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Hybrid Warfare and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): An Analysis of Economic and Strategic Challenges for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

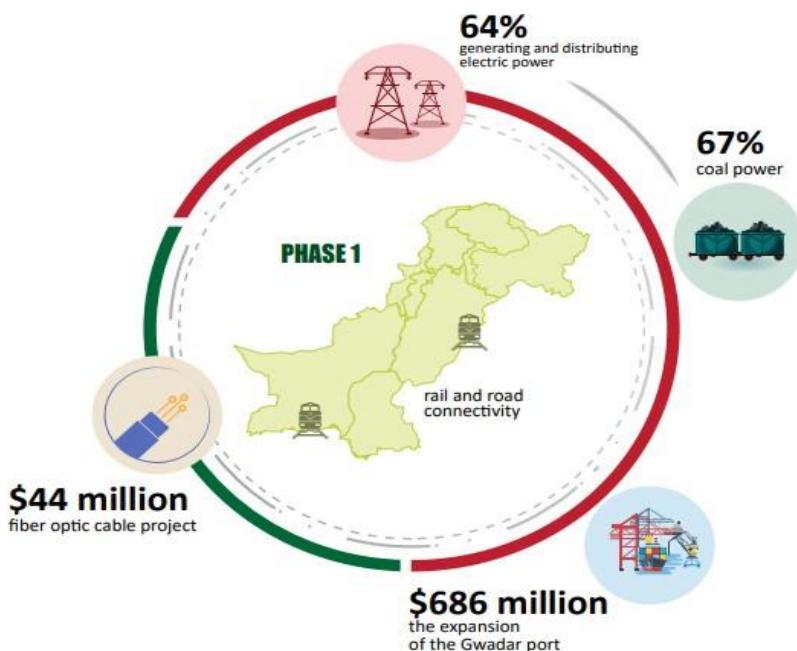
This article aims to evaluate the existence of hybrid warfare in the context of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its strategic and economic ramifications for Pakistan. Using a qualitative and document-based approach, it discusses how regional competitors use hybrid tools to impede Pakistan's progress, damage its reputation, and sabotage Sino-Pak strategic alignment. In order to counter these nontraditional challenges, this study also examines Pakistan's institutional responses, security-based arrangements, and legislative limits. Lastly, it aims to provide a policy-relevant study on the confluence of economic statecraft and hybrid warfare in one of Asia's most disputed geostrategic areas. The study concludes that in a century where more wars are fought covertly, Pakistan's success will not depend on its ability to avoid conflict but rather on its ability to recognise, neutralise, and eliminate threats before they materialise. CPEC must be protected as both a strategic lifeline and an economic corridor.

Keywords: Hybrid Warfare, Strategic Ramifications, CPEC, Traditional & Non-Traditional Threats, Economic Statecraft.

