Issue Brief
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From Corridors to Code: China's Digital Statecraft through CPEC

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This issue brief analyzes the digital dimension of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), arguing that the significance of the corridor lies less in physical connectivity and more in the expansion of energy and technological infrastructure. It examines how projects such as fiber-optic networks, surveillance systems, and satellite cooperation reshape Pakistan's security practices and economic development. The paper contends that these initiatives embed Pakistan within Chinese technological standards and ecosystems, potentially generating long-term dependencies while advancing China's strategic interests. In the long term, Pakistan's embeddedness may complicate its ability to maintain strategic autonomy in an era of intensifying geopolitical competition.

Introduction

What if the core of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) lies not in the grand highways or ports that dominate the headlines, but in power plants and digital technology? These elements, while less visible than CPEC's megaprojects, reveal how the corridor encompasses far more than just improving connectivity. Indeed, the Long Term Plan for China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (2017-2030)[1] reflects this broader vision, setting out goals to build cross-border fiber-optic cables; promote the adoption of Chinese technical standards such as its Digital Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcast (DTMB); expand e-government, border monitoring, and Safe City systems; and strengthen Pakistan's ICT workforce through training and exchange programs.

These initiatives carry political implications that extend beyond technical modernization. Digital infrastructure and technological standards shape the way states and communities grapple with the

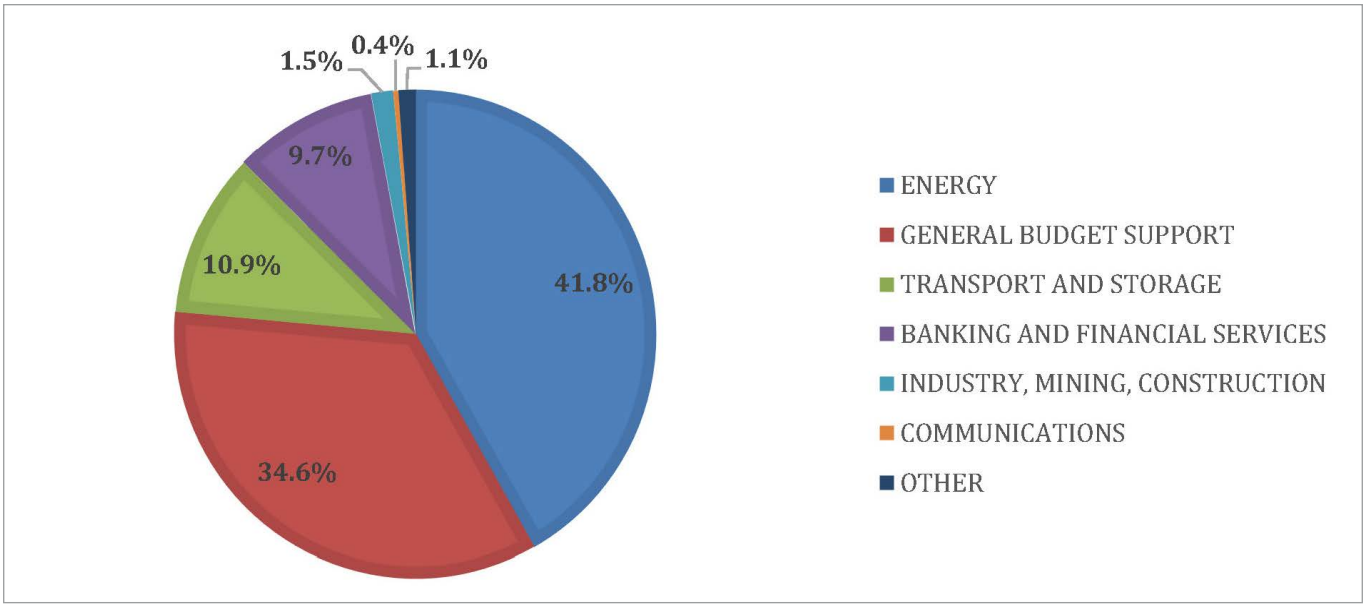
digital world, which in turn impacts security and governance systems.[2] In the context of CPEC, this raises questions about how Chinese-built communications networks, surveillance platforms, and satellite systems may influence Pakistan's security practices and long-term geopolitical strategy in the future.

