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THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FORMATION OF A MACROREGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) plays an important role in the formation of strategic interconnectivity between the regions of South and Central Asia. Chinese institutional development, which began in the mid-2010s with the introduction of the transport and logistics strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative, has formed new geo-economic and institutional mechanisms. At present, there exists geopolitical and geostrategic relevance in the formation and development of a new transport and logistics route, which may seriously affect the new functionality of CPEC. The development of CPEC plays an important geostrategic role, as it may lead to an increase in strategic interconnectivity between South and Central Asia, two regions that have historically been socially and culturally interconnected. The article examines the formation of new prospects for CPEC. This project possesses significant potential for Central Asia as a new geo-economic mechanism, which may lead to an increase in trade turnover between the two regions and to the formation of a new macro-regional security cluster. The article examines the development and formation of this process through the prism of the Regional Security Complex Theory of the Copenhagen School of International Relations and identifies the main challenges and prospects for the development and influence of CPEC in new geopolitical realities.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Regional Connectivity, Central Asia, South Asia, China, Institutionalisation.

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Макроаймақтық қауіпсіздік кешенін қалыптастыру аясында Қытай-Пәкістан экономикалық дәлізінің эволюциясы

Қытай-Пәкістан экономикалық дәлізінің (ҚПЭД) дамуы Оңтүстік және Орталық Азия аймақтары арасындағы стратегиялық өзара байланыстылықты қалыптастыруда маңызды рөл атқарады. 2010 жылдардың ортасынан бастап «Белдеу және жол» бастамасының көлік-логистикалық стратегиясын енгізу аясында басталған Қытайдың институционалдық құрылыс үдерісі жаңа геэкономикалық және институционалдық механизмдерді қалыптастырды. Қазіргі таңда жаңа көлік-логистикалық бағытты қалыптастыру мен дамытудың геосаяси және геостратегиялық өзектілігі бар, ол ҚПЭД-тің жаңа функционалдық мүмкіндіктеріне елеулі әсер етуі мүмкін. ҚПЭД-тің дамуы маңызды геостратегиялық рөл атқарады, себебі ол тарихи тұрғыдан әлеуметтік және мәдени тұрғыда өзара байланысқан Оңтүстік және Орталық Азия арасындағы стратегиялық өзара байланыстылықтың артуына алып келуі мүмкін. Мақалада ҚПЭД үшін жаңа перспективалардың қалыптасуы қарастырылады. Аталған жоба Орталық Азия үшін жаңа геэкономикалық механизм ретінде елеулі әлеуетке ие, бұл екі аймақ арасындағы сауда айналымының ұлғаюына және жаңа макроөңірлік қауіпсіздік кластерінің қалыптасуына алып келуі мүмкін. Мақалада осы үдерістің дамуы мен қалыптасуы халықаралық қатынастардағы Копенгаген мектебінің аймақтық қауіпсіздік кешені теориясы тұрғысынан қарастырылып, жаңа геосаяси жағдайлардағы ҚПЭД-тің дамуындағы негізгі сын-қатерлер мен даму перспективалары айқындалады.

Түйін сөздер: Қытай-Пәкістан экономикалық дәлізі, аймақтық өзара байланыс, Орталық Азия, Оңтүстік Азия, Қытай, институционалдандыру.

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Эволюция китайско-пакистанского экономического коридора в контексте формирования макрорегионального комплекса безопасности

Развитие Китайско-пакистанского экономического коридора (КПЭК) играет важную роль в формировании стратегической взаимосвязанности между регионами Южной и Центральной Азии. Китайское институциональное строительство, которое началось в середине 2010-х гг., с внедрением транспортно-логистической стратегии Инициативы Пояса и Пути, сформировала новые геоэкономические и институциональные механизмы. Сейчас существует геополитическая и геостратегическая актуальность формирования и развития нового транспортно-логистического пути, которая может серьезно повлиять на новую функциональность КПЭК. Развитие КПЭК играет важную геостратегическую роль, которая может привести к росту стратегической взаимосвязанности между Южной и Центральной Азией, двумя регионами, которые исторически были социально и культурно взаимосвязаны. Статья рассматривает формирование новых перспектив для КПЭК. Данный проект обладает крупным потенциалом для Центральной Азии, как новый геоэкономический механизм, что может привести к увеличению торгового оборота между двумя регионами, и формированию нового макрорегионального кластера безопасности. Статья рассматривает развитие и формирование данного процесса, через призму теории комплекса региональной безопасности Копенгагенской школы международных отношений и выявляет основные вызовы и перспективы развития и влияния КПЭК в новых геополитических реалиях.

Ключевые слова: Китайско-пакистанский экономический коридор, региональная взаимосвязанность, Центральная Азия, Южная Азия, Китай, институционализация.

Introduction

The development of CPEC has become one of the leading elements within the existence and functioning of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, the formation of the Belt and Road Initiative as one of the leading geopolitical factors has become one of the reasons for the intensification of Sino-American strategic rivalry.

