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ANALYSING NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES TO THE CHINA-PAKISTAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AFTER CPEC

Muhammad Anwer Shaheen[1], Dr. Muhammad Hatim[*2], Amin Abdus Samad[3]

[1]*M. Phil scholar in the Department of International Relations, University of Sargodha*
[*2]*Assistant Professor at the Department of International Relations, University of Sargodha,*
[3]*Lecturer at the Department of International Relations, University of Sargodha,*

[*2]muhammad. hatim@uos.edu.pk, [3]amin.abdus@uos.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Muhammad Hatim

Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched in 2015 as a connectivity and infrastructure-financing project; a decade on, it has become the site of one of the most consequential non-traditional security (NTS) tests the China-Pakistan strategic partnership has faced since diplomatic relations began in 1951. This article first highlights the main non-traditional security threats that have arisen in the post-CPEC era and then analyses their impact on the depth, breadth and durability of bilateral cooperation. It then assesses the policy responses by Pakistan and China. The resurgence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Baloch ethno-nationalist insurgency, non-violent societal contestation in Gwadar, the commercialization of Chinese debt and climate-related threats to infrastructure, alongside a still inadequate digital-security literature, yield a multi-layered and mutually reinforcing threat environment, according to the article, drawing on Complex Interdependence Theory and Non-Traditional Security Theory, as well as qualitative, theory-informed process tracing, thematic analysis, and triangulation across documentary, journalistic and 2026 peer-reviewed sources. This landscape has caused tensions, but not conflicts, in bilateral cooperation, which is best understood as high sensitivity and relatively low vulnerability dependency driven by the structural dependence of Pakistan on Chinese capital as the only alternative is not pluralist. Terrorist threats are securitised and highly prioritised in the policy response, while drivers of insecurity related to debt and environmental and digital drivers are comparatively under-addressed. The article concludes with suggestions based on facts for the Pakistan and Chinese policymakers in the second phase of the corridor, CPEC 2.0.

1. INTRODUCTION

China and Pakistan have had diplomatic relations since 1951, and this has been formalized by a boundary agreement in 1963 and a Treaty of Friendship in 2005, which was followed by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC Secretariat, 2025) from April 2015. CPEC's first phase brought highways, power generation facilities, and the deep-water port of Gwadar; its institutional framework, based on a Joint Cooperation Committee, which has met fourteen times, resulted in the launch of a diversified

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second phase dubbed CPEC 2.0 in September 2025 (CPEC Secretariat, 2025). For most of its first decade, CPEC was seen primarily as an economic and connectivity initiative whose primary risks were financial (cost overruns, debt exposure), delivery (project management), or in traditional geopolitical lenses, as a means of regional competition. That's an outdated perspective. As the corridor has grown, it has also created a proliferating array of "new and emerging security" (NES) threats, including terrorism targeting Chinese employees, debt issues, social tensions in host countries, climate risk to the infrastructure, and reliance on digital technology.As the corridor has developed, it has also produced an expanding set of non-traditional security threats (NTS), such as terrorism targeting Chinese staff, indebtedness, contestation in host societies, climate risk to infrastructure, and dependence on digital technology, which has become one of the most serious stress-tests the partnership has ever received since its start. This is relevant because it has taken place in the absence of the analytical language that predominated in the first decade of CPEC scholarship. Economic evaluations of the corridor have generally included a "hand-out" consideration of security incidents, and security-based commentary has generally included a consideration of individual attacks as discrete law-and-order events without considering them in the wider context of the structural interdependence CPEC itself has created. This article maintains that neither reading alone is sufficient and that a theoretical treatment which combines both is necessary to elucidate not only the threats that have arisen, but also how they have been constituted in the layered form that they are. This article deals with three questions for research. First, what are the major non-traditional security issues that are expected to face the China-Pakistan strategic partnership in the post-CPEC era and what are the changes in security dynamics of the bilateral relationship? Second, what have been the impact of these challenges on the depth, scope and sustainability of the China-Pakistan bilateral cooperation? Third, what policy solutions has China and Pakistan taken to address these threats and what strategic changes are needed for the long-term viability of CPEC? The article is organized in the following way. The existing literature is reviewed in Section 2 and the gap that this study addresses is identified in the review. The combined theoretical framework and methodology is presented in Section 3. The three research questions are answered in sections 4, 5 and 6. The findings are discussed in Section 7 and the contribution, limitations and recommendations are discussed in Section 8.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

