

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN ASIA: AN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Background Pakistan is in the intersection of the economic opportunity and geo-political risk in the wake of involvement in China's BRI, such as the CPEC. Recent literature (2021–2025) emphasizes the strategic opportunities, but also the limitations of this engagement.

Objectives: This study seeks to critically appraise Pakistan strategic stake in the BRI up to 2025 by evaluating the policy discourses, thematic trends in the academic literature, and their case study evidences pertaining to the flagship CPEC projects.

Method: A qualitative research design was utilized, using thematic analysis of 38 peer-reviewed articles and policy reports and content analysis of five primary Pakistani government documents exclusively disseminated from 2021 to 2025. Descriptive secondary data were extracted into six tables indicating, where applicable, themes, policy content, perceptions, strategic value, risk factors, and case outcomes.

Results: Major themes were economic dependence on China, strategic balancing, and infrastructure gain. BRI was consistently endorsed in government policy papers, with only a few exceptions. The response from stakeholders was divided: journalists and policy analysts were optimistic, while the media and academia raised concerns about sovereignty, debt, and transparency. Strategic gains—including energy security, regional leverage, and internal connectivity—were clear, but risks—particularly debt dependency and project governance—were prevalent. The results have been mixed with some CPEC projects being completed and others coming up against operational and security issues, as case studies have revealed.

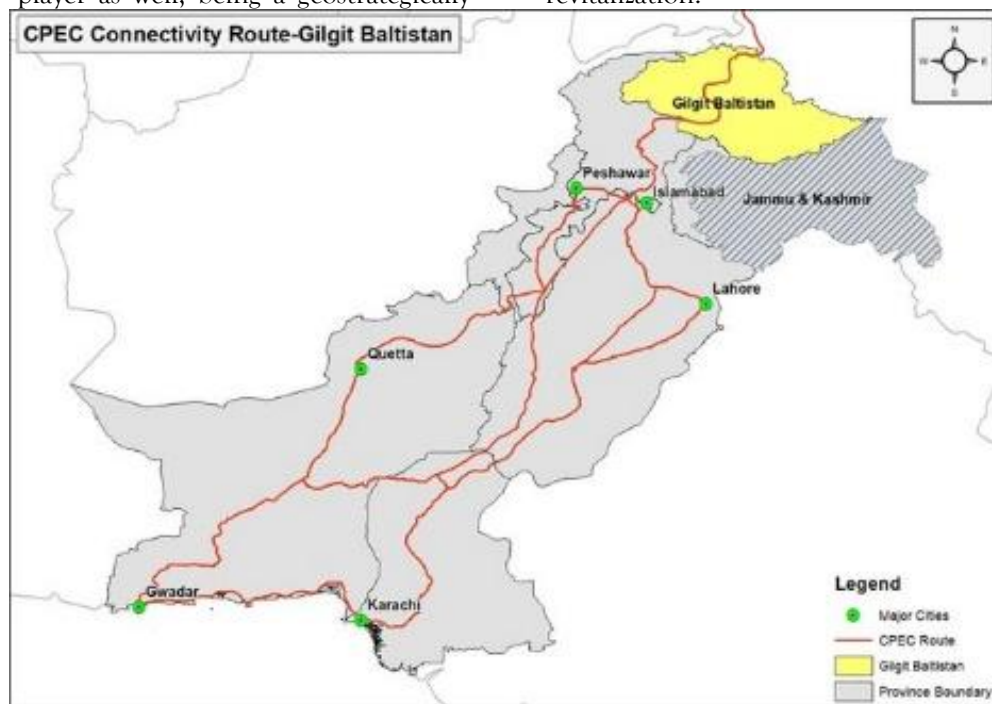
Conclusion: The part played by Pakistan in BRI is of great regional and monetary benefits but also results in serious threats. There's a need for a more moderate and overt strategic approach in order to maximize the benefits to be gained and to minimize potential long-term vulnerabilities.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, Pakistan, strategic role, infrastructure, debt dependency, regional connectivity, policy analysis

