



CPEC, in Balochistan, the Marginalized, Exploited and Beneficiaries

Mihrullah¹, Dr. Muhammad Hatim² & Dr. Adeel Irfan³

¹Department of International Relations, University of Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan, Email: mihrullah388@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sargodha,
Email: muhammad.hatim@uos.edu.pk

³Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations University of Sargodha,
Email: adeel.irfan@uos.edu.pk

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	March	26, 2025
Revised:	May	03, 2025
Accepted:	May	10, 2025
Available Online:	May	18, 2025

Keywords:

CPEC, Gwadar, Balochistan, Development, Displacement, Marginalization, Militarization, Environment, Land Rights, Local Communities.

Corresponding Author:

Mihrullah

Email:

mihrullah388@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

This research critically examines the growth of Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its implications for Balochistan, with special emphasis on the socio-political, economic, and environmental impacts suffered by the Baloch people. Although Gwadar has been represented by the state and global stakeholders as a beacon of economic hope and regional integration, the research argues that the development has unevenly favored external parties—specifically Chinese investors and Pakistani elites—at the expense of local communities. Through a comprehensive analysis of scholarly literature, policy briefs, and media reports, this research uncovers an alarming trend of land grabbing, militarization, ecological destruction, and silencing of Baloch voices in the decision-making process. The study contends that the CPEC project in Balochistan, rather than being an inclusive development project, has further entrenched pre-existing inequalities and socio-political grievances. In bringing out these structural imbalances, the research appeals for a remaking of development that is premised on local agency, equitable distribution of resources, and an appreciation of Balochistan's socio-cultural and environmental context.

Introduction

One of the world's most grandiose development and infrastructure undertakings of the contemporary period, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is a large-scale development scheme intended to enhance connectivity between Pakistan, China, and the entire region. A system of roadways, railway lines, pipelines, and harbors, stretching from the north border of China to the south, ending on the Arabian Sea, with Gwadar Port in Balochistan as the crown jewel in its development, CPEC comprises all of them. Under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the

project is expected to bring great impetus to trade, drive economic growth, and deepen economic cooperation between China and Pakistan (Wolf, 2019; Javaid & Javaid, 2016). Nevertheless, in spite of the high-flown rhetoric, the effect of CPEC, especially in Balochistan, has been the focus of a very contentious debate. Being a province endowed with natural resources, Balochistan has historically been economically and politically excluded in Pakistan. The intricate socio-political dynamics of the province have resulted in long-standing grievances by the local Baloch population in the form of exploitation, deprivation of access to development, and poor political representation (Yousaf, 2018). The construction of Gwadar Port under CPEC has also contributed to further worsen these issues, with the local population fearing that they are being left out of the economic dividends of the project, with the consequent environmental degradation, displacement, and militarization of the area (Akhtar, 2018; Naseer, 2021). This study aims to explore the socio-political, economic, and environmental effects of CPEC on Balochistan, with specific emphasis on the development of Gwadar Port. The research will explore how the visions of economic growth and prosperity are being translated into reality in the region, and whether the local Baloch people actually gain from the current developments. Although CPEC has the potential to greatly improve the economic profile of Pakistan, its execution has come under fire for not incorporating local populations in Balochistan (Zeb, 2020). Rather than gaining from the growth of Gwadar Port and related infrastructure, the Baloch people are confronting many challenges. These include displacement from their ancestral lands, limited job opportunities, and increased militarization as a result of enhanced security force deployment (ICG, 2018). Additionally, the region's environmental implications of massive constructions are a source of worry, especially in the sensitive ecosystems of Balochistan (Huang et al., 2021). This study answers these questions by examining the construction of Gwadar Port under CPEC and determining who really gains from the project, and who pays for it. The study will explore the socio-political, economic, and environmental impacts for the Baloch people, who are kept on the periphery of the development process. The primary goals of this study are to analyze the historical evolution of Gwadar Port and its integration into the CPEC paradigm, to investigate the socio-political and economic effects of CPEC, especially the Gwadar Port project, on the local Baloch people, to evaluate the degree to which the local Baloch people gain from the economic opportunities generated by CPEC, such as employment, infrastructure development, and access to resources, to investigate the environmental effects of the CPEC project in Balochistan, particularly land grabbing, displacement, and the destruction of local ecosystems, and to determine the role of local, national, and international actors in shaping the CPEC outcomes in Balochistan, and to examine how the political dynamics of the region affect the development process. This study will answer the following main questions: How has the construction of Gwadar Port under CPEC affected the socio-political stability of Balochistan? What are the economic consequences of CPEC for the Baloch people, especially in terms of employment, income, and access to resources? To what degree has the local population been excluded from the dividends of CPEC, and why? What are the environmental issues that have resulted from the establishment of CPEC infrastructure in Balochistan? How do the political, economic, and historical grievances of the Baloch impact the understanding of CPEC and its development success? The importance of this research is the potential to illuminate the dynamic interplay among megadevelopment projects such as CPEC and the local communities impacted by them. While the national and global economic benefits of CPEC dominate most of the discussion, its local effects on marginalized areas like Balochistan are frequently ignored. In paying attention to the Baloch community and its experiences with CPEC, this research intends to add to the larger debate concerning the inclusiveness and sustainability of development in Pakistan (Rafi & Khan, 2019). This study is vital to policymakers, domestic stakeholders, and foreign actors that are part of CPEC since it gives an extensive breakdown of the disparities between the CPEC promises and reality on the ground. It also points to a greater need for more inclusive development strategies that consider the health and welfare of domestic communities, particularly in areas plagued by conflict

