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# The Impact of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Security Situation on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

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**Abstract:** During the implementation of CPEC in Pakistan, there have been attacks by terrorist organizations, particularly threats from Baloch separatists and the Pakistani Taliban, leading to frequent assaults on Chinese citizens and infrastructure. Additionally, the domestic turmoil and border disputes in Afghanistan have created significant obstacles to the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan. The security situation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is complex, and Afghanistan's unstable political, economic, and social environment has heightened the risks to the development of CPEC in the region.

**Keywords:** CPEC Security Threats Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Conflict

## 1. Introduction:

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative was first proposed during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Pakistan in May 2013.[1] Over the past decade, the project has made significant progress, benefiting both the Chinese and Pakistani peoples, and playing a crucial role in enhancing regional connectivity and economic cooperation between the two countries. As an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative, the advancement of CPEC has not only strengthened the link between China's northwestern regions and South Asia, opening a new passage for China to access the Indian Ocean, but also has major implications for China's western border security and counter-terrorism efforts. For Pakistan, the CPEC project runs through the entire country from north to south, improving domestic connectivity and infrastructure, and further deepening China-Pakistan relations. The two countries have become all-weather strategic cooperative partners. [2]However, during its more than ten years of development, CPEC has faced many obstacles, such as political instability within Pakistan, high public expectations regarding the outcomes of CPEC, difficulties in unifying the elite's attitude toward China, and security issues along the CPEC route.[3]

This article will focus on the security threats faced by the CPEC during its development. After the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the country has faced multiple challenges, including national reconstruction, economic recovery, and seeking international recognition. The Taliban has repeatedly expressed support for the CPEC and its desire to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative.[4] Furthermore, the Chinese government explored the possibility of extending CPEC into Afghanistan as early as 2017.[5]As a result, the security challenges facing the CPEC project are no longer limited to China and Pakistan but are gradually extending to Afghanistan and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. The security situation in this border area will have a profound impact on the CPEC project. This article will discuss the development status of the CPEC and its potential extension into Afghanistan from the perspective of building a community of shared human destiny, analyze the security situation in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region, its impact on the CPEC, and the responses of the governments of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

## 2. The Impact on Existing CPEC Projects in Pakistan

Over the past decade, several CPEC projects have been launched in Pakistan, particularly in the energy and transportation sectors. To date, Pakistan has completed 14 energy projects, including hydropower, coal, wind, and solar energy, with a total power generation capacity of 12,000 MW. There are also two ongoing projects and five more under consideration. In the transportation sector, five major infrastructure projects have been completed, including the PKM highway (Multan to Sukkur), the largest CPEC transportation project undertaken by Chinese construction companies. Additionally, five projects are under construction, eight are in preparation, and five long-term projects are planned, totaling nearly 6,000 kilometers of planned roadways. Furthermore, the strategic Gwadar Port, a critical element of CPEC, has also seen progress. A free trade zone and a seawater desalination plant have already been completed, and the new Gwadar International Airport, along with port breakwaters and docking areas, are under construction or in the planning stages.

Despite these significant achievements, instability in Pakistan has severely hindered the development of CPEC. In recent years, attacks on Chinese citizens and CPEC infrastructure have been frequent, exacerbating tensions between the Pakistani government and the residents of Balochistan. Terrorist organizations operating along the Afghanistan-

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Pakistan border have often been the perpetrators of these attacks, resulting in casualties and economic losses. This instability has significantly affected Chinese investment confidence in Pakistan, casting a shadow over the future of China-Pakistan economic cooperation.

#### (1) Threats to Chinese Nationals

Since the launch of CPEC, many Chinese investors, engineers, and construction workers have traveled between China and Pakistan, making them vulnerable to the threats posed by active terrorist groups along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. These threats not only directly affect Chinese workers and businesses but also challenge the progress of CPEC and the broader China-Pakistan relationship.

Since 2018, attacks on Chinese nationals have increased, and Chinese citizens in Pakistan have become frequent targets of terrorist attacks. These attacks typically stem from several sources: the notorious Baloch separatist movements, such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), strongly oppose CPEC, claiming it does not benefit the local communities but rather exploits their resources and land. As a result, these groups view Chinese nationals as invaders and have launched multiple attacks against them. Islamic extremist groups in Pakistan, such as the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also see CPEC and Chinese nationals as targets. These organizations employ violent methods to disrupt China-Pakistan cooperation, particularly in critical infrastructure projects and energy development. Additionally, local armed and criminal groups have also posed a threat to Chinese nationals, often engaging in kidnappings and assaults for ransom or other motives.

