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Reimagining Pakistan's Role in China–Pakistan Cooperation Beyond the Corridor Model under CPEC 2.0

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Abstract: This study reinterprets China-Pakistan relations in the era of CPEC 2.0. It argues that the earlier description of Pakistan as a strategic pivot, a connecting state, and a demonstration case for the Belt and Road Initiative remains useful but no longer explains the present stage of cooperation. CPEC 1.0 was organized around urgent infrastructure deficits, especially energy generation, transport corridors, and Gwadar Port. CPEC 2.0 is more demanding: it seeks to convert that physical base into industrial capacity, agricultural modernization, mining value chains, digital connectivity, skills formation, and wider regional coordination. At the same time, the corridor now operates within a dense risk environment shaped by fiscal vulnerability, energy-sector stress, provincial grievances, insecurity in Balochistan and along the Afghan border, and the geopolitical constraints created by India-Pakistan rivalry and wider great-power competition. The study therefore proposes the concept of Pakistan as a resilient hub. A resilient hub is not simply a transit space. It is a cooperation platform able to keep routes functional, turn infrastructure into production and employment, manage local and security risks, and provide regional public goods under pressure. Drawing on policy-document analysis, historical-institutional interpretation, and a risk-governance framework, the study develops four dimensions of resilience: connectivity resilience, economic resilience, governance resilience, and regional resilience. The argument is that the future of China-Pakistan relations will depend less on the repetition of friendship language than on the institutional conversion of trust into visible developmental outcomes. The central task of the new era is therefore to move from a friendship narrative to a governance narrative, and from a strategic corridor to a resilient hub.

Keywords: China-Pakistan relations; CPEC 2.0; Belt and Road Initiative; regional governance

1. Introduction

China-Pakistan relations have usually been described through a vocabulary of exceptional friendship: all-weather partnership, iron brotherhood, strategic trust, and mutual support on core interests. That vocabulary is not empty. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1951, the two countries have developed a relationship combining geopolitical convergence, defense cooperation, diplomatic coordination, and repeated elite-level reassurance. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this long-standing strategic relationship acquired a large-scale developmental platform through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC gave the partnership a visible material form through power plants, roads, port facilities, transmission infrastructure, and proposed industrial zones. Yet this vocabulary can also become analytically limiting. If China-Pakistan relations are explained only as a story of friendship and strategic importance, the argument can become circular: Pakistan is important because the relationship is special, and the relationship is special because Pakistan is important. Such a narrative helps explain the political durability of cooperation, but it does not adequately explain why implementation has become more difficult, why some projects encounter local resistance, why security incidents continue despite strong bilateral commitment, or why the second phase of CPEC requires a different policy toolkit from the first [1], [2].

The relationship has entered a new stage. The May 2026 China-Pakistan joint statement called for high-quality development of the upgraded CPEC 2.0, phased advancement of the Karakoram Highway realignment, better use of the Khunjerab Pass, development of Gwadar as a regional connectivity hub, locally adapted industrial parks, mineral cooperation, agricultural capacity building, digital-economy cooperation, and training opportunities for Pakistan [1]. These priorities move beyond the early image of CPEC as a bundle of infrastructure projects. They point toward a more complex development platform that must connect infrastructure with production, skills, local welfare, regional logistics, and security governance. The challenge is that this broader agenda is being pursued in a difficult domestic and regional environment. Pakistan has recovered a measure of macroeconomic stability, but stabilization is not equivalent to structural transformation. The IMF's 2026 review emphasized reserves, tax broadening, competitiveness,

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state-owned enterprise reform, public-service provision, and energy-sector viability, while the World Bank identified persistent constraints including low exports, limited job creation, climate shocks, and fiscal pressure [3], [5]. These conditions matter directly for CPEC 2.0 because industrial zones, mining, agriculture, and logistics cannot achieve their intended effects unless the host economy can absorb investment, provide reliable energy, maintain predictable regulation, and generate productive employment and exports.

Security developments further demonstrate that the corridor does not operate in a politically neutral environment. Attacks near Gwadar, violence affecting workers in Balochistan, repeated threats to Chinese personnel and Pakistani security forces, and Pakistan-Afghanistan border tensions reveal an environment in which infrastructure can be interpreted not only as connectivity, but also through questions of state authority, resource distribution, local exclusion, and foreign presence [8], [10], [11], [16]. These developments do not by themselves determine the future of CPEC. Rather, they demonstrate that the implementation of CPEC 2.0 involves social, political, economic, and security conditions that cannot be addressed through infrastructure provision alone. The corridor therefore needs to be examined as a governance and development system in which physical connectivity interacts with institutional capacity, local participation, economic opportunity, and regional stability.

Against this background, this study addresses four research questions:

- RQ1: How can Pakistan's role in China-Pakistan cooperation be reconceptualized under CPEC 2.0 beyond the traditional corridor model?
- RQ2: What institutional, economic, connectivity, and regional conditions determine Pakistan's capacity to function as a resilient hub?
- RQ3: How do security risks, domestic governance constraints, and local development concerns affect the implementation of CPEC 2.0?
- RQ4: How can governance mechanisms and policy instruments translate CPEC 2.0 from infrastructure connectivity into more resilient and locally embedded development?

The study argues that the earlier framework of Pakistan as a strategic pivot, connecting state, and demonstration case remains historically useful but is increasingly insufficient for analyzing the institutional requirements of CPEC 2.0. The next stage requires a shift from corridor thinking to resilience thinking. In this study, Pakistan is conceptualized as a potential resilient hub: a state and cooperation platform capable of maintaining connectivity under pressure, converting infrastructure into productive economic capacity, managing local grievances and security risks, and supporting wider regional coordination. The concept does not imply that Pakistan has already achieved these capacities. Rather, it provides an analytical framework for assessing the conditions under which such a role could emerge.

2. Methodology and Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual, and explanatory research design combining policy-document analysis, historical-institutional interpretation, and risk-governance analysis. The analysis proceeds in three stages: first, policy and institutional documents are examined to identify changing priorities in China-Pakistan cooperation; second, economic, security, and regional evidence is analyzed to identify implementation constraints; and third, the findings are organized through four dimensions of resilience—connectivity, economic, governance, and regional resilience—and applied to CPEC 2.0, including the Gwadar case. This approach connects policy intentions with implementation conditions and provides an analytical basis for assessing Pakistan's potential role as a resilient hub.