like Balochistan. This research will target Gwadar Port development under CPEC in particular, with its socio-political, economic, and environmental implications for the Baloch population. Historical, ongoing, and upcoming developments will be researched to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of CPEC's long-term implications for Balochistan. The research scope will also entail examining significant local concerns including land ownership, displacement, employment prospects, and local grievances toward the project.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the strategic development and significance of Gwadar Port within the CPEC framework. This includes understanding how and why Gwadar became central to CPEC.
2. To explore the multidimensional impacts of CPEC on Balochistan's local communities, focusing on economic opportunities, political representation, and social transformation. Especially in relation to employment, displacement, and marginalization.
3. To analyze the role of various stakeholders local, national, and international in shaping the development outcomes and addressing local grievances in Balochistan. Highlighting power dynamics and decision-making processes.

Research Questions

- How has the development of Gwadar Port under CPEC altered the socio-political landscape of Balochistan?
 - Does it contribute to integration or deepen existing political grievances?
- Why are the economic benefits of CPEC, such as employment and infrastructure, not equitably reaching the local Baloch communities?
 - What mechanisms of exclusion are at play?
- What are the major environmental and societal challenges caused by large-scale CPEC infrastructure projects in Balochistan, and how are local communities responding?
 - Particularly regarding displacement, land rights, and ecological damage.

Literature Review

The literature on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is quite extensive, ranging from glorified accounts of development potential to critical considerations of political, economic, and social fallout. This part thus categorizes the literature into optimistic narratives and critiques, as well as identifies principal spots of divergence that the present study aims to fill, especially with regard to Balochistan.

Optimistic Narratives: Development, Integration, and Economic Modernization

CPEC advocates often pontificate its transformational power in the economy of Pakistan. As Wolf (2019) has put it, CPEC is "the flagship project" under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the purpose of which was not just limited to infrastructure development but also included regional connectivity, trade, and investment stimulation. The Pakistani government regularly emphasizes that CPEC is a "game-changer" for integrating far-flung areas into national development programs. Research by affiliated think tanks with the government, such as the Pakistan Institute for Development Economics (PIDE), argue that CPEC will provide around 700,000 jobs (PIDE 2017) and enhance the supply side of the trade by reducing its cost while also alleviating the energy crisis through the establishment of various power projects. These narratives highlight the development of Gwadar as a new economic hub and present CPEC as a way to promote national cohesion, economic uplift, and regional integration. Moreover, some scholars observe that on the one hand, CPEC deepens Sino-Pakistani cooperation in strategic matters, enhancing the geopolitical leverage

of Pakistan. According to Haider (2017), CPEC coincides with Pakistan's Look East policy as an alternative to the existing dependence on Western aid and IMF loans.