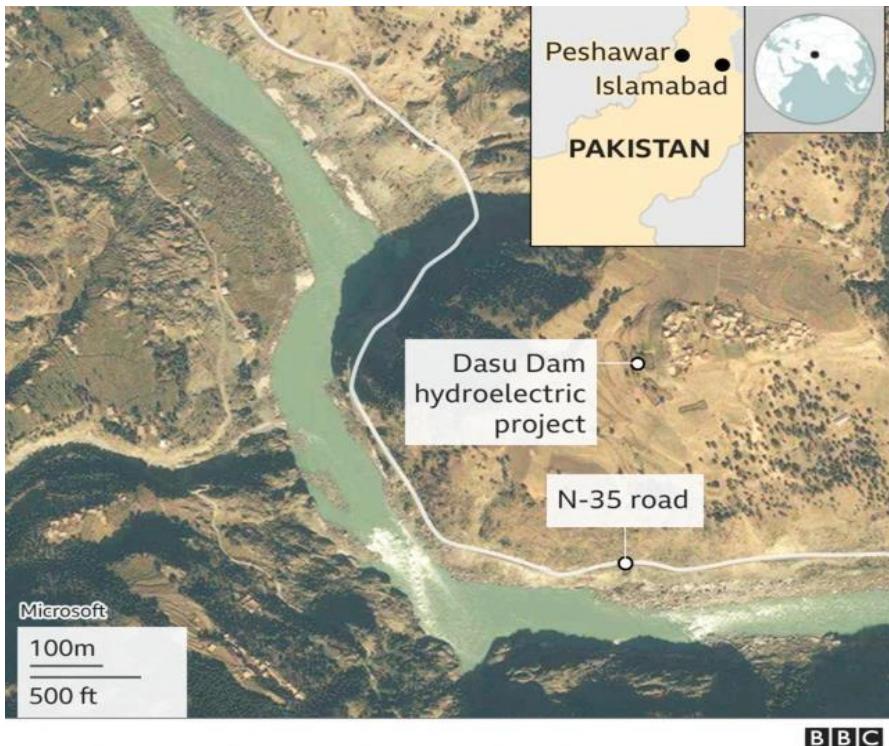
Introduction

According to the nature of threats experienced by the developing states (especially those positioned in the centre of rivalry between the regional powers), a shift in global conflict and its 21st -century transformation have redefined the features of such threats. So-called hybrid warfare has become a predominant type of war, and it is usually viewed as a combination of conventional and unconventional, military and non-military approaches. It involves integrated disinformation campaigns, cyber incursions, proxy militancy, lawfare, and economic blackmail as methods of destabilizing the target countries without a declared war (Gerasimov, 2016). Pakistan is gaining helmet as the main location of hybrid warfare in South Asia furthermore after formal replacement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in April 2015, a marquee venture of the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Development of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is estimated to cost about USD \$65 billion by 2024 aims to link Gwadar port in Balochistan through a 3,000-kilometer road, railways, fibre-optic and energy systems to Xinjiang province in China (Abbas & Fani, 2021). The official data gathered by the Planning Commission and the CPEC Authority means that the CPEC framework comprises of \$33.8 billion of energy related projects, \$9.79 billion transport infrastructure, \$1.6 billion assigned to Lahore Metro, and \$792million allocated to Gwadar port development (Ali, 2018; McCartney, 2018). Although CPEC is expected to produce electricity of more than 17,000 MW and create thousands of opportunities to work, it has also elicited strategic opposition as well as hybrid interference especially by India that considers the project as both an economic and geopolitical challenge (Qureshi & Khalid, 2024).



Several hybrid approaches have been reported in the past years. The 2016 case of the capture of an Indian intelligence agent, Kulbhushan Jadhav, accused of using sabotage and spying cells in Balochistan, highlighted the secret nature of the activity of government disruption (IPRI, 2020c (Hussain et al., 2023). At the cyber level, there has been a synchronized disinformation campaign and both Chinese and Pakistani stakeholders have been exposed to the same on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Javed, 2024; Sharif & Mansoor, 2025). The campaign with the false narratives of Chinese colonization and debt-trap diplomacy resonated not only in domestic but also in international media.



With this, the hybrid threats have manipulated the internal weaknesses of Pakistan including political instability, uneven development and ethnic grievances. This type of civil discontent is usually depicted as spontaneous despite its proven connections with genuine grievances and externally induced narratives as it happens with protests in Gwadar and sections of interior Sindh (Abbasi, 2020). Such interactions indicate the complexity of the issue CPEC is. On the one hand, it creates a possibility of much-needed economic buoyancy; on the other hand, it opens the state to a whole-new realm of the contestation, which could not be assessed by military security providers.

The proposed study aims at critically assessing the presence of hybrid warfare in the scenario of CPEC and its economic and strategic implications to Pakistan. Employing document-based and qualitative technique, it addresses the way regional rivals utilize hybrid instruments to hamper the progress path of Pakistan, undermine the popularity, and derail Sino-Pak strategic alignment. The paper also explores institute responses of Pakistan, security-based arrangements and policy constraints to break these nontraditional threats. Finally, it seeks to present a policy-relevant report of the convergence between the hybrid warfare and the economic statecraft on one of the most contentious geostrategic geographical regions in Asia.

Theoretical Framework

To research the complex threats to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), this research paper will seek to use a multi-theoretical perspective by integrating some aspects of hybrid warfare theory, fifth-generation warfare (5GW), perception management, strategic realism, and asymmetric conflict. All these lenses lead to a better insight into the changing aspect of warfare and conflict in the strategic dimension of Pakistan.

Frank Hoffman (2007) established the Hybrid Warfare Theory by defining it as the fusion of conventional military techniques with irregular, cyber, and psychological way of assaulting an opposition with the aim of taking advantage of internal weak points. According to Hoffman, the contemporary battles are no longer waged on the battlefield only, but these conflicts reach a political system, civil society, and informational space. The idea found its response in the NATO doctrines and subsequently found its counterpart in the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine that can be famously linked to the Russian military reasoning and proposes non-military means like propaganda, economic pressure, and social destabilization as powerful methods of strategic confrontation (Gerasimov, 2013; Bartles, 2016). Such notions provide one with a perspective through which India has multidimensional strategy towards CPEC confrontation can be seen, where it aims not to use kinetic warfare but rather undermine the stability of Pakistan through hybrid warfare techniques.

Similar to that is the structure of Fifth Generation Warfare (5GW) which is played often to the security predicaments of Pakistan in the digital era. According to Hussain et al. (2023), the use of information, perception, and technology has made 5GW dependent on information, and not on force. It implies tactical employment of social media, cyberattacks, fake information, and psychological operation. The objective is not the actual taking over of the terrain but rather the manipulation of belief system, popular faith as well as the legitimacy of the state. As another example, the online stories portraying CPEC as an instrument of the Chinese neo-colonialism are a part of the greater 5GW strategies designed to provoke unrest throughout such areas as Gwadar and Balochistan (Askari, 2021). Perception Management, which is a major element in both, the hybrid and fifth-generation warfare, is also employed to manipulate and pervert the perceptions of the people and the society on the political or economic realities. Ajmal Abbasi (2020) describes the mechanism of change of the opinion of the population by rivals with the help of cognitive instruments and in many respects based on social engineering, manipulation of media space, and psychological manipulation. In the situation of CPEC, the image management practices have endeavoured to portray the Chinese investments as exploitative, which adds further confusion to the subject of whether it is worth the effort or not.

