

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF CPEC IN PAKISTAN

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This issue brief examines the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a social and political process, not merely an infrastructure project. It argues that while CPEC has improved energy supply, connectivity and investment prospects, its benefits remain unevenly distributed. The analysis focuses on five dimensions: regional inequality, debt and transparency, gender, environment, and securitization. It shows that CPEC has strengthened older patterns of centralized decision-making and uneven development in Pakistan. Regions such as Balochistan and Gwadar face displacement, livelihood disruption, environmental stress and limited participation in planning. Women also remain largely outside CPEC's formal economic gains, even as they bear many of its social costs. The increasing securitization around CPEC has narrowed civic space and increased mistrust between local communities and the state.

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Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is often described through numbers such as investment amounts, megawatts (MW) of electricity produced, kilometers of roads built, and similar indicators. Data such as these are emphasized within official communications and policy debates. Yet they capture only part of what is unfolding. Beneath these visible gains lies a deeper transformation of social life in Pakistan. CPEC is transforming how people work, where

they live, how resources are distributed, and how new forms of interaction are emerging between the Pakistani government and its citizens. These changes are uneven.

As a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC was initiated by both countries in 2015. At the time of its launch, CPEC was designed to combine energy generation, transportation infrastructure, the development of Gwadar Port, and Special Economic Zones

(SEZs). The amount of money allocated toward CPEC initially totaled approximately USD 46 billion and currently is greater than USD 60 billion in planned and committed investments. For Pakistan, CPEC presented an opportunity to address several long-term issues, including persistent energy shortages, underdeveloped transportation networks, and a lack of investment in industry. For China, CPEC represents a shorter and strategically significant corridor connecting Xinjiang to the Arabian Sea and providing an alternative route that reduces dependence on sea lanes that traverse geopolitical choke points.

Within the official discourse surrounding CPEC, it is framed as transformative.¹ It is possible to view CPEC from this perspective. While energy availability has improved, leading to reductions in load shedding within select urban centers, transportation links have been extended, resulting in reduced travel times and improvements in connectivity among large cities.² However, a decade into its implementation, the social picture is much more complex. Gains resulting from CPEC are visible, but they are not equally shared among all regions and populations or social

groups. While certain locations and groups have benefited disproportionately from CPEC-related developments, other regions, communities, and population segments face challenges associated with forced displacement, environmental degradation, and unequal access to new opportunities.

This study examines CPEC not just as an economic project but as a social process embedded in Pakistan's political economy. The outcomes of CPEC depend upon who receives benefits and/or faces costs from developing CPEC-related infrastructure, how decision-making authority regarding CPEC is exercised, and how the daily life experiences of local communities evolve as a result of the project. The analysis is organized around five interrelated themes: uneven regional development and disparities, questions of debt and transparency, the gendered dimensions of CPEC, the environmental effects of development, and the intersectionality between CPEC and the militarization/securitization of everyday life. Together, these themes demonstrate that CPEC is not just producing infrastructure and growth, but also reshaping social relationships, state-society interactions, and patterns of inclusion and exclusion. This study draws attention to these less observable consequences by examining how development unfolds on the ground and how it is experienced by different sections of society.

The outcomes of CPEC depend upon who receives benefits and/or faces costs from developing CPEC-related infrastructure, how decision-making authority regarding CPEC is exercised, and how the daily life experiences of local communities evolve as a result of the project.

Federalism, Uneven Development, and the Politics of Distribution

CPEC has revived an old question in Pakistan's political economy: who will benefit from the development, and who will decide? The corridor was promoted as a national project that would create common prosperity. However, both the distribution of CPEC's benefits and the institutional arrangements governing CPEC, are uneven. The result is a pattern in which economic benefits, political authority, and social costs of

CPEC are distributed along pre-existing lines of hierarchy, rather than reflecting a departure from the status quo.³

