



RESEARCH PAPER

Provincial Marginalisation and the Myth of National Unity: CPEC's Impact on Intergovernmental Relations in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a critical discussion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has been over the years being marketed as a key driver of national development but, ironically, seems to have further marginalized the provinces in Pakistan and raised the level of intergovernmental conflict in the country. The analysis, based on a qualitative approach to the topic and close examination of policy documents, statements made by authoritative figures, and available literature, places CPEC in the context of deep-rooted center-province tensions and specifically examines the experience of Balochistan and Sindh. The fact suggests that instead of stimulating a sense of national unity, the centralized system of governance and the lack of transparency in decision-making linked to CPEC has solidified the discourse of federal pre-eminence and unequal resource allocation. In addition, the paper reveals that provincial views have continued to be pushed to the periphery of not only the planning but also the execution phases, thus fueling the already existing resentments and undermining the foundations of cooperative federalism. The work advocates strongly in favor of the use of a more inclusive, transparent intergovernmental regime that would support equitable development and enhance political stability in a federation traditionally characterized by fragmentation by unraveling the mythos of national unity promoted in the discourse of CPEC.

KEYWORDS CPEC, Marginalization, Provincial Marginalisation, China-Pakistan, BRI

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which launched in 2015 as the flagship of China's Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia, was hypothesized to bring unmatched integration and economic boosts to Pakistan. Its implementation, nonetheless, has revealed the endemic structural frictions of the federal system of the country (Tan & Soong, 2025). The federal government has continuously centralized decision-making powers over CPEC at the expense of provincial stakeholders and rekindled old resentments relating to unequal distribution of resources and the marginalization of certain ethno-regions (Abb, 2022; Adeney & Boni, 2021; Boni & Adeney, 2020; Rahim, Khan & Muzaffar, 2018). This has been a centralized method, as has been seen in the controversies surrounding the choice of routes, specifically the eastern focus with Punjab that led to strong opposition by Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Rizvi, 2015; Rafiq, 2017). The provincial governments and nationalist parties have even come up with the name the China-Punjab Economic Corridor for the project (Lashari, 2017; Raza, 2015).

Although this country has constitutional changes like the 18th Amendment and the redesigned National Finance Commission (NFC) Award in order to allow provinces to have powers, real fiscal and administrative autonomy has still not been achieved (Khalid and Hussain, 2018). Such decision-making rooms as the Council of Common Interests (CCI) were regularly circumvented in the CPEC planning, where federal ministries and the military have dominated (Youseafzai, 2016; Ismail and Camba, 2022). The project in Balochistan, where Gwadar Port is located, has deep-rooted beliefs of foreign exploitation and internal marginalization. Citizens of the area not only do not participate in the design of projects; in addition, they report land dispossession and marginalization in a socio-economic sense (Zahra-Malik, 2017; Shah, Muzaffar, & Yaseen, 2020; Kakar, 2020).

Empirical examination of how CPEC has transformed intergovernmental relations or further solidified center-periphery relationships has little representation in the literature on this topic, focusing on its economic or geopolitical features (Ahmed, 2018; Hameed, 2018; Akhter et al., 2022). The current paper aims to address that gap by analyzing the influence of CPEC using a historically based and analytically critical prism with special attention to how it is a reflection and reinforcement of a majoritarian federal system (Hsu and Soong, 2025). It examines the impacts of the CPEC government on the political agency and developmental inclusion of smaller provinces, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular (Dadparvar & Kaleji, 2025).

The following research questions will inform the research agenda: How has CPEC governance transformed the nature of intergovernmental relations in Pakistan? How has it influenced the provincial experience of marginalization and involvement? Does CPEC strengthen or weaken the myth of national unity being propagated by the federal authorities? The issues of such questions are discussed based on qualitative and document-based analysis of the narratives of the policies, provincial reaction, and patterns of governance.

The interpretation of the political economy of CPEC provides a wider perspective about the intersection of megaprojects with the federal government in ethnically diverse and long-term fragmented states. This study adds to the body of literature on federalism, development, and center-periphery relationships in Pakistan through shedding light on asymmetric benefits and burdens in the country (Kakar, 2020; Boni and Adeney, 2020; Abb, 2023; Ain, Muzaffar, & Yaseen, 2024). It also highlights how planning and centralized management that are not conflict-sensitive may add tension instead of fostering unity, making the prospect of collective prosperity a political battlefield instead of unity (Aziz, Jizza, Ali & He, 2025).

