

**THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF REGIME CHANGE IN
AFGHANISTAN ON CHINA PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR**

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Abstract

With the recent regime change in Afghanistan, questions have been raised about the future of the CPEC. The CPEC is a giant economic and infrastructural developmental project that connects Xinjiang area of the China with Gwadar Port in Baluchistan. The project is a central constituent of the giant project, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) originated by China. The regime change and the Taliban rule in Afghanistan has maximized worries about the security, law and the economic as well as political development of the China, Pakistan and Afghanistan region, as well as the future of CPEC. This abrupt change in the region has raised crucial apprehensions about the potential for increased regional uncertainties, particularly given the historical animosity between the Pakistan and the Afghan government on Durand Line, and other security misunderstandings. This, in turn, may impact CPEC as well multilateral relation between China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and their relationship with other regional powers and which would further complicate CPEC's progress. This paper analyzes the geopolitical impacts of regime change in Afghanistan on CPEC, including security concerns, potential disruptions to supply chains, changes in economic and political relationships, and the uncertain nature of the new Afghan government's relationship with China and Pakistan. The paper also examines the potential impacts of geopolitical tensions between China and the US during its stay in Afghanistan and after withdrawal. By analyzing these factors, the paper aims to provide insights into the future of the corridor and its role in the development of the political and economic landscape in the connected areas.

Keywords: Regime Change, Policy Shift, Geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC, Butterfly Effect, Trilateral Relations, Durand Line

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Introduction:

The globalized international theater has enhanced and justified the ‘butterfly effect’ pattern of the chaos theory, that ‘any minor occurrence at one corner of the globe can be echoed at another’ (Lorenz, 1996). The phenomena get sterner for countries with regional and demographical connectivity. China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan share borders with socio-political and economic connectivity since 1950s. During the second decade of the 21st century, China announced a herculean infrastructural and economic project in the region with the title “belt and road initiative” as the renaissance of the ancient Silk Road (McCartney, 2018). This revolutionary project aims to connect Asia, Africa Europe, and South America with maritime and belt routes to promote economic cooperation, infrastructural development, and communication enhancement.

Since the initiation of CPEC as a 62\$ billion worth sub-projects of BRI in 2013, the project has been seen as a major development in the energy, infrastructural and economic sector of the concern areas (Sajid, 2016). Following the China’s ‘Good Neighbor Policy’ the project aims to have win-win approach towards good multi-lateral relation with neighboring countries (Chung, 2009). The scheme has been made a profound trilateral connectivity with the inclusion of Afghanistan. The project includes 265 km Pesh-kabul motorway, 75 km Peshawar-Jalalabad highway, and a long chain of railway track from Peshawar Pakistan to Jalalabad (Esteban, 2016). This establishes a hope of redressing the longstanding abhorrence between Kabul and Islamabad.

Unfortunately, this region has been preyed to various domestic and international disruptions. A perpetual war in Afghanistan after the 9/11 incident has been a headache for the implementation of CPEC on due time. China was somewhat worrisome about the existence of US in Afghanistan, but its evacuation has deteriorated the situation further. The recent regime change in Afghanistan has had a humongous impact on Afghanistan foreign policy regarding neighboring countries. This major shift in power status have initiated further queries to the completion of the vital component of the BRI, CPEC. With the regime change, the security, and economic prospects of the CPEC project have become even more uncertain. The changes in Afghanistan have resulted in the rise of risks to its development. The Taliban government is likely to be more assertive in pursuing its own interests and may be less willing to accept Chinese influence. As a result, fears of a disrupted CPEC have been growing, and it is essential to assess the risks. This article will look at the various ways in

which the regime change in Afghanistan has impacted the CPEC, as well as the potential implications of these changes.

Research Objectives:

The prime objectives of this article are to investigate the historical and status of the trilateral relation between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, to evaluate the probable risks to CPEC due to regime change, find out the reasons and to provide way forward to redress the issue.

Problem Statement:

CPEC is an inclusive project that enhances its effects and effectiveness to almost all connected regions. Afghanistan, due to its geographical and socio-political connections with Pakistan, have associated itself directly to CPEC. The current regime changes with the rise of newly established emirate under Taliban have created new arena of discussions about the impacts of this change. Taliban must have their own approach to international relations specifically with Pakistan. The question of ‘either the Taliban government would have sustained the policy of Afghanistan regarding CPEC’ need to be investigated. This article tends to investigate the impacts off this regime change in Afghanistan on CPEC and trilateral relations with China and Pakistan.