#### (2) Attacks on Infrastructure

Terrorist attacks on CPEC-related infrastructure in Pakistan have become widespread, targeting not only Pakistani security forces but also Chinese citizens and CPEC projects. The most notable attackers are the Baloch Liberation Army. These attacks, whether targeting construction personnel or infrastructure, represent a significant threat to the continued success of CPEC.

From March 16 to 26, 2024, five terrorist attacks occurred in Pakistan, three of which seemed directly related to CPEC and Chinese interests. On March 20, armed assailants attacked the Gwadar Port Authority building, killing two civilians and eight militants. The Baloch Liberation Army claimed responsibility for the attack.[6] Later, the group also targeted Pakistan's second-largest naval base in Balochistan, citing opposition to Chinese investment in the region.[6] On March 26, a suicide bombing in northwest Pakistan killed five Chinese nationals, who were workers and engineers at the Dasu Dam, Pakistan's largest hydroelectric power station. Although no group claimed responsibility, the Baloch Liberation Army was the primary suspect, with other organizations such as the TTP and ISIS also under suspicion.

It is foreseeable that as China and Pakistan deepen their economic cooperation and expand development in Balochistan, attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC infrastructure will become more frequent.

#### (3) Economic Disruption

The instability within Pakistan has had a clear negative impact on CPEC's development, but it is not solely Pakistan's fault. Foreign powers, especially the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, have significantly influenced the security situation in Pakistan. Many terrorist organizations operating within Pakistan have been emboldened by the Taliban's rise, becoming more brazen in their opposition to the Pakistani government and launching attacks to cause panic and expand their influence within the country. According to data from the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), between 2018 and 2020, Pakistan experienced 493 terrorist incidents. After the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan in 2021, the number of incidents surged, with 633 attacks in 2021 and 2022 alone, and 527 attacks in 2023. By April 10, 2024, Pakistan had already experienced 172 terrorist incidents in the first four months of the year, surpassing the average for the preceding three years. [7] This surge in terrorism, largely triggered by the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban's resurgence, has dealt a major blow to the CPEC project.

Originally, the greatest obstacle to CPEC was expected to be in Balochistan, where local extremist groups have repeatedly shown hostility towards the Pakistani government and Chinese nationals, attacking both the infrastructure and personnel associated with CPEC. However, the growing threat from terrorist organizations active along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, even those not explicitly targeting Chinese interests, is increasingly jeopardizing the safety and stability of CPEC.

Pakistan's unstable domestic situation provides a volatile environment for CPEC, putting billions of dollars in Chinese investment at risk and causing delays and setbacks for infrastructure projects. With Chinese workers' safety at risk and the long-term prospects of CPEC uncertain, it has become a tool for Western media to undermine China's reputation and sow discord between China and its neighboring countries, further complicating the development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### 3. Impact on the Potential Extension of CPEC to Afghanistan

With the Taliban's strong desire to join CPEC and China's positive response, the possibility of extending CPEC into Afghanistan has become increasingly likely. However, given the current security situation and international distrust toward the Taliban, several obstacles remain. Issues such as the ongoing border conflicts between Afghanistan and Pakistan, frequent terrorist activities, and the instability of the Afghan political and public sentiment all present

significant challenges to the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan. Resolving these issues and providing a stable, secure environment for the project is crucial.

#### (1) Ongoing Border Conflicts

The security situation at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border is primarily influenced by two major factors. First, there is the border conflict between the two countries, which centers around the "Durand Line." This colonial-era legacy has led to numerous clashes between the military and police forces of both nations along the border, and border posts are frequently closed. These tensions inevitably impact trade and economic exchanges between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and could also affect the future extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan. The second factor is the activities of terrorist organizations operating along the border. During the construction of the CPEC extension into Afghanistan, similar challenges to those currently faced in Pakistan—such as the threat of terrorist attacks disrupting the corridor—are likely to arise. These two issues represent the most significant security concerns in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. The first issue could potentially be resolved through diplomatic efforts and peaceful negotiations between the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, the second issue, the persistent threat of terrorism, remains a difficult and unresolved challenge.