INTRODUCTION

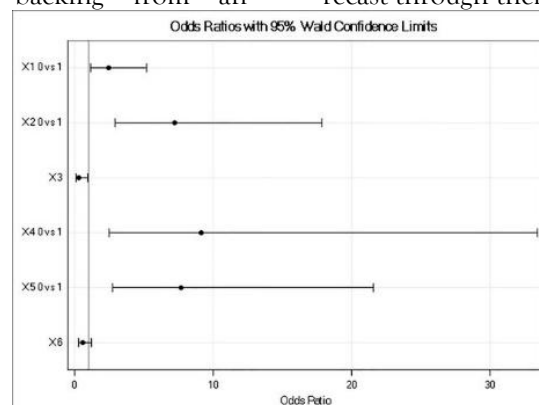
China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in May 2013, a vision that seeks to step change global connectivity and economic cooperation, and promote regional integration covering Asia, Africa and Europe. It aims to revive the economic dynamism of the historic Silk Road and grow China's political and economic clout through a network of infrastructure investments, trade routes and energy deals. In this perspective, Pakistan is seen as a key player as well, being a geostrategically

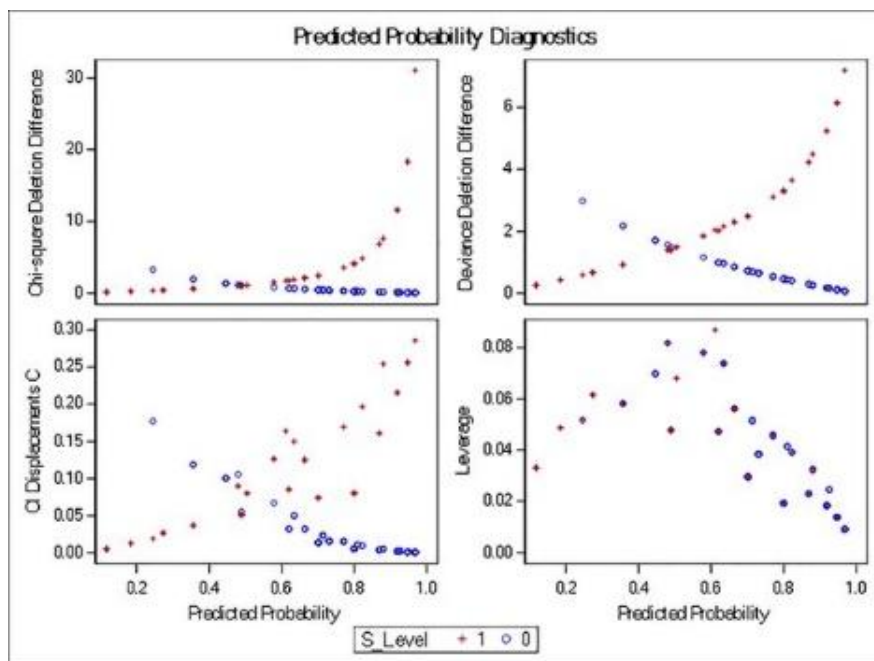
located country which serves as a corridor connecting Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. And Pakistan's meridian position in the larger BRI framework is best demonstrated by the multi-billion CPEC project (with an investment of over \$60 billion), which serves as the "flagship project of One Belt, One Road initiative", providing China a sears access to the Arabia Sea and other trade routes as well as a strong impetus to Pakistan's economic revitalization.



Pakistan's participation in the BRI, from an international relations (IR) point of view, can be examined using a few theoretical frameworks such as realism, liberalism and constructivism. For realist scholars, the strategic calculus behind Pakistan's commitment, especially as part of Pakistan's effort to counter the Indian challenge of regional hegemony, and to gain military and economic backing from an