Sino-American strategic rivalry found its institutional formalisation under Trump, when the Republican administration of the White House at that time abandoned the institutional strategy that had been proposed by the previous Democratic administration. It is evident that the intensification of Sino – American strategic rivalry was shaped by Chinese institutional narratives, which found their confirmation in the institutional strategy of Xi Jinping. In this case, the Belt and Road Initiative acts as a new non-Western-centric international platform that is intended to contribute to international development.

Alongside the identification of certain trends, nevertheless, the international system in the period after 2022 begins to acquire features of geo-economic bipolarity. In particular, it is necessary to note the factors of territoriality and de-territoriality that exist within the Regional Security Complex Theory. Buzan and Wæver identified the factor of territoriality and de-territoriality as hard and soft

security. Hard security is characteristic of the modern system, whereas the predominance of soft security is characteristic of the postmodern system. In this case, this indicates that the Soviet-American confrontation was formed within the framework of “territoriality”, and the measurement of poles is also assessed within the framework of the classical paradigm of defensive realism. “De-territoriality”, in this case, signifies the presence of non-traditional aspects of security, such as global economic interdependence. Therefore, the format of Sino – American strategic rivalry is formed in the geo-economic dimension.

The purpose of the study is to examine the growth of strategic interconnectivity between the regions of South and Central Asia in the context of the advancement of Chinese institutional development in Eurasia, which intensified in the pre-COVID period. CPEC acts as one of the flagships of Chinese institutions that possess the potential for linkage between South and Central Asia.

The next important aspect relates to a greater extent to the formation of a bipolar model of international relations. The contemporary situation, to a certain extent, resembles the interwar period, when, in terms of nation-states, the system was multipolar, but in terms of the existence of military-political alliances, the system was bipolar. These narratives can also be identified within the framework of the formation of global institutions, where the Belt and

Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, in its updated format, act as new institutional paradigms that do not fall under Western standards of global governance.

Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of the Study

The primary theoretical approach of this study is based on the theory of the regional security complex (RSC). It explains the diversity of complexes in a geographical context, bordering countries, and interconnected geopolitical rivalries, historical ties, and political events. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is not limited to two countries but plays a key role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which connects 56 countries. Although India is a Global South country officially pursuing this project, this trilateral complex is the subject of analysis in this study. Within this framework, the concept of securitization is of particular importance for explaining the CPEC. In this context, the study applies the theory of the regional security complex (RSC) developed by B. Buzan and O. Wæver. RSC theory postulates the existence of a distinct regional security complex, the intellectual foundations of which are based on two key concepts: balance of power and social constructivism, with changes in the balance of power generating specific social constructs (Buzan and Wæver, 2003).

Representatives of the Copenhagen School, Buzan and Wæver, within the framework of regional security theory, argue that the regional security complex constitutes the fundamental structure of the international system, which is divided into several levels, including regional and macro-regional complexes. Furthermore, the following levels of the regional security complex are identified: domestic, regional, interregional, and global. These levels determine the dynamics of interdependence between states at the micro-regional, macro-regional, and global levels. The authors also emphasize the existence of a special type of state, called an isolator state, which simultaneously belongs to various regional security complexes. This concept is particularly important for this study, as it takes into account the central position of Afghanistan. RSC theory provides insight into regional security clusters. Regional security complex (RSC) theory also posits a macro-regional security complex, which in turn consists of smaller regional security clusters operating at the national, regional, interregional, and global levels (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

One of its propositions concerns the isolator state, meaning that a single state can simultaneously be in both security clusters. Afghanistan's position is a good and pertinent example of this. Afghanistan's position exemplifies its simultaneous Central Asian and South Asian identities. The policies and potential of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) align with the explanations and perspectives of RSC theory.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most promising areas of the BRI, with the potential to restore connections between Central and South Asia.

The paper uses a qualitative research methodology based on the content analysis to examine the evolving regional dynamic changes associated with the CPEC and its implications for the interactions between Central and South Asia. Additionally, this method is used by analyzing academic literature, policy documents and government statements verify the patterns in political discourse, regional cooperation and security perceptions related to the project.

The quantitative data collected from analytical reports and official policy discussions analyze the link between BRI and the regional connectivity projects, especially the political and diplomatic developments of Pakistan and Afghanistan to Central Asia states. These developments are analyzed as indicators of evolving regional cooperation and integration processes.

Through this methodological approach, the study aims to reveal how regional actors interpret and promote connectivity initiatives and how these interpretations shape the evolving relationship between Central and South Asia within broader geopolitical context.

Literature review

This study draws on a range of scholarly works that, to varying degrees, address the prospects for strategic interaction between South and Central Asia.