All these hybrid approaches are supported by the classical theory of international relations termed as Strategic Realism which emphasizes that states work on motive behind national interests foremost. According to Sharif and

Mansoor (2025), the fact that India has been opposing CPEC continuously and due to its alignment with the anti-BRI rhetoric in the international arena, they are implementing the realist approach of containing Pakistan or China. In this way hybrid warfare turns into the tool of India power struggle and strategic balancing in the region.

Last, the Asymmetric Conflict Theory describes the mechanisms through which less capable actors and non-state ones act through non-conventional methods to weaken stronger actors (Lele, 2015). In the instance of CPEC, targeted killings, sabotage, and cyber access are some of the tactics used by local insurgents and militant proxies, frequently sponsored by hostile intelligence organizations to use against CPEC. These communities are highly mobile and cost-effective, which is why they make a great instrument of the hybrid form of disruption (Waseem et al., 2023; PJIA, 2020).

The combination of these strands of theory has the capacity to build a strong basis of analytic capabilities by trying to evaluate how and why CPEC continues to experience non-kinetic threats and how Pakistan can leverage its strategic response to these threats in response.

CPEC: Origination, Investment, and Strategic Extent

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the brightest elements of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is aimed at developing the connectivity between the Chinese city of Kashgar in Xinjiang province and Pakistani Gwadar Port within the province of Balochistan. As conceived the CPEC is an interconnected system of road and rail systems, power plants, industrial belts and fiber-optic communications networks spread over in a grand total of more than 3,000 kilometres and comprising long, medium as well as short-term multi sector development projects (Faisal & Askari, 2024).

By 2024, the combined binding investment in CPEC is around 65 billion US dollars compared to the initial projection of 46 billion US dollars in 2015. Its investments largely concentrate on four areas which include energy production, transport and infrastructure, port development (Gwadar), and individual partnership in terms of special economic zones (SEZs) (Ali, 2018; McCartney, 2018). Mostly power plants and road networks have been completed or will soon be completed as early harvest projects, whereas further capital-intensive projects in Gwadar and SEZs are in the process of being constructed.

A Geographic routing approach that has triple alignments in CPEC is one of its key features:

- The Eastern path crosses through the provinces of Punjab and Sindh and incorporates some of the biggest motorways and high-velocity rails linking Lahore, Multan and Karachi.

- The Central Route which connects Dera Ismail Khan to Quetta and Khuzdar is a major developmental connexion, but it is only being implemented at a slower pace now.
- The Western Route (via D.I. Khan, Zhob, Quetta and Gwadar) has a strategic priority because it is the one that will help to include remote regions such as Balochistan in the national economy.
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The coordination of these alignments is strategic and aims at involving the underdeveloped areas into national development and logically accessing the Gwadar Port. Nevertheless, the political and ethnic considerations have also been elicited by the differentiated rate of investment along these routes with stakeholders of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan has accused of replacement (Waseem et al., 2023).

The financial profile of CPEC consists of both public and private funding, mainly, through mediums of concessional loan, direct foreign investment, and government-to-government financing. Prime implementers have included state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in China like China Communication Construction Company (CCCC), State Grid, PowerChina. Specifically, the energy sector is determined by the Independent Power Producer (IPP) mode, according to which Chinese companies are guaranteed returns pursuant to the Pakistani government of sovereign trade: regularly such guarantees are strengthened by tariffs and subsidies in Pakistani rupees.

Table 1: CPEC Financial Allocation by Sector (as of 2024)

Sector	Estimated Investment (USD)	Key Projects	Completion Status
Energy	\$33.8 billion	Sahiwal Coal Plant, Port Qasim, Karot HPP	Mostly Completed
Transport Infrastructure	\$9.79 billion	Lahore–Karachi Motorway, Karakoram Highway Phase 2	Ongoing
Gwadar Development	\$792 million	Eastbay Expressway, Gwadar Port Expansion	Partially Completed
Special Economic Zones	\$1.5 billion (est.)	Allama Iqbal SEZ, Rashakai SEZ	In Progress
Fiber Optic Connectivity	\$44 million	Cross-border Fiber Network (Pak–China)	Completed
Lahore Orange Line Metro	\$1.6 billion	Urban Transit Project (Lahore)	Operational Since 2020

Table 1 Planning Commission of Pakistan (pc.gov.pk), CPEC Authority (cpec.gov.pk), Abbas & Fani (2021), McCartney (2018)

Even though China has done the greater share of the capital and technical know-how, the input that Pakistan has made, mainly in the form of land, local funding and facilitation of policies has been huge too (Ali & Askari, 2023). The partnership is a mix of the public and the private and as such, it can balance the risks through the diversification of the risk but concerns about sovereign liabilities will arise particularly in case of delayed returns or operational losses. In addition, the lack of transparency to financial shows about repayment plans and interest charges has only added to criticisms and would-be hybrid storylines of CPEC being a debt trap (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025).