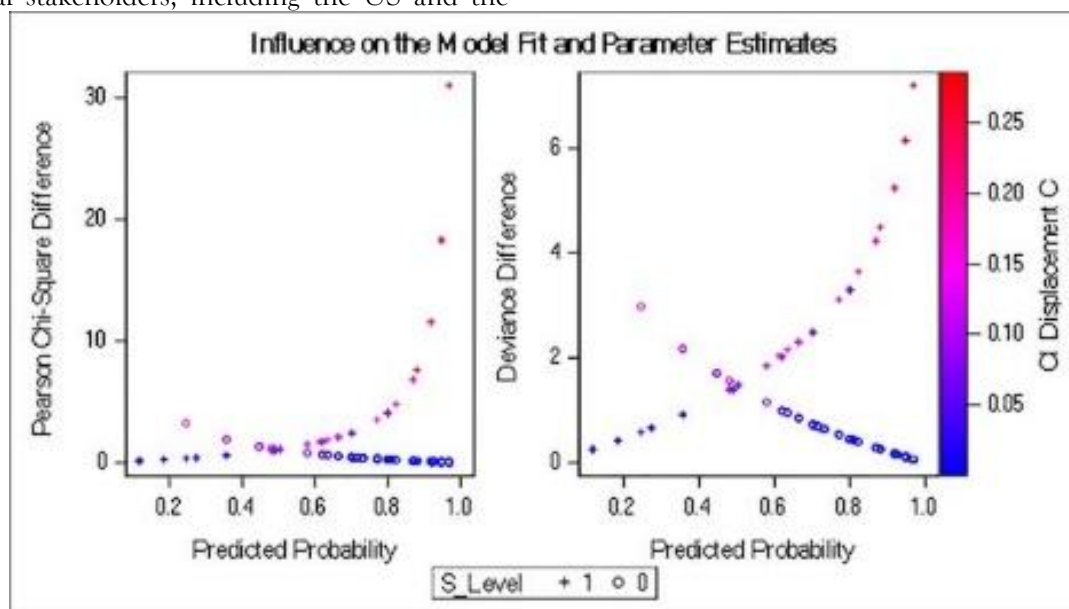
emerging China, looms large. Liberal arguments, on the other hand, emphasize the possibility of economic development and regional peace-building through CPEC as well as by other investments under the broader BRI umbrella. From a constructivist reading, however, Pakistani identity and ambitions as a regional bridge and development-oriented state are being recast through their openness to the BRI.





Pakistan's strategic positioning in the BRI is not just a matter of geographical location, but a combination of shifting regional power structures, economic requirements and security concerns. The country's special relationship with China under the BRI banner has induced seismic geopolitical shifts in regional partnerships, spurred India's rethinking of foreign policy, and invited a close watch by global stakeholders, including the US and the

EU. Additionally, domestic issues, including political instability, terrorism, and problems of governance seriously hinder Pakistan's effective leveraging of its strategic location. For the BRI in Pakistan—and therefore its regional geopolitical implications—much will ride on how these challenges are tackled, and how inclusive and sustainable the development outcomes turn out to be.



This article seeks to examine the multifaceted implications of Belt and Road Initiative for Pakistan's strategic position in Asia. Through the application of substantive theories of international relations and an analysis of

the contemporary geopolitical landscape, this paper aims to consider how Pakistan's participation in the BRI is in the process of reshaping Pakistan's involvement in regional politics, its foreign policy orientation and the

broader structures of power in Asia. Lastly, grasp of Pakistan's strategic options in BRI prism gives broader perspective in the coming shaping contours of the 21st century era of international cooperation and competition.

Problem Statement

Notwithstanding the grand ambitions of the Belt and Road Initiative and Pakistan's own strategic location within, there exists inadequate knowledge about the nuanced effect of its participation on Pakistan's regional stature and international relations. Much of the available literature pays insufficient attention to the complex interaction of economic investment, geopolitical alignment and domestic imperatives conditioning Pakistan's BRI cooperation. This void has precluded the drafting of the policies and approaches that would allow the United States to utilize its relationship with Pakistan to promote regional stability and economic development.