At the heart of the debate is the relationship between federalism and development. Studies show that the governance structure of CPEC has been highly centralized. There has been very little consultation with provincial governments during the design and implementation phases of CPEC, and on decisions such as route alignments and project priorities. The unequal distribution of CPEC's benefits is directly linked to the way the project is managed. This has caused a great deal of contention in Balochistan and Sindh.⁴ Political elites in these two provinces claim that the process has marginalized their interests and strengthened federal hegemony instead of fostering cooperative federalism.⁵

The centralization of governance arrangements is related to the spatial distribution of benefits. Most investments have taken place in relatively developed regions such as Punjab and parts of Sindh.⁶ Peripheral regions such as Balochistan and large portions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have experienced relatively low levels of integration into the main flow of CPEC benefits. At the same time, they face a number of social and environmental challenges. This spatial dimension reflects a general tendency in Pakistan's historical development experiences, where growth tends to take off in centers of established economic activity rather than redistributing opportunities across regions.

These trends manifest themselves at the local level as well. While CPEC creates employment, increases land prices, and raises the competitiveness of actors who are better connected to the corridor, for many communities it does not create sustainable long-term economic change.⁷ Instead, CPEC often results in unstable or tem-

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porary income opportunities. Some refer to the CPEC as a form of enclave development,⁸ where modern infrastructure is developed alongside communities that are disconnected from its potential benefits.⁹ Zones designated for industry and transportation corridors function like islands of development. They tend to remain separate from surrounding communities. Benefits go primarily to individuals who possess capital, skills, and networks, while local populations have difficulty in accessing these opportunities.

Balochistan provides the clearest example of these dynamics. The province has historically experienced political marginalization and conflict due to dissatisfaction with resource extraction and lack of local control.¹⁰ Thus, CPEC is perceived by many in Balochistan as a continuation of a long-established pattern of exploitation: externally funded investors extract wealth while locals receive minimal returns on their resources.¹¹ This perception has been reinforced by developments in Gwadar, the flagship site of the corridor.

Gwadar was expected to develop through port-based growth and improved connectivity. However, for many local residents, especially fishermen and fish traders, CPEC has resulted in greater disruption than positive transformation.¹² Infrastructure construction under CPEC has displaced people, restricted access to the sea, and increased living expenses.¹³ Reports have documented forced evictions and the loss of livelihoods due to the decline of traditional fishing and coastal trading practices.¹⁴ The influx of outside labor and investments into Gwadar has also transformed the social composition of the city, creating new forms of inequality and social tension among residents.

Local communities often feel that they have little influence over decision-making related to CPEC. Information tends to flow unidirectionally, and consultations are often seen as symbolic rather than substantive. As a result, the developmental process is experienced by local residents not as

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a collaborative effort but as something imposed upon them from above. A top-down approach toward development has obvious political implications. When communities experience displacement, job loss or environmental degradation due to CPEC without meaningful consultation with them, they are more likely to perceive the initiative as unfair. Such negative perceptions contribute to mistrust and unrest particularly when prior grievances exist in the affected area.¹⁵ Protests in Gwadar during 2021 and 2022 concerning issues like fishing rights, water scarcity and restrictions on movement demonstrate how localized opposition can expand into larger-scale political mobilization.¹⁶

The relationship between federalism and regional underdevelopment is revealed through this larger dynamic. While CPEC has created an environment in which issues associated with underdevelopment have been highlighted, it did not create the underlying problems of resource distribution, regional authority, and center-province power dynamics. Therefore, the main concern surrounding CPEC is not whether economic growth will occur because of the project. Rather, the primary concern involves how CPEC-generated economic growth will be distributed and managed.

Current patterns suggest that individuals who have certain advantages (such as capital, connections and/or political influence) are best positioned to benefit from growth. Conversely, individuals lacking such advantages are more likely to perceive economic growth due to CPEC not as an opportunity but as a threat to their existing standard of living.