The document corpus comprises four categories: Chinese and Pakistani official documents and joint statements; multilateral economic and development reports; security and conflict-related reports; and selected reputable news reports. Sources were selected according to their direct relevance to CPEC, China-Pakistan cooperation, Pakistan's economic and governance conditions, or the security and regional environment affecting implementation. Priority was given to primary and institutional sources, while reputable news reports were used selectively for time-specific security incidents, border disruptions, and other developments not adequately documented in official sources. Different source types are treated according to their evidentiary functions: official documents indicate policy intentions, multilateral reports provide economic and institutional assessments, security reports document risk patterns, and news reports provide event-level evidence [1]-[8], [10]-[18].

The documents were analyzed thematically using the four-dimensional resilient-hub framework. Connectivity resilience refers to the capacity to maintain and adapt transport, logistics, border, port, and digital connections under disruption; economic resilience concerns the ability to convert infrastructure and investment into productive activity, employment, exports, and diversified growth; governance resilience concerns institutional coordination, project management, security provision, grievance resolution, and regulatory predictability; and regional resilience concerns the capacity to sustain cross-border economic and logistical linkages under regional instability. Within each dimension,

the analysis distinguishes policy objectives, implementation conditions, observed risks, and governance responses, thereby avoiding the treatment of policy commitments as evidence of successful implementation.

Historical-institutional and risk-governance perspectives provide additional analytical depth. China-Pakistan cooperation has accumulated patterns of political trust, elite consultation, and security coordination that facilitate continued cooperation, but historical trust cannot substitute for effective local and institutional governance. The study therefore treats bilateral friendship as an enabling condition rather than a sufficient explanation of outcomes. Risk analysis examines how security, fiscal, energy, local-governance, and regional risks interact, including how security incidents can increase costs and reduce investment, while weak local benefits can intensify governance pressures [12], [16]-[18]. Because different sources use different definitions and reporting methods, security and economic statistics are treated as source-specific indicators rather than directly additive measures; apparent discrepancies are assessed according to source, definition, reporting period, and methodology to reduce double counting.

The study relies substantially on policy documents, institutional reports, and secondary sources and therefore cannot fully capture the perspectives of local communities, firms, workers, or project-level officials. Official documents primarily indicate policy intentions rather than implementation outcomes, while security and economic datasets may use different definitions and methodologies, limiting direct quantitative comparison. The resilient-hub framework is also an analytical and explanatory construct rather than a statistically validated causal model. Accordingly, the study does not claim that Pakistan has already become a resilient hub or provide a comprehensive quantitative evaluation of all CPEC projects. Instead, it develops and applies a framework for assessing the institutional, economic, security, connectivity, and regional conditions that could enable Pakistan to perform such a role under CPEC 2.0.

3. Conceptual Framework

The concept of a resilient hub is designed to correct the limits of earlier corridor language. As summarized in Figure 1, a pivot state emphasizes strategic location; a connecting state emphasizes links between land and sea routes; and a demonstration state emphasizes the symbolic value of a flagship project. These categories explain why Pakistan became central to the BRI, but they do not fully explain what is required for Pakistan to remain central in the next phase. Recent resilience literature stresses that resilience should be understood as dynamic capacity across social, economic, technical, and institutional systems rather than as a static attribute [19], [20]. Applied to CPEC, this means that connectivity must be evaluated by its ability to function under pressure.

A resilient hub may be defined as a strategic node whose value depends on four capacities: first, the ability to keep land, maritime, border, and digital routes operational under pressure; second, the ability to convert infrastructure into industrial production, exports, local employment, agricultural upgrading, and mining value chains; third, the ability to manage local grievances, security threats, fiscal risks, environmental concerns, and provincial coordination; and fourth, the ability to support wider regional coordination despite instability and geopolitical rivalry. A hub connects. A resilient hub continues to connect, produce, govern, and adapt.

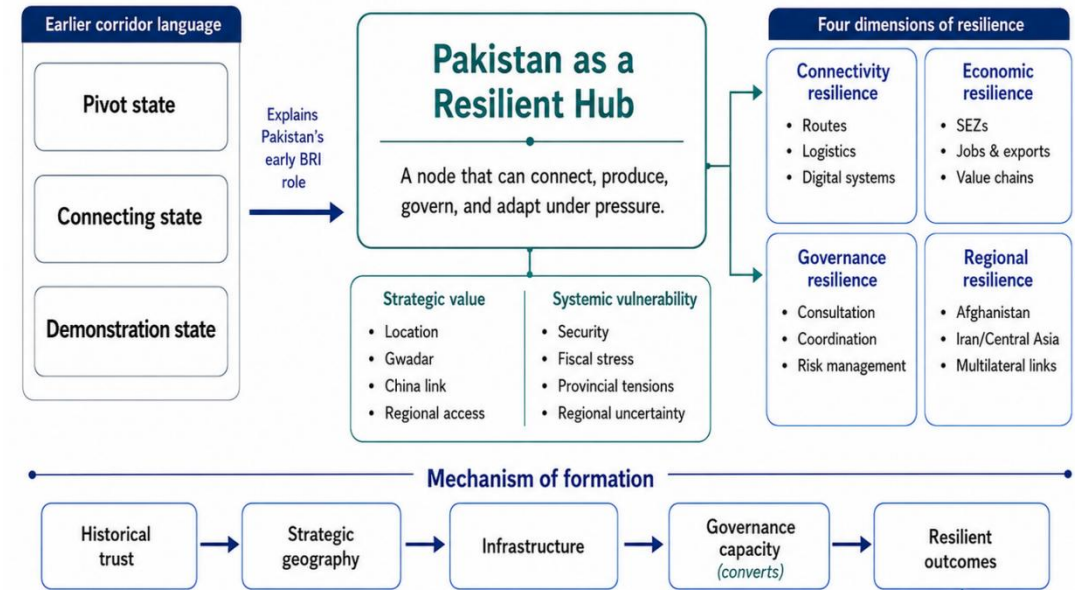


Figure 1. Mechanism of resilient hub formation (Source: made by the author)

Pakistan's location links South Asia, western China, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf, Afghanistan, Iran, and possible Central Asian routes. Gwadar Port gives Pakistan maritime potential, while the Karakoram Highway and Khunjerab Pass provide a difficult but symbolically powerful overland connection with China [1], [8]. At the same time, Pakistan faces

security threats, fiscal constraints, energy-sector stress, provincial tensions, climate vulnerability, and a difficult regional environment. These conditions do not negate Pakistan's importance; they change the standard by which importance should be judged.

The resilient hub framework has four dimensions. Connectivity resilience refers to the practical reliability of routes and nodes: Gwadar operations, the Karakoram Highway, Khunjerab clearance, customs systems, logistics continuity, digital tracking, and disaster response. Economic resilience refers to the ability to turn the corridor into productive capacity: SEZ firms, supplier networks, vocational training, exports, agro-processing, mining processing, and energy affordability. Governance resilience refers to risk management: consultation, grievance mechanisms, transparency, provincial coordination, environmental safeguards, and security coordination. Regional resilience refers to the ability to make CPEC useful beyond the bilateral relationship through cautious links with Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, the Gulf, and relevant multilateral platforms [12], [13].

