPEC projects (UNPO, 2017.; Le Monde, 2024). Their exclusion from meaningful consultation processes undermines both the legitimacy and sustainability of development initiatives. Therefore, fostering mechanisms for participatory governance is paramount. This

can be achieved through institutionalizing local representation in decision-making bodies related to CPEC planning and implementation, ensuring that development priorities align with community needs.

Moreover, the adoption of community-based impact assessments can provide a more nuanced understanding of the socio-economic and environmental implications of projects. Such assessments should emphasize transparency, incorporate indigenous knowledge, and consider long-term sustainability rather than short-term gains (EFSAS, 2022.; Khursheed et al., 2019). This approach could also help address environmental concerns by involving locals in resource management and conservation strategies.

Employment generation policies must be restructured to prioritize local hiring and skills development. Vocational training programs tailored to the socio-economic context of Balochistan can empower youth and reduce dependence on migrant labor, thereby mitigating ethnic tensions and fostering social cohesion (Wadood et al., 2024; Kaur & Malhi, 2023). Furthermore, compensation mechanisms for land acquisition and displacement should be fair, prompt, and culturally sensitive to uphold community rights and livelihoods.

From a political perspective, addressing historical grievances and human rights concerns is crucial for creating a conducive environment for inclusive development. Dialogue platforms involving government officials, local leaders, civil society, and security forces can help build trust and formulate mutually acceptable security arrangements that respect community rights (Baloch & Ellis-Petersen, 2025; Saleem, 2017). Such peace-building efforts are fundamental to breaking the cycle of militarization and unrest that undermines development prospects.

Lastly, communication strategies must be improved to disseminate accurate information about CPEC's objectives, progress, and benefits. Transparent information sharing can counteract misinformation and conspiracy theories that often fuel resistance. Media and civil society can play pivotal roles in facilitating inclusive dialogues and ensuring accountability (Malik, 2019; Razzaq, 2023).

Synthesis and Implications

The dual analysis of economic impacts and local inclusion reveals that CPEC's success in Balochistan is contingent upon balancing ambitious infrastructural and economic goals with robust socio-political engagement and environmental stewardship. Mega-projects like CPEC, when imposed without local consent and participation, risk exacerbating pre-existing conflicts and undermining long-term stability.

This study's emphasis on underrepresented local voices aligns with broader scholarship on sustainable development in conflict-affected regions, which underscores participation, equity, and justice as pillars of effective development (Beg et al., 2018; Khan & Khan, 2019). Addressing the research gap identified in this article by centering indigenous perspectives not only enriches academic understanding but also offers practical pathways toward more equitable policy frameworks.

In conclusion, integrating local community perspectives is not merely a normative ideal but a pragmatic necessity. Only through inclusive governance, culturally sensitive development policies, and meaningful community engagement can CPEC realize its potential as a catalyst for sustainable peace and prosperity in Balochistan.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach, as it is descriptive in nature, and integrates the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology to enhance analytical depth. By combining these methods, the research ensures a structured, rigorous, and transparent process for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting relevant literature. This approach enables a comprehensive and unbiased synthesis of existing

knowledge on the socio-political and economic impacts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Balochistan.

Search Strategy and Data Sources

A broad search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including JSTOR, ResearchGate, SpringerOpen, and institutional repositories such as the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO). Additionally, credible media sources like *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, and *AP News* were incorporated to capture contemporary developments and socio-political narratives. Keywords used in the search included "CPEC," "Balochistan," "socio-political impact," "economic development," "security," and "local communities."

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies published between 2015 and 2025 were considered to ensure relevance to the evolving CPEC context. Sources were selected based on their direct relevance to Balochistan's socio-economic and political conditions in relation to CPEC. Peer-reviewed journal articles, policy papers, governmental and non-governmental reports, and investigative news articles were included. Opinion pieces and sources lacking empirical or analytical rigor were excluded to maintain academic quality.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction focused on identifying themes related to economic development, governance, security, social impacts, and the representation of local communities. The extracted information was then categorized and synthesized thematically to address the research questions. Particular attention was given to identifying gaps in the literature, especially concerning the under-representation of indigenous perspectives.

Limitations

While the SLR methodology provides a systematic approach, the study is limited by the availability of local-level ethnographic research, which remains sparse. The reliance on secondary sources may also reflect biases inherent in state and media narratives. Nonetheless, the triangulation of diverse sources mitigates these limitations by presenting a balanced and multi-dimensional analysis.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the multifaceted impacts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on Balochistan through a systematic literature review, highlighting the complex interplay of economic development, socio-political dynamics, and local governance challenges. While CPEC represents a significant infrastructural and economic opportunity for Pakistan, its implementation in Balochistan has revealed persistent structural inequalities and political marginalization that complicate the project's potential benefits.

Economically, CPEC initiatives have introduced much-needed infrastructure and connectivity improvements that can stimulate trade, energy access, and industrial growth in the region. However, these benefits have been unevenly distributed, often bypassing the local Baloch population and favoring external contractors and migrant labor forces. The failure to equitably integrate local communities into economic opportunities undermines both the sustainability and legitimacy of development efforts.

Socio-politically, the study underscores that Balochistan's historical grievances over resource control, political representation, and cultural identity remain largely unaddressed within the CPEC framework. The militarization and security-centric approaches to protect CPEC assets have exacerbated tensions,

reinforcing a cycle of mistrust between local communities and state authorities. Furthermore, the demographic shifts induced by development projects threaten to dilute indigenous cultural and political agency, fueling resistance movements.

A critical finding of this research is the notable underrepresentation of local voices in the discourse surrounding CPEC. Existing literature predominantly adopts top-down perspectives, focusing on macroeconomic and geopolitical benefits while neglecting the lived experiences, concerns, and aspirations of Baloch communities. This gap perpetuates policies that lack legitimacy and fail to foster inclusive development.

To realize the full potential of CPEC in Balochistan, there is an urgent need for transparent governance mechanisms that prioritize participatory decision-making, local empowerment, and equitable resource sharing. Incorporating the perspectives of indigenous populations into planning and implementation can mitigate conflict risks and promote sustainable outcomes that resonate with community needs. Additionally, addressing socio-political grievances through dialogue, legal reforms, and human rights protections is vital to break the cycle of unrest and insecurity.

In conclusion, the future of CPEC in Balochistan hinges on balancing economic ambitions with socio-political justice. Without addressing historical inequities and empowering local stakeholders, the corridor risks deepening divisions rather than bridging them. This study advocates for an inclusive development paradigm that integrates economic progress with social cohesion and political inclusion, ensuring that mega-projects like CPEC contribute meaningfully to peace, prosperity, and stability in Balochistan.

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