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Role of CPEC in Shaping Geopolitics of the Indian Ocean (2014–2024)

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Abstract

From 2014 to 2024, the geopolitical dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have been greatly impacted by the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a major initiative of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This paper investigates how CPEC alters economic interdependence, maritime security, and regional power dynamics. The study investigates strategic alignments between key powers, such as China, Pakistan, India, and the United States, using a qualitative analytical method. The results imply that CPEC is a geostrategic tool that increases China's access to the Arabian Sea, bolsters Pakistan's maritime significance, and heightens regional rivalry rather than only being an economic endeavor (Rahman et al., 2021).

Introduction

The rise of powerful regional powers threatens the unipolar order and could result in a multipolar world, marking a dramatic change in global dynamics in the twenty-first century. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a crucial part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a ground-breaking economic and infrastructure initiative that is transforming South Asia's geopolitical and economic environment. This study critically examines the complex implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), analyzing its role in promoting economic integration, bolstering bilateral ties, and changing power dynamics in South Asia. To ensure a fair assessment, it presents perspectives from China, Pakistan, India, and other stake holders (Manhas et al., 2025). Santos and Costa (2026) explain that influence outside of its traditional East and Southeast Asian territories was the aim of early initiatives like the Central Asian Republics Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program and the New Eurasian Land Bridge. These essential Connectivity measures culminated in China's 2013 introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a comprehensive worldwide plan

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Literature Review

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched under the broader framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has emerged as a transformative geo-economic and geopolitical project linking Western China to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan. Scholars widely interpret CPEC as more than an economic corridor; it is viewed as a strategic instrument reshaping regional alignments, maritime calculations, and power competition across South Asia and the Indian Ocean. Academic discourse from 2014 to 2024 highlights how CPEC intersects with traditional security concerns, economic interdependence, and great-power rivalry, particularly involving China, Pakistan, India, and the United States.

A substantial body of literature evaluates how CPEC intensifies regional power competition. Analysts argue that China’s expanding footprint in Pakistan through infrastructure, energy, and port development challenges existing strategic balances in South Asia. India perceives CPEC as a strategic encirclement, particularly because parts of the corridor pass through disputed territory in Gilgit-Baltistan. Meanwhile, the United States views CPEC within the larger context of China’s maritime expansion and strategic access points across the Indo-Pacific. Researchers note that CPEC alters the strategic calculus by enhancing China’s overland access to the sea, reducing its reliance on the Strait of Malacca, and projecting influence into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

The strategic importance of Gwadar Port is a central theme in the literature. Scholars describe Gwadar as a potential hub for trade, energy transit, and naval logistics. Its proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of global oil shipments pass, elevates its geostrategic value. Maritime scholars argue that Gwadar provides China and Pakistan with a vantage point over critical Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). Some studies emphasize its commercial potential, while others underscore its possible dual-use role in future naval strategy, contributing to debates about militarization versus economic development.

From a regional security perspective, literature from 2014–2024 explores both cooperative and conflictual implications of CPEC. On one hand, CPEC promotes economic integration, infrastructure connectivity, and regional trade, which could foster interdependence and stability. On the other hand, internal security challenges in Balochistan, insurgency threats, and geopolitical tensions with India create vulnerabilities. Scholars discuss how Pakistan has restructured its security architecture, including special security divisions, to safeguard CPEC projects. The corridor also encourages diplomatic engagement with neighboring states, including Afghanistan and Iran, for broader connectivity.

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The geopolitical significance of CPEC in the Indian Ocean Region is widely debated. Researchers link CPEC to China's broader maritime strategy and its network of ports across the IOR, sometimes described in strategic studies as a "string of pearls." The corridor strengthens China's capacity to participate in Indian Ocean affairs while reinforcing Pakistan's role as a maritime stakeholder. This shift has implications for naval balance, regional alliances, and maritime governance, prompting responses such as India's deepening partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia under Indo-Pacific frameworks.