The Geostrategic Context of CPEC

In CPEC's early stages, Chinese and international scholars emphasized its geostrategic importance. The corridor was seen as addressing three primary strategic concerns for China. First, it would address the so-called "Malacca Dilemma", referring to China's vulnerability arising from its heavy dependence on energy imports transiting the Strait of Malacca. Oil and gas could bypass the long sea route via the Strait of Malacca and instead be transported overland from Gwadar, which is located just 400 km from the Strait of Hormuz.[3] Second, access to the Indian Ocean would break what some in the Chinese literature have called America's "C-shaped encirclement" (C形包围圈) of China,[4] which is understood as a chain of U.S.-aligned powers and strategic positions stretching from East Asia through Southeast Asia to South Asia, effectively surrounding China along its maritime periphery. Third, it would provide for the security and economic development of China's western regions and its strategic position in Central Asia more generally.[5] Thus, if one were to take CPEC's primary purpose as a transport corridor at face value, this would be seen as a portent of Beijing's broader geopolitical ambitions.[6]

This has made the actual pattern of Chinese investment in CPEC all the more puzzling. While connectivity projects such as railways and ports are, of course, an important part of CPEC, Chinese investment in Pakistan has been far more heavily weighted toward domestic energy generation and development.[7] Between 2013 and 2023, energy and budgetary support accounted for about 42 percent and 35 percent of total investment, respectively, compared to just 11 percent for transport (Figure 1). This distribution is reflected structurally in the "1+4" framework for CPEC launched in 2015, where energy and industrial cooperation are central alongside the Gwadar Port and transport infrastructure.[8]

Figure 1: Composition of Chinese Investment in Pakistan by Sector (2013–2023)



Source: Aiddata.org, "China's Global Loans and Grants Dataset, Version 1.0."[9]

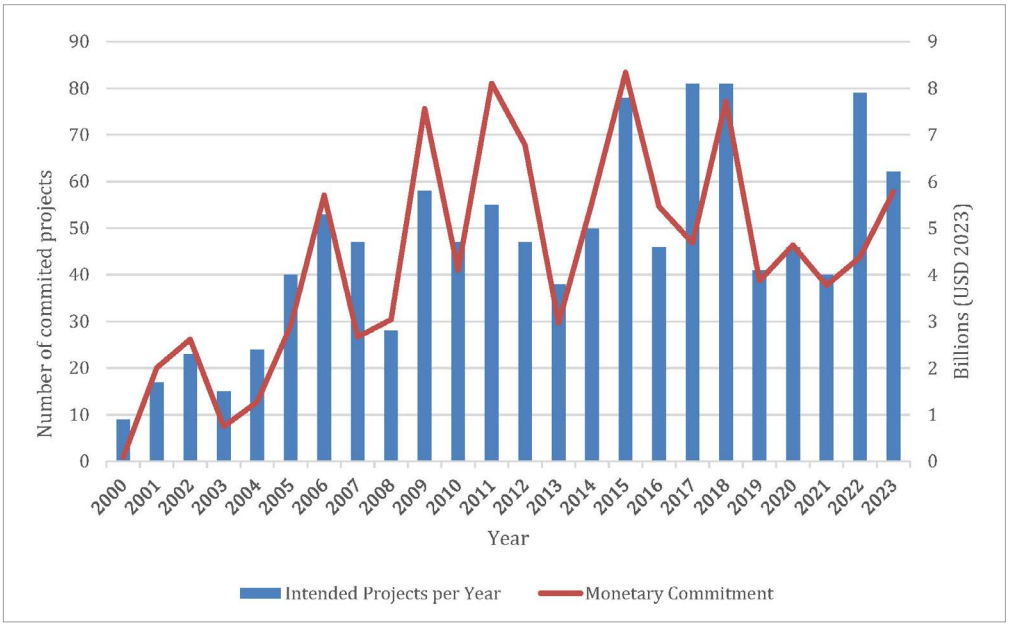
Some Chinese scholars have suggested that this reflects the "de-geopoliticization" (去地缘化) of CPEC.[10] This is evident, they argue, not only in the nature of Chinese investment but also in planning documents and official statements, which have downplayed connectivity and its geopolitical implications while emphasizing comprehensive development in the energy sector and, increasingly, in technology cooperation.[11] In this framing, CPEC is recast as primarily a developmental initiative, consistent with the "all-weather strategic partnership" (全天候合作伙伴) between the two countries.

However, CPEC's continued designation as a "flagship project" (旗舰项目) under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) belies the claim that it is far removed from China's geopolitical strategy.[12] As a "flagship project", CPEC's success would validate the BRI model, while failure would carry disproportionate reputational and strategic costs. In effect, CPEC operates as a "too big to fail" project at the core of China's external economic and geopolitical ambitions.[13] Thus, rather than evidence of de-geopoliticization, China's emphasis on the energy and technology sectors can be explained by its more subtle approach to advancing its strategic interests in the digital age.