Early observations on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) were articulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his book *The Game Plan*, in which he highlighted the strategic significance of developing what would later become CPEC for China's economic rise (Brzezinski, 1986). These remarks may be regarded as preliminary reflections on the development of transport and logistics linkages between South and Central Asia, with China acting as a Central Asian participant and Pakistan

as a South Asian one. The importance of this contribution lies in the articulation of the first strategic narratives concerning this process.

David Brewster examines Chinese policy and strategy in the broader Indian Ocean region. He focuses on China's growing dependence on energy supplies from Africa and argues that this dependence prompted Beijing to advance a comprehensive strategy in South Asia, encompassing the development of transport and logistics networks alongside political, economic, and diplomatic instruments. From an economic perspective, China has developed a system of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) across the Indian Ocean region (Brewster, 2019).

Andrew Small analyses the prospects for strategic interaction between China and Pakistan. He notes that whereas the balance of power was a central factor during the Cold War, Pakistan's contemporary relevance—particularly from India's perspective—lies in its access to the Indian Ocean and the modernisation of the port of Gwadar. As a result, the focus of cooperation has shifted from traditional balance-of-power considerations towards the sphere of institutional cooperation (Small, 2015).

In a similar vein, the French scholar Frédéric Grare examines CPEC in the context of regional rivalry with India. From this perspective, the Indian government views CPEC as a security dilemma within the framework of the China–India–Pakistan strategic triangle (Grare, 2020).

The Chinese scholar Huo Wenle addresses the strategic significance of the Maritime Silk Road. Its importance lies in its potential to connect the countries of South Asia, and more broadly the Indian Ocean region. For the Chinese economy, the relevance of this sector is rooted in its transport and logistics capacity, which is essential for enhancing future strategic connectivity between South and Central Asia (Huo, 2017).

The Indian expert M. S. Prathibha focuses on the stages of CPEC's development and its impact on regional politics. At the official, interstate level, the CPEC project was articulated as early as the beginning of the 2010s. Through CPEC, China sought to modernise Pakistan's transport and logistics system and to securitise its economic interests (Prathibha, 2017). In this context, the work of the Italian scholar Andrea Ghiselli is also significant. In his book *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitisation and Foreign Policy*, Ghiselli argues that China's economic rise under conditions of globalisation has led to the securitisation of economic interests becoming a core component of the PRC's foreign

policy, which he conceptualises as a comprehensive mechanism (Ghiselli, 2021).

The Pakistani expert Faisal Javaid likewise points to the growing strategic interconnectivity between South and Central Asia, emphasising the role of Afghanistan and the potential implementation of trans-Afghan projects (Javaid, 2023).

The Uzbek researcher Nargiza Umarova analyses the prospects and potential of trans-Afghan projects, which play a significant role in the future evolution of CPEC and its capacity to link South and Central Asia (Umarova, 2025).

Another important strand of the literature is represented by the work of the American scholar Christopher Miller. He examines the dynamics and transformation of the Russia–China strategic interaction in Central Asia. Miller notes the presence of balancing elements in Sino-Russian relations, highlighting, in particular, Russian dissatisfaction with the fact that Chinese investment levels in the economies of Kazakhstan and Russia are comparable, despite Russia's economy being approximately ten times larger. This, he argues, indicates the existence of balancing behavior despite official declarations of strategic partnership (Miller, 2020).

Despite the substantial body of academic literature that has already accumulated on various aspects of CPEC, significant research gaps remain, particularly with regard to the securitisation dimension of this project.

Research questions

The above highlighted literature explains the diverse studies related to China Pakistan Economic Corridor. In this regard, this study target following research objects as a part of questions to unearth in the discussion and results section based on the Regional Security Complex Theory.

- What is the potential of CPEC for interaction between South and Central Asia?
- Why do the consequences of instability affect CPEC implementation?
- What is the strategic importance of CPEC?

Discussions and results

The CPEC Model for Interaction between Central and South Asia

With regard to CPEC, several stages can be identified in the evolution of this framework. The earliest references to what would later become CPEC can be found in Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Game*

Plan. In this work, the author argues that a key objective of the United States was to draw China out of the Soviet Union's geopolitical orbit through the introduction of market-oriented economic reforms and China's integration into global trade. Within this context, the development of a trans-Himalayan transport route linking China and Pakistan played an important role, although CPEC itself had not yet been institutionalised at that time (Brzezinski, 1986).

The second phase of CPEC's development falls within the period 2013–2015. The advent of the corridor plan took place in 2013 (Prathibha, 2017), during the visit of Premier Li Keqiang in Pakistan where the corridor signed under the first tenure of Asif Ali Zardari. However, the routes of the plan traced in the annals of 90s, when China initiated to enroute economic collation to the Indo-Ocean countries, linking South Asia, Middle East and towards Africa. In this matter of the fact, CPEC plan played a decisive role for economic interests into the intraregional expansion. According to Kamphausen, (2012), the main institutional and administrative shift and changes in foreign policy of China was the adoption of "New Historic Missions" in 2002 for the People's Liberation Army of China. The safety of national interests in terms of economic was the core principle in terms of outside China, an objective which significantly shaped the vision of Military Operations than Warfare system (MOOTW) (Brewster, 2019).