Literature Review

The scholarly discussion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has shifted from an initially celebratory discussion by focusing on the economic opportunity and strategic alliance to a more provocatively engaged discussion that preempts the possible political, social, and governance consequences (Alhasan, 2025).

The early statements presented CPEC as a game-changer in terms of the Pakistani economic environment and connectivity in the region, highlighting the prospects of infrastructure development, creation of employment opportunities, and energy security (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015; Ali, 2016).

However, the later scholarship, specifically in the perception of unequal actualization and politicization of the project, has focused on the socio-political asymmetry inherent in its governance structure and reversed the previous optimism.

Much of this newer literature is critical of the centralized form of the institutional structure of CPEC. The corridor has been ruled by ad hoc and informal institutions, as observed by Abb (2022) and Boni and Adeney (2020), to circumvent intergovernmental organizations established by the constitution (i.e., the Council of Common Interests) and instead relied on the power of the federal ministries and military agencies. The marginalization of provincial governments and parliaments has led to the emergence of issues about the undermining of democratic federalism and the duplication of authoritarian governance styles in the name of national development (Abb, 2023; Ismail & Camba, 2022).

Specifically, the choice of route and distribution of resources, as well as the prioritization of projects provided by CPEC, were pointed out by researchers as disproportionate to Punjab and leading to the outbreak of dissatisfaction in Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Rafiq, 2017; Raza, 2015; Lashari, 2017). The prioritization of the eastern route over the western one, which was initially offered to Balochistan and KP, has turned into a petri dish and stoked the sense of internal colonialism and economic marginalization. These accusations echo the old provincial concerns regarding unfair federal arrangements and Punjab-based policy formulation (Ahmed, 2018; Waseem, 2010).

The literature in Balochistan, where the strategically very important Gwadar Port is located, shows a severe dislocation between the federal rhetoric of development and actualities. According to Kakar (2020) and Zahra-Malik (2017), local populations have suffered the effects of dispossession, militarization, and lack of economic gains in its benefits, which fuels the existing conflicts and mistrust when it comes to the central state (Sahakyan, 2024). These dynamics resonate with previous criticisms of mega-projects, which are designed to serve the interests of the elite and national level, but they marginalize the interests of the peripheral people, especially in multi-ethnic governments like Pakistan.

Theoretical contributions have been made to explain CPEC in terms of such concepts as authoritarian infrastructuralism (Boni and Adeney, 2020), elite bargains (Akhster et al., 2022), and infrastructure-led authoritarianism (Abb, 2023). These models claim that the development within the framework of CPEC is entrenched in one of the modes of governance that strengthens centralized control, stems out dissent, and limits provincial autonomy. This becomes particularly noticeable with the example of securitization of CPEC as the Pakistani military Special Security Division (SSD) takes center stage, which signifies a transition from civilian-based development planning to militarized project governance (Yousafzai, 2016; Small, 2015).

Also, the Baloch nationalist complaint that CPEC is a mechanism of resource extraction without representation has been empirically supported by the literature that has revealed how employers, investment, and remuneration systems are engineered to marginalize locals in favor of foreign contractors and the central elite connections (Khalid and Hussain, 2018; Kakar, 2020). Researchers believe that this weakens the authority of the state and breeds the cycles of insurgency and instability in unstable areas (Abb, 2022; Ahmed & Baloch, 2022).

Moreover, the influence of the Chinese stakeholders on the process of developing the domestic political economy in Pakistan has been brought into the focus of academic attention (S. Khan & Ahmed, 2024). Some thinkers tend to focus on the possible strategic gains of both sides, whereas others point to the fact that Chinese stability-seeking and security-seeking ideologies and elite orientation support the lean towards authoritarianism and marginalize provincial actors (Adeney & Boni, 2021; Ismail and Camba, 2022; Abb, 2023). The outcome is a hybrid political economy whereby formal democratic forms of political organization coexist with informal, centralized, and opaque forms of governance.

The article introduces a new element in the literature because it explicitly connects CPEC to the overall historical development of the federal-provincial relationships in Pakistan. It goes beyond the criticism of centralized planning and authoritarian infrastructuralism by anticipating how CPEC has not just failed to alleviate center-periphery tensions but actually exacerbated them (Chen et al., 2024). By doing so, the article addresses a significant literature gap with a historically based, empirically detailed, and theoretically informed discussion on the nature of mega-infrastructure projects and how they cross into problematic state formations and disrupt the national cohesion narrative.