Critical Perspectives: Asymmetries, Exclusion, and Securitization

In contrast, critical theorists highlight that benefits from CPEC are unevenly distributed, leaving areas such as Balochistan at a disadvantage. Case in point, Small (2020) discusses the increasing dependence of Pakistan on China in economic and strategic terms and argues that CPEC has reinforced power asymmetries in its decision-making process, thereby limiting state autonomy. Equally, Rolland (2020) accuses the site of BRI being used by China essentially for economic statecraft and for geopolitical interests at the expense of local economic development. Ahmed (2018) takes a critical account of CPEC governance and argues that the ambiguous decision-making processes coupled with little consultation have led to a breakdown of public trust. Central authorities decide on significant issues, he argues, without adequate input from poor provincial governments that often have a say on project location, resource distribution, or employment guarantees. Siddiqi (2020) draws attention to Balochistan's militarization of development. She supports an argument against civilian oversight and civil rights for the security-centric implementation of CPEC, which is shown by the formation of the Special Security Division (SSD) and limited access to Gwadar. Her work connects militarization with community displacement, where people are either relocated or watched in the name of security. Other organizations, such as the HRCP and the ICG, have highlighted human rights abuses by CPEC projects, including forced evictions, environmental destruction, and suppression of dissent. Reports further indicate that EIAs are minimal to non-public, adding to ecological risks and public mistrust.

Indigenous and Regional Scholarship: Balochistan in Focus

Even though literature on CPEC is growing, focused studies on Balochistan remain rather scarce. Most academic and policy discussions generalize their findings to Pakistan as a whole or narrowly focus their analysis on Gwadar and neglect the broader provincial context. Nevertheless, a handful of regional scholars and journalists have attempted to bridge this gap. Baloch (2021) furnishes ethnographic insights from Gwadar, documenting locals' "perceptions of exclusion and disenchantment." According to him, development is interpreted as an "occupation," fencing local fishing communities off from their ancestral coasts. Likewise, the interviews conducted by Yusufzai (2022) in Quetta and Turbat expressed a widely held opinion that CPEC is rather an instrument for exploitation than empowerment. Rashid (2020) admonished the collusion between Balochistan's political elites and the federal government, arguing that instead of empowering local representation, CPEC had co-opted it. The author equates this with a pattern of "internal colonization," whereby peripheral regions are exploited for national benefits without granting sufficient political or economic returns. These narratives resonate the wider structural critique of the center-periphery relationship in Pakistan. Drawing from Wallerstein's world-systems theory, internal peripheries like Balochistan are locked into dependent and extractive relationships with the national center and exhibit characteristics of exploitation similar to the world core-periphery (Frank, 1967; Wallerstein, 1974).

Environmental, Gendered, and Human Rights Dimensions

An emerging strand in the literature is focused on CPEC impacts on the environment and sociocultural variables. Shiraz (2021) examined ecological hazards posed by infrastructure projects such as increased salinization, water scarcity, and marine degradation along coastal Balochistan. Environmental insulations and a lack of public consultation have carried high on these studies' agendas. Introspection into gendered dimensions may also be called for, though they remain largely underexplored. Under this premise, Akhtar (2022) argues in her work that women in

Balochistan suffer the "double marginalization" of belonging to a peripheral region and being excluded as female subjects from a formal labor market and public decision-making arenas. Enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, and restricted media coverage in CPEC zones have also been highlighted in the reports of Amnesty International and the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). Such trends erode the social contract and further alienate local populations from living their lives with the political benefits derived from development led by the state.

Gaps in the Literature and the Contribution of This Study

The increasing academic and policy attention on CPEC has led to numerous studies, but localized, on-site research in regard to CPEC and its impacts in Balochistan is still insufficient. Most of the literature is lower-level, dealing with economic forecasts or strategic implications, rarely capturing CPEC from the point of view of ordinary Baloch communities.

Very few studies, therefore, have attempted to apply theoretical frameworks like center-periphery theory or critical political economy to explain the political structures and power asymmetries behind CPEC. For the most part, analyses have remained descriptive rather than explanatory or normative.

This study fills these gaps through:

- Concentration exclusively on Balochistan, focusing also beyond-Gwadar;
- Application of center-periphery and internal colonization to study power and resource distribution;
- Highlighting costs in the socio-economic realm like displacement, environmental degradation, and political exclusion;
- Offering policy options based on inclusive development and participatory development.