The existing literature on the security aspect of CPEC can be grouped under several strands which are somewhat distinct from each other. A first strand uses the CIT theory in a direct way in the relationship. While both Ahmad (2018) and Hussain, Hussain and Qambari (2020) interpret CPEC as a deepening pluralist interdependence, neither focuses on the security aspect and both come before the threat environment of this article, which was post-2021. The arguments Wolf (2020) reaches in his book-length study of CPEC for Springer are not quite the same, even though he is not using the framework of complex interdependence, as he maintains that the corridor's importance is defined as much by the home countries' Pakistani and Chinese motivations as by the stated logic of connectivity. A darker political-economy take on this optimism, though, comes from Garlick (2018) in the Journal of Contemporary China, who sees Belt and Road as a tool for statecraft at the hands of elites, and Jones and Zeng (2019) in Third World Quarterly, who turns this reading onto CPEC by suggesting that the implementation of this corridor has been influenced throughout by Pakistan's military-bureaucratic political system. It is to these darker readings that Samad (2025) in the newly-established Critical Pakistan Studies adds a critique. The second is related to the financial structure of CPEC. However, Brautigam (2020) in

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Area Development and Policy and Singh (2020) in Third World Quarterly have rejected the popular 'debt-trap diplomacy' framing, concluding that there is less evidence that China intended to create a debt crisis to extract strategic assets. Applied specifically to Pakistan, we find that around 80 percent of the funding of CPEC has come in the form of equity or concessional rather than commercial debt, and Pakistan's own Institute of Development Economics (PIDE, 2020) has separately noted that CPEC-related commercial loans also have higher interest rates than multilateral loans, which this article revisits in Section 7. The third strand considers the post-2021 terrorism context. The literature also focuses on the resurgence of TTP as a result of the triumph of the Afghan Taliban in 2021, whether in Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict (2023) or The Round Table (2025). The geographic breadth of the resurgence is only briefly mentioned in the literature in relation to the northern energy corridor of CPEC. A fourth strand, much more CPEC-specific, takes into account the contestation of society in Gwadar, reading the Gwadar Haq Do Tehreek movement as a reaction to the failure of CPEC to offer any benefit to the Baloch fisher folk. Readers are referred to Khan and Bakh (2025) in Third World Quarterly, which presents the most theoretically advanced account of this movement. A last, thinner strand relates to the digital and cyber aspect of CPEC, where none of the peer-reviewed studies reviewed here have conducted a systematic assessment of risks associated with CPEC-related infrastructure. This review highlights 3 gaps. First, there has not been an identified study that applies CIT and NTS systematically throughout the entire multi-sectoral threat spectrum, specifically across the realm of 'terrorism', 'debt', 'societal contestation', 'environment' and 'digital risk' in the context of the China-Pakistan case. Second, the literature is thematically siloed, that is, terrorism scholars don't talk with the debt literature, and societal-contestation scholars don't talk with the terrorism literature, although there is a lot of substantial overlap in Balochistan, and the environmental and the digital literatures remain largely disconnected. Third, there is little peer-reviewed literature that deals with developments since the launch of CPEC 2.0 in September 2025. This article directly targets the three gaps.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this study, two complementary theories are applied. According to Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye, 2001) the structural situation in which the partnership has been exposed to non-traditional threats is: CPEC has increased the number of interstate, transgovernmental and transnational channels connecting Pakistan and China, and it is the transnational dimension, with tens of thousands of Chinese personnel physically present in Pakistan that has become the main source of threat. The theoretical concept of difference between the "sensitivity interdependence" (speed with which a shock has an expensive effect) and the "vulnerability interdependence" (expensiveness of adjusting to the shock after a policy change) is directly used in explaining the pattern of strain and resilience reported in Section 5. The categories developed to identify and classify the threats analyzed in Section 4 follow the Non-Traditional Security Theory tradition of the Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998), and elaborated by its Asian followers (Caballero-Anthony, 2016), while its securitization concept accounts for the nature of the policy responses analyzed in Section 6. A summary of the division of analytical labour between the two theories is given in Table 1.

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Table 1. The combined theoretical framework applied in this article.

Theory	Analytical Role	Research Question(s) Served
Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane & Nye, 2001)	Explains the structural exposure created by CPEC's multiple interstate, transgovernmental and transnational channels, and the sensitivity/vulnerability distinction that shapes how shocks are absorbed	RQ1, RQ2
Non-Traditional Security Theory (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998; Caballero-Anthony, 2016)	Supplies the categories, terrorism, societal, economic, environmental, digital, for identifying and evaluating threats, and the securitization lens for interpreting the policy response	RQ1, RQ3

Table 1. Both the theoretical frameworks used in the present article. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach with the help of documentary research, thematic analysis to categorize a diverse body of evidence into patterns of threats, process tracing to trace threats from the 2021 Taliban takeover to the Besham attack in 2024 and further to the CPEC 2.0 launch in 2025, and triangulation between three types of evidence – official and institutional documents, contemporaneous journalism, and academic peer-review research – the first two of which are documentary evidence of events and the last of which is interpretive context. As part of the study's commitment to citing integrity, no casualty figure, attribution of responsibility or contested claim is presented as being "settled" when there is credible disagreement, with discrepancies being reported, not resolved by inference.