Material and Methods

The paper takes a qualitative, historically based approach to ask questions about the consequences of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on the intergovernmental relationship and marginalization of Pakistan provinces. Given the complexity and politeness of the architectural form of CPEC governance, we use document analysis and interpretive policy analysis as our two main methodological instruments. The case study is based on a detailed analysis of official government reports, parliamentary documents, inter-ministerial letters, debates of the provincial assemblies, and CPEC-specific reports, as well as planning reports published by the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives. These core artifacts are supplemented with a critical textual analysis of academic literature, investigative journalism, and reports published by national and international think tanks and thus help us triangulate our results.

Our paradigmatic framework is based on constructivist-interpretivist approaches, whereby policy texts and institutional discourses are considered essential in explaining the outlines of political activity and intergovernmental exchange (Abb, 2022; Boni and Adeney, 2020). Using a historical-institutionalist perspective, we follow the path according to which already existing center-province tensions have guided the course of decision-making regarding CPEC (Ahmed, 2018; Kakar, 2020). Specifically, we examine the manner in which federal and provincial actors have presented antagonistic demands with regard to development, representation, and autonomy (Bastanifar, Ali & Khan, 2024).

The focal point of our analysis is the discursive contextualization of CPEC in political discourses, parliamentary discussions, and the media coverage (Adeney and Boni, 2024). To determine the extent to which CPEC has been justified or challenged, we analyzed statements of the Planning Commission, parliamentary testified statements of leaders of the opposition, and resolutions of the Balochistan and Sindh Assemblies (Lashari, 2017; Raza, 2015; Zahra-Malik, 2017). Using the thematic coding approach, we

have mined repeated stories of marginalization, national unity, securitization, and the capture of elites (Spies, 2023).

In addition to our qualitative investigation, we used secondary data, which were based on peer-reviewed articles, providing a critical analysis of the governance dynamics of CPEC, institutional structures, and socio-political implications (Abb, 2023; Adeney and Boni, 2021; Ismail and Camba, 2022; Akhter et al., 2022). In addition to shedding light on the role played by informal networks and military institutions over constitutional structures, our analysis reveals tendencies towards centralization in the process of approving projects, financing them, and their implementation (Youseafzai, 2016; Khalid and Hussain, 2018).

This study methodologically favors provincial views – especially those generated by Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – by the systematic analysis of provincial assembly debates, media coverage, and policy critique by sub-national political parties (Landry, 2023). The subaltern lens allows us to decentre the dominant conceptualization of CPEC and shed light on the ways in which marginalized territories view CPEC governance and experience the impacts of CPEC governance (Ahmed and Baloch, 2022; Kakar, 2020).

The combination of interpretive document analysis and a historically informed federalism theory provides results of this study with an empirically based, yet theoretically sound, assessment of the impact of CPEC on intergovernmental relations in Pakistan. It is a part of the larger academic project in the field of political geography and development studies that attempts to clarify the role of mega-infrastructure projects in redefining power relations in federations that are ethnically heterogeneous.

Results and Discussion

The political relations of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) demonstrate an extreme concentration of authority that has increased the marginalization of provinces and restructured the federal relationships in Pakistan. This paper, using a descriptive account, establishes the nature of key decisions in making project prioritization, route alignment, and institutional oversight without significant provincial consultation (Jamali, Hongsong, and Hussain, 2023). An example is that the decision to put emphasis on the eastern route, which benefits Punjab and Sindh, rather than the western route initially planned to pass through Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was not discussed in constitutional venues like the Council of Common Interests (CCI) (Boni & Adeney, 2020; Abb, 2022). This move caused an uproar among minor provinces, who saw it as a recurrence of the historical center-periphery disparity that existed in Pakistan.

The development of CPEC governance is historically contextualized within a wider trend in Pakistan of authoritarian infrastructuralism, in which key decisions in development have been constrained by the military or the central executive (Iqbal & Masroor, 2023). CPEC has remained closely linked to national security goals since 2015, with the military now being in a leadership position through the Special Security Division (SSD), thereby securitizing the development agenda (Youseafzai, 2016; Abb, 2023). This course is indicative of not just a postcolonial tradition of centralized rule in Pakistan but also the emergent power of elite-centered stability in the overseas infrastructure diplomacy of China (Adeney & Boni, 2021; Ismail and Camba, 2022).

Thematic analysis comes up with the common patterns of the elite capture, the lack of transparency on the procedure, and the lack of the indigenous community participation, particularly in Balochistan. With the Gwadar Port being strategically located in the province, there have been minimal trickle-down gains from CPEC projects (Abb, 2023). Lands are reported to have been acquired without consultation, no local jobs were available, and they are overly militarized (Kakar, 2020; Zahra-Malik, 2017). Nationalist agencies and provincial political parties have continued to define CPEC as the continuation of internal colonialism, a precedent of developmental complaints (Ahmed & Baloch, 2022; Raza, 2015).