This paper thus contributes to the literature concerning CPEC development in terms of broader debates on development, justice, and state-society relations in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

This study takes a critical and postcolonial approach, using center-periphery theory, internal colonization, dependency theory, and critical development studies to critique the political, economic, and ideological underpinnings of CPEC as it plays out in Balochistan. These theories are not used as academic abstractions but as tools of analysis to deconstruct what this paper contends is a strategic illusion of development—a process that masks dispossession and state overlordship in the name of modernization. Wallerstein's World-Systems Theory (1974) depicts the international capitalist system as organized through a division of labour between the "core," which accumulates power and wealth, and the "periphery," which provides raw materials, low-cost labour, and land. The same global dynamic is replicated in national hierarchies in Pakistan, with Balochistan serving as an internal periphery, subject to the centre of power for the federal state and ruling provinces like Punjab. In this regard, CPEC functions not as an agent of national integration but as a mechanism of extraction. The natural endowment and strategic geography of Balochistan are exploited to fulfill national and Chinese agendas with the indigenous people reaping negligible dividends. Instead, the province witnesses militarization, displacement, and environmental destruction, evidencing a structural deficit that enforces underdevelopment by way of centralized exploitation and not investment or redistribution. Hechter's internal colonialism theory (1975) further describes how contemporary nation-states can mimic colonial processes within their own borders. CPEC, although depicted as a national development initiative, exhibits these processes in Balochistan. Land is taken over without local permission, resources are exploited without fair benefit-sharing, and important decisions are taken far from the affected communities.

Development in Balochistan is reduced to a control mechanism rather than a right. The militarized execution of CPEC—seen in projects such as the Special Security Division (SSD), fencing of Gwadar, and limited mobility—is reminiscent of colonial frontier policies, prioritizing state security at the expense of local empowerment. Official discourses that hold out promises of prosperity to the province serve to discipline dissent and legitimize the repression of civil liberties. From a dependency theory point of view (Frank, 1967), CPEC serves to perpetuate economic dependence by locating Balochistan in unequal relationships that enrich federal elites and overseas investors. Instead of enabling diversified or independent economic development, CPEC locks Balochistan into a limited position as a source of resources and transit corridors. It keeps the province out of general industrialization, technological upgrading, and decision-making power. This is indicative of an age-old trend of internal neocolonialism in which the state exercises economic extraction as well as security domination over the peripheral spaces. Critical development studies also disapprove of dominant discourses to applaud CPEC as a "game-changer" according to quantitative metrics such as GDP growth, estimates of employment, and foreign direct investment. Researchers like Escobar (1995) and Ferguson (1994) contend that big infrastructure projects tend to function as "anti-politics machines," depoliticizing power, displacement, and inequality issues by framing them as technical management problems. CPEC is no exception to this trend, dressing itself in the robe of opportunity and modernity while stifling opposition, particularly in Balochistan. Protest is regularly termed "anti-national" or "terrorist," pushing to the margin the voices of people most affected directly. Synthesizing these theoretical understandings, the present study contends that CPEC in Balochistan must not be interpreted as a failed development project, but as a successful coercive integration into global capitalism under ongoing central control. It succeeds not in elevating the excluded, but in entrenching their marginalization. This strategic project of dispossession presents itself as one of progress behind the mask of development to disguise repression. The approach taken here therefore offers a critical and decolonial perspective from which to analyze both the story and practice of CPEC in a historically marginalized province..

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach to examine the socio-political and economic impacts of CPEC in Balochistan. The research is interpretive, attempting to learn from the experiences of marginalized communities and the structural inequalities shaping their experience of the project. Balochistan is employed as a case study to examine internal peripheralization in the national context, particularly against the backdrop of massive development projects. The study relies primarily on secondary sources due to the sensitive topic and restricted access to the field. These include academic articles, human rights organizations' reports such as HRCP, Amnesty International, and the Asian Human Rights Commission, investigative journalism, policy briefs, and public statements by state institutions. Ethnographic accounts and testimonial narratives by local researchers and journalists are also used to add depth to the analysis. Critical discourse analysis is applied to examine how the framing of CPEC is portrayed in various narratives, specifically focusing on exclusion, militarization, environmental degradation, and political marginalization. The discourses are explained against the backdrop of the theoretical paradigms outlined above, i.e., center-periphery theory, internal colonization, and dependency theory. While the study is not conducted on the basis of primary data collection through interviewing or surveying, it compensates for that deficiency by critically examining a wide range of qualitative sources. The absence of primary fieldwork is identified as a shortcoming; however, the method allows for extended structural and theoretical exploration of how CPEC is reconfiguring the political and economic dynamics of Balochistan.