CPEC, as a transport and logistics corridor, is closely linked to China's so-called "Malacca Dilemma", which highlighted Beijing's need to ensure the security of its transport and supply routes (Ghiselli, 2021). Broadly speaking, the functionality of CPEC can be divided into two main stages.

The first stage covers the period from 2013 to 2021/22 and is characterised by a primary focus on the securitisation of resource supplies from the region. China prioritised the modernisation of the port of Gwadar, which became a central hub within the corridor and provided access to Xinjiang via Pakistan's Gilgit–Baltistan region. Resources originating from the wider Indian Ocean region, including the Middle East and Africa, were transported to Gwadar and subsequently redirected to China. In addition, China invested approximately USD 60 billion in the development and modernisation of the corridor (Small, 2015).

Another significant factor shaping the dynamics of CPEC's development concerns security considerations, which can be divided into internal and external dimensions. Internally, a key priority has

been ensuring protection against attacks by armed groups, both in southern Pakistan, where Baloch separatist movements are active and in the north, characterised by instability in the tribal areas. The implementation of CPEC has also had a notable impact on the regional geopolitical configuration, as the corridor technically passes through parts of Kashmir, a territory claimed by India as its own. From the Indian perspective, CPEC thus constitutes a security dilemma (Grare, 2020).

The second phase of CPEC's evolution can be associated with the period following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Although the United States initially pursued ambitious objectives in Afghanistan, its role in the conflict gradually became marginalised. To understand this second stage, it is essential to examine the process of institutionalising Chinese influence in Central Asia. Within Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), the concept of an "insulator state" refers to a state that is simultaneously located within two regional security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2023). Owing to its geographical characteristics, Afghanistan occupies such a position, being situated at the intersection of both Central and South Asia.

The institutionalisation of Chinese influence in Central Asia began in the early 2010s, particularly following President Xi Jinping's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in Astana in September 2013. Over the spare of time, it directed to the formation of so-called Eurasian Land connection, linking China with Central Asia then Europe. This geopolitical growth enormously empowered the institutionalisation of China's influence by creating new diplomatic, economic, and institutional interaction in accordance with the BRI approach.

At this stage, China has significantly extended its economic influence in Central Asia, particularly through geo-economic tools and infrastructure development. Within this framework, CPEC is no longer projected to its original part of safeguarding and boosting China's economic interests, But also acquired the potential to play as a role of connective framework between South Asia to connect Central Asia through Afghanistan, facilitating both regions in terms of open market access and Indo-Ocean reach.

The institutional construction signifies historically important for China with the implementation of the BRI. From bygone times, till the modern era, Central Asia and South Asia balanced close geo-economic and cultural ties through the road ways. However, the expansion of the Russian Empire from

the north, the British Empire from the south, and later the formation of the Soviet Union led to the fragmentation and weakening of these connections. Over the course of the twentieth century, the two regions became increasingly estranged. The development of new transport and logistics routes, together with the emergence of geo-economic patterns within China's macro-regional institutional framework, may contribute to the restoration of these historical linkages.

Within the framework of RSCT and the logical interconnection between Central Asia and CPEC, several strategic narratives can thus be identified. Central Asia has traditionally been viewed as an integral part of the post-Soviet or Eurasian geopolitical space, particularly during the 1990s and 2000s. From a social constructivist perspective, the post-Soviet geopolitical space that emerged after the collapse of the USSR—with its geopolitical and socio-cultural orientation towards Moscow—can be seen as a product of a Eurocentric system, given that its security patterns have largely been oriented towards Russia and Europe. Although US presence in the region has been limited, the Russia-US balance has nevertheless constituted one of the mechanisms of the regional security system.

A distinctive feature of China's strategic behavior in Central Asia has been the creation of geo-economic institutions and mechanisms that function as security patterns. By 2017–2018, the Belt and Road Initiative had generated new geo-economic mechanisms. From the perspective of RSCT, the implementation of CPEC is therefore expected to further consolidate pro-Chinese geo-economic institutions. Consequently, the development and institutionalisation of CPEC point to the emergence of an Asia-centred model of security, one that prioritises non-traditional dimensions of security.

The Potential of CPEC for Central Asia in the Context of Institutionalisation

CPEC opens up new prospects and formats of interaction with the states of Central Asia. Its classical function was primarily oriented towards safeguarding Chinese economic interests; however, following the Taliban's return to power, the situation has undergone a significant transformation.

From an analytical perspective, available evidence remains contradictory, particularly with regard to the Taliban's willingness to participate in regional projects. The core issue lies in the extent to which Afghanistan is prepared to engage in regional initiatives. Initially, conflicting narratives

suggested that the “new Afghanistan” constituted a comprehensive threat to its neighbours (Satpayev, 2021). For example, it was argued that the United States had left behind substantial quantities of military equipment in order to create security threats along the southern periphery of Russian influence in Central Asia, thereby allegedly opening opportunities for Russia to provide military assistance to Central Asian states and strengthen its regional position. These narratives, however, have largely become outdated and no longer correspond to contemporary strategic realities.