The critical analysis of parliamentary debates, policy documents, and domestic press reports indicates that the federal government has used a discourse of national solidarity to quiet or block provincial attackers (Nitza-Makowska, 2022). Federal players have delegitimized provincial interests and reduced the spirit of participation initiative in the federalist relationship by framing dissent as anti-development or anti-national (Abb, 2022; Lashari, 2017). This rhetoric approach brushes up an ordered structure of development, which gives importance to the infrastructural visibility instead of inclusive governance.

This trend is more or less a reflection of the previous mega-development initiatives in Pakistan, including the Kalabagh Dam, where a centralized decision-making process and provincial marginalization resulted in political reaction and unsuccessful execution (McCartney, 2022). Nonetheless, CPEC is supported by global strategic needs, in particular, the BRI led by China, unlike previous endeavors, and its mode of governance is less prone to local democratic influences (Abb, 2023; Akhter et al., 2022). This creates an additional challenge in regard to accountability between the governments, since the provinces lack bargaining power to provide fair terms.

Finally, CPEC has intensified the preexisting asymmetries of the federal system by circumventing institutions and strengthening centralization, as well as privileging security-based development over democratic inclusion. Quite on the contrary, the project has enhanced regional disparities and political division—hence revealing the myth of national unity that frequently follows mega-infrastructure debate in Pakistan.

The findings of this paper can be taken as a critical perspective into the way the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has strengthened the existing asymmetries of the federal system of Pakistan, and this paper will offer the answers to the research questions. CPEC management has not supported the idea of cooperative federalism but has institutionalized a trend of centralized domination that is consistent with the idea of authoritarian infrastructuralism proposed by Abb (2023), as well as with the idea of elite-based governance that is guided by foreign investment rationales (Ismail and Camba 2022). The lack of provincial input and autonomy in the management of CPEC projects has been eviscerated in a systematic way by the dominance of federal and military institutions, both through the workaround of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) and otherwise (Boni and Adeney, 2020; Adeney and Boni, 2021; Abb, 2022).

This observation reinforces and further elaborates the argument that CPEC restates historical power relations between the center and the periphery, especially in marginalized provinces, including Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. According to Javaid and Jahangir (2022), the initial design of the CPEC route and the consequent change were signs of a clear neglect of the western provinces in favor of regions more politically dominant (Punjab and Sindh) and resulted in numerous protests and political

alienation. Lashari (2017) and Zahra-Malik (2017) also note symbolic and material implications, describing the Gwadar Port development on the Baloch population in terms of more militarization, displacement, and disappointment in the prospect of inclusive development.

Kakar (2020) also notes that such marginalization is not an accident but a continuation of the colonial lines of development that focus on national infrastructures at the expense of local sovereignty. This is further affirmed by Abb (2022), who demonstrates that the involvement of China in Pakistan, and its involvement in CPEC, facilitates institutional pathways, which are favorable towards security, elite coordination, and executive centralization, thus leading to a hybrid regime structure limiting democratic deliberation and federal equity (Kurita, 2022).

A comparative approach over time shows that there are similarities with the previous mega-projects, including the Kalabagh Dam, that also created center-province conflict because the federal government made decisions alone and did not focus on provincial interests (Ahmed, 2018). What distinguishes it compared to CPEC is that it has a shield of strategic significance due to its international anchoring, in particular, the Belt and Road Initiative of China, which allows the federal actors to practice opaque governance with little to no accountability (Akhter et al., 2022; Abb, 2023).

Moreover, according to the results provided by Adeney and Boni (2021), CPEC was promoted as a national project, but in reality, its implementation enhanced the structural inequalities by solidifying the Punjab-centered vision of development (Kanwal, Hameed, Imran, Adnan, and Iqbal, 2022). The fact that the planning ministry did not coordinate with provincial planning authorities and that the security forces were involved in securing projects also contributed to the marginalization of the local administrative capacity (Youseafzai, 2016; Rafiq, 2017).

This process can also be seen through the use of critical discourse analysis to show how the use of the rhetoric of national unity by the federal elites subverts provincial criticism. According to Abb (2023), it is a discursive approach in which any dissent is reconceptualized as a menace to national stability, effectively silencing valid demands to get equal participation. Such delegitimization, as Ahmed and Baloch (2022) posit, only increases the political alienation of ethnic communities that already have some suspicions about the developmental promises of Islamabad (Ahsan, 2022).

