



Commentaries Series
Commentary #2, November 2024

BRIDGES AND BARRIERS: THE POLITICAL AND SECURITY LANDSCAPE OF CPEC

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Bridges and Barriers: The Political and Security Landscape of CPEC

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At the center of turmoil and conflicts in South Asia lies the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key initiative of China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). This ambitious project aims to extend China's capital, technology, and industrial capabilities while enhancing regional connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe through transportation, energy, and telecommunications infrastructure.¹ The objectives of the BRI include facilitating trade, fostering policy coordination, ensuring unimpeded trade, promoting financial integration, and strengthening people-to-people connections.² As of 2023, China has signed over 150 memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with various countries.³

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The most influential of all is CPEC. Officially announced in April 2015, this project encompasses 62 billion USD in investment and is a 3,000 km long economic corridor with a collection of highways, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, and a fiber optic network connecting China's Kashgar and Pakistan's Gwadar.

related incidents in the region. As a result of this uptick in violence, the Pakistani government has created a task force to protect CPEC projects and exercised extremely restrictive/oppressive measures such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.¹² The Baloch Students Council claims that enforced disappearances are part of a political strategy to silence opposition and resistance.¹³ Compiling data from the SATP, roughly 174 Baloch allegedly forcibly disappeared in 2024 (as of November 1). Those who disappear are journalists, students, human rights activists, and political workers.

While not intended by China, CPEC has heightened tensions between Pakistan and India, fueled ethnic conflicts and insurgencies, and contributed to an unstable environment in South Asia. These challenges are hurdles that must be addressed. Leaders in China and Pakistan must prioritize equitable economic development, protect human rights, and resolve geopolitical disputes through diplomacy. The international community should pressure the Pakistani government to provide information about forcibly disappeared individuals and enhance human rights protections in Balochistan. Efforts should be made to foster dialogue and cooperation among China, India, and Pakistan to prevent the escalation of interstate conflicts. While the BRI has the potential to benefit the region, it also poses risks to stability. Thus, it is crucial that both China and Pakistan manage projects responsibly.

¹² SATP, "Balochistan: Assessment- 2024". Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century?: Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, 77-78.

¹³ The Balochistan Post, "Balochistan: Baloch Students Demand Release of Suhail and Faseeh amid Enforced Disappearances", *The Balochistan Post*, 11 February 2024, <https://aninews.in/news/world/asia/balochistan-baloch-students-demand-release-of-suhail-and-faseeh-amid-enforced-disappearances20241102135432/>