Debt, Dependency and the Issue of Transparency

One of the most persistent domestic criticisms of CPEC concerns debt and the increasing

economic dependence on China. Pakistan's external debt more than doubled between 2013 and 2021, and liabilities to Chinese creditors represent a considerable portion of this increase. These developments have raised concerns about Pakistan's fiscal viability and long-term policy autonomy. Advocates of the "debt-trap" narrative cite opaque loan terms, sovereign guarantees, and the high cost of service payments in the power sector. They contend that these factors could put Pakistan under considerable financial stress for many years and diminish its capability to negotiate individually with organizations such as the IMF.¹⁷

A more conservative interpretation, however, complicates this argument. Studies have noted that CPEC-related borrowing is only a small part of Pakistan's total foreign debt. Structural weaknesses in Pakistan's own economy—including low tax revenues, persistent fiscal deficits, and underperforming exports—have also contributed significantly to current debt levels.¹⁸ Therefore, the main issue is not merely the magnitude of borrowing, but rather the economic returns generated by that borrowing. The central question is whether CPEC investments have expanded Pakistan's export capacity, enhanced productivity, and strengthened its manufacturing base. Without such improvements, even lending based on concessionary pricing may ultimately become unsustainable. According to a World Bank report, Pakistan must transform its economy, invest heavily in human capital (education/health), increase female labor force participation to 45 percent, ensure environmental sustainability, and strengthen governance in order to boost productivity.¹⁹

Lack of transparency compounds the problem. Most CPEC agreements remain confidential or have been only partially disclosed to the public.²⁰ The lack of clarity surrounding the

actual financing terms (interest rates, repayment timelines, and tax concessions to Chinese corporations) has fueled speculation about the nature of these terms. Due to the lack of full disclosure, public discourse has relied on fragmented information, thereby exacerbating distrust. In this context, transparency is not merely a procedural issue; it shapes how the entire initiative is perceived within Pakistan and affects its political legitimacy.

Additionally, the extent of Chinese funding has led to widespread concern among Pakistanis about their economic position. Financing provided through both long-term infrastructure projects and short-term balance-of-payments assistance have expanded Beijing's role in Pakistan's financial system. Critics see this as evidence of increased dependence. However, an estimated 80 percent of CPEC financing is provided in the form of equity grants or subsidized loans, while only a smaller portion adds to Pakistan's sovereign debt.²¹ Thus, although CPEC represents a source of some of Pakistan's debt distress, it is representative of the broader structural problems in Pakistan's economy that predate the corridor. Nevertheless, the scale and visibility of Chinese involvement, combined with limited transparency, have made CPEC a focal point for wider concerns about Pakistan's economic vulnerability.

Financial risks associated with CPEC are most apparent in the energy sector. Most CPEC power projects are funded through Chinese banks and project company-based arrangements. Although these structures are intended to limit direct sovereign liability, Pakistan remains exposed to significant risks through sovereign guarantees and long-term payment commitments. These guarantees assure investors of returns on their investment; however, they also transfer financial burdens to the government when inefficiencies in Pakistan's power sector remain unaddressed.²²

This is where the political economy of CPEC becomes most evident. The benefits of these projects—electricity generation and improved infrastructure—are immediate and visible. The financial costs, by contrast, are spread over several years and ultimately borne by the public budget. Distribution losses, tariff distortion and governance gaps continue to plague Pakistan’s power sector. When additional generating capacity is created without resolving the aforementioned structural flaws, the government bears the cost of electricity production without ensuring its efficient utilization. As a result, circular debt increases, placing further pressure on public finances.²³

Therefore, debates on debt, dependency, and transparency go well beyond CPEC itself. Rather, they reflect more fundamental questions regarding Pakistan’s economic governance and development strategy.