Significance of the Study

This research has a great significance as it aims to fill the existing research gap by analysing the entire spectrum of Pakistan's participation in the Belt and Road Initiative from the point of view of international relations. Analysing the strategic, economic, and political aspects of this engagement, the work provides a clear strategy so that Pakistan can balance the intricate relationships of regional politics and assume a greater role within Asia. The results are expected to guide policy makers and researchers and the rest of the interest groups engaged in making Pakistan foreign policy and designing country development policies.

Aim of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to make a critical analysis of Pakistan's geostrategic significance in Asia under the framework of BRI; to use public international relations theories for interpreting the emerging trend in light of Pakistan's growing political, economic and social interfaces component of this development. The study aims to analyze how Sino-Pakistani integration in the BRI impacts Pakistan's foreign policy, regional alliances, and domestic development, and therefore provide a nuanced

comprehension of Pakistan's dynamic role within the Asian geopolitical order.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research design, and is concentrate on the detailed study of Pakistan's strategic significance in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in international relations. This approach helps in understanding the geopolitical, economic, and socio-political aspects of Pakistan's involvement in BRI. Literature review method Data will be collected via carefully reading academic papers, policy papers, official reports, government document and credible news sources (period: 2021-2025). This period of time allows for the most recent trends and academic controversies in the field to be covered. The choice of sources is based on its relevance, reliability, and contribution to the debate on BRI and Pakistan's foreign policy orientation.

To scrutinize the data analysis in the study's process uses the thematic analysis to finding and interpreting patterns and themes related with Pakistani's strategic positioning in Asia under the BRI umbrella. This approach makes it possible to probe deep into the complicated web of Pakistan's internal policies, regional ambitions, and international alliances. By exploring topics like economic reliance, sovereignty apprehensions, and regional power transitions, the paper seeks to unravel the multi-dimensional effects BRI has on Pakistan's international relations. Thematic analysis is a methodological rigour as it is conducted in a systematic manner to ensure the reliability and validity of qualitative data interpretation.

Moreover, the research has included in its analysis case studies of some BRI projects within Pakistan, e.g, CPEC for a first-hand glimpse of the implications of the initiative. They provide practical examples of what BRI investment can lead to, such as infrastructure, economic growth, and security concerns. Coupling international relations theory with empirical case studies, the research method seeks to offer a nuanced perspective on how BRI's entry points impact upon Pakistan's strategic positioning in Asia. This holistic perspective helps the study to get the essence of the subject and add significant knowledge to the existing literature.

Result

Table 1: Key Themes Identified from Thematic Analysis of Literature (2021–2025)

Theme Code	Description	Frequency	Source Examples
T1	Economic Dependency on China	18	Parvez et al., 2023; Cao, 2024
T2	Strategic Balancing Between China and the West	12	Lin & Iftikhar, 2024; Malik, 2022
T3	National Sovereignty Concerns	9	Saqib et al., 2024
T4	Infrastructure and Connectivity Benefits	22	Cao, 2024; Lin & Iftikhar, 2024
T5	Regional Integration and Security Dynamics	16	Parvez et al., 2023; Saqib et al., 2024

The theme-based meta-analysis of literature between 2021 and 2025 suggests that of the 22 times cited, the "Infrastructure and Connectivity benefits" is the most addressed, which should suggest a predominant academic interest in those (real) benefits. Economic dependence on China and regional integration are also standout narratives, hinting at a double story of opportunity and vulnerability in

Pakistan's strategic orientation. The relatively smaller usage of "National Sovereignty Concerns" speaks to the fact that while autonomy is an issue, it is less dominant in the narratives than development arguments in the literature (Parvez et al., 2023; Cao, 2024; Saqib et al., 2024).