The Afghan government—more precisely, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan—has declared that it does not intend to export its ideology beyond national borders (TASS, 2021). Subsequently, Afghanistan has begun to engage more actively in regional initiatives. The Taliban authorities are interested in national reconstruction, and the principal—albeit paradoxical—challenge they face concerns the complex and problematic relations with Pakistan and China. In the case of Pakistan, the issue is closely linked to military and political ties between the two sides, which became particularly evident in 2024.

The nature of Pakistan-Taliban relations remains ambiguous. Some sources continue to claim that the Taliban regime is dependent on Pakistan—a view that has been prevalent since the 1990s—while others argue that relations between Pakistan and the Taliban are, on the contrary, conflictual. The coalition originated from the NATO's legacy of twenty-year presence in Afghanistan, which pushed the cousins at war in shape of Pakistan-Taliban relations in a highly complex and inconsistent state behavior. However, the rise of Taliban divisions within the Taliban movement more complicated this tie.

Similarly, the influence of China in Afghanistan is also overpassed and contested. Although China is the second-largest economy with significant economic capacity underscore to exert influence in Afghanistan. However, it is confidential that Beijing embodied the geo-economic tools to undermine its dealings with Afghanistan at both bilateral and multilateral levels. For China, the main concerns also exist in the northern border activities where the presences of terrorist groups, particularly those linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) are question mark to resolve at this level. At the same time, contradictory reports suggest that the Taliban have severed ties with ETIM, partly due to the prospect of Chinese investment in Afghanistan's economy.

Another illustrative example of stereotypical perceptions of the Taliban concerns Russia's role. In the aftermath of the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Kazakh political analyst Dosym Satpayev argued that this development provided Russia with an opportunity to strengthen its influence in the region (Satpayev, 2021). This thesis, however, does not fully correspond to the dynamic expansion of transport and logistics infrastructure in the region. Russia has become increasingly engaged in developing bilateral relations with the Taliban authorities (RBC, 2025), driven by both practical and ideological considerations. Practically, this engagement is linked to the development of transport and logistics infrastructure in which Afghanistan plays an active role. This process aligns with the logic of the North–South Economic Corridor, a Russo–Iranian initiative, parts of which traverse Iranian and Afghan territory.

By the second half of the 2010s, Central Asia witnessed a gradual shift in the Russia–China balance. Through geo-economic instruments, China has increasingly displaced Russian influence in the region. Against this backdrop, the expansion of Russia's strategic engagement with Afghanistan serves as a partial counterbalance to China's growing presence.

In accordance with Chinese perspective, two dominant paradigms of interpretation highlighted to identify. The first line emphasizes the core extension of geoeconomic import and export ties. The second line focused on capitulated discourses according to the upgradation and modernization of the Qosh Tepa Canal. However, the specific Central Asian sources claimed that the canal's modernization is applied through USAID funds, forming it as an indirect US endeavour to destabilize the Central Asian region. In contrast, other sources argue that Chinese investment aided to build the project, displaying the canal as a tool of geo-economic influence. If implemented successfully, the canal underscored harsh environmental outcomes for Central Asian states, thereby highlighting its geostrategic strength.

In this case, the ties between Central Asia and China are no longer on the same which were considered back then in 90. Since 2013, China has pursued an active strategy of institutionalising its influence. The introduction of the "Xi'an Summit" format represents one of the key processes underpinning contemporary geopolitical transformations in the region. Although cooperation with the European Union remains limited within the framework of China–Central Asia relations, there remains potential for joint problem-solving. The implementa-

tion of CPEC thus represents one example of emerging geo-economic institutions. Nevertheless, CPEC remains less economically competitive than the North–South Economic Corridor, which constitutes a Russo–Iranian project.

A major challenge for CPEC lies in geographical constraints. Its adaptation to Central Asia would require modernisation efforts in south-eastern Afghanistan, particularly in Paktia Province. The Himalayan geography also presents structural limitations. CPEC holds particular strategic interest for Uzbekistan, which is seeking access to Pakistan's seaports (Expert interview, personal communication, 2024). However, it is likely that CPEC will require approximately a decade to mature into a fully functional and effective trade regime.

Another significant factor is the gradual rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan since the late 2010s. This development reflects broader shifts in the global balance of power since 2018, particularly the institutionalisation of Sino-American strategic rivalry during the Trump administration. Whereas, the extra developments limited to be exaggerated merely through balance of power approach, shifts in global order likewise Sino-Russian closeness and Indo-American relations rise have exclusively reshaped the international arena. Nonetheless, geoeconomic aspects ever more play a conclusive role, portentous that modern transformations are not completely determined by geopolitical rivalries.