The framework also contains a mechanism. Historical trust lowers political transaction costs. Strategic geography creates opportunity. Infrastructure investment supplies the physical base. Governance capacity is the converting variable. It turns friendship into institutions, geography into flows, infrastructure into production, and projects into local benefits. Without governance capacity, political trust may remain elite-level language, geography may remain a map, and infrastructure may remain underused. This conceptual shift changes the evaluation of CPEC: the first phase could be partly assessed by completed power plants, roads, and port facilities, but CPEC 2.0 must be assessed by whether SEZs host operating firms, whether Gwadar improves municipal services and local livelihoods, whether mining projects generate provincial benefits, and whether security measures reduce the political production of risk rather than merely protecting project sites.

4. CPEC 2.0: From Infrastructure Corridor to Development Platform

CPEC 1.0 was shaped largely by Pakistan's urgent infrastructure deficits. Energy shortages, unreliable roads, weak transmission systems, and limited port capacity constrained economic growth and discouraged investment. The early sequencing of CPEC therefore had a clear developmental rationale: power generation, transmission, transport corridors, and Gwadar provided the physical foundations for subsequent economic activity. Pakistan's Ministry of Planning reported in 2023 that 13 power-generation projects, with a combined installed capacity of 8,020 MW, and one HVDC transmission line, with 4,000 MW of evacuation capacity, had achieved commercial operation [6]. These achievements demonstrate that the first phase addressed substantial and measurable infrastructure bottlenecks and should not be evaluated solely against the objectives of the second phase.

The central challenge, however, is that infrastructure provision does not automatically generate structural transformation. Power generation does not by itself create export competitiveness; roads do not automatically produce efficient logistics networks; a port does not automatically become a maritime hub; and the establishment of a special economic zone (SEZ) does not guarantee the emergence of an industrial cluster. The significance of CPEC 2.0 therefore lies less in abandoning infrastructure than in connecting infrastructure with productive, institutional, and social capabilities. The May 2026 China-Pakistan joint statement places greater emphasis on industrial cooperation, agriculture, mining, digital cooperation, artificial intelligence, skills development, trade facilitation, and the further development of Gwadar [1]. These priorities indicate a transition from a predominantly infrastructure-oriented corridor toward a broader development platform in which physical connectivity is expected to generate economic activity, institutional capacity, and wider regional linkages [1], [7], [8].

The transition can therefore be understood through three interconnected dimensions: policy priorities, economic logic, and governance requirements. Under CPEC 1.0, the immediate policy priority was to address infrastructure and energy deficits. Its economic logic was primarily based on reducing physical bottlenecks and improving basic connectivity. CPEC 2.0 retains these foundations but places greater emphasis on industrial upgrading, agricultural modernization, mineral development, digital transformation, skills, trade, and regional integration. Correspondingly, its governance requirements become more demanding because the success of these activities depends on coordination among federal and provincial governments, local authorities, firms, communities, and Chinese partners. The transition is therefore not from infrastructure to something completely different, but from infrastructure provision to infrastructure-enabled development.

Pakistan's export structure illustrates why this transition matters. The World Bank reports that exports declined from approximately 16 percent of GDP in the 1990s to around 10 percent in 2024, while the export basket remains concentrated in relatively low-value textiles and agricultural products [5]. This structural constraint means that CPEC 2.0 should not be evaluated primarily by the volume of Chinese investment or the number of projects completed. A more relevant question is whether cooperation enables firms to improve productivity, participate in domestic and international supplier networks, adopt new technologies, develop higher-value products, and enter new export markets. Industrial cooperation in textiles, home appliances, light manufacturing, food processing, construction materials, mining equipment, logistics, and information services may therefore provide more immediate opportunities for economic upgrading than ambitious high-technology initiatives that lack supporting supply chains.

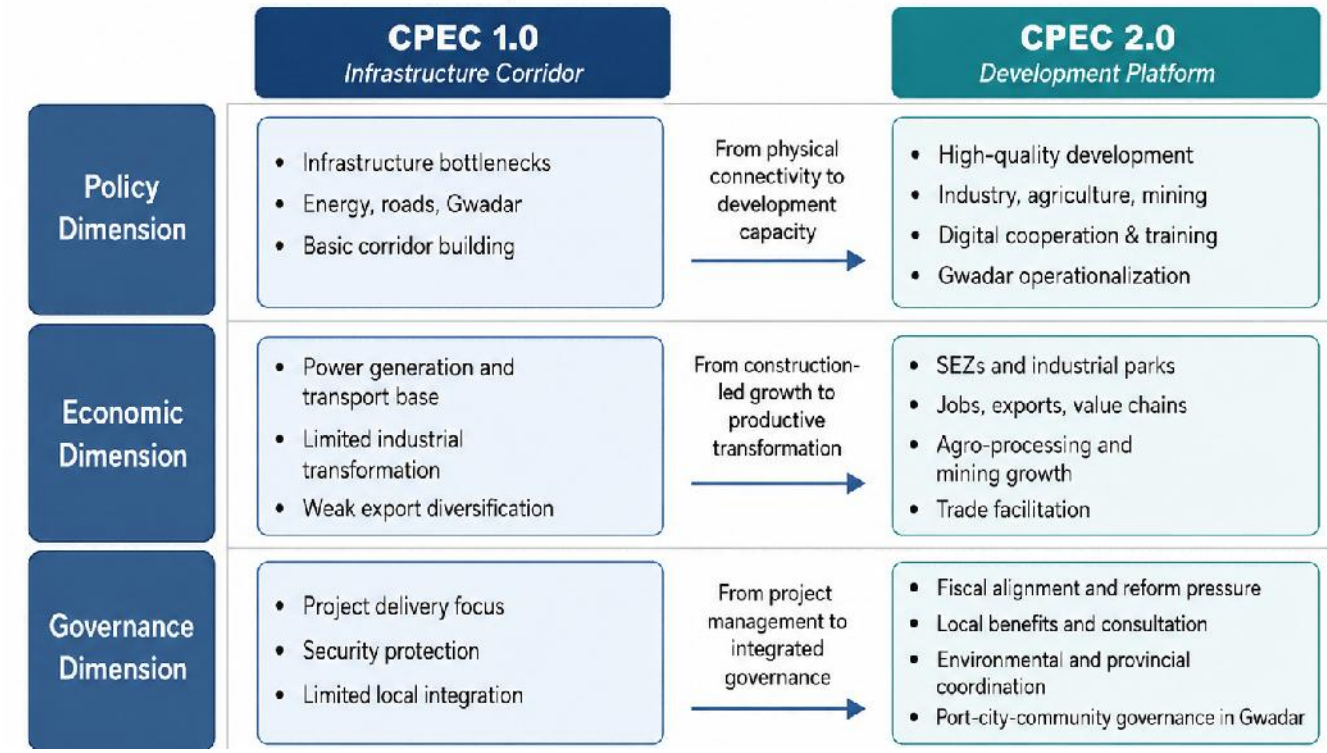


Figure 2. CPEC 1.0 vs. CPEC 2.0: a three-dimensional comparison (Source: made by the author)

This perspective also changes how SEZ performance should be understood. The establishment of an industrial zone is an input, rather than evidence of industrial transformation. A resilient development platform should be assessed according to whether firms actually operate within the zone, whether domestic suppliers are integrated into production networks, whether stable employment is generated, whether firms export, and whether workers acquire transferable skills. These indicators provide a more meaningful connection between infrastructure investment and economic resilience.