Planes, Trains and Satellites: CPEC as an Energy and Technology Initiative Rather Than a Transport Corridor

To understand CPEC's digital dimension, it needs to be placed within the corridor's broader phased structure. At its inception, CPEC projects were divided into short-, medium-, and long-term plans, with completion targets of 2020, 2025, and 2030, respectively.[14] As a result, digital initiatives only became more prominent after the 'early-harvest' (早期收获) phase, defined by some Chinese scholars as spanning between 2014 and 2018.[15] This early phase was dominated by energy and transport infrastructure,[16] including the inauguration of two major coal power plants at Sahiwal and Port Qasim.[17] It is only as long-term planning moved to the fore that digital projects grew in prominence. This roughly coincides with a general increase in the number of Chinese investments in communication projects across all BRI countries, with a slight dip during the COVID pandemic (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Growth of Chinese Global Communications-Related Financing Over Time



Source: Aiddata.org, "China's Global Loans and Grants Dataset, Version 1.0."[18]

CPEC's digital infrastructure initiatives can also be understood as part of a broader effort to manage the economic and security vulnerabilities that have become increasingly visible around the corridor. On the economic side, they were tied to improved communications, coordination, and governance across transportation and energy projects, while also supporting projects such as Gwadar port whose commercial promise remains uncertain. On the security side, especially in Balochistan, digital projects such as telecommunications networks and surveillance-related systems are presented as ways to protect personnel and infrastructure in the face of escalating terror attacks.

In recent years, CPEC projects have been targeted by Balochistan nationalist insurgent organizations, who have carried out terrorist attacks against Chinese nationals both within Balochistan and in other parts of Pakistan.[19] These groups see China as being complicit in what they consider to be Islamabad's exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources at the expense of local populations.[20] Boni argues that one of the aims of Chinese investment in fiber-optic, telecoms, and surveillance systems is to secure communications to protect Chinese personnel and infrastructure as part of China's two-pronged response to these terror threats alongside partnering with Pakistan's military and private security actors.[21]

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These digital projects, however, are not merely defensive. As McCartney notes, Chinese infrastructure investment has the long-term potential to lock Pakistan into Chinese-compatible inputs, technologies, and standards, including in fiber optics, telecommunications, and navigation systems.[22] This may deepen long-term dependence on Chinese suppliers while hindering the positive spillover effects on domestic industries.

CPEC's Technological Architecture: Surveillance, Data Integration, and Entrenched Security

CPEC's digital dimension spans fiber-optic networks, urban surveillance systems, satellite navigation, broadcasting standards, and space cooperation. Examining these technologies together shows how CPEC has institutionalized arrangements that reinforce Pakistan's integration into the Chinese digital ecosystem.

Fiber Optic Cable

Launched in 2018, the Pak-China Fiber Optic Cable Construction Project is an approximately 820 km overland cable running from the Khunjerab Pass on the China–Pakistan border to Rawalpindi in Punjab.[23] The link connects Pakistan's telecommunications network to China's terrestrial fiber system, allowing inbound and outbound internet traffic to be routed through Chinese infrastructure.

Although introducing its own vulnerabilities, the Pak–China fiber-optic cable is often justified in security terms as a way to reduce reliance on Pakistan's existing communications routes.[24] By linking Pakistan's network directly to the Chinese side of the Transit Europe-Asia Terrestrial Cable Network,[25] the cable provides an alternative path for data and telecommunications traffic that does not depend solely on vulnerable undersea cables or domestic infrastructure concentrated in coastal areas. This redundancy can reduce the risk of interception and disruption by external actors and is framed as strengthening the resilience of communications infrastructure tied to CPEC projects and Chinese personnel operating in Pakistan.[26]

At the same time, concerns have been raised that the adoption of Chinese infrastructure and standards could also facilitate greater monitoring or filtering by the Pakistani government aligned with Chinese digital governance models. Prior to CPEC, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) had already considered introducing a Chinese-style internet firewall that would expand the state's ability to regulate online content.[27]

The Pak–China fiber-optic cable also carries clear security implications for CPEC, linking the corridor's communications infrastructure to military-linked institutions. This security dimension is reflected in the actors responsible for building and operating the system. Huawei was the contractor responsible for designing and constructing the cable, while China Telecom and Pakistan's Special Communications Organization (SCO) jointly operate it.[28] The SCO, though formally under the Ministry of Information Technology, is in practice controlled by the Pakistan Army.[29] Prior to construction, the SCO's director, a major general in the army, explicitly linked the cable to CPEC security, calling protection of CPEC projects an "utmost priority for Pakistan."[30]

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However, economic realities may complicate the long-term viability of the project. There are indications that the concessional loan from the Export-Import Bank of China used to finance the cable has underperformed.[31] Beijing has already agreed to postpone repayments multiple times.[32] These adjustments highlight a broader tension between China's strategic and security goals and economic returns that may be more limited than initially anticipated.