Both Zahra-Malik (2017) and Abb (2022) provide empirical evidence of how the lack of consent in development, especially in militarized areas such as Gwadar, deteriorates trust, despite the provision of infrastructure, which may be apparent. This evidence supports more general arguments about BRI corridors in Asia and Africa, in which the infrastructural investments support authoritarian forms of governance and weaken the local agency (Boni and Adeney, 2020; Abb, 2023).

The implications of this in Pakistan are that CPEC has turned into a channel of accumulation of executive authority, but not national unity. Having local actors, as revealed by Kakar (2020) and Ahmed (2018), view the project as foreign and centrally managed and have limited means to exercise democratic accountability (Boon and Ong, 2021). These consequences are dramatic: recreating the exclusion patterns on the pretext of development, CPEC threatens to aggravate ethnic conflicts, diminish the state legitimacy, and ruin federal unity (Ul Hassan, 2020).

This analysis is a case of urgent institutional reform in contemporary terminology. According to Khalid and Hussain (2018), the future of the federation in Pakistan is on its knees in case the CCI and National Finance Commission are not reinvigorated and revered. This paper does not just confirm their concern but emphasizes how CPEC, instead of sealing the federal gap, has only increased it. The discussion, in turn, is part of the discussion of infrastructure governance, center-periphery relations, and the future of inclusive federalism in the politics of Pakistan (Khan, Guo, Muhammad, Raza, and Issack, 2020).

Conclusion

The current study aimed to determine the implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for intergovernmental relations and provincial exclusion in Pakistan. Relying on an in-depth study of primary sources and secondary sources in the project file, it is clear that CPEC has solidified a centralized rule, enhanced inter-provincial inequalities, and undermined the values of cooperative federalism as opposed to the creation of a feeling of national unity. Instead of being a unifying economic belt, CPEC has unveiled and escalated the tensions that existed between the federal government and the provinces in the country. The constitutional procedures in which the decision concerning CPEC, especially in terms of route selection, the distribution of resources, and the control of institutions, have always circumvented the constitutional processes of decision-making, which have been based on informal, security-based, and elite-oriented frameworks.

This analysis also indicates that this centralized pattern of governance has left such provinces as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa politically marginalized and economically underprivileged, even though both form the heart of the CPEC infrastructure presence. In these areas, local communities have reported cases of land dispossession, militarization, lack of job opportunities, and the lack of real representation in the decision-making processes. The constant use of nationalistic language by the federal forces to repress opposition and to make CPEC look like a universally positive project continues to shut down subnational voices, supporting a narrative of development that, in fact, continues to be exclusionary.

Traditionally, such results are reverberated by the long-standing issue of ethnicity and the lack of equity in Pakistan, whose political system is heavily centralized. Even though the 18th Constitutional Amendment and the National Finance Commission Award were aimed at equalizing the relations of federal and provincial governments, the establishment of CPEC proves the fact that the rule of political centralization and bureaucracy is still in the lead. This issue has been worsened by the high-profile role of the military in project governance and security, which has restricted the room of the civilian institutions and elected provincial institutions to participate substantively in the planning and supervision of development initiatives.

Recommendations

This paper highlights the broader sense of authoritarian infrastructuralism in Pakistan. It reveals how, with elite interests governing infrastructure projects and being immune to democratic processes, infrastructure projects can recapitulate historical processes of marginalization and entrench internal divisions. Another aspect of these dynamics identified by the research is the international one, specifically, the role of China

in favoring elite bargains and stability-oriented relations in affecting the domestic political economy of recipient states.

The research is important in the sense that it fills the research gap in the role of infrastructure research, federalism, and political geography in Pakistan. Not only does it criticize the myth of national unity attached to CPEC, but it also provides a strong analysis structure to understand the overlap of development and governance in a disjointed, postcolonial state. The focus on provincial experience and asymmetries of intergovernmental interaction will help the study highlight the democratic gaps within the institutional design of CPEC.

Future studies need to take further empirical research involving fieldwork, interviews, and local accounts of the affected groups and thus generate more content about the experienced realities of marginalization. The comparison with other Belt and Road Initiative corridors in similarly structured federal or multi-ethnic states would also contribute to the theoretical knowledge. Lastly, the present study demands policy-oriented research that investigates how intergovernmental mechanisms could be restructured to bring about equitable and participatory infrastructure governance to bring the rhetoric of inclusivity to the real world.

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