Agriculture represents another important channel through which CPEC 2.0 can connect national development with local livelihoods. Rural employment, food security, water stress, and climate vulnerability continue to influence Pakistan's political economy. Agricultural cooperation can potentially connect CPEC with households and local economies more directly than major transport infrastructure can. The May 2026 joint statement referred to the completion of a training program for 1,000 young Pakistani agricultural technicians in China and to Chinese support for improving agricultural production capacity and market access for Pakistani products [1]. Such initiatives can be understood as components of a broader rural-resilience strategy involving improved seeds, irrigation, mechanization, disease control, storage, cold chains, agro-processing, technical training, and export certification. Their significance should therefore be assessed not simply by the number of trainees or cooperation agreements, but by whether knowledge and technology are subsequently adopted in agricultural production and value chains.

Pakistan also possesses substantial mineral resources, including copper, gold, coal, chromite, and other minerals. CPEC 2.0's emphasis on mining and oil and gas cooperation reflects an effort to diversify sources of growth and investment [1], [9]. However, mineral development presents a particular governance challenge because resource projects can generate tensions when local communities perceive that economic benefits are concentrated elsewhere. A resilient-hub approach therefore requires mining governance to incorporate transparent licensing, environmental safeguards, downstream processing, local employment, provincial revenue arrangements, and meaningful community consultation. In this context, economic resilience and governance resilience are mutually dependent: the long-term viability of resource investment depends partly on whether local stakeholders perceive the distribution of costs and benefits as sufficiently legitimate.

Gwadar provides a particularly useful empirical setting for examining this transition because it brings together connectivity, economic development, governance, security, and local participation within a single location. Its position on the Arabian Sea and its potential connections with Gulf and regional markets give it strategic significance, but strategic location alone does not constitute hub functionality. For analytical purposes, Gwadar can be understood as a port-city-community system consisting of three mutually dependent layers. The port layer requires shipping, customs, logistics, storage, processing, road connections, and security. The city layer requires reliable water and electricity,

health care, education, housing, sanitation, and capable municipal administration. The community layer requires livelihood protection, particularly for fisheries, local employment, vocational training, small-business opportunities, and credible channels for consultation and grievance resolution. The effectiveness of Gwadar as a resilient hub therefore depends on whether these three layers develop together rather than independently [13].

The same principle applies to the northern land corridor. The Khunjerab Pass and the Karakoram Highway provide an important overland connection, but physical connectivity alone cannot ensure effective regional trade. Border procedures, customs coordination, logistics services, warehousing, payment mechanisms, and predictable operating arrangements are equally important [1], [8]. Engineering makes a route physically possible; institutions make that route economically usable. This distinction captures the central analytical shift of CPEC 2.0: from measuring the existence of infrastructure to assessing the resilience of the systems that enable infrastructure to generate sustained economic and regional value.

5. Resilience-Based Evaluation of CPEC 2.0

First, sectoral performance should be assessed beyond input-based metrics. In the energy sector, installed generation capacity is an important baseline indicator, but subsequent evaluation should examine electricity reliability, tariff sustainability, circular-debt dynamics, grid stability, industrial electricity costs, and the fiscal and environmental sustainability of the energy system. This distinction is important because additional generating capacity does not automatically translate into reliable or affordable electricity for industrial users.

For SEZs and industrial projects, evaluation should prioritize the number of operational firms, jobs created, domestic supplier linkages, exports, investment realization, customs efficiency, and training outcomes, rather than the number or physical scale of zones established. Agricultural cooperation should similarly be evaluated through indicators such as technology adoption, irrigation efficiency, extension services, cold-chain development, agro-processing, certification capacity, and changes in agricultural productivity and market access. In mining, relevant indicators include investment depth, local employment, downstream processing, provincial revenue arrangements, environmental compliance, and grievance-resolution mechanisms. These indicators connect physical investment with the broader question of whether CPEC contributes to productive and inclusive economic transformation [5], [7], [9], [14], [15].

This approach also reinforces the distinction between economic resilience and economic growth. Growth may be reflected in increased output or investment, whereas resilience concerns the capacity of an economic system to withstand disruption, adapt to changing conditions, and maintain productive functions. For CPEC 2.0, this means that diversified exports, domestic supplier networks, skills development, and multiple logistics options may be as important as the absolute volume of investment.

5.2 Gwadar and Local Resilience

Second, Gwadar requires localized indicators because the performance of a port cannot be separated from the performance of the city and communities surrounding it. Assessment should therefore include port throughput and vessel activity, customs clearance, water and electricity reliability, fisheries protection, municipal service delivery, local employment and training, small-business participation, and security conditions. These indicators help distinguish a strategically important geographic location from a functioning port-city-community system [13].

The significance of this approach is that it makes local participation part of the resilience framework rather than treating it as a separate social issue. If port expansion generates limited local employment, weakens existing livelihoods, or is accompanied by inadequate municipal services, physical connectivity may increase without a corresponding increase in local resilience. Conversely, improvements in vocational training, local procurement, fisheries protection, utilities, and municipal services can strengthen the social and economic foundations upon which the port depends.

5.3 Regional and Cross-Border Resilience

At the regional level, CPEC should be assessed not simply by whether a particular route exists, but by whether the wider network can adapt when individual routes are disrupted. Relevant indicators include border-opening frequency, transit-agreement implementation, customs-processing time, trade disruptions involving Afghanistan, and the availability and integration of alternative routes through Iran and Central Asia.