Safe Cities

China's "Safe City" concept refers to an urban security model that integrates large-scale surveillance systems with digital policing tools to monitor and manage public spaces.[33] Promoted largely by Chinese technology firms such as Hua-

wei, these projects are often marketed as part of broader "smart city" initiatives that combine public infrastructure with data analytics and communication networks.[34]

The Safe City concept in Pakistan was first implemented in Islamabad as part of a broader effort to improve urban security through surveillance and digital policing.[35] The Islamabad Safe City Project introduced a large network of high-resolution cameras, command and control centers, and integrated monitoring systems to assist law enforcement agencies in crime prevention. Building on this model, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved the Gwadar Safe City Project Phase I in July 2025 to enhance security in the port city.[36] The project was estimated to cost tens of millions of dollars and planned to install hundreds of high-tech surveillance cameras across the city. However, despite the approval, there have been mixed reports on its implementation status.

Chinese firms have promoted Safe City systems primarily as tools for urban security and crime prevention, but where these technologies are deployed in areas linked to CPEC, enhanced surveillance is also used to monitor infrastructure projects and protect Chinese personnel and investments. Their expansion in Pakistan also reflects Islamabad's efforts to respond to Beijing's repeated calls for stronger protection of Chinese citizens and strategic projects associated with the corridor.[37]

Remote Sensing Satellites

China–Pakistan space cooperation predates CPEC and reflects a long-standing technological partnership. Although Pakistan established the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission (SUPARCO) in 1961 and launched its first rocket, *Rehbar-I*, in 1962 with NASA support, escalating India–Pakistan tensions redirected funding toward nuclear development and stalled the country's space program.[38]

Pakistan eventually launched its first satellite, *Badr-I*, in 1990 with Chinese assistance, marking the beginning of deeper bilateral collaboration.[39] In the 21st century, this partnership expanded through joint satellite launches from Chinese soil such as the *PAKSAT-1R* in 2011;[40] the *PRSS-1* in 2018;[41] and most recently the PRSS-2 in 2025.[42] These initiatives now form part of what analysts have dubbed China's "Space Silk Road," [43] which they say is China's initiative to integrate satellite navigation, communications, and remote sensing across Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partners.

Pakistani officials have directly linked this cooperation to CPEC. Remote-sensing satellites such as PRSS-1 have been understood to monitor corridor infrastructure, land use, and environmental conditions, giving Pakistan greater capacity to track large-scale projects and support other initiatives along the corridor.[44] At the same time, the long-term implications for Pakistan are more ambiguous. Because Pakistan's recent Earth-observation satellites have been built and launched by China, some analysts argue the partnership reinforces Pakistan's dependence on Chinese technology and undermines the development of Pakistan's autonomous national space program.[45]

BeiDou Navigation Satellite System

Another flagship technology underpinning the Space Silk Road is the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System (BeiDou). Beidou is a state-controlled satellite system providing positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) services that is positioned by China as an alternative to the U.S. Global Positioning System (GPS).[46] Pakistan was the first nation outside China to adopt the BeiDou system, granting Islamabad access to sophisticated navigation and positioning capabilities.[47]

BeiDou has also increasingly been integrated into CPEC, where the technology has been touted as improving logistics and enhancing port operations at Gwadar and Karachi.[48] Pakistani offi-

cials have argued that Beidou effectively turns CPEC from a purely physical infrastructure corridor into "a digital corridor powered by space technology."[49]

The experience of Pakistan with Beidou illustrates how a single technology can enhance the security and development of BRI infrastructure projects, while also advancing China's strategic goals under the Space Silk Road. Indeed, reports indicate that expanding BeiDou's adoption across other BRI countries has become a central goal for China as part of its efforts to create a BRI Space Information Corridor.[50]

Control by Other Means or Developmental Partnership?

As Cannon notes,[51] China's infrastructure partnerships do not automatically subordinate participating states, nor are the projects necessarily coercive. Some governments welcome these projects as a way to advance their development goals and reinforce existing partnerships, even when they involve indirect forms of influence that amount to a form of "control by other means".

Pakistan's foreign policy strategy has historically sought to balance between major powers rather than align exclusively with one, though this strategy remains constrained and not always consistently achieved. However, its role in mediating between the United States and Iran is evidence par excellence of a recent success of this strategy.[52] It is a significant achievement that Pakistan has hosted mediation talks between Washington and Tehran while also coordinating with Beijing to release a five-point initiative to resolve the war.[53]

However, the growing depth of Pakistan's reliance on China risks narrowing Islamabad's strategic hedging. The digital domain is especially sensitive because technological ecosystems tend to be mutually incompatible. Digital systems often require compatibility between hardware, software, and technical standards, meaning that adopting one country's technology can complicate integration with others.[54]

As great-power competition increasingly centers on telecommunications networks, satellite systems, and digital standards, Pakistan's expanding reliance on Chinese platforms may constrain its ability to balance between rival powers and could ultimately undermine the strategic flexibility that has historically characterized its foreign policy.

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