Rationale of the Study:

The article tends to investigate the impacts of political, economic and security situation in Afghanistan after Taliban Takeover can affect the outcomes of the CPEC. The paper examines the opportunities and risk factors taking in consideration the evolving geopolitical landscape in the region after this regime change.

Methodology:

As for as the nature of the phenomenon is concern this research relies upon the secondary data. For this research articles, news reports, journal and online sources will be

Scope of the Study:

The paper examines the ‘pre and post regime change’ relations of Afghanistan with China and Pakistan. it also investigates the probable transformation of foreign policy of Afghanistan regarding Pakistan, China, and their joint projects. It also analyses the potential impacts of the challenges like security risks, logistic hazards, political, economic, and strategic

fluctuations in Afghanistan after Taliban takeover on CPEC. The paper investigates the issue through secondary data from various sources.

Statement of the Research:

Many researchers concern about the Taliban doctrine in Afghanistan and its impacts on the flagship project of CPEC. This article aims to analyze the impacts of this regime change in Afghanistan on CPEC.

Overview of CPEC:

The CPEC is an important part of China-Pakistan relations, as well as an important part of BRI. The CPEC is a network of economic, commercial, and infrastructural development schemes that are to be built throughout Pakistan, with the aim to develop connectivity bilateral trade and connectivity between two states. The CPEC is a project that spans many years and will be implemented in three phases. The CPEC Phase-I was initiated in 2015 and completed by the end of 2020. Phase-I has seen 23 projects being implemented, with a total investment of \$19 billion. The CPEC Phase-II was announced in April 2017 and is expected to be implemented between 2021 and 2030. Phase-II includes an additional set of 30 projects, with a total investment of \$62 billion. The 3rd phase is long term phase that will initiate in 2026 and is set to be completed by 2030 (Salman, 2019). These three phases are designed in such a manner that envisaged short term progress and towards long term growth.

The early harvest projects were primarily concerned with the critical infrastructure required for the country's industrial rebirth. As a result, the construction of all energy projects, roads, and the Gwadar port was equated to a debt trap. Due to the lack of data readily available, the idea gained momentum, and the enterprises began to suffer because of the negative press. This bad branding prompted concerns even among those who were aware of the significance of the initiative. This critique persists, and international actors are working hard to smear CPEC's image, despite the fact that the truth is quite the reverse. Only time will allow the people of Pakistan to reap the benefits of CPEC project.

Main Components of the Corridor:

The CPEC authority under Ministry of Planning, Development, & Special Initiatives, claims the implication of the project to the following components.

1. The area of Gwadar which includes the city and exactly the port and economic development there.
2. Most importantly the Energy sector i.e., LNG, Hydel, Transmission Solar, Coal, Wind.
3. The prominent scheme is of ‘Communication and Transport Infrastructure’ through the establishment of Railway tracks, Highways and Aviation.
4. The prime focus is on ‘Investment and Industrial Cooperation’ with the initiation of Gwadar Free economic Zone and other industrial estates to be completed.
5. The final one id any mutually agreed noticed area (CPEC Authority)[§]

An Overview to the Trilateral Relation among China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan:

Diplomatic relation and dependability among China, Pakistan and Afghanistan has a long history of ups and downs. Three countries have their own national interests in the region. The ultimate concern in the region was determining peace due to cold war situation. Chinese Premier Zhu Enlai in his discussion in PRC commented on Pakistan foreign policy that “Pakistan should negotiate and develop diplomatic relation with Afghanistan to minimizes it arm expenditures” (Zhao, 2012). Pakistan as well Afghanistan was in need of shared friend to absorb the shocks of cold war and bilateral antagonism between them. Formal trilateral meeting among three countries in 2012. During a series of meetings, in 2017 they established two approaches i.e., “crisis prevention and management mechanism” to mediate in peaceful negotiation, reliable communication and economic cooperation (Institute of and diplomatic studies, 2018). During the same year Quadrilateral Coordination Group meeting enhanced further rebuilding and trilateral relation among them. The trilateral relation took a blooming turn with the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan with immediate impact to enhance communication between these countries as well far central Asian nations. After the current regime change, in formal meeting with Taliban delegated in July 2021, Chinese delegates demonstrated the bilateral relation with good neighborhood and peaceful diplomacy with Afghan government (Aljazeera News, 2021). In response China critical concern about peace and security was ensured by the Taliban regime, like they had done in 1990’s. Some security

threats are still existing in the region like between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which China wants to minimize with peaceful negotiation for the long-term development in the region.