The experience of Afghanistan illustrates why this network perspective matters. The evidence cited in the original manuscript indicates that Afghan trade continued despite repeated disruptions at Pakistan's borders, with traders using alternative routes including Iran's Chabahar port and Central Asian connections [18]. This observation should not be interpreted as evidence that one corridor has permanently replaced another. Rather, it demonstrates that traders can adapt their route choices when connectivity becomes unreliable. For CPEC 2.0, the implication is analytical: geographical advantage alone does not guarantee network centrality. Reliability, customs efficiency, cost, security, and institutional coordination increasingly influence whether firms actually use a corridor.

Accordingly, regional resilience should not be understood as eliminating alternative routes. A more resilient CPEC network may instead be one that can maintain its role while connecting with complementary regional corridors. This shifts the concept of Pakistan as a resilient hub away from a model of exclusive dependence on one route and toward a model of network adaptability and institutional interoperability.

5.4 From Monitoring Indicators to the Resilient-Hub Concept

Taken together, the indicators in Table 1 operationalize the central argument of this study. A resilient hub is not defined simply by the amount of infrastructure located within a country. It is defined by the interaction of functional connectivity, productive economic capacity, capable governance, and adaptable regional linkages. Gwadar adds a fifth, localized dimension because the long-term sustainability of a major connectivity node depends on the resilience of the city and communities that support it.

The framework therefore provides a basis for moving from a geopolitical description of Pakistan's location to an institutional assessment of its capacity. CPEC 2.0 can be considered to be moving toward a resilient-hub model when physical connections become more reliable, infrastructure generates diversified economic activity, governance institutions can manage risks and grievances, and regional networks remain adaptable under disruption. This is a framework for assessment rather than a claim that these conditions have already been fully achieved.

6. CPEC 2.0 Risk Structure

CPEC 2.0 encompasses the interaction of militant violence, fiscal stress, energy-sector weaknesses, local grievances, federal-provincial coordination problems, climate shocks, border disruptions, and geopolitical tensions. These risks are analytically distinct, but they can reinforce one another. A security incident may delay construction and increase protection costs; fiscal stress may constrain complementary infrastructure and public services; weak local benefit sharing may intensify grievances; and border disruptions may reduce the commercial value of otherwise functioning transport infrastructure. Treating these risks independently can therefore produce fragmented policy responses. A resilience-based approach instead examines how risks are transmitted across economic, institutional, social, and regional systems.

Table 2 summarizes the principal risk dimensions identified in the documentary evidence. The figures are presented as source-specific indicators rather than a single aggregated measure of risk. This distinction is important because AP, CRSS, and PICSS employ different definitions, reporting periods, and categories of violence. Consequently, their figures should not be added together or interpreted as directly equivalent measures of fatalities or attacks.

Table 2. Multi-dimensional risk structure facing CPEC 2.0

Risk dimension	Empirical evidence / recent data	Source
Violence / security risk	AP reported that militant attacks in Pakistan increased by approximately 40% in 2024 compared with 2023 and that Pakistani security forces experienced their highest casualties in nearly a decade. CRSS recorded 2,414 conflict-related fatalities during January–September 2025, compared with 1,527 during the corresponding period of 2024. PICSS reported 3,387 combat-related deaths for 2025, representing a 73% increase over its corresponding measure. These figures use different definitions and should not be combined.	[16]–[18]
Fiscal stress risk	IMF programs emphasize reserve rebuilding, tax broadening, state-owned enterprise reform, governance, public-service provision, and energy-sector viability. The May 2026 board decision provided approximately US$1.32 billion in access under the EFF and RSF.	[3], [4]
Energy-sector risk	CPEC 1.0 added substantial generation and transmission capacity, but capacity payments were estimated at approximately PKR 1.9–2.1 trillion in FY2024, while circular debt was approximately PKR 2.4 trillion.	[6], [14], [15]
Local grievance / social risk	Reporting from Gwadar identifies concerns involving public-service provision, local employment, security restrictions, water, electricity, and the distribution of economic benefits.	[13], [22]
Climate and environmental risk	The 2022 floods affected approximately 33 million people; reported damages exceeded US$14.9 billion and economic losses reached approximately US$15.2 billion, with reconstruction needs estimated at more than US$16 billion.	[21]
Border and	Repeated disruptions at Pakistan-Afghanistan crossings in 2025 encouraged some Afghan traders to use alternative routes through Iran, including Chabahar, and through Central Asia.	[18]

Risk dimension	Empirical evidence / recent data	Source
connectivity risk		
Geopolitical competition risk	India continues to object to CPEC-related activities in territory it claims as part of Jammu and Kashmir. Alternative routes through Iran and Central Asia also reduce Pakistan's potential exclusivity as a regional transit route.	[12], [18]

6.1 Security Risk and the Governance of Resilience

Security is the most visible and rapidly evolving risk affecting CPEC. Between 2021 and 2025, Pakistan experienced sustained militant violence, with attacks occurring across multiple regions and involving different armed actors. AP reported that militant attacks increased by approximately 40% in 2024 compared with 2023 and that Pakistani security forces suffered their highest casualties in nearly a decade [16]. CRSS subsequently reported 2,414 fatalities during the first three quarters of 2025, compared with 1,527 during the same period of 2024 [17]. PICSS reported 3,387 combat-related deaths for 2025, describing a 73% increase according to its own methodology [18].

These figures should not be interpreted as three independent counts of the same phenomenon. AP, CRSS, and PICSS differ in their definitions, geographic coverage, reporting periods, and treatment of civilian, security-force, and combat-related deaths. The purpose of citing them together is therefore not to calculate a cumulative fatality figure, but to demonstrate a consistent pattern of heightened security pressure across multiple reporting systems [16]–[18]. This distinction also responds to the methodological problem of comparing or adding non-equivalent security indicators.

For CPEC, persistent insecurity can increase protection expenditure, insurance costs, project delays, and restrictions on worker mobility. It can also affect perceptions of investment risk. More importantly, however, security has a governance dimension. An infrastructure project may be physically protected while remaining socially disconnected from the communities in which it operates. In such circumstances, physical security can reduce immediate threats without necessarily improving the broader conditions required for long-term resilience.

In Balochistan, security concerns intersect with questions involving resource distribution, provincial autonomy, employment, land, fisheries, public services, and perceptions of political exclusion. Reuters reported an attack on a complex near Gwadar port in March 2024, for which the Baloch Liberation Army claimed responsibility, and separately reported a May 2024 attack in which seven laborers near Gwadar were killed [10], [11]. These incidents illustrate the operational vulnerability of projects and workers, but they should not be interpreted as evidence that all local grievances are linked to militant activity. Rather, they demonstrate why security policy and development governance need to be analyzed together.

Accordingly, a resilient-hub approach does not treat security as a purely military problem. Physical protection, intelligence coordination, emergency response, and secure transportation remain necessary, but they should be accompanied by credible local employment mechanisms, transparent compensation, accessible grievance procedures, reliable public services, and community participation. The objective is not to replace hard security with development policy, but to reduce the extent to which economic and governance weaknesses can amplify security vulnerabilities.