This notwithstanding, CPEC forms the focus of the long-term economic plan in Pakistan and presents the hope of connectivity in the region, industrialization, and energy security of Pakistan. These benefits would however be determined by a good control of both internal inefficiencies and external hybrid threats that would often tempt to sabotage the project both physically and cognitively.

Techniques of Hybrid Warfare against CPEC

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that has been anticipated to be an economic-game changer has also fallen victim to constant campaigns of hybrid warfare. However, unlike typical military aggression, non-kinetic approaches are

used in the form of disinformation, digital sabotage, asymmetric violence to realize hybrid threats directed against CPEC. These manoeuvres are aimed to weaken the across land and undermine the economic validity of this corridor and to block the incumbent rise of strategic ties between Pakistan and China.

Disinformation + Media Warfare

Distribution of disinformation is one of the most harmful aspects of hybrid wars against CPEC. Twitter and Facebook constitute social media that have been leveraged to spread false and misleading messages about CPEC being a Chinese colonial project, it is stealing land, altering population in Gwadar, and other unfair labor situations (Javed, 2024). These stories are not naturally produced but they are usually coordinated by networks of foreign affiliation. Research by Hussain et al. (2023) and Abbasi (2020) affirms that there is no denying that digital propaganda campaigns have worked towards trying to control the minds of people by depicting the CPEC as a means of exploiting resources instead of development. This strategy conforms to Gerasimov Doctrine that reinforces the centrality of media and cognitive operations in influencing the political conduct and mindset of the enemy populations (Bartles, 2016). Crimpling confidence in the project, these campaigns seek to put pressure on policymakers to buckle down or revise collaboration with China. One such instance was the rapid propagation of hoaxed photos in 2021 that falsely suggested that the Chinese Navy has completely militarized the Gwadar Port—an incident that was denied by official clarification, although proving quite disruptive to diplomatic relations and public outrage (Askari & Niazi, 2022).

Furthermore, China-Pakistan relations oftentimes serve as an example or an inspiration of what can and should be done by impoverished masses and slave nations, since the promotion of Chinese politics by representatives of the terrorist-terrorist cluster of foreign governments in the country of the world, which is usually characterized by the theory of “debt-trap diplomacy.” (Abb, 2022). Such activities do not only have an impact on investor confidence but offer protection of more kinetic hybrid operations.

Cyber and Info Tech Threats

With CPEC developing new technologically connected spheres, including smart grids, optical fiber communication, and digitized transport, the cyber domain has turned into one of the main arenas of the struggle. As per the records of the Ministry of Information Technology as well as the published reports by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA), several unsuccessful attacks were detected between 2019 and 2022 bearing against CPEC-related government servers and email domains, of the Chinese contracting companies and the energy project databases.

According to a 2021 internal report reported by Waseem et al. (2023) malicious actors had tried to access encrypted plans of the Karot Hydropower Project and the Orange Line Metro. Although they were not successful, the fact that they were well designed, attributed to state-sponsored threat actors, demonstrated the systemic inefficiencies in the cyber defense architecture in Pakistan. In late 2022, abnormal traffic aimed at smart meter infrastructure was also reported by the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) as an indication of the increased cyber-kinetic confluence of hybrid warfare.

Besides the traditional hacking techniques, the Pakistani officials are handling CPEC portfolios, which have been targeted by data scraping and social engineering means. They can exploit sensitive credentials and geographical information of the key personnel through fake job posts and phishing operations. Such attacks also indicate the changing face of digital hybrid war, with cyber attacks not just being an independent strike but also a precondition to direct sabotage and kinetics.

Proxy Militancy and Targeted Violence

The most apparent and lethal implementation of hybrid war assaults on CPEC has possibly been the proxy militant assaults synthetically targeting the Chinese staff and engineers. Since 2016, at least a dozen high-profile incidents of attacks have been reported in Gwadar, Quetta, Karachi, and Dasu and have often been claimed by banned separatist outfits like the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA).

The Spite bombing of a bus in July 2021 was a major hybrid warfare activity whereby a bus with Chinese hydropower engineers was gone after in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, killing 13 individuals, nine of whom were Chinese nationals. Pakistani probes subsequently found that the operation was orchestrated by foreign intelligence handlers, and they used sophisticated explosives, which was a feature of state-sponsored proxies (Hussain et al., 2023).

The other critical example is the arrest of Indian naval officer Kulbhushan Jadhav in 2016 who was found acting as a spy in Balochistan. His self-confessed speeches, aired by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), accused India Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of trying to destroy CPEC projects and fuel separatists (IPRI, 2020). Criticized diplomatically by India, the case of Jadhav has been used many times by Pakistan as a direct example of a hybrid war being fought by use of covert force.

The 2019-2023 security reports have also reported the rise of the acts aimed at sabotaging the construction of the roads and the railway lines that are being constructed along the Western Route. Usage of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), targeting of engineers by snipers and kidnapping attempts on engineers has hampered the progress in some parts, made these projects incur high security charges and put the projects at a risk situation.