Risks and their Implications:

The most recent incident in Peshawar underscores what experts have long suspected: the security situation on Pak-Afghan borders, attack on police line in Peshawar, attack in Karachi. The Security situation in almost all big cities in Pakistan are at stack. After the regime change in Afghanistan, the line and order situation has deteriorated further. Instead of managing the dispute, national and foreign actors are putting their part to follow their national interest and security aims. Afghanistan is the ideal example of how a militarized solution has never addressed a political problem anywhere in the world. However, it appears that regional and international powers have not learnt their lesson. The important parties continue to intervene in the country, dragging Afghanistan again into chaos and a repeated version of 1990s. Following the hard days in the past, the ongoing unrest is seeming to have heavy-handed consequences in the Pak-Afghan-China region.

Pakistan's Concerns:

Pak-Afghan relation can be quoted as byzantine and multifaced with long history of social, political and security magnitudes. Due to historical, social, political, and regional dependability they can never be parted at any cost. Pakistan's position in Afghanistan has evolved over time as a result of its geopolitical interests. The impact of India in the region is of more concerned for Pakistan, due to its direct geographical and political connection to area (Shoukat, 2015). Therefore, throughout the 1990s, Pakistan aided the Afghan Taliban in seizing the rule in Afghanistan. This assistance awarded Pakistan with upper hand over the existing influencer, India, in the region (Ikram, et al., 2017). The Emirate of Taliban based on religious ideology also seemed to have detach the Iran due to Shia dominancy in Afghanistan with Sunni's influence, benefiting Pakistan, which is also largely Sunni (Ishaq, et al., 2017). Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, establishing strategic depth through ethnic and religious ties has been a crucial component of Pakistan's Afghan policy. This is why, particularly in the eyes of the West, Afghanistan and Pakistan has been regarded through a single lens.

Situation at Baluchistan:

Like other countries in the region, Pakistan has its own objectives in its neighboring states. Afghanistan due to its longstanding conflict during and after the completion of Cold war has an undeniable impact in South Asia. In this regards, prominent Pakistani expert Zahid Hussain correctly claims in his recently published book, “No-Win War,” that “the Taliban had created a strategic depth in Pakistan” because of its expanding bossy policy towards Afghanistan (Hussain, 2019). The existing phase of uncertainties, particularly, are professed to have to have an adverse impacts on China’s objectives, particularly the multibillion-dollar CPEC project. The CPEC which can be proclaimed as the ‘divine jewel’ of China’s massive BRI, which aims to bring infrastructural development, strengthen economic relations, and aid to the connectivity throughout Eurasia and enormous Africa. China has shown its concern to drag CPEC to Pakistan's adjacent countries, particularly to Afghanistan, since the project's introduction in 2015. China Beijing has been inspiring Pakistan to revisit it policy towards Afghanistan with peaceful means to enhance fiscal connections and bilateral trade which can boost up the significance of CPEC. Consequently, Pakistan has shown its will to launch twelve border marketplaces with Afghanistan, with half of it with Iran (Javaid, 2016).

Nevertheless, this giant project in Pakistan has been hindered by numerous vulnerabilities like political instability, local unrests, sectarian and regional uncertainties, and economic malfeasance. The critical among all hazards is the coercive actions of the local influencers and Baloch separatists in Baluchistan. The Taliban rule and the uncertainties created by it in the borders have aided to the already defiant groups in Baluchistan. Their activities have created critical hinders the project with their violent actions against the project and its operators. The regime change in the neighboring Afghanistan are seemed to have extended their heavy-handed actions against the state and its projects. The party has also joined by the Sindhi separatists that have added fuel to the situations further. Their coercive association has extended their violent course of actions to the Karachi, the provincial headquarter of Sindh. They share their logistic and economic ties to threaten the project and its operational team from China. For example, they recent attack on Pak Stock Exchange in Karachi was claimed by the BLA (Rifaat, et.al., 2016). The violent incident that happened in 5-star hotel in Quetta in April 2021, claimed by the TTP. That was a critical alarm for the operation of CPEC. According to BBC report “Pakistan hotel bomb: Deadly blast hits luxury venue in Quetta” (BBC, April 2021), five persons were murdered and 12 were injured in the attack. Early reports proclaimed that the prime target of the attack was the Nung Rong, China’s

ambassador to Pakistan. The ambassador survives the attack for he was not present at the venue but the upshots of the attack remained perilous for the operation of the CPEC.