6.2 Macroeconomic and Fiscal Risk

Macroeconomic vulnerability constitutes a second major risk dimension. Pakistan's macroeconomic position has shown signs of stabilization, but this stabilization remains dependent on continued fiscal and monetary discipline as well as external financial support. IMF arrangements under the EFF and RSF emphasize reserve rebuilding, tax reform, state-owned enterprise governance, human capital, public-service delivery, and energy-sector viability [3], [4]. These reforms are directly relevant to CPEC 2.0 because the commercial success of industrial parks, mining projects, agricultural initiatives, and logistics networks depends on the wider investment environment.

This relationship can be expressed as a governance chain:

macroeconomic stability → investment confidence → infrastructure utilization → productive activity → employment and exports.

Weakness at any stage can reduce the effectiveness of the others. For example, infrastructure may be completed but underutilized if firms face high energy costs, limited access to finance, regulatory uncertainty, or insufficient export competitiveness. CPEC 2.0 therefore cannot be insulated from Pakistan's broader structural reform agenda.

The implication is not that CPEC should be expected to solve Pakistan's macroeconomic problems. Rather, the resilience of CPEC investments depends partly on the capacity of the national economy to provide a stable institutional

and financial environment. This is why economic resilience is treated in this study as a system-level condition rather than simply a measure of investment volume.

6.3 Energy-Sector Risk

The energy sector illustrates particularly clearly the distinction between infrastructure expansion and systemic resilience. CPEC 1.0 substantially increased generation and transmission capacity, helping address severe electricity shortages [6]. However, additional capacity does not by itself eliminate problems associated with tariffs, transmission and distribution losses, circular debt, affordability, and the financial sustainability of the power sector.

Recent assessments estimate FY2024 capacity payments at approximately PKR 1.9–2.1 trillion and circular debt at approximately PKR 2.4 trillion [14], [15]. These figures are important because they demonstrate the difference between physical capacity and systemic functionality. Industrial users require not only available generating capacity but also reliable supply at commercially sustainable prices.

This has direct implications for CPEC 2.0. Industrial zones cannot become competitive manufacturing clusters if electricity is unreliable or prohibitively expensive. Likewise, public perceptions of CPEC-linked energy projects can be affected by debates over tariffs and fiscal costs. Energy cooperation should therefore increasingly be connected with industrial demand, grid modernization, transmission efficiency, tariff reform, and long-term financial sustainability.

6.4 Local Grievance and Provincial Governance Risk

CPEC is negotiated at the bilateral level but implemented across multiple territorial and institutional jurisdictions. Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Islamabad experience the corridor differently because their economic structures, political priorities, infrastructure needs, and development expectations vary.

This makes federal-provincial coordination an important component of governance resilience. Differences in infrastructure allocation, land use, employment, revenue distribution, and security arrangements can influence perceptions of whether CPEC generates equitable benefits. The issue is particularly significant in Balochistan, where Gwadar's port, mineral resources, coastal infrastructure, and security arrangements intersect with longstanding development and resource-governance concerns [13], [22].

The relevant policy question is therefore not simply whether CPEC generates aggregate economic benefits, but where those benefits are generated, who receives them, and through what institutional mechanisms. Local employment, vocational training, procurement from local firms, fisheries protection, public-service provision, transparent compensation, and accessible grievance mechanisms can make economic benefits more visible and institutionally credible.

This perspective also clarifies the relationship between local legitimacy and security. Local participation should not be presented as a guarantee against violence, nor should community grievances be equated with support for militant organizations. Rather, inclusive governance can reduce some of the institutional vulnerabilities that complicate the implementation of major infrastructure projects.

6.5 Climate and Environmental Risk

Climate change introduces a further layer of systemic vulnerability. Pakistan's 2022 floods affected approximately 33 million people, with reported damages exceeding US$14.9 billion and losses of approximately US$15.2 billion; reconstruction needs were estimated at more than US$16 billion [21]. Such events demonstrate that infrastructure corridors operate within an environment exposed to extreme weather and climate-related disruption.

For CPEC 2.0, climate resilience should therefore be incorporated into project planning rather than treated solely as a post-disaster response. Roads, bridges, power systems, ports, industrial facilities, agricultural projects, and water infrastructure require risk-sensitive design and maintenance. Agricultural cooperation is particularly exposed because climate shocks can simultaneously affect production, food prices, rural incomes, and logistics.

Climate resilience also reinforces the argument for diversification. Multiple transport routes, distributed energy systems, resilient supply chains, and diversified agricultural production can reduce dependence on individual infrastructure nodes. In this sense, environmental resilience is not separate from connectivity and economic resilience; it contributes to the capacity of the wider CPEC system to absorb and recover from disruption.

6.6 Border and Connectivity Risk

Regional connectivity creates opportunities but also introduces dependence on border management and neighboring states. Afghanistan represents an important potential extension of CPEC toward Central Asia, but border closures, security instability, and political tensions can interrupt trade flows. The May 2025 China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilateral meeting reiterated support for extending CPEC toward Afghanistan, but practical implementation will depend on reliable border procedures, transport infrastructure, trade facilitation, and security coordination [12].

The experience of Afghan trade in 2025 illustrates the importance of route adaptability. The evidence cited in the original manuscript indicates that repeated disruptions at Pakistan's crossings encouraged traders to use alternative routes through Iran and Central Asia [18]. This should not be interpreted as evidence that these alternatives have displaced Pakistan as a regional route. Instead, it demonstrates that commercial actors respond to changes in reliability, cost, and accessibility by adjusting their routes.

For the resilient-hub concept, this has an important implication: resilience is not the same as exclusivity. A resilient hub should be able to maintain its functions and adapt to competition rather than depend on the absence of alternative corridors. Pakistan's long-term connectivity position will therefore depend not only on geography but also on border efficiency, customs coordination, logistics quality, security, cost, and the ability to connect with complementary regional routes.

6.7 Geopolitical Competition and Regional Positioning

Finally, CPEC operates within a contested regional environment. India's opposition to CPEC is linked to its position concerning territory in Jammu and Kashmir through which parts of the corridor pass [12]. At the same time, alternative connectivity initiatives involving Iran, Central Asia, and other regional routes create a broader competitive environment for transit and logistics [18].

These geopolitical conditions do not necessarily prevent CPEC 2.0 from developing, but they affect the policy environment in which regionalization occurs. Pakistan therefore faces a distinction between strategic significance and operational connectivity. A route may have considerable geopolitical importance while still facing commercial competition from alternative routes.