Overall, the literature concludes that CPEC represents a convergence of geo-economics and geopolitics. It redefines regional power structures, enhances the strategic relevance of Gwadar, introduces new dimensions to regional security cooperation and contestation, and elevates the importance of the Indian Ocean in global strategic discourse.

Objectives

1. To evaluate how CPEC influences regional power competition.
2. To scrutinize the strategic importance of Gwadar Port and maritime routes.
3. To assess the implications of CPEC for regional security and cooperation (2014–2024).
4. To analyze the geopolitical significance of CPEC in the Indian Ocean Region.

5. Background

The Indian Ocean Region holds immense strategic importance due to its critical sea lanes, energy routes, and global trade connectivity. Approximately 80% of global oil trade passes through this region, making it a focal point of geopolitical competition.

CPEC, launched in 2013–14, connects China's Xinjiang region to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, providing China direct access to the Arabian Sea. This reduces dependence on the Malacca Strait and strengthens China's maritime reach (Rahman et al., 2021).

➤ CPEC changed in stages between 2014 and 2024:

Phase I: Energy and infrastructure development (2014–2020).

➤

Phase II (2020–2024): Regional connectivity, agriculture, and industrial cooperation.

The project has enhanced Pakistan's geostrategic importance while embedding China more deeply into the Indian Ocean geopolitics (Manhas et al., 2025).

Philosophical Theory (Theoretical Foundations)

1. Classical Geopolitics

Classical thinkers like Alfred Thayer Mahan emphasized sea power as the key to global dominance. CPEC aligns with this idea by strengthening China's maritime access and naval logistics in the Indian Ocean.

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2. Mackinder's Heartland Theory

Halford Mackinder argued that control over Eurasia determines global power. CPEC bridges continental (Eurasian landmass) and maritime domains, making it a hybrid geopolitical strategy.

3. Geoeconomic Theory

Modern geopolitics integrates economic tools into strategic competition. Infrastructure projects like CPEC serve both economic and political purposes, reflecting the fusion of geoeconomics and geopolitics.

4. Neoclassical Realism

This theory explains how domestic and international factors shape state behavior. CPEC reflects China's global ambitions and Pakistan's strategic needs within a competitive regional system.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a **Geoeconomic–Geopolitical Framework** to explain how major infrastructure initiatives operate simultaneously as development mechanisms and strategic instruments of statecraft. Within this lens, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a core component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is interpreted not merely as an economic corridor but as a multidimensional strategy that fuses trade, infrastructure, energy routes, and maritime access with long-term geopolitical objectives.

Core Propositions of the Framework

- **Economic instruments as tools of strategy:** States deploy infrastructure, trade corridors, ports, and connectivity projects to expand influence, secure supply chains, and shape regional orders without direct military confrontation.
- **Dual character of CPEC:** CPEC functions both as a development initiative for Pakistan and as a strategic pathway for China to access the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- **Energy security and influence projection:** By linking Western China to **Gwadar Port**, CPEC reduces China's dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints and enhances its geopolitical reach, while elevating Pakistan's geostrategic relevance.

Interplay Highlighted by the Framework

1. Power Politics

The framework situates CPEC within regional power competition involving China, Pakistan, India, and extra-regional actors. Infrastructure becomes a non-military means of shifting strategic balances and influencing alignments across South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

2. Economic Connectivity

Roads, railways, energy pipelines, and special economic zones foster interdependence, trade integration, and development. These economic links, however, are also pathways for strategic leverage and long-term influence.

3. Maritime Strategy

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Access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar enhances sea-land integration, strengthens oversight of vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and embeds CPEC within broader Indian Ocean maritime calculations.

Analytical Utility

Using this Goeconomic–Geopolitical Framework allows the study to interpret CPEC as a convergence point where **development**, **security**, and **strategy** intersect. It provides a coherent lens to analyze how economic connectivity projects reshape regional power structures, maritime dynamics, and state behavior between 2014 and 2024.