Similarly, the closeness of Pakistan and Russia has developed inappropriate lessons for India. During this tenure of Sharif family in Pakistan have turned into new era where Russia and Pakistan have acknowledged to recognize one another as major actors, which certainly shifts the balance of power in Central Asia specifically for India. An individual geopolitical feature of bilateral ties between Islamabad and Moscow shows that both countries have the power capacity to exert influence in this region. Scholars mainly discuss separating great powers like Russia, China, and America, and secondary actors such as the European Union, India, Iran, Japan, and North Korea. Pakistan was not traditionally included among these actors; however, it now faces a strategic window of opportunity through enhanced cooperation with Russia and active participation in China's macro-regional initiatives. In this respect, Pakistan's position appears more advantageous than that of India, which remains a largely extra-regional actor.

Pakistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) five years ago. SCO membership

facilitates systematic multilateral engagement, including participation in joint military exercises such as the “Friendship” drills conducted since 2016 (TASS, 2024). The SCO has increasingly matured into a macro-regional organisation, extending beyond Central Asia to encompass South Asia, where the securitisation of Sino-Indian rivalry plays a central role in shaping regional security dynamics. In this context, the SCO provides an appropriate platform for cooperation and potential conflict management. Pakistan’s neutral stance on the Ukraine conflict further contributes to a favourable environment for cooperation.

In September 2024, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk met with senior Pakistani officials, including General Asim Munir and Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, to discuss prospects for expanding bilateral economic ties. Dar described Russia as an important actor in Western, Southern, and Central Asia and emphasised Pakistan’s commitment to working with Moscow to promote peace and stability in Afghanistan (TASS, 2024).

The institutionalisation of Chinese influence in Central Asia enables Pakistan to emerge as an active regional actor not through balance-of-power mechanisms, but through institutional cooperation. In this context, the trend towards intensified Russia–Pakistan cooperation becomes particularly evident.

A parallel can thus be drawn between the institutionalisation of Chinese influence in South and Central Asia. The Indian Ocean region holds strategic significance for China’s transport and logistics strategy. The expansion of Chinese economic presence has strengthened political and economic ties, with numerous Chinese projects contributing to the transformation of the macro-regional order (Brewster, 2019). From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this suggests growing interconnectivity between South and Central Asia.

China has invested heavily in the modernisation of the Maritime Silk Road since its announcement in 2013 (Huo, 2017). Together with the Eurasian Land Bridge, it constitutes a core component of China’s broader Eurasian strategy. Notably, Chinese investment levels in Russia and Kazakhstan—USD 2.174 trillion and USD 288.4 billion respectively—were proportionally comparable, underscoring Beijing’s prioritisation of the modernisation of the Eurasian corridor (Miller, 2020).

Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban’s return to power, the institutionalisation of Chinese influence has had a stabilising

effect on Afghanistan’s adaptation to regional dynamics. Within the emerging continental economic framework, Afghanistan’s role has grown significantly (Umarova, 2025). Unlike Eurocentric powers such as the USSR and the United States, which approached Afghanistan primarily through the lens of classical geopolitics, China and subsequently Russia have increasingly framed Afghanistan’s role in geo-economic terms. For China, economic corridor development forms an integral part of advancing the institutional foundations of its Eurasian strategy.

For Russia, the North–South Economic Corridor offers opportunities to reorient trade flows from Europe towards Asia. As noted by Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, trade between Russia and Pakistan reached USD 1 billion last year, with both sides committed to addressing logistical challenges to further expand trade (Russia’s Pivot to Asia, 2025).

In contrast, enhanced activity within extra-regional organizations displays logical system of the relations. However, the first SCO transport took place on 01 November 2023 in Tashkent

On 1 November 2023, the first SCO Transport Forum was held in Tashkent, where nine state members joined, representing their services. It focused the discussions on logistics development, transport, digitalization and infrastructure development projects. During this meeting, a memorandum was signed to build a transport corridor connecting Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in shape of South and Central connectivity. While Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan are core SCO members, but Afghanistan and Belarus are observer state in the SCO accentuate to play key roles in this scheme.

Given Pakistan’s influence in Afghanistan and the nature of Sino–Pakistani relations, this configuration may positively contribute to the implementation of the North–South geo-economic project. The corridor could facilitate the development of new geo-economic security mechanisms. As Pakistani expert Faisal Javaid observes, earlier agreements between Pakistan and Central Asian states faced challenges due to instability in Afghanistan; however, the inclusion of Russia and Belarus introduces new opportunities, particularly in the context of Russia’s search for alternative trade routes following the war in Ukraine (Faisal, 2023).

In sum, the institutionalisation of Chinese influence in Eurasia—emerging alongside shifts in the balance of power—suggests that the large-scale implementation of the North–South project carries significant geopolitical implications. India’s par-

participation in the QUAD, an explicitly anti-China framework within the Indo-Pacific strategy, further reinforces this dynamic. Consequently, the realisation of the North–South geo-economic corridor is likely to unfold amid open confrontation with India on China’s part, and more covertly through China-aligned states.