Table 2: Major Hybrid Warfare Incidents Targeting CPEC (2016–2023)

Year	Location	Type of Threat	Target	Suspected Actor	Impact
2016	Balochistan	Covert Espionage	CPEC routes, Gwadar planning	Kulbhushan Jadhav / RAW	Diplomatic fallout, security clampdown
2018	Quetta	Militant Bombing	Chinese engineers convoy	BLA	3 dead, construction paused
2021	Dasu (KPK)	Suicide Bombing	Chinese hydropower engineers	Unknown (foreign-backed)	13 dead, including 9 Chinese nationals
2022	Karachi	VBIED Attack on Chinese Teachers	Confucius Institute vehicle	BLF	4 dead, anti-China protest surge
2023	Cyber (Multiple)	Data Breach Attempt	Karot HPP, NEPRA, SEZ infrastructure	Suspected state actors	Alert status raised, no breach
2023	Gwadar, Baloch.	Disinformation Campaign	Gwadar Port militarization claim	Coordinated social media ops	Investor uncertainty, narrative damage

Table 2 PJHSS (2023); IPRI (2020); REPS (2024); Hussain et al. (2023); ISPR; Pakistan Telecommunication Authority Reports

These strategies are an all rounded, cross spanning attempt at suppressing the Pakistani development sovereignty. The hybrid campaign is not only on a reactive route to Chinese presence but a proactive campaign to ensure that Pakistan will remain under internal instability and ambiguity that makes its economy depressed. CPEC will not be able to succeed only based on the completion of the construction tasks, but on how capable Pakistan can become in terms of establishing and maintaining security in the hybrid battlespace that the corridor is currently ensconced in.



Economic Challenges under Hybrid Pressure

The Chinese Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) presents a multilayered and complicated economic aspect of the hybrid warfare. Although there is much in terms of physical and cyber intervention, the greatest form of hybrid intervention is in manipulating the Pakistani economic track record, regional notions of fairness, and debt-related phobias. Combined, all these have started to transform the investor behaviour, strengthen grievances/resentments across different provinces and cast light on national sovereignty. This part decomposes the economic risks that have arisen as the side effect of the hybrid intervention in the biggest foreign investment in Pakistan.

Investment Risk & Image Sabotage

A destabilization rendered by an economic attack, such as undermining investor confidence, as well as global financial positioning, is one of the primaries aims of hybrid warfare targeting a country. In case of Pakistan, this has manifested in terms of its frequent grey-listing by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) since the year 2018 through to 2022. Despite being officially motivated by the necessity to comply with anti-money laundering and terrorism financing regulations, there is substantial evidence that geopolitical lobbying effects have contributed to a certain extent, specifically, by the states facing the adverse geostrategic outcomes of CPEC (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025; PJHSS, 2023).

International financial outlets have also reported alarmist headlines, more than once, that Pakistan is experiencing a Chinese debt trap angle on the news routinely repeating what Sri Lanka has learned about political constraints over the leasing of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka. Although the total CPEC-related debt is only a fraction of the total public external debt in Pakistan (it stands less than 10 percent), the reputation and psychological changes caused by those narratives have been much more important than the quantitative threat that it caused (IMF, 2023). Chinese investments, in particular power and transport, tend to be run as Public Private Partnership (PPP) and are modelled based on guaranteed returns, but not direct state borrowing. But when CPEC is always presented with a debt-constraining project, then it becomes politically and economically controversial.

There is a direct-world impact of such reputational attacks. According to the Board of Investment (BOI) and Pakistan Business Council, those international investors who are interested to co-finance the projects, which are associated with CPEC, have become more and more hesitant under the influence of the so-called political uncertainty, debt incident and security-related instability of the country. These fears are usually further exacerbated by hybrid media campaigns that are aimed at them.

Internal Socioeconomic Dissatisfaction

The next economically weak point targeted with the help of hybrid measures is the disparity in CPEC benefits allocation in the provinces of Pakistan, regarding the sense of marginalization in Balochistan. Despite Gwadar being the geographical centre of the CPEC project, the local communities have been complaining regularly about the failure to deliver on their promises about job creation, access to power, and access to clean water (Waseem et al., 2023; Abbasi, 2020).

Grassroots mobilizations in Gwadar, such as the 2021 movement Gwadar ko Haq Do, have had much media coverage. Nevertheless, national security-based investigative reporting by policy groups and policy institutes have indicated some aspects of these protests have been used by foreign-funded media influencers to brew anti-China sentiment. The grievances were communicated as the Chinese corporations were taking up local land, fishing rights were cancelled, and positions were withheld by foreigners misrepresenting or contextualized (IPRI, 2020).

By contrast, picking up CPEC-related infrastructure and industrial development has been easier in Punjab and Sindh, and bringing a feeling of marginalization in peripheries. The asymmetrical provincial benefit setup has turned out to be a decisive leveraging point by the hybrid actors' quest to divide national unity on CPEC.