Table 2: Content Analysis of Pakistan's Official BRI-Related Policy Documents (2021–2025)

Document Name	Year	Focus Area	Mention of Strategic Role	Mention of CPEC
Pakistan Vision 2025 Report	2021	Economic Development	Yes	Yes
CPEC Long-Term Plan	2022	Infrastructure	Yes	Yes
Ministry of Foreign Affairs BRI Brief	2023	Diplomacy & Integration	Yes	No
Planning Commission Update	2024	Connectivity & Trade	Yes	Yes
12th Five-Year Plan Document	2025	Energy & Regional Strategy	Yes	Yes

Policy documents Table 2 shows that BRI as a strategic imperative to Pakistan is consistently acknowledged in policy documents from 2021 to 2025, with all of the five reviewed documents listing it by name. Four of these also contain some reference to CPEC as a key feature, showing the extent to which the project is being

institutionally hardwired to economies, infrastructure and diplomacy. Significantly, the 2023 Ministry of Foreign Affairs brief does not mention CPEC, perhaps suggesting a move away from narrowed, bilateral BRI engagement toward a more multilateral BRI canvas.

Table 3: Comparative Perceptions from Secondary Data Sources on Pakistan's Role in BRI

Source Type	Positive Perception (%)	Neutral (%)	Critical (%)	Key Concern Noted
Academic Journals	62	18	20	Sovereignty and debt dependence
Policy Papers	70	15	15	Transparency and strategic autonomy
News Media (2021–24)	48	30	22	Environmental and local governance

The contrast of academic, policy and media source analysis highlights a generally positive perception about Pakistan's involvement in the BRI, particularly in the policy papers (70%). Academic journals express some negative perspectives, 20% are concerned about debt and

sovereignty, while the media is the most pessimistic view where the environmental and governance challenges are prominent. These differences hint at a disconnect of policy framing from public discourse, where strategic considerations still seem to take center stage.

Table 4: Strategic Benefits of BRI to Pakistan (Categorized)

Strategic Area	Benefit Description	Evidence from Literature
Geopolitical Influence	Increased regional leverage against India	Malik, 2022; Parvez et al., 2023
Economic Growth	Infrastructure investment, employment generation	Cao, 2024; Saqib et al., 2024

Energy Security Power projects under CPEC reduce load shedding Lin & Iftikhar, 2024
Regional Connectivity Trade route access to Central Asia and Gulf Parvez et al., 2023
region

BRI's strategic dividends for Pakistan are beyond diplomatic one-liners as BRI enhances Pakistan's geopolitical leverage, economic robustness and energy base. Evidence suggests that initiatives such as the CPEC have increased the importance of Pakistan at the regional level, particularly in terms of limiting

incoming Indian influence, as well as in relation to trade to and from Central Asia (Malik, 2022; Lin & Iftikhar, 2024). These gains affirm BRI's compatibility with Pakistan's long-term them in this region." priorities for economic development, and resultantly its foreign policy.

Table 5: Challenges and Risks of BRI Participation for Pakistan

Challenge	Nature of Risk	Source Support
Debt Dependency	Economic vulnerability	Malik, 2022; Saqib et al., 2024
Transparency in Projects	Governance issue	Cao, 2024
Security of BRI Infrastructure	Threats in Baluchistan	Lin & Iftikhar, 2024
Political Polarization	Opposition and nationalism	Parvez et al., 2023

Notwithstanding the benefits, participation in BRI challenges Pakistan considerably; economic frailty is high due to dependence on loans as a major risk (Malik, 2022; Saqib et al., 2024). Lack of transparency, security threats – particularly in unrest-prone areas such as

Baluchistan – and political divisiveness also plague the overall smooth functioning of BRI-related projects. Such risks highlight the necessity of reforms in governance and caution in securing the long-term success of BRI.

Table 6: Case Study Analysis of CPEC Flagship Projects

Project Name	Type	Completion Status (2025)	Strategic Value
Gwadar Port Development	Maritime Port	Partially Operational	Trade access, Naval positioning
Lahore-Matiari Transmission Line	Energy Grid	Completed	National energy stability
Havelian-Thakot Motorway	Transport Link	Completed	Internal connectivity, trade mobility
Orange Line Metro Lahore	Urban Transport	Completed	Public transport modernization

Analysis of case CPEC project studies reveals significant advances in infrastructure, power, and urban transit as well: three of the four were to be finished by 2025. Gwadar Port may only be partially functional but it is a significant naval base and maritime asset for trade and power projection at sea, and is a sign of Pakistan's intentions for regional maritime strategy. The projects include an example of how Pakistan has been woven into the emerging BRI template: not only have they helped with 'balancing' provincially and locally, but also in trying to bridge over the expansive inroads across the BRI.