Gendered Aspects of CPEC

Gender remains one of the least visible yet most important dimensions of CPEC’s social impact. While much discussion of CPEC focuses on infrastructure, trade, and macroeconomic outcomes, its effects on everyday life are mediated through existing gender relationships and social structures. In general, women are optimistic about several aspects of CPEC. For example, they hope that improved road networks and enhanced access to markets and educational services will improve their overall well-being. At the same time, these hopes are tempered by apprehensions regarding environmental degradation, personal security, and whether the economic opportunities generated by CPEC will be accessible to them within prevailing social constraints.²⁴

These tensions are most pronounced in rural areas, where gender roles tend to be more

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rigidly defined. Women perceive CPEC as a real-world transformational process—not simply a conceptualized economy. They view CPEC as impacting their day-to-day routines, mobility, and social interactions. Improved connectivity may reduce social isolation and provide more opportunities for women to participate in markets and service-sector opportunities. Nevertheless, the extent to which women benefit from CPEC depends upon their ability to travel safely, manage income and interact with institutions (i.e., schools and businesses) that are generally dominated by males. Unless these underlying constraints are addressed, the benefits of CPEC-related connectivity are likely to be inequitable.²⁵

CPEC-linked labor markets also reflect this asymmetry. Official narratives emphasize job creation and economic opportunities; however, women are largely relegated to lower-wage, informal, or peripheral positions. Employment opportunities associated with construction, transportation, and manufacturing—the sectors that represent the core of CPEC-related economic

activity—continue to be almost exclusively male. Even where opportunities exist for women, their engagement is constrained by limited access to training programs, restricted mobility, and concerns regarding workplace safety and security.²⁶

Women's restricted access to employment opportunities is tied to broader decision-making structures. In many areas impacted by CPEC, major decisions related to land acquisition, compensation, and local development are negotiated through male-dominated institutions. Women are generally excluded from these decision-making processes despite having significant interest in the outcomes. Therefore, they lack the power to determine how resources are allocated and how risks are managed at both the household and community levels.

A less visible but no less critical aspect of the gendered dimension of CPEC relates to reports of human trafficking and exploitative marriages involving young Pakistani women and Chinese men. This issue has not received much media attention.²⁷ Another often-overlooked aspect is the burden of unpaid labor. In addition to creating jobs and increasing revenue streams, large-scale development projects like CPEC often place an additional burden of responsibility on women, who continue to provide caregiving and household services. When families migrate, when homes are displaced or when individual livelihoods undergo change due to CPEC-related economic changes, women are typically expected to absorb and manage the social implications of these changes. These responsibilities include caring for family members, maintaining household stability, and addressing the social costs of disruptions. Without supportive policies, these responsibilities will undoubtedly increase regardless of whether formal employment opportunities become available to women.²⁸

Environmental and social risks linked to CPEC also have gender-specific consequences. Rural and low-income households headed by females experience more immediate environmental impacts as a result of reduced access to clean water, poor air quality, and diminished access to shared resources. The environmental challenges associated with CPEC lead to increased hours spent collecting water or fuel, greater health risks and decreased time devoted to education or generating income. Consequently, environmental pressure tends to exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities rather than uniformly impacting all social groups.²⁹

At the same time, there are indicators that CPEC can create space for positive change. Improved infrastructure, increased connectivity, and exposure to new forms of economic activity can contribute to gradual shifts in social expectations and gender norms. Younger women specifically identify CPEC as a mechanism for increased involvement in education and the economy. Again, however, such changes remain uneven and depend heavily on local context, institutional support, and the existence of enabling policies.

Ultimately, the key point is that gender outcomes are not predetermined. Without intentional action by government entities or other stakeholders, large-scale development initiatives tend to perpetuate existing social hierarchies. As such, men are more likely to capture the direct economic benefits generated by CPEC, while women remain engaged in informal labor or unpaid roles. Addressing this disparity requires specific, targeted policies such as skills training for women, affordable transportation, child care support, and greater female participation in local decision-making processes.

Thus, the gendered dimension of CPEC presents an overarching problem in development policy.

Development projects can generate economic opportunities; however, they cannot independently transform embedded social relations. Without explicit consideration of gender differences and needs, CPEC may only serve to reinforce the very inequalities it has the capacity to mitigate. The question is not whether CPEC affects women; rather, it is whether the project can be developed in ways that make those effects more equitable and inclusive.

Environment and