Chart 2. CPEC Projects Public Opinion Survey (Regional comparison)

Province	Positive View of CPEC (%)	Perceived Inclusion (%)	Economic
Punjab	82%	74%	
Sindh	76%	69%	
Khyber	63%	48%	
Pakhtunkhwa			
Balochistan	44%	29%	

A comparison of the survey of secondary data (aggregated by PJIA, 2020 and Hussain et al., 2023) signifies obviously uneven regional differences in the perceptions of CPEC:

This fact confirms the claim that hybrid actors have received more willing ears to anti-CPEC discourses in areas perceived to be less included. It also highlights how there is an inclination of having more comprehensive development planning and local consultation to ward off any chances of internal vulnerabilities being exploited.

Dependency Dilemma

Among the constant issues that have been raised against the CPEC is the fact that it can make Pakistani more reliant on China economically at the expense of its

capacity to adopt independent economic approach. This is mostly quoted alongside with hybrid stories wherein economic interdependence is equated with strategic subjugation.

Although China is the largest bilateral creditor to Pakistan (contributing to about 30 percent of aggregate bilateral debt of Pakistan) (IMF, 2023), the bulk of this debt is in the nature of concessionary loans doled out to fund long-term infrastructure projects and not lent out as emergency funds. Nonetheless, the Pakistan negotiation with IMF and foreign exchange crises have been utilized by hybrid narratives to misinform and mislead people that CPEC loans are causing it when in fact the majority of the financial trouble has been relations to external commodity price boom and busts and fiscal defaults unrelated to CPEC loans.

Nevertheless, the dependency dilemma is still an issue that is long-range in nature. Besides Chinese capital, CPEC hopes to rely on local economics, personal investment, as well as the adoption of policies. This is made more complicated by the fact that hybrid warfare forces the framing of any economic choice associated with China as a loss of sovereignty and effectively locks policy debate at the domestic level, discouraging policy innovation.

As a short conclusion, the fact that the economic instruments of hybrid warfare (sabotage of the image, division of the population, and anxiety) are equally dangerous as the kinetic ones sounds quite alarming. To cushion CPEC in Pakistan against such forces, a national policy comprising of regional fairness, rhetorical control, and debt disclosure is necessary.

Strategic Challenges and Geopolitics in the Region

Although CPEC is an economic project in the first place, one cannot deny its geopolitical consequences. Being a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China, the CPEC distributes the influence of the latter to the Indian Ocean and makes Pakistan a critical median trade and energy supply point. Such a rearrangement of the world regional has enabled strategic countermoves not by means of warfare but of strategic containment by regional competitors. Such strategies are engraved in wider disputes and reflect Cold War-type balancing conduct in South Asia.

Indian Strategic Blockage

India has turned out to be the most vociferous regional opponent to CPEC. New Delhi has always opposed the initiative raising the issue of sovereignty of Gilgit-Baltistan region which India claims to be a part of the contentious issue of Jammu and Kashmir. In addition to diplomatic rhetoric, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) of India agency has been blamed in organizing information as well as covert sabotage of CPEC. These allegations were given empirical evidence by the

arrest in 2016 of Commander Kulbhushan Jadhav in the province of Balochistan, who admitted to planning sabotage of CPEC facilities and separatism (IPRI, 2020). In India there exist two-fold strategic calculations to one the fact that India does not want to see China establish a permanent presence in the Arabian Sea and on the second the fact that it will deny Pakistan access to diversified sources of trade and energy resources. The country (India) has also improved its defence cooperation with the United States, Japan and Australia in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which some strategists view as an international containment belt against the BRI scheme (Sharif & Mansoor, 2025).

The US-China Rivalry and Pakistan's Balancing Dilemma

CPEC is being increasingly caught up in the larger US-China conflict, and it now typifies the global strategic picture. The US has been sceptical about the BRI activities in other parts of the world because of lack of transparency, debt sustainability and geopolitical concerns. What is going on in Pakistan is that the State Department in America has warned that there is a strategic meaning in CPEC implementation, especially with the regard of the dual-use (civilian and martial-use) capabilities of Gwadar.

This places Pakistan in a tricky situation because on one hand China stands as one of its steadfast economic and military allies whereas on the other hand it is dependent on western financial organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. To reach this narrow path of strategic neutrality in this tension is further complicated by hybrid narratives on both sides in attempts to influence domestic policymaking and the shape of popular opinion. What it creates is a paradox between security and economy as Pakistan enjoys the Chinese capital investment but takes a loss in terms of reputation in the West.

Iran, Afghanistan and Competition in the Region

The other form of complexity is regional rivalry with Iran especially in relation to port development. The Chabahar Port of Iran that is being developed with Indian help is regularly publicised as a counterpoint against Gwadar. Although there have been some dialogue on economic cooperation between the two countries, Iranian uneasiness towards CPEC and Chinese investments in the region goes to show that Tehran is afraid of being marginalized in regional supply chains.



On the other hand, Afghanistan since the US withdrawal has turned into a kind of vacuum and a wild card. The Taliban government has not been in contrary of organizing Afghanistan into CPEC, however, there is a lot at stake in form of continued instabilities, porous borders, and the spill-over effects of militants back into Balochistan (Iqbal & Askari, 2023.) In the hybrid warfare conditions, the Afghan soil has also been the jumping block of cross-border militant attacks on CPEC installations in Balochistan and KPK (Waseem et al., 2023).