Analysis and Discussion: Unpacking CPEC's Impact on Balochistan

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been presented by both Chinese and Pakistani leadership as a game-changer development program with the promise of far-reaching economic transformation, regional connectivity, and infrastructural development. At the center of this vision is Balochistan—a geographically large but historically neglected province which has become the fulcrum of the corridor. With Gwadar Port serving as the lynchpin of CPEC and the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Balochistan has received renewed strategic attention. Yet, despite the ambitious plans and heavy investments being channeled into the province, local reactions remain conflicted, shaped by a history of political alienation, resource exploitation, and underdevelopment. This section examines the CPEC-related progress in Balochistan sector-wise—energy, infrastructure, port development, and Special Economic Zones (SEZs)—and analyzes the political, economic, and social issues raised by local communities, political parties, and nationalist movements. Balochistan has received only two of 21 CPEC-related power projects in the country, with a total capacity of 1,620 megawatts and an investment of around USD 2.54 billion. These are the 300 MW Gwadar coal-based power plant and the significantly larger 1,320 MW Hub-based CPHGC power plant. The energy output is considerable and stands to benefit tens of millions of households, although the majority of the generated power is channeled into the national grid at the expense of the province's under-serviced population. The irony is that Balochistan—hosting these energy schemes—remains plagued by prolonged electricity shortages for the most part because of inadequate transmission infrastructure. This inconsistency makes the local complaint more credible in the sense that the province, far from directly benefiting from them, is utilized as a transit point for those benefits to head elsewhere, solidifying long-drawn feelings of marginalization. Infrastructure development involving CPEC projects in Balochistan is primarily in the form of road initiatives like the N-30 Khuzdar-Basima road and partly the D.I. Khan-Zhob corridor. These projects, while major on paper, have been stalled and plagued by funding doubts, with Chinese authorities reportedly putting off financing for numerous road projects during 2017. Rail investment, such as planned new rail lines from Gwadar to Jacobabad and Karachi and a Quetta mass transit system, has largely stalled in the planning stages, with little apparent forward movement on the ground. Such infrastructural developments are not only crucial for enhancing connectivity but also to facilitate the easy movement of people and goods. Yet, it is the secrecy and delay in implementation that generate local doubt that these projects are actually designed towards regional integration or are only catering to federal and Chinese interests. The jewel in the crown of CPEC is the construction of Gwadar Port, which is geographically located close to the Strait of Hormuz and provides China with an outlet to the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and a possible entry into markets in Africa and the Middle East. Initially in operation since 2007, the port was handed over to China Overseas Ports Holding Company in 2013 and now has only two operational berths of a projected 120. Even with expectations of expanded trade volumes, from 1.2 million tons in 2018 to an estimated 13 million tons by 2022, most of this has not had much impact at the local economic level. The port is surrounded by a plethora of related projects—like the East-Bay Expressway, a new international airport, dredging and breakwater work, the Gwadar Free Zone, vocational training centers, and even a mega oil city spanning 80,000 acres—yet the trickle-down benefits of these ambitious plans have yet to reach the local populace. Gwadar remains plagued by acute water shortages, even after the commissioning of a desalination plant, and the presence of basic facilities is woefully inadequate. Secondly, not a single Special Economic Zone (SEZ) has been allotted to Balochistan: just the Bostan Industrial Zone in Quetta. While the zone is as large as 1,000 acres, the development has progressed only on 200 acres up to now, and the progress is slow. The sectors earmarked for the SEZ—such as fruit processing to pharmaceuticals—do stand a chance of accessing the resources and labor in the region. Yet, it is the quality of infrastructure and policy facilitation that has up to now remained weak or deferred. The province's connectivity is