Further modernisation of CPEC also represents an important technical instrument for Russia’s economic transformation and access to South Asia. Historically, Russia was near to integrate with the EU in terms of trade. In contrast, the policies after 2022 have underscored Moscow to transmit its geoeconomic orientation towards Asia which is currently influenced as Asian century under China’s rise. In this case, the corridor project emerged the defining trends of ongoing economic structural changes, infrastructure development and a step towards DE-dollarization.

Additional distinguished consequence is the empowerment of Pakistan and Central Asia relations after 2010s, in accordance with the extra extension of Chinese influence in this Asian region. It has enhanced transport, logistics connectivity which has been a key driver for these involved countries. Pakistan’s Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Nauman Bashir Bhatti, highlighted the Karakoram Highway as the shortest and most cost-effective route for freight between Pakistan and Kazakhstan, emphasising its role within the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (Kazinform, 2024). Pakistan has shown several times to support Kazakhstan in gaining access to the Arabian Sea through Indo-Ocean, potentially developing in depth geo-economic interdependence from landlocked to the water access for the open markets of South Asia.

Consequently, the advancement of logistics and transport road networks contribute to the initiate of an innovative cluster of regional security. Although, South Asia was historically connected with Central Asia through silk road routes, and imperialistic divisions and the Cold War warring ties. During this time, the advanced development of infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative facilitate the gradual restoration in the ties. Following this, CPEC highlight the substantial geopolitical, geo-economic gateway to underpin the emergence of a new security complex.

The Impact of Regional Instability on CPEC

The disputed territory of Kashmir between Pakistan and India created unforeseen circumstance playing nasty role in reshaping the regional balance of power in South Asia. The conflict limited

to understand enough through the prism of Indo-Pak traditional rivalry. The particular significant is more deepen geostrategic relations between India-US partnership, which has advance convoluted under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, Modi government has institutionalised its strategic partnership with the United States through the QUAD linkages, alongside a broader sense of economic, military and political, cooperation.

The second tenure of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America paves the grounds for advancing Washington’s foreign policy trajectory together with his consistently confrontational aggressive steps towards China. Even though, it is crucial to note that a Trump administration has displayed an enthusiasm of decisive, aggressive and harsh actions. This, in turn, suggests that the United States may prioritise efforts aimed at undermining the functionality of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including, in particular, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The Indo-Pakistani conflict is therefore embedded within the broader logic of Sino-American strategic rivalry. Pakistan occupies a crucial strategic position in the securitisation of China’s national economic interests, which, as noted above, underpin the formation of a pro-Chinese geo-economic order.

India’s opposition to CPEC is primarily linked to the fact that parts of the corridor traverse territories claimed by India as falling under its sovereignty. According to media reports, Pakistani officials have stated that India is prepared to launch strikes against Pakistan, citing intelligence assessments. In this context, the attack in Pahalgam created a strategic window of opportunity for the Modi government to target CPEC infrastructure. Tactically, such a conflict would appear to be confined to India and Pakistan; however, this represents an overly narrow interpretation. Theoretically, India could strike CPEC facilities, but such actions would effectively constitute an attack on China. The logic of complex interdependence has strengthened geo-economic mechanisms, and any strike against CPEC would align with the dynamics of Sino-American strategic competition. Nevertheless, such actions would entail significant political and legal consequences. In this sense, CPEC functions as a security pattern of a fundamentally geo-economic nature. With regard to the Indo-Pakistani crisis of 2025, three scenarios can be envisaged.

First, the conflict may resemble the 2001–2002 military standoff, with both sides relying on nuclear deterrence.

Second, limited border clashes and aerial engagements could occur as a form of tactical confrontation, fluctuating between latent escalation and de-escalation depending on circumstances.

Third, India could strike strategic CPEC facilities. In this scenario, the primary diplomatic signal would be directed not at Pakistan, but at China. Such a course of action would aim to undermine China's strategic potential and could align with US interests under conditions of heightened global polarity. Attempts to disrupt CPEC would thus represent a direct signal challenging China's global institutional construction.

At the same time, French analyst Frédéric Grare notes that India adheres to a policy of strategic ambiguity, enabling it to balance between competing actors (Grare, 2020). Even within the QUAD framework, India has refrained from emphasising militarisation, preferring to preserve a diplomatic format. According to Grare's logic, a strike against CPEC would only intensify Sino-Indian rivalry—an outcome New Delhi seeks to avoid.

Nonetheless, the geo-economic dimension of CPEC warrants particular attention. While India possesses the military capability to strike targets within Pakistan, the implementation of CPEC has played a decisive role in transforming the regional balance of power. For this reason, several analysts have described CPEC as a “game changer” (Small, 2015), given its substantial geo-economic potential. It is therefore not coincidental that Modi openly opposed CPEC in 2015. Notably, some CPEC facilities are located in close proximity to Pakistani military installations, which indirectly enhances their security.