Table 3: The attitudes of regional players concerning CPEC

Country	Position on CPEC	Hybrid Tactics Reported	Strategic Objective
India	Opposed	Espionage (Jadhav), Disinfo campaigns, proxy funding	Undermine Pakistan-China cooperation, contest GB region
USA	Skeptical	Debt-trap narrative, IMF conditionalities	Counterbalance China's BRI ambitions
Iran	Neutral–Competitive	Port rivalry (Chabahar vs Gwadar), lukewarm corridor integration	Maintain autonomy in Persian Gulf trade dynamics
Afghanistan	Unstable/Undefined	Militant spillover, unofficial safe havens	Maximize leverage amid security vacuum

Table 3 Hussain et al. (2023); IPRI (2020); Javed (2024); REPS Journal; PJIA (2020)

The strategic geography of CPEC can be summed up as the use of multi-front hybrid contestation. The project is not just exposing new patterns of trade; it is redrawing any strategic alliances along with forming new dependencies. Pakistan, therefore, needs to normalize its regional politics to ensure that CPEC remains viable as it tries not to hurt rivaling partnerships.

Pakistan Strategic and Policy Responses

Pakistan has implemented numerous counteraction measures in the field of military, diplomatic, and regulation due to the recognition of a complicated chain of hybrid threats to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Such answers explain the dynamic realization in Pakistani civil and security agencies that national development is no longer under the sole threat of kinetics but of the cognitive, economical, and technological kind.

Military and Police Collaboration: Security Infrastructural Pro Torture

The Special Security Division (SSD) is one of the first established institutional measures adopted by Pakistan against the physical security issues of CPEC when it was formed in 2016. The SSD (which consists of about 15,000 men) is charged with the duty of ensuring the security of Chinese nationals, contractors and Chinese owned infrastructure projects in various provinces. It consists of both military and civil security equips, where a chain of command is directly connected to the General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi (Hussain et al., 2023).

After the increase in threats in the Western Route, in 2019, a second unit (SSD-II) was raised, particularly in Balochistan. Moreover, systematic police security force has been relieved in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab to protect SEZs and transit corridors. Although these measures have foiled a number of attempted attacks, their success would be measured in the long run by constant input of intelligence and involvement of local communities.

Computerized Protection and Security Counters

Over the past couple of years, Pakistan has started realizing the importance of cyber war and digital spying as elements of the hybrid threat landscape. Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) and National Response Centre for Cyber Crime (NR3C) have embarked on restricted initiative to curb phishing, data scraping and hacking attempts on the infrastructure of the CPEC. These capabilities are however immature.

In August 2022, the Ministry of IT and Telecom in Pakistan presented a proposal to establish a National Cyber Security Policy, including establishing a Central Cyber Command under the Strategic Plans Division (SPD) of the Pakistan Army. This initiative is still in development and seeks to establish pre-emptive defence systems, especially those concerning the energy, transport, and SEZ data systems that are becoming thoroughly digitized and can be easily infiltrated (Javed, 2024).

Pakistan and China have also reached an agreement at a diplomatic level to engage in bilateral coordination on cyber defence and digital security of CPEC although specific plans of implementation are scarce.

Perception Managing and Media Control

Since a lot of operations in hybrid warfare belong to the cognitive and informational domain, perception management has taken a leading role in the CPEC tactics in Pakistan. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting have initiated focused media campaigns against disinformation and presentation of developmental gains of CPEC.

It is mainly in such provinces such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where these campaigns are especially alive with anti-CPEC plots gaining popularity. The state-owned broadcasting houses and social media teams have been put on the mode of spreading ground level success tales, employment numbers and as well infrastructural development. ISPR has also been breaking down fake narratives, like the rumours that Chinese military have taken the control of Gwadar, in press briefings and through content in multiple languages (Abbasi, 2020).

Nonetheless, the Pakistani media control is reactive in nature, and the innovative policies are required to observe the trend with the activation of stronger digital literacy campaigns, the content tracking with the help of AI technology, and the independent fact-checkers to counter the viral disinformation in advance.

Community and Policy Reforms

To curb internal socioeconomic weaknesses, widely used by the hybrid warfare, Pakistan initiated so far limited community engagement programs in Gwadar, Dera Ismail Khan, and Rashakai. These are vocational training programs associated with CPEC, health initiatives and small business loans. This is to augment local investment in development with the view of lessening the attraction of separatist or anti-state discourse.

They have also endeavoured to inject policy transparency into CPEC investment agreements. The CPEC Authority set up by Planning Commission has introduced online project tracking dashboard, but not all information is complete or updated.

In the institutional sphere, the recent resurgence of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) has been re-conceptualised to encompass the so-called hybrid threats (i.e., cybercrime, anti-state propaganda, and economic sabotage) as part of its analytical terrain (REPS, 2024).