4. Non-Traditional Security Threats After CPEC

Since the launch of CPEC, five categories of the non-traditional threats have come together. The first is religiously motivated terrorism, which has been ramped up by the return of the Afghan Taliban to power in August 2021, the release of imprisoned TTP members, provision of access to abandoned military equipment, and enabling the regrouping of previously divided factions (Akhtar & Ahmed, 2023). Khan and Ahmed (2025) place this resurgence in the broader context of the contested Durand Line border, and conclude that Pakistan's hopes that a friendly Taliban government would be able to put an end to TTP activities were a major strategic error. This revival is directly linked to the northern energy corridor of CPEC, which was the target of the July 2021 Dasu bus bombing that claimed the lives of thirteen people, including nine Chinese nationals (BBC, 2021), and the Besham attack in March 2024, which killed five more Chinese engineers en route to that same project (CNN, 2024a). The second category is Baloch ethno-nationalist insurgency, through primarily the Baloch Liberation Army, which has identified Chinese nationals and installations as symbols of what it calls China's economic expansionism, from the attack on its consulate in Karachi in 2018, through a record attack by a female suicide bomber on the Confucius Institute in Karachi in April 2022, to the attack on the airport in Karachi in October 2024 that killed two Chinese engineers (CNN, 2024b). The following table, Table 2, summarises the main documented incidents.

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Table 2. Documented attacks on Chinese nationals and CPEC-linked assets, 2018-2024.

Date	Location	Incident	Chinese Fatalities	Attributed To
Nov 2018	Karachi	Attack on Chinese Consulate	0 (4 killed incl. attackers/police)	Baloch Liberation Army
14 Jul 2021	Upper Kohistan, KP	Bus bombing, Dasu hydropower convoy	9	Disputed; later attributed to a TTP-linked bomber
26 Apr 2022	Karachi	Suicide bombing, Confucius Institute staff van	3	Baloch Liberation Army
26 Mar 2024	Besham/Shangla, KP	Suicide car-bomb, Dasu-bound convoy	5	Unclaimed; suspected TTP-linked
6 Oct 2024	Karachi airport	Suicide car-bomb, Port Qasim convoy	2	Baloch Liberation Army

The third is non-violent contestation of society, such as the Haq Do Tehreek of Gwadar, which involved tens of thousands from November 2021 over unregulated trawling, security checkpoints and the lack of macro-level investment returning local benefits to the majority of the population who are Baloch fisher folk of Gwadar (Khan & Bakhsh, 2025). The fourth is economic and financial vulnerability, which pertains to China and his government holding about 25% of Pakistan's external debt on commercial, not concessional, terms as of 2023 and 2024 (World Bank, 2024; PIDE, 2020) is real but not a deliberate vulnerability as demonstrated by Arsalan (2025). The fifth and sixth are comparatively under documented, but structurally significant: Recurring glacial lake outburst floods since 2022 have repeatedly interfered with the Karakoram Highway, which no deployment of troops can resolve; Pakistan's increasing dependence on Chinese digital infrastructure supplied under CPEC 2.0 presents data-sovereignty questions that the existing peer-reviewed literature has not yet addressed in any great detail. Despite significant security investments, the threat landscape has not died down—high casualty attacks persisted as late as October 2024 well after major security expansion, and the continued use of cross-border militant sanctuary, a lack of resolution to distributive grievances, and structured debt exposure and climate change remain significantly underinvested. It is important to express clearly that these categories are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the same period in which TTP related violence had gone on a rampage in KPK, the non-traditional terrorism exposure in the south was also spreading its wings in the form of the Baloch Liberation Army, which meant that in March 2024, both countries and Chinese linked targets as well as Pakistani state-security targets were attacked within the same week, making this non-traditional terrorism exposure a structural feature of the entire footprint of the corridor rather than a localised issue.