Another important strategic dimension is that a short-term conflict between India and Pakistan has revealed technical aspects of the broader US-China military-strategic rivalry. As the United States and China are not directly engaged in armed conflict, Washington lacks opportunities to assess China's military capabilities firsthand. In this context, the Kashmir conflict serves as a critical testing ground. The Pakistani armed forces are partially equipped with Chinese military technology. Analysts have noted that the share prices of Dassault Aviation, the supplier of India's Rafale aircraft, declined by 9.48 per cent over five days, while shares of China's AVIC Chengdu Aircraft-producer of the J-10C and JF-17 Thunder aircraft used by Pakistan rose by 61.65 per cent over the same period (TRT World, 2025). For the United States, Kashmir thus functions as an indirect arena for assessing relative military performance.

From a balance-of-power perspective, the situation is even more complex. The role of two extra-regional actors has grown significantly: Türkiye, which adopts a pro-Pakistani stance, and Iran, which tends to support India. For Türkiye, her existence in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia epitomizes a central hub of expanding the geopolitical emergence into South Asian region. The central trajectory is reliable with its ambition to unite its position for Ankara as a middle power. Besides, Türkiye already possesses a geostrategic vicinity in Central Asian region. It is also vital to underpin the advancing reconciliation between Türkiye and China in the shape of the connectivity. This way, Türkiye position a significant pillar along the Belt Road routes, which fostered to bring closer with China.

Meanwhile, Pakistan plays pivot role in connecting Türkiye by the maritime routes and by road through Iran which is known as westward ways. It underscores the Sino-Turkish alignment in the joint share with Pakistan. This trio-dynamic signify a bridge to boost the institutionalisation of Chinese influence toward Eurasia, as the corridor highlight political strengthening. In this regard, Pakistan found as a major linchpin between China and Türkiye.

Overall, the situation reflects the evolution of balance-of-power mechanisms in South Asia, with actors becoming directly or indirectly involved in the process. For Türkiye, engagement through Pakistan strengthens its ties with China and serves as a test of its middle-power ambitions. For Iran, its positioning reflects classic balance-of-power logic, whereby actors seek to hedge against excessive Chinese influence.

From a military-strategic standpoint, the likelihood of a large-scale war has significantly diminished. Conflict increasingly functions as a diplomatic instrument rather than a means of outright confrontation. The presence of CPEC has exerted a stabilising influence. Although China conducted military exercises along its border with India (largely symbolic in nature) the geo-economic dimension embodied by CPEC has played a restraining role in preventing escalation into a full-scale conflict.

CPEC maintains good potential for the development of Pakistan and Central Asian economic relations and broadly may lead to the development between Central and South Asia connectivity. But the major issue, that CPEC is still in the process of development. Russia, China and the West, with the US and the EU, can be seen as the major geopolitical participants, meanwhile Iran, Türkiye, South Korea, Japan and India as a less influential but still impor-

tant participant, especially taking into the view previous South Korean and Japanese initiatives for the region's programs of the development. In this sense, Pakistan becomes one of the leading regional actors. Probably, it will take few decades in order to build and launch the CPEC as a complete and well-functioning institutional entity within the region.

Conclusion

CPEC as Chinese institutional building instrument provides Pakistan with a strategic opportunity to expand its influence in the region. It establishes a new format of geo-economic interaction, signaling an evolution in the security architecture of Central Asia.

The implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, together with the institutionalisation of Chinese influence, has led to a transformation of prevailing security patterns.

From the 2010s onwards, however, Chinese institutional construction in Central Asia intensified markedly, most notably through the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative as a core geo-economic mechanism. By the late 2010s, the BRI had become a defining element of China's institutional presence in the region. In the post-pandemic period, a new geo-economic foundation has begun to take shape,

centered on transport and logistics connectivity, most prominently the North-South Economic Corridor and its competitor, CPEC.

CPEC has a vast potential for the provision and the development of the South and Central Asia connectivity. Afghanistan's geographic position poses new economic and political perspectives in terms of the geoeconomic and new geopolitical trends. In this sense presents a new institutional character, which is also can be viewed as a Chinese institutional building. But the growing and Trump's broader policy on countering China and the chains of instability arising locally and strategically, poses challenges for the CPEC potential.

Strategically, CPEC has a vast potential for the South and Central Asia connectivity development, but the geopolitical conditions around it, put strong political and bureaucratic pressure on its ability and potential of functioning. The relevance of Regional Security Complex Theory in the context of CPEC lies in its capacity to explain how Chinese institutional construction facilitates deeper integration and strategic interaction between South and Central Asia. This process is likely to result in an expansion of strategic contacts and sustained interaction between the two macro-regions. So CPEC functions as a new geo-economic platform that contributes to the transformation of the regional security system.

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