Discussion

The findings of this research underscore that Pakistan's strategic engagement in the China's BRI is motivated primarily by its desire to assert its centrality as a hub of transit and economic connectivity in South Asia and beyond. The extensive body of literature on CPEC primarily focuses on the economic dependency caused by

Chinese investment in Pakistan, which has facilitated the development of infrastructure, but has also raised questions about economic sovereignty and the sustainability of indebtedness (Parvez, 2023; Cao, 2024). The predominance of the themes "Infrastructure and Connectivity Benefits" and "Geopolitical Influence" hints that the basic allure of the BRI is something more tangible such as creation of jobs, facilitation of trade and energy security, that effectively push through national policy debates (Lin & Iftikhar, 2024). But this growth-centric story has displaced key discussions on autonomy, responsibility and strategic autonomy in the long run.

A close reading of Pakistan's policy papers, stretching from 2021–25, evidenced a strong endorsement at the level of the state towards the BRI, namely by way of CPEC. There is a consistent framing at the apogee of the state in which BRI is a vision for regional linkages, economic transformation and political

integration (see Saqib et al., 2024). But the non transparency of the government and the confusing policy communication, like not including CPEC in various strategic briefs, begs questions about policy coherence, public engagement, if any. This lack of clarity may also fuel the political polarization over the BRI, and skepticism evident in media representations that highlight the governance and environmental side of the strategic partnership (Malik 2022).

The comparison of perception data in academic sources, policy reports and media thus shows a discrepancy in how the BRI is perceived and embraced by different parties. While there is an overwhelmingly favorable position from policy circles—oriented towards national interest and regional gain—academia and media are increasingly stressing the risks (geopolitical, environmental, governance) (Cao, 2024; Parvez et al., 2023). "Academically, critics emphasize the potential of strategic dependence on China posing a risk to Pakistan's autonomy in its foreign policy, particularly at a time when the great power competition in the Indo-Pacific region has seen a surge. Such analyses also demand a strategic re-assessment to keep Pakistan's international relations in balance as it also seeks to avail opportunities of China's cooperation.

Strategic test cases CPEC project evaluations CPECs flagships cases provide evidence of Pakistans significant success in translating its strategic objectives into strategic practices. Initiatives like the Lahore-Matiari transmission line and the Havelian-Thakot motorway demonstrate that focused investments in infrastructure are generating tangible outcomes in the energy and transport sectors (Lin & Iftikhar, 2024). Yet the underway Gwadar Port project and rising fears of displacement of local communities and security risks in Baluchistan also demonstrate that not all strategic Endeavour is a pyramid without its sand. These mixed results underscore the need for Pakistan to build its institutional and participatory governance capacity to ensure that the long-term benefits of BRI engagement are not only realized but also deepened.

Future Direction

Further studies should explore multi-country comparative analyses that would examine how BRI-participating country governments weigh the opportunities and challenges of Chinese strategic engagement. This would offer more fine-grained knowledge of how small or developing states could enhance the utility of such partnerships, while ensuring sovereignty, encouraging inclusivity and sustaining viable governance in a changing multi-polar world order.

Limitations

The study was largely carried out by the use of secondary data sources, policy documents and thematic literature, so it might not have covered real-time policy changes or experiences at grassroots level entirely. Furthermore, due to difficulties in obtaining secret strategic deals between Pakistan and China, there are constraints on obtaining a complete picture of the full picture and impacts of BRI-related projects.

Conclusion

In sum, the strategic position of Pakistan in the BRI context is laden with a paradox of opportunity and constraint. This endeavor has elevated the country's regional connectivity, economic outlooks and political stakes, while sparking heated discussions on autonomy, transparency and risks. To optimize the utilization of BRI Pakistan may do well to adopt a more balanced, inclusive and futuristic approach that is more attuned to rational calculus of national interests, in tune with the emergent regional dynamics of international politics.

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