The TTP Question

In Pakistan, the TTP is believed to be a strong trustee of the Afghan Taliban. Due to their roots connected with the Taliban in Afghanistan, their course of actions and any development in their operational activities can be directly associated with them. (India Today, 2021). The Pakistani military have claimed the evacuation of the TTP from the targeted areas to avoid any unfortunate occurring that can threaten the operations off the CPEC. Even though, the terrorist actions in Pakistan, like blasting in Peshawar, Quetta, and Karachi are claimed to have planted in Afghanistan by the Pakistan authorities. Pakistan's objections regarding the issue has not yet taken serious by the Afghan authorities which interims deteriorated the situation further (Ahmed, 2017). The TTP infiltration to the Pakistan are claimed to have happened through the apprehensive spongy borders with the neighbors, encouraging Pakistan to fence and lock its border with critical look up to movements through Afghanistan (Khan, 2014).

After the US recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, the TTP has unveiled their activities with violent actions in various cities to establish their impact in the region. Overall, as the US will depart, their focus has switched to Chinese projects and investments in the region in the form of BRI and particularly CPEC. The uncertain security and economic situation in Afghanistan is going to hamper the operations and success of the project. As the attacks on the infrastructure and worker and operators of the project enhanced, like the attack on hydropower project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in July 2021 (Xinhua, 2021). The organization has showed its detachment with the attack but has admitted that a sheard party could have some engrossment to the incident. The attack on labors to a working site is claimed to have killed nine Chinese engineers. In response, the China Embassy issued an alarming declaration retelling its workers, operators, citizens, investments, and all projects in Pakistan to remain cautious. They not to have considered the security situation, social protection, take firm precautions, and refrain moving out of their houses unless any emergency. With extended China investments, it pushed Pakistan to eliminate all forms of militancy, via through coercive operations or negotiations. In spite of Pakistan's counter actions to stop the violence, attacks have occurred on a regular basis which can be connected to recent development in Afghanistan. This unstoppable disruption makes debate on issue overwhelming.

CPEC projects are claimed to be already beset by delays and security concerns. Since 2007, China has been battling to make Gwadar port fully operational. Beijing is also dealing with domestic economic insecurity. Thus, the question arises, why is China taking on further risks by getting the Taliban administration on the connectivity project of CPEC? The line and order situation in Pak-Afghan region is clearly worrying. Gwadar is still rocked by a fierce popular movement for rights. According to 'The Diplomat', Gwadar residents have been protesting their exclusion from the advantages of development projects in and around Gwadar (Bilal, 2023). They believe that "development has left them behind" (Munir, 2021). So far, the government has failed to answer their demands for improved living conditions and essentials such as improved water, power, and drainage infrastructure.

Direct Threats from the Regime:

The violence in both Afghanistan and Pakistan is at rise with the passage of time. On December 11, 2022, Afghan forces opened unjustified fire on civilians near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border at Balochistan, killing six persons and injuring hundreds more. DAWN News reported that on December 12, 2020, a bomb-and-gun attack on a Chinese-owned hotel in downtown Kabul frequented by Chinese officials killed at least three of the attackers and injured 21, including two foreigners (Khan, 2020). The Chinese government had ordered the Taliban administration the day before the attack to pay special attention to the security of the Chinese embassy in Kabul. Following the attack, China issued a warning to its citizens in Afghanistan to evacuate.

While the Western media has made much of China's desire to exert substantial influence in Pak-Afghan region. "China recognizes that Afghanistan is a risky investment" (Yu, 2021). China have already proclaimed its will about the extension of its investments to Afghanistan, but schemes seemed to have been beleaguered by various hazards which placed a long paused to its implementation. The most prominent of these projects was the "Mis Ayenak copper mine in Wardak Province, in central Afghanistan, which has been preyed to violent conflict and unpredictability for years" (Thompson, 2019). In spite, Taliban has shown their will in resuming this project, but China demonstrates the security concerns. Given the expansion of IS-K and increasing dissensions within the Taliban movement, the Taliban's capacity to offer this remains in doubt.