Conceptual Framework

This study conceptualizes how the **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor** drives changes in regional strategy and maritime geopolitics through a chain of connectivity and power projection.

Independent Variable

- **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)** as a connectivity and infrastructure system linking Western China to the Arabian Sea via **Gwadar Port**.

Intervening Variables

- **Regional security dynamics** (insurgency, border tensions, protection of projects)
- **Strategic rivalries** among China, India, and the United States
- **Maritime chokepoints** shaping energy and trade flows:
 - **Strait of Hormuz**
 - **Strait of Malacca**

Dependent Variables

- Geopolitical shifts in the Indian Ocean
- Evolution of maritime security architecture
- Regional alliances, alignments, and competition

Conceptual Link (Causal Chain)

CPEC → Strategic Connectivity → Increased Chinese Presence → Regional Power Shift → Geopolitical Transformation

This framework illustrates how an infrastructure corridor translates into strategic presence. CPEC enhances land–sea integration, which facilitates sustained Chinese engagement in the Indian Ocean while elevating Pakistan’s maritime role. The intervening variables—security conditions, rivalries, and chokepoints—shape how strongly and in what direction this influence materializes, ultimately producing observable geopolitical and maritime outcomes across the region (2014–2024).

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Discussion: CPEC and Indian Ocean Geopolitics (2014–2024)

1) Strategic Expansion of China

Through the **China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, China advances a geoeconomic route that mitigates its “Malacca Dilemma” by reducing reliance on the **Strait of Malacca**. Overland access to the Arabian Sea via **Gwadar Port** enables more direct connectivity to Middle Eastern energy markets and embeds China more deeply in Indian Ocean affairs. This land–sea integration supports long-term maritime influence without requiring immediate force projection, aligning infrastructure with strategic reach.

2) Rise of Gwadar Port

Gwadar has evolved into a pivotal strategic node. Its location near the **Strait of Hormuz** positions it along vital energy sea lanes. Scholars assess its potential as a future logistics and naval support point, a commercial gateway to Central Asia, and a catalyst for enhancing Pakistan’s maritime centrality in regional trade and security calculations.

3) Regional Power Competition

India interprets CPEC as a strategic challenge and has invested in alternatives such as **Chabahar Port** to offset Gwadar’s rise. The United States, within its Indo-Pacific approach, supports India’s balancing role against China’s expanding footprint. Meanwhile, the China–Pakistan partnership has deepened across economic, diplomatic, and security domains, reinforcing a durable alignment in South Asia.

4) Maritime Security Dynamics

CPEC’s expansion correlates with heightened naval attention in the Indian Ocean, raising concerns about militarization and competition over Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). As connectivity improves, maritime presence by regional and extra-regional powers has increased, reflecting the strategic value of trade routes and chokepoints linked to CPEC’s endpoints.

5) Challenges

- Persistent security threats, particularly militancy in Balochistan
- Political and governance instability affecting project continuity
- Questions regarding debt, returns on investment, and long-term economic sustainability

Despite these constraints, CPEC remains a decisive factor shaping regional geopolitics, maritime strategy, and power alignments across South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Summary

From 2014 to 2024, CPEC has transformed the Indian Ocean’s geopolitical landscape by:

- Enhancing China’s strategic outreach
- Elevating Pakistan’s geostrategic role
- Intensifying regional rivalries
- Integrating economic and military dimensions of geopolitics

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It represents a shift from traditional military dominance to infrastructure-driven strategic influence.

Conclusion

CPEC is a pivotal project redefining the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region. It reflects the transition from classical geopolitics to geoeconomic statecraft, where infrastructure and connectivity shape global power dynamics. While it offers economic opportunities and regional integration, it also intensifies strategic competition, particularly involving China, India, and the United States.

Ultimately, CPEC's long-term impact will depend on its sustainability, regional cooperation, and the evolving balance of power in the Indian Ocean. It stands as a defining case of 21st-century geopolitics, where economic corridors become instruments of strategic influence.

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