The border conflict between Afghanistan and Pakistan is driven by numerous historical and contemporary factors. These include the territorial dispute over the "Durand Line" and the cross-border efforts to combat terrorism. The chaotic security situation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has provided refuge for various terrorist organizations. These groups often launch attacks from one country into the other, prompting retaliatory strikes from the neighboring country. However, because these militants operate covertly, it is usually the border forces and civilians living in border towns who suffer the consequences of such exchanges of fire. Such clashes are often perceived as hostile actions between the two countries, potentially escalating into larger-scale conflicts.

For example, on March 18, 2024, [9]Pakistan conducted airstrikes on Taliban militants hiding in Afghanistan's Khost and Paktika provinces. The airstrikes were a response to a previous attack by the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) on Pakistani territory. In retaliation, the Afghan military swiftly launched airstrikes against Pakistani border forces, resulting in casualties on both sides. Since the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan, the two countries have engaged in over a dozen clashes along the border, most of which were reprisals against terrorist activities. As a result of these conflicts, the flow of people and trade between the two countries has been severely disrupted.[10]

At the same time, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region has long been one of the most active areas for terrorist activities. Dozens of terrorist organizations, both large and small, operate in this region, often moving between the borders of the two countries. Among these groups are the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which has long been a thorn in the side of the Pakistani government, and the ISIS-Khorasan branch, which has become a key target for the Afghan Taliban since they regained power. The TTP frequently plans attacks on Pakistan from its hideouts in Afghanistan, and for Pakistan to counter these terrorist activities, it must conduct cross-border operations into Afghanistan, which in turn exacerbates tensions between the two countries. Such incidents have become commonplace.

Of course, Pakistan has also attempted diplomatic efforts, and since the Taliban took power, the Pakistani government has repeatedly urged the Taliban to crack down on terrorist organizations targeting Pakistan within Afghanistan. However, these efforts have largely been ineffective. Clearly, the Taliban is reluctant to take action against what was once their ally, especially since their primary threat is ISIS. As a result, the TTP, encouraged by the Taliban's return to power and protected by their policy of appeasement, has intensified its terrorist attacks against Pakistan. As previously mentioned, the number of terrorist attacks within Pakistan has sharply increased since the Taliban's return to power, causing significant economic losses to Pakistan, which is clearly linked to the Taliban's resurgence.

Whether Pakistan conducts cross-border operations against the TTP or Afghanistan retaliates against Pakistan, both actions are driven by the respective national interests of the two countries. For Pakistan, as long as the TTP remains, there can be no peace. For the Afghan Taliban, cracking down on the TTP carries more risks than benefits, so they prefer to "keep the enemy close" rather than take direct action. Moreover, Pakistan's attacks within Afghan territory are seen as a violation of Afghanistan's territorial sovereignty, prompting retaliation. This creates a dangerous and bizarre pattern: TTP attacks Pakistan — Pakistan attacks Afghan territory — Afghanistan retaliates against Pakistan, which leads to a continuous deterioration of relations between the two countries, without resolving the terrorist issue. Combined with the long-standing border disputes and ethnic and tribal issues between the two countries, the prospects for peace are bleak, especially when considering the planned extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan.

The extension of the CPEC into Afghanistan currently faces serious challenges at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. First, the repeated conflicts between the two countries at the border, due to various reasons, have resulted in extremely tense border relations. Second, the chaotic situation in the region provides a natural shelter for terrorist activities. A large number of destructive actions have caused significant economic losses to the local economy and have created security risks for the development of the economic corridor. If terrorism cannot be curbed and the border issues between the two countries are not resolved, conducting trade activities along the border, let alone extending the CPEC into Afghanistan, would be extremely risky. Therefore, as an investor, China must consider whether the risks align with the potential returns, making the extension of the CPEC into Afghanistan difficult to implement.

## (2) Domestic Environment Poses Concerns

The prospects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) extending into Afghanistan will also be affected by the domestic situation within Afghanistan. Since the Taliban regained power, the domestic situation in Afghanistan has been fraught with challenges. Its political situation, economic development, and security environment all face serious difficulties.

In terms of political stability, significant improvements have been made compared to the early days of the Taliban's return to power. The Taliban's grip on power in Afghanistan is now unshakable. While the Taliban has yet to receive international recognition, a unified and stable Afghanistan would benefit Central Asia, South Asia, and even the world. As long as it can maintain internal stability, international recognition for the Taliban is likely only a matter of time.