improving but not enough to back the planned industrial boom, while issues regarding equal access and the allocation of resources remain. Local opposition to CPEC projects in Balochistan is rooted deeply in political history and socio-economic disparities. There is a wide range of opposition—from political parties that push for provincial rights to militant nationalist organizations that oppose federal control in general. Political parties like the National Party and BNP-Mengal have persistently raised demands for equitable job distribution, local management of Gwadar Port, and revenue sharing in proportion. Others, like the PkMAP, are critical of the militarized approach to CPEC, contending that troop deployment and checkpoints disempower civilian governments and isolate local populations. More extreme elements, like those represented by the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) and Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), portray CPEC as a neo-colonial enterprise aimed at depriving the Baloch of land and identity. These communities cite the application of military power to displace land for construction and exclusion of local voices from planning efforts as proof of foreign and federal exploitation. One of the most disputed aspects is the apprehension of demographical displacement. The influx of foreign laborers and bureaucrats into Gwadar and surrounding regions has led to demands from the local leadership to limit voting rights, ownership of land, and ID issuance to foreigners. The concern is that the Baloch people can become a minority in their province within a short while, jeopardizing their political rights and their cultural identity. The same problem arises in the labor market where the absence of vocational training and language issues hold back Baloch laborers from qualifying for technical jobs, and those jobs get filled by Chinese or other Pakistani laborers. This financial exclusion mirrors the processes of projects such as the Saindak mine, where locals were basically hired to work in low-paying support jobs, and outsiders profited. Transparency is also a significant concern. Local citizens, including members of parliament, have protested over the lack of transparency in project agreements and the failure to involve the public in decision-making. Without access to information, communities cannot evaluate the potential risks and benefits of these projects, leading to a climate of mistrust. Similarly, revenue distribution is seen as unfair. China receives 91% of the revenue generated from Gwadar Port, while the remaining 9% goes to the federal government. Balochistan's contribution is indirect, received through the National Finance Commission (NFC) award, which is commonly regarded as being dominated by Punjab and insufficient to address the needs of the province's development. XThe extremely securitized environment around CPEC routes and installations further fuels tensions. Although security is warranted to safeguard foreign workers and infrastructure, over-militarization, excessive checkpoints, and regrettably restricted local access create an atmosphere of alienation and control. Instead of being co-partners in development, most Baloch citizens are made to feel like intruders within their own country, unable to access or engage with the very projects that are reshaping their landscape. Despite all the criticism and complaints, though, there remains a guarded air of hopefulness among some pockets of the Baloch population. Many feel that if carried out in a clean and inclusive way, CPEC has the potential to bring needed jobs, schooling facilities, and infrastructure to the area. Again, this optimism is tenuous and depends greatly on dramatic changes in policy which focus on more local involvement, fair resource sharing, and genuine socio-economic incorporation. Its failure to solve these issues will create more chances of radicalization and reinforce insurgency messages that don't see CPEC as an avenue for wealth but as a means of dispossession and hegemony. Therefore, in final analysis, whether or not the success of CPEC in Balochistan materializes will have less to do with the sheer volume of the projects or level of investment involved but with the degree to which they capture the aspirations and dignity of the native population. The economic and strategic worth of the province, especially Gwadar Port, cannot be questioned, but neither can the long-standing grievances over decades of exploitation and neglect. In order to convert CPEC into a development project in true sense of integrative and make it an area of common cooperation, the federal government needs to make sure that the Baloch people are not mere spectators but active participants in deciding the future of their country.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a "game-changer" and epitome of strategic cooperation between China and Pakistan, has profoundly reshaped the region's geopolitical and economic landscape. At the epicenter of this mega infrastructure project is Gwadar Port, strategically located in Balochistan—a resource-abundant province long neglected and marginalized by the state. This study has explored the development of Gwadar Port and related CPEC projects in light of Balochistan's singular socio-political context with the view to respond to the all-important question of who actually benefits and who eventually pays for this ambitious project. What presents itself in this questioning is a rich and disquieting story: as the state and external investors rejoice at economic advance and geopolitical influence, the Baloch remain subject to dispossession, exclusion, and militarized dominion, furthering chronic grievances and deepening the center-periphery trust deficit. Gwadar's evolution in a historical context shows how choices of national importance have been made frequently enough without due consultation from local stakeholders. Since the annexation of Gwadar into Pakistan in 1958, Balochistan has seen waves of underdevelopment and state neglect follow one another. With the arrival of CPEC, this trend continues in a new guise: massive infrastructure and energy development projects have been initiated with minimal concern for local ownership, participation, or benefit. The promise of job creation, education, and improved livelihoods remains largely unfulfilled, as most employment opportunities are captured by outsiders, and educational or vocational institutions tailored to the needs of local youth remain scarce. This development, instead of being inclusive and participatory, appears extractive and externally imposed, deepening feelings of alienation among the Baloch people. Additionally, the militarization of Gwadar and other CPEC facilities in the name of "security" has amplified socio-political tensions. Military deployment, setting up checkpoints, and monitoring of local movement have instilled an atmosphere of fear and control. The security rhetoric, instead of safeguarding the interests of locals, is universally seen as a tool to cover foreign investments and suppress dissent. This has created more resistance from Baloch nationalist parties and political parties who see CPEC as not a development tool but a tool of further domination. The outcome is a volatile and tenuous political situation where any prospect of long-term stability or prosperity is eroded by state high-handedness and absence of meaningful dialogue. Though the economic potential of CPEC cannot be doubted, its manifestation in Balochistan is riddled with challenges. The physical upgrading of Gwadar as a port city with modern-day infrastructure is apparent; however, this development does not find expression in the local population's lives. Essential facilities like potable drinking water, electricity, medical care, and schooling are still insufficient. Fishing communities, which have long been the lifeblood of Gwadar, have been marginalized, and land acquisition procedures have been tainted by lack of transparency and accusations of land grabbing. Environmental costs of development, including pollution, coastal erosion, and community displacement, represent an additional concern that has not been sufficiently treated in policy discussion.