5. Impact on the Depth, Scope and Sustainability of Bilateral Cooperation

The evidence suggests a consistent pattern: individual shocks lead to immediate, high-sensitivity reactions, joint investigations, temporary work stoppages, diplomatic reassurance

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without changing the overall trajectory of the partnership for long. In 2024, bilateral trade reached two and a half trillion dollars of the United States and the Fourteenth Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) at that time of heightened security concerns initiated a wider process of cooperation, rather than a more restrictive one (CPEC Secretariat, 2025). Keohane and Nye (2001) characterized this pattern as a distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability: in Pakistan, the low level of vulnerability is not due to the fact that it has alternative sources of funding, but rather because it does not. The classical interdependence theory of pluralism assumes that the presence of alternatives would lead to the high level of vulnerability. This strain can be spotted in three dimensions. Despite the impact of security events on work stoppages at Dasu and Tarbela in the past few years, aggregate trade and investment figures continue to rise, with bilateral trade surpassing twenty-three billion US dollars in 2024 and over five hundred entrepreneurs taking part in a Beijing business-to-business conference covering various sectors including information technology, agriculture, mining, and textiles. China's institutional coordination has become increasingly security-centric with China pressing for its own nationals' security since 2022, including reported (but not fully confirmed) private security deployment, and Pakistan resisting ceding control, an unresolved trust deficit observed during the successive Joint Cooperation Committee meetings, and reflected in the visit of Chinese Premier Li Qiang in October 2024, which resulted in agreements on bullet-proof vehicles and security memoranda, with several planned major financing arrangements still not being finalised. The most lasting damage seems to be on people-to-people relations, the stated infrastructural target of the Haq Do Tehreek was also a cultural target, while the Confucius Institute, a cultural rather than infrastructural target, showed that the societal channels complex interdependence deems central to the relationship have also become contested space. Yet, despite the strain, the cooperation has been durable: neither government has determined that the withdrawal costs are less than the costs of maintaining cooperation while dealing with periodic shocks, and both decided to increase, not decrease, the formal nature of their cooperation during the times of greatest security threat in 2025.

6. Policy Responses and Their Adequacy

The reaction in Pakistan has been large, but very securitised. The Special Security Division, initiated in 2016 and expanded in 2020, and a newer Special Protection Unit specifically for the Chinese nationals, and renewed national counter-terrorism campaign, Operation Azm-e-Istehkam, initiated in June 2024, form the core of this response (Dawn, 2016; Express Tribune, 2026). China has also been simultaneously applying pressure through its own efforts to increase direct security control; although not fully independently verifiable, reports suggest that Chinese private security personnel were already deployed in a few CPEC sites and Chinese President Xi Jinping personally pushed Pakistani counterparts to ensure the protection of Chinese workers at these sites in September 2025 (MP-IDSA, 2026). The launch of CPEC 2.0 in September 2025 has been leveraged by both governments to expand the scope of the partnership to include special economic zones, agriculture, and climate resilience, in addition to ongoing security cooperation (CPEC Secretariat, 2025). This record is consistently structurally imbalanced as judged by critical evaluation. Anti-terrorism, force generation, counter-terrorism, and security diplomacy measures are many and well-resourced; societal, economic, environmental and digital drivers (Section 4) are comparatively underdeveloped. This is in line with Non-Traditional Security Theory's own critique of securitization (Buzan, Waever, & de Wilde, 1998): a threat in an existential, military-security mode of discourse enables it to receive exceptional resources even if the evidence indicates that it may

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not be as threatening as a slower moving non-military threat. A second gap is on the issue of sovereignty and accountability – the incremental acceptance of Chinese security engagement has not been accompanied by a clear, publicly discussed legal framework. A third relates to Gwadar in particular, where a growing security presence has continued alongside – not alleviated – the grievance of a distributive conflict (as described in Section 4), and where both violent violence and civic mobilisation have continued for years after significant security investment.