A resilient approach consequently favors gradual and diversified regional engagement rather than dependence on a single geopolitical pathway. CPEC 2.0's regional dimension should focus on practical areas such as customs interoperability, trade facilitation, border infrastructure, logistics services, energy cooperation, and carefully sequenced connectivity with neighboring economies. Such measures can increase the practical value of CPEC while reducing vulnerability to disruption in any single corridor.

7. The Gwadar Case

Gwadar is a port, a city, a community, a security environment, a provincial political issue, and a regional ambition at the same time. The strongest arguments about CPEC and the strongest criticisms of CPEC both meet in Gwadar. At the strategic level, Gwadar is often described as Pakistan's gateway to the Arabian Sea and a possible link to Gulf, African, and Central Asian trade routes. This description is geographically accurate but analytically incomplete. Ports do not become hubs because maps make them look useful. They become hubs when shipping lines, logistics firms, customs systems, industrial processors, road and rail links, and stable urban services make them reliable and commercially attractive. At the local level, Gwadar is a place where residents have demanded water, electricity, jobs, fisheries protection, municipal services, and participation. These demands are not secondary to strategy; they are part of the conditions under which strategy can function. If residents see the port as separated from their lives, Gwadar may remain strategically valuable but socially fragile. If they see improvements in livelihoods and services, local legitimacy can become a form of security. Recent reporting on the China-financed New Gwadar International Airport underscores this gap between symbolic infrastructure and local perceptions, noting concerns over water, electricity, security restrictions, and limited local employment benefits [13].

As illustrated in Figure 3, a port-city-community model should guide Gwadar policy. The port layer focuses on shipping, customs, logistics, storage, industrial processing, and hinterland connectivity. The city layer addresses water, power, roads, sanitation, health care, education, housing, and municipal administration. The community layer emphasizes fishermen, small traders, youth employment, displaced households, vocational training, and grievance resolution. These layers must be planned together rather than treated as separate files in separate ministries.

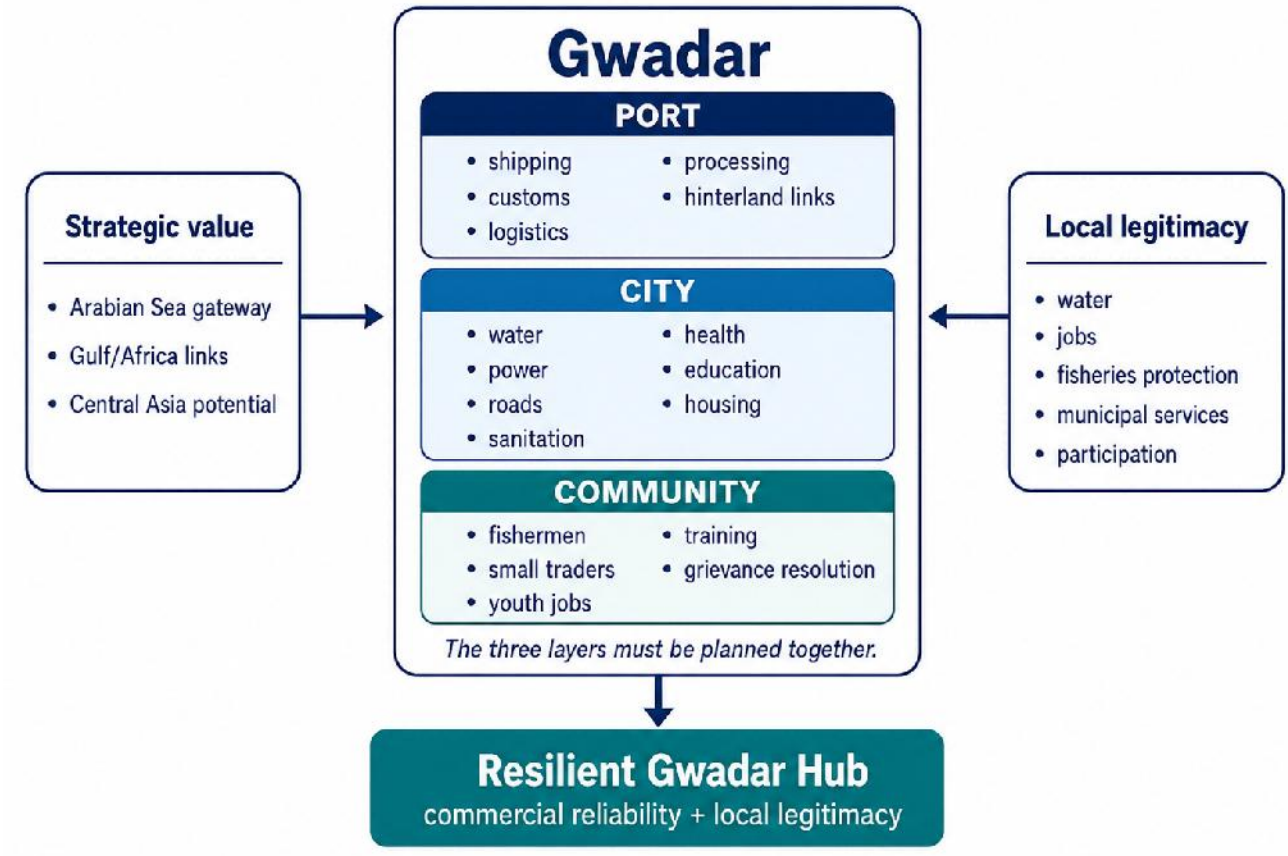


Figure 3. Gwadar Port-City-Community Model (Source: made by the author)

8. Policy Pathways and Discussion

China and Pakistan already maintain high-level consultation mechanisms, including the Joint Cooperation Committee under CPEC. The next phase, however, requires stronger operational integration rather than another symbolic forum. The central challenge is the fragmentation of responsibilities across institutions dealing with interconnected security, fiscal, environmental, local-governance, industrial, and regional risks. The two sides should therefore consider establishing a CPEC 2.0 Integrated Risk Board that complements rather than replaces existing mechanisms. It could bring together federal and provincial authorities, security agencies, Chinese and Pakistani project authorities, economic planners, environmental specialists, and independent technical advisers. Its functions could include early-warning assessments, project-level risk mapping, fiscal exposure analysis, local grievance monitoring, climate-risk review, and security-development coordination. Such integration would help shift CPEC governance from reactive problem-solving toward anticipatory and coordinated risk management.

Security cooperation should likewise move from a predominantly protective model toward broader security governance. Physical protection of Chinese and Pakistani personnel, project sites, and transport routes remains necessary, particularly in high-risk areas. However, the security environment surrounding CPEC is also influenced by employment disputes, compensation claims, inadequate public services, community protests, misinformation, and perceptions of exclusion. Security planning should therefore involve provincial and municipal authorities and incorporate local consultation and grievance-management mechanisms. This approach does not reduce the importance of physical security; rather, it broadens the concept of protection by recognizing social stability, local legitimacy, and effective grievance resolution as components of a sustainable security architecture. In this sense, security and development should be treated as interconnected dimensions of CPEC governance rather than separate policy domains.

CPEC 2.0 should prioritize productive industrial ecosystems rather than isolated special economic zones (SEZs). Each SEZ should be connected with domestic suppliers, vocational institutions, customs services, finance, transport, export promotion, and predictable policy incentives. Priority sectors should be selected according to Pakistan's existing industrial capabilities and employment needs. Textiles and garments, food processing, agricultural machinery, home appliances, construction materials, mineral processing, logistics, and IT-enabled services may provide more immediate opportunities than sectors based primarily on abstract high-technology aspirations. The performance of an SEZ should therefore be assessed by operational firms, production, employment, exports, supplier participation, and business continuity rather than by the announcement of projects or the size of designated land. Agriculture should be treated as another livelihood-centered pillar of CPEC 2.0, with cooperation in seed quality, irrigation efficiency, mechanization,

veterinary services, crop-disease control, cold chains, storage, processing, certification, and market access. Provincial agriculture departments, universities, farmer organizations, and private processors should participate in program design so that cooperation generates visible benefits in rural areas and contributes to food security and climate resilience.

Mining cooperation, Gwadar development, and regional connectivity require similarly integrated approaches. Mining projects should incorporate transparent licensing, feasible local employment, technical training, downstream processing, environmental monitoring, water-use rules, provincial revenue arrangements, and accessible grievance procedures. Without mechanisms for local participation and benefit sharing, resource extraction may generate additional governance pressures; with appropriate institutions, it can contribute to productive capacity and provincial development. Gwadar should be managed as a port-city-community system rather than solely as a port project, with attention to port operations, customs and logistics, water and electricity, fisheries, employment, vocational training, small businesses, municipal services, and security. Regionalization should also proceed pragmatically. CPEC can facilitate connections with Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia, the Gulf, and the wider Indian Ocean region, but geographical connectivity does not automatically produce regional economic integration. Customs coordination, border management, logistics services, commercial agreements, and reliable routes are necessary to convert geographical potential into sustained regional connectivity.

A governance-oriented CPEC 2.0 should also establish transparent mechanisms for monitoring and public evaluation. A public performance dashboard could report selected indicators covering operational SEZ firms, employment, training graduates, exports, local procurement, agricultural pilot outcomes, mining benefit-sharing arrangements, Gwadar service improvements, security incidents, and project delays. Such monitoring would help distinguish implementation outcomes from policy announcements and provide a common evidence base for bilateral and domestic decision-making. More broadly, the concept of China-Pakistan friendship should be connected to concrete governance mechanisms. Friendship can facilitate political trust, elite consultation, and continued cooperation under pressure, but it cannot substitute for effective institutions. The relevant policy question is therefore not simply whether CPEC is strategically important, but how institutional arrangements convert political trust into functioning projects, economic benefits, local participation, and risk-management capacity [3]-[5], [14], [15].

This governance perspective also connects CPEC 2.0 with Pakistan's broader domestic reform agenda. The full benefits of cooperation depend partly on the host-country environment, including the tax system, energy-sector governance, customs efficiency, provincial coordination, regulatory predictability, and public-service capacity. External investment can support institutional and economic transformation, but it cannot replace domestic governance capacity. Local legitimacy should consequently be treated as a strategic component of resilience rather than as a secondary social concern. Consultation, compensation, employment, vocational training, fisheries protection, municipal services, and transparency can influence whether infrastructure becomes socially and economically embedded. The resilient-hub framework therefore avoids both strategic optimism, which assumes that friendship and geography automatically generate success, and risk determinism, which treats security and economic constraints as necessarily preventing cooperation. Instead, it emphasizes that Pakistan's potential role as a resilient hub must be produced through institutions capable of integrating connectivity, productive capacity, governance, local legitimacy, and regional adaptation.

9. Conclusion

China-Pakistan relations are entering a stage of structural upgrading. The traditional foundation of the relationship remains strong: political trust, defense cooperation, diplomatic support, and geopolitical complementarity continue to shape bilateral cooperation. However, the standard by which the relationship should be evaluated has changed. The central question is no longer whether Pakistan is strategically located or whether China and Pakistan describe each other as close partners. Rather, the key question is whether this partnership can generate resilient development under conditions of fiscal pressure, security threats, local grievances, regional uncertainty, and geopolitical competition.

CPEC 2.0 is the main arena in which this question will be tested. Its agenda extends far beyond the infrastructure priorities of the first phase and now includes industrial cooperation, agricultural modernization, mining, digital systems, vocational training, Gwadar, Khunjerab, the Karakoram Highway, third-party participation, and regional coordination. This broader agenda creates new opportunities, but it also exposes the corridor to more complex risks. Industrial cooperation requires reliable energy, predictable regulation, supplier networks, skilled labor, customs efficiency, and export capacity. Agriculture requires rural institutions and market access. Mining requires benefit sharing and environmental safeguards. Gwadar requires a functioning port-city-community system. Regional expansion requires border reliability and cautious diplomacy.

This study has proposed the concept of Pakistan as a resilient hub to explain this new stage of China-Pakistan cooperation. A resilient hub is not simply a place through which routes pass. It is a cooperation platform capable of keeping routes functional, converting infrastructure into productive capacity, managing local and security risks, and supporting regional public goods. The framework developed in this article identifies four dimensions of resilience:

connectivity resilience, economic resilience, governance resilience, and regional resilience. These dimensions provide both an analytical lens for understanding CPEC 2.0 and a practical policy checklist for assessing its implementation.

The theoretical contribution of this study is to move CPEC research from corridor thinking to resilience thinking. Its policy contribution is to show that the future of China-Pakistan cooperation depends on governance mechanisms, including integrated risk mapping, security governance, industrial ecosystem building, agricultural livelihood programs, mining benefit-sharing, a Gwadar port-city-community platform, cautious regionalization, and public performance indicators. Friendship explains why China and Pakistan can cooperate, but governance will determine whether that cooperation succeeds. Future research should test this framework through fieldwork, interviews, firm surveys, customs data, port statistics, provincial budget information, and project-level analysis. Gwadar, Rashakai, Allama Iqbal Industrial City, Balochistan mining areas, and the Khunjerab-Karakoram corridor would be especially useful cases. The central conclusion is clear: CPEC 2.0 will succeed only if historical trust is converted into institutional capacity, strategic geography into productive development, and bilateral partnership into regional resilience.

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