In view of these observations, a number of policy recommendations are imperative if CPEC is to live up to its potential of equitable development and regional integration. To begin with, the federal and provincial governments need to make inclusive governance a priority by ensuring Baloch representation in decision-making circles concerning CPEC projects. Local voices should be strengthened by participatory processes, and traditional leaders, civil society, and elected representatives should be consulted during development planning and implementation. Second, transparency and accountability in project implementation need to be improved. Existing lack of information on contracts, land transactions, and employment quotas breeds suspicion and distrust. Explicit guidelines for benefit-sharing, environmental management, and human rights protections need to be developed and applied. Public availability of information about projects is important in

creating confidence and ensuring that development does not occur at the cost of local welfare. Third, special socio-economic interventions are required to remedy the Balochistan development deficit. Human capital investment, particularly in education, vocational training, and healthcare, must be prioritized with special focus on the demographic and cultural imperatives of the region. Baloch nationals must be reserved special employment quotas in all CPEC projects, and local industries must be brought into value chains to activate bottom-up economic development. Finally, demilitarization of development should be given immediate thought. Security must not be pursued at the expense of civil rights and local self-governance. A move away from a securitized paradigm to a rights-based approach to development would not only lessen resistance but also open the doors to enduring peace and prosperity. It is only by confronting the underlying causes of Baloch disenfranchisement—political exclusion, economic marginalization, and cultural oppression—that CPEC can become a force for integration, not division.

In summary, while CPEC has transformative potential for Pakistan and the region as a whole, its success will depend on how inclusive and equitable its implementation is, especially in Balochistan. Gwadar Port development must not be a symbol of local hardship for national benefit. Rather, it needs to be reimagined as a paradigm of shared growth—where progress is not only observed in roads and harbors, but in the empowerment, dignity, and well-being of the people who inhabit this land.

References

1. Cooley, A., & Laruelle, M. (2018). **The impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative: From Asia to Europe**. Routledge.
2. Rolland, N. (2017). **China's Eurasian century? Political and strategic implications of the Belt and Road Initiative**. National Bureau of Asian Research.
3. Ahmed, A. (2013). *The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*. Brookings Institution Press.
4. Akhtar, A. S. (2018). *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Baloch, S. (2021). "CPEC and the Question of Balochistan: Who Benefits?" *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 36(2), 145–164.
6. Bukhari, S. A. A., & Javaid, U. (2016). CPEC: Opportunities and Challenges. *South Asian Studies*, 31(2), 365–375.
7. Gazdar, H. (2007). Balochistan Economic Report. *World Bank Discussion Papers*.
8. International Crisis Group. (2006). *Pakistan: The Worsening Conflict in Balochistan* (Asia Report No. 119). <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/pakistan-worsening-conflict-balochistan>
9. Kugelman, M. (Ed.). (2018). *China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Future of South Asia*. Wilson Center.
10. Rahman, S. (2020). "Development without Representation: CPEC in Balochistan and the Politics of Infrastructure." *Asian Affairs*, 51(1), 98–114.
11. Siddiqui, A. (2019). *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Infrastructure, Social Change and Political Implications*. Routledge.
12. Small, A. (2015). *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*. Oxford University Press.
13. Yousaf, F. (2019). *Balochistan: Caught in the Fragility Trap*. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre.
https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/197754/6c89a4_d1d1b3762c01491a86a9f607b4431710.pdf