7. Discussion: Reading the Findings Together

These findings are read together, not separately, and so eliminate an apparent conflict in the literature surveyed in Section 2. The evidence from Section 4 and 5 demonstrates that the number of channels in CPEC has indeed been multiplied, as the optimistic reading claims (Ahmad, Sohail, & Rizwan, 2018; Hussain, Hussain, & Qambari, 2020); however, these channels have not necessarily decreased the vulnerability of the two states, but have done so under the guise of structural dependency. This is a reading closer to that advanced by Samad (2025) and the military-bureaucratic-elite framing of the reading by Garlick (2018) and Jones & Zeng (2019) than to the pluralist-bargaining power reading attributed to channel multiplication by the classic interdependence theory. More precisely, Farrell and Newman (2019) have defined a new concept of weaponized interdependence: states that occupy central nodes of the network can have a latent coercive leverage, regardless of whether they choose to use it, whereas the original and more symmetrically pluralist concept (Keohane and Nye 2001) stipulates that the leverage must be exercised. The evidence suggests that China hasn't yet deliberately used this leverage. The other puzzle is, why have threats that are overwhelmingly not of military origin, resulted in an overwhelmingly militarised response? The answer lies in the securitization framework offered by Buzan et al., 1998: the success in framing Chinese-national safety as an existential threat was sufficient to unlock exceptional measures, which slower, more contained threats, debt servicing costs, glacial retreat were not able to command, interacting with Pakistan's civil-military institutional balance to create a securitised response mix even in the absence of a military component. Gwadar exemplifies a similar local phenomenon – the violence of the Baloch Liberation Army and the mobilisation of the Haq Do Tehreek are both tactical manifestations of the same underlying structure of grievance, and security measures aimed at eradicating one response preserves the other, the structural source of the pressure that drives both tactical responses. Last, the "vulnerability" concept introduced by Keohane and Nye (2001) is more useful for analysing the debt evidence found in Section 2 than the more limited question of whether China actively pursues leverage through debt. This scholarly consensus that the Chinese state is not engaging in deliberate asset-seizure is not contradictory with the fact that Chinese debt, which is traded commercially at relatively low rates, is the real source of vulnerability interdependence for Pakistan although it is not with intent to seize assets, which is a pure matter of China's goodwill, but it is a fact of structural imbalance in Pakistan's balance of payments which has direct implications on China's unilateral latitude in future negotiations.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The main objective of this article was to identify non-traditional security challenges that the China-Pakistan partnership will have to face after the launch of CPEC, analyse their impact on bilateral cooperation, and examine the policy response to these challenges. The evidence is conclusive: the China-Pakistan strategic partnership, which was built on mutual strategic interests, is not weaker because of CPEC, but it is different – it now rests on a combination of mutual strategic interests with structural reliance on China by Pakistan, and

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on the security architecture established since 2016 that has dampened the loudest symptoms of change, namely terrorism and insurgency, but not the quieter ones of the shift, such as the debt structure, the distributive grievance, and the Pakistan-China climate exposure. The article offers an empirical response in addition to a modest but specific theoretical contribution. It shows that, although Complex Interdependence Theory was conceived overwhelmingly in the context of the Western industrial democracies, and Non-Traditional Security Theory in the context of Southeast Asian regionalism, the two can be combined together and fruitfully analyzed in an asymmetric defence origin bilaterally dependent bilateral dyad, if the distinction between sensitivity and vulnerability is read with care: the low vulnerability in this article is not the pluralist alternative-seeking one envisioned by classical interdependence theory, but rather the structural dependency of this article, which can be applied to other Belt and Road corridors that share structural dependency with the secondary country. The following five recommendations come immediately. First, Pakistan's counterterrorism resourcing should shift towards intelligence-driven and community-level counterterrorism strategies to stem the recurrence of attacks rather than continue to rely on force expansion, considering that the trend in the process tracing suggests that since 2016, attacks have continued despite the deployment of additional troops. Secondly, the fisheries economy of Gwadar needs concrete, independently verifiable improvement along with effective enforcement against illegal fishing, and a clear increase in local employment without resorting to security measures as the way to deal with a distributive grievance. Thirdly, Pakistan should move for systematic negotiation of commercially priced Chinese debt in the process of being offered more concessionary terms, in conjunction with a project-insurance agreement that puts China on a commercial rather than goodwill basis. Fourth, the CPEC 2.0 climate-resilience and digital-governance aspects should be funded in accordance with their recognized risk and not be relegated as lesser priority projects to the corridor's security and industrial pillars. Fifth, the extension of Chinese security presence within Pakistan must be done in a transparent publicly debated legal process, otherwise the accountability issue raised in Section 6 will remain unchecked and not be worked out by design. This study's limitations must be clearly stated: The study is based on documentary rather than field-based evidence, because the real-world constraints on access are genuine in Balochistan; For some of the casualty and attribution figures cited in this study, there will be genuine problems of contention across credible sources, and this article has noted, but not resolved, such problems; and the evidence base for the digital-security dimension of this study is far less comprehensive than for the other areas of the study, and, as such, there can be greater levels of confidence in the conclusions made in this study on the other areas of the study than on this one. It is not clear if the wider, more diversified agenda of CPEC 2.0 will reduce the corridor's vulnerability to the threats listed in this article or whether it will merely manage the threats at a greater institutional level, but a study 2-3 years from now, when the record of CPEC 2.0 will have been written, would be positioned to shed light on these questions.

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