Chart 4 Budget Allocation of Pakistan to the CPEC Security (2016-2023)

Year	Security Billion)	Budget (PKR	Remarks
2016	12.5		Initial SSD deployment
2018	18.7		SSD-II initiated in Balochistan
2020	20.3		Expanded surveillance and drone integration
2022	24.1		Cybersecurity and digital monitoring added
2023	26.8		Joint security command for SEZs established

Table 4 Ministry of Interior, Pakistan Economic Survey, REPS Journal (2024)

To conclude it is observable that Pakistan has reacted to hybrid warfare in and around the CPEC with a multidimensional yet developing response. Although hard security and media messaging has become more efficient, there exist lapses in cyber preparations, clarity in policies and ad-located improvements planning. The failure to seal these gaps might keep on subjecting CPEC to hybrid manipulation and prevent its sustainability in the long term.

Recommendations

Pakistan has been responding to multifaceted economic, strategic, and psychological threats facing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on an ad hoc basis, but its future should be based on national strategy that should be based on doctrines, capacity building, and regional coordination. What is outlined below are suggestions that can help guide insulation of CPEC against interruptions caused by hybrid warfare, and promote its sustainability:

Create a National Hybrid Warfare Doctrine

Pakistan should have a well-defined National Hybrid Warfare Doctrine and support must be given by the military and the civilian leadership. This doctrine ought to outline hybrid threats, comprising of disinformation, cyber assaults, lawfare, financial sabotage, and proxy militancy as national security. It must also require the inter-agency coordination between ISPR, NACTA, PTA and civilian ministries to identify, evaluate as well as counter hybrid campaigns.

Increase Digital Resilience and Cybersecurity

State has to take quick steps in investing in the national cyber infrastructure, especially in CPEC energy and transport corridors. The Ministry of IT and the military cyber units should be involved in the creation of a Central Cyber

Command to be conducted as a body with the legal aim to defend vital digital resources. There is also a need to invest in artificial intelligence-based threat detection, real-time monitoring, and cyber hygiene education of the officials.

The Information Warfare counsel and Counter-Narrative

A CPEC Information and Strategic Communication Cell should be set up at the centre and by coordination with the ISPR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Ministry of Information. Such a cell would oversee, intercept, and prevent disinformation campaigns by fact-checking, multilingual engagement and strategic media collaboration. Public diplomacy aimed at getting regional and Western buy-in must be fortified in ensuring that CPEC is seen as a developmental project and not the said geopolitical gamble.

Promote Sound Regional Development

The way to forestall the weaponization of internal dissent is that Pakistan has to enforce equity-sensitive planning for CPEC. This involves imposing local quotas in employment, open land compensation processes as well as a faster government service delivery rate (water, power, health), especially in places such as Gwadar and the interior parts of Balochistan. Every large CPEC project must be equipped with a Community Liaison Office that will work directly with the local stakeholders and address grievances on a real-time basis.

Make Pakistan-China Strategic Coordination Institutionalized.

Finally, Pakistan and China ought to make an improvement in their coordination to the strategic level in form of joint task units on hybrid threat analysis, training on cyber defense and counter terrorism exercises and training that are specific to the CPEC infrastructure. There ought to be a permanent China-Pakistan CPEC Security Council that takes a cue off current multilateral joint defense measures that would guarantee continuity, trust, and common response planning.

When these policy shifts are pursued in a coordinated fashion, they do not only ensure the protection of CPEC, but they also help Pakistan in broad-strategic protection in an environment where the rules of wars have shifted towards an invisible war.

Conclusion

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is both a strike of opportunity as well as weakness. Being an ambitious project, which, among other things, offers regional integration, greater energy security, and economic revitalization to Pakistan, CPEC is also a potential geopolitical hotspot in the context of the

competing global powers, which are actively battling over the South Asian region and beyond. This duality places it at specific risk with hybrid warfare an emerging asymmetric and warfare identity that displaces warfare mechanisms by the exploitation of misconception, cyber interruption, economic sycophancy, and proxy militancy, instead of standard armed confrontation.

Meanwhile the attitudes of the strategic and institutional responses of Pakistan towards the US and her allies has changed. The need to create special divisions that counter the threat of hybrid war, to arrange diplomatic collaboration with China, to develop cyber defense strategies, and to engage in perception management, all indicate an increased realization of the hybrid threat range. But these are piecemeal and much of a response to situations. Pakistan has to become more proactive, doctrine-driven and whole-of-state as hybrid threats become more diverse and intense.

Long-term prospects of CPEC and, accordingly, the economic sovereignty of Pakistan, are not limited solely to the finalization of roads and ports but rather rely on the hardiness of the vision. Should hybrid warfare intend to weaken by chaos generation, distrust, and diversion, the remedy should be found in policy clarity, the cohesion of goals, and institutional and agency ability to protect national interests across all fronts physical, digital, cognitive, and economic.

It is in a century where war is being waged more without a declaration, the victory of Pakistan will not be based on survival without involvement in war, but the capacity to identify, manipulate and obliterate the threat in its incipient stage before it becomes full blown. As an economic corridor, CPEC has to be safeguarded, but it must be safeguarded as a strategic lifeline.

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