Ideological Concerns:

There is a little compatibility with Afghanistan emirate's ideological imposition with socialist tendencies of China. Taliban's ideological dilemma has a little flexibility towards such dogma. The Taliban's compromise over security cooperation like deportation of Uighurs, with "China seems a compromise over their legitimacy in their own country" (Ma, 2022). China's pursuance of the desired interests seems a herculean matter to be sustained in such situation.

Durand Line Issue

Afghanistan and Pakistan have a heavy past with border dispute over 2,640-kilometer-long Durand Line. Afghanistan is not ready to recognize it a border between two countries since the independence of Pakistan. The existing Emirate of Taliban has also uttered its antagonism to the Durand Line and has called for its reconsideration which led to cross border exchange of fire few days ago (ABC News, 2022,). The subject could have created a serious concern for Pakistan and China because it has disrupted the desired routes of CPEC to bring infrastructural and economic connectivity in south and central Asian region. The issue has created a direct threat to the infrastructure of the CPEC and its extended routes.

The USA Dilemma:

The USA hegemonic influence and association, either win-win or zero-sum, with the Taliban regime could have potential implications for CPEC. The US is not convinced yet to recognize the Taliban regime. It has also pressurized other states to avoid any diplomatic connectivity with Taliban. The US establishment demonstrated that "it would hold the state responsible for any actions that threaten US interests in the region" (Shahid, 2018). Any country with such accusation will have faced economic sanctions like that of Iran and North Korea. This restriction would have affected their ability to conduct international trade. If the Taliban regime or any neighboring nation fall prey to US led sanctions, it could impact the desired developments of CPEC in the Pak-Afghan region. The withdrawal has also dire impacts on security concerns. It created a security vacuum in the region. The project is at high risk due this security dilemma. The infrastructure and personnel, making it more difficult to maintain the smooth functioning of the corridor.

Geopolitical Issues

BBC in a report “Afghanistan: Political uncertainty and the Taliban's balancing act” claims that the foreign as well as national policy of Afghanistan government are still uncertain (BBC News, 2022). They do not issue any clear stance regarding the regional and international connectivity with other nations. This uncertainty has maximized further qualms regarding the regime future impact in the region. This indistinct policy of the Taliban regime generates geopolitical menaces that could negatively affect the feasibility of CPEC. Following the ‘butterfly effect’ approach of the intentional relations, the situation created in Afghanistan would definitely destabilize the region. This will create a worst dilemma of geopolitical crises in neighboring and other accessible regions.

Conclusion

The US withdrawal and the current regime change in Afghanistan could have substantial impacts on trilateral relation between China Pakistan and Afghanistan. Though, the full impact of the Taliban’s regime on the CPEC remains to be seen but the sour past of Pak-Afghan relation and Taliban’s anti-socialist rhetoric could establish security risks, diplomatic tensions, and potentially impact regional stability, all of which could threaten the viability of the CPEC.

Moreover, the unrest and bloodshed in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as clashes along their border, do not bode well for China's intentions to extend CPEC to Afghanistan. Dividends from natural resource extraction may be appealing, but is the risk worth it? Even though, the Afghan Taliban have supposedly ensured that terrorists seeking to attack other nations will not be housed in Afghanistan. The groups opposed to both Pakistan and China, particularly after China’s significant investment in CPEC, have long sought asylum in Afghanistan are not privileged at any cost. The Afghan regime is doubted that they are unwilling take practical actions against those who are threatening the interests of China as well as Pakistan, due to fear of retribution or kinship associations. The critical threat created by Non state actor, and other organizations are still continue to endangered the interests of China in Pakistan, and if not controlled it may have created a solemn threat to CPEC.

The fruits of the CPEC are going to have placed in the flexibility of all stakeholders to work together to maximizes the benefits of the project. All must struggle to ensure the stability and security of the region, address long-standing disputes such as the Durand Line issue, and create an environment that is conducive to regional economic development and cooperation. Pakistan being a prime stakeholder, should mitigate with neighboring Afghanistan over cross

border disputes and geopolitical misunderstanding through peaceful negotiations. Afghanistan government must be convinced about the affect and effectiveness of the project for regional development. it is important for both Pakistan and China to closely monitor the situation and take steps to mitigate any potential risks to the scheme. This could include increasing security measures, engaging with regional stakeholders to build support for the project, and diversifying trade routes to reduce dependence on any one particular route.

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