From an economic perspective, since the chaos of 2021, Afghanistan's economy has shown no signs of recovery. For the past 20 years, Afghanistan's economy has been heavily dependent on international aid. Although Afghanistan has self-sustaining sectors like agriculture and mining, along with some illicit earnings from drug production that have provided some buffer for rural areas, these have been insufficient to counterbalance the damage caused by the ongoing instability. After the stabilization of the Taliban regime, international organizations such as the World Bank have gradually resumed humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, despite the Taliban's repeated failure to meet their commitments. However, Afghanistan's overall economic activity remains sluggish, with high unemployment and a dysfunctional central bank. The country's economic situation is still in a fragile state. Prolonged stagnation and growing unemployment are likely to lead to food insecurity, loss of credibility for the Taliban's transitional government, and other serious issues, which could trigger fresh chaos. This represents a new round of tests for the Taliban's ability to govern. If the CPEC extension into Afghanistan is to be successfully implemented, Afghanistan's fragile domestic environment and economic conditions must be carefully considered.

At present, Afghanistan's international political environment, economic strength, and security situation are all far from capable of realizing the vision of the CPEC extending into Afghanistan. First, Afghanistan has yet to receive recognition from any country. If the CPEC is extended into Afghanistan, it is highly likely to face obstruction or even sabotage from countries such as the United States and India. This is especially clear in the case of India, which is sensitive to the South Asian situation and has shown a consistent stance against China and Pakistan, as well as against the CPEC. Although the United States has ended its military and political involvement in Afghanistan, it still harbors hegemonic ambitions in South Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, making it highly likely that the U.S. will collaborate with India to thwart the CPEC's extension into Afghanistan. Second, it is evident that Afghanistan's fragile economic situation cannot support economic and trade cooperation with China and Pakistan. Although the Taliban government is eager to receive financial support from China to revive its domestic economy, and China is willing to see a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Afghanistan, the associated risks must be carefully considered. Finally, the ongoing unrest in Afghanistan remains a major concern. While the Taliban may be able to control the entire country, whether they can provide a conducive environment for trilateral economic cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan is yet to be seen. If even basic security cannot be guaranteed, the progress of extending the CPEC into Afghanistan will likely remain confined to the speeches of Afghan Taliban diplomats.

## (3) Uncertain Domestic Public Sentiment

In addition to the previously mentioned issues, the extension of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into Afghanistan could also be influenced by the sentiments of the Afghan people. Although the Taliban currently controls Afghanistan and it is unlikely that another power will replace them in the short term, whether this regime—one that has deeply hurt the Afghan people in the past—can gain the trust of the Afghan populace is a significant question. Furthermore, whether the Taliban's declarations to the world truly reflect the will of the Afghan people is highly questionable. The Taliban has repeatedly expressed to China its desire to extend the CPEC into Afghanistan, but this is clearly driven by the Taliban's own interests: to seek Chinese funding and possibly gain recognition as the legitimate and sole government of Afghanistan. The key issue is whether the Afghan people are willing to accept the CPEC, and whether they believe that the Taliban government will bring a bright future for them. Moreover, once the CPEC project takes root in Afghanistan, it will bring a flood of high-quality and inexpensive goods, which could significantly disrupt Afghanistan's nascent private economy. This would likely lead to the bankruptcy of many local Afghan businesses, mass unemployment, and a blow to ethnic enterprises. Therefore, while the CPEC project might bring economic benefits, it could also exacerbate Afghanistan's existing instability and chaos. Thus, how to integrate Afghan local businesses with the CPEC extension project is a critical issue that must be carefully considered in the planning process. Minimizing the impact on Afghan national enterprises is crucial. If this step is mishandled, it could deal a devastating blow to economic and trade cooperation among China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

## 4. Conclusion

Since the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), multiple projects have been completed in sectors such as energy, transportation, industrial parks, and ports. Over the past decade, with the progress of CPEC, the vision of connectivity and mutual benefit between China and Pakistan has largely been realized, and the two countries have

successfully established an "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership." Through the CPEC, China has deepened its cooperation with the Pakistani government and expanded its political and economic influence in South Asia.

In 2021, the Taliban made a return to power in Afghanistan, and since then, the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan has been a goal for the Taliban government. However, it faces significant resistance and consequences. The extension of CPEC into Afghanistan will have multiple impacts on Afghanistan's political, economic, and security situation, and it may also affect Afghanistan's international standing and its relations with neighboring countries. We know that the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan has enormous economic potential and can bring opportunities for Afghanistan's economic development, infrastructure improvement, and political stability. However, this process also faces challenges related to security and geopolitics. How Afghanistan manages these challenges, and how it cooperates with China, Pakistan, and other regional powers, will determine the success of the CPEC extension project and its profound impact on Afghanistan's future development.

At the same time, the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan will influence the political landscape of South Asia. It will enhance economic ties between South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia, promoting regional economic integration. By strengthening trade relations between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, economic activity in South Asia will become more dynamic. However, this project could also prompt countries like India and Iran to reassess their economic strategies, potentially leading to new diplomatic maneuvers. Yet, despite these possibilities, the extension of CPEC into Afghanistan has not yet made groundbreaking progress. The current Taliban regime in Afghanistan has yet to prove its ability to lead Afghanistan back on track and gain acceptance from both China and Pakistan to become part of the CPEC project.

The ongoing conflict in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region continues to impact the security of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Due to the complex historical and cultural environment of the region, the Pakistan-Afghanistan border has become one of the most conflict-ridden areas in the world. First, the long-standing dispute between the two countries over the "Durand Line"—the border demarcation and its underlying, more complicated issue of Pashtunistan—has led to numerous conflicts over the past century. This issue, which is rooted in colonial-era legacies, nationalism, and the competing interests of various groups, has severely affected the security situation along the border. The ongoing conflict and disorder have provided hiding places for terrorists and created opportunities for terrorist activities, posing a threat not only to the safety of the citizens of both Pakistan and Afghanistan but also endangering the "Belt and Road" initiative, including CPEC, in the region.

Secondly, the continued presence of terrorism along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border exacerbates the situation. Both Pakistan and Afghanistan are among the countries most affected by terrorism, with dozens of terrorist groups operating across the border. Notably, active groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS), the Haqqani network, and even al-Qaeda, which was once a top target for the U.S., are all operating under the Taliban's protection in the border region. In Pakistan, the situation is similarly grim, with numerous terrorist organizations active within its borders, the most significant being the Pakistani Taliban (TTP) and separatist movements in Balochistan. The Pakistani Taliban is a loose alliance of various factions and branches, exploiting security gaps along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to plan terrorist attacks against Pakistan's civilian population, public infrastructure, security forces, and even CPEC projects. Separatist movements in Balochistan, while often linked to complex ethnic issues, also pose a serious threat, with numerous terrorist groups operating in the province, including the Baloch Liberation Army and the Baloch Republican Army, who are hostile to both the Pakistani government and the CPEC initiative.

The tense security situation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border presents a huge threat to CPEC. For the ongoing projects in Pakistan, there is the constant risk of sabotage and disruption by groups such as the Pakistani Taliban and Baloch separatists. These terrorist organizations target Chinese citizens, including engineers, workers, and civilians involved in CPEC projects, as well as the existing infrastructure, especially in the restive Balochistan region. The extension of CPEC into Afghanistan will also be affected by the border security situation, and the uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan's domestic political situation and public sentiment adds further complications. Whether these issues can be reasonably addressed to provide a stable and secure environment for the CPEC extension to Afghanistan is crucial. At present, significant efforts are still needed to address these challenges.

In summary, the security situation along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, shaped by territorial disputes and ongoing terrorist activities, is a significant challenge for CPEC. While offering substantial economic opportunities, it also faces complex security and geopolitical challenges. Both China and Pakistan must work together to strengthen security measures and deepen cooperation to overcome these obstacles and ensure the long-term development of CPEC. At the same time, because the Taliban in Afghanistan has not yet demonstrated the "sincerity" required to join the CPEC project, the timing for extending CPEC into Afghanistan is not yet ripe and requires further observation and evaluation. However, we continue to believe that the Afghan people will choose the right path, and that the destinies of the people of China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are interconnected. We hope to see more countries and their people welcome and join China's "Belt and Road" initiative, building a community of shared destiny that benefits all of humanity.

**Funding:** This article was Supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, Southwest Minzu University, "Impact of Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Security Situation on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

in the Perspective of Community of Human Destiny” (Project No. 3300224723); and the research results of a general project of the National Social Science Foundation of China, “On the Impact and Countermeasures of the Afghan Taliban’s Becoming to Power on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” (Project No. 23BGJ074); and the general project of the Center for Pakistan Studies of China West Normal University, “Study on Security Risks of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” (Project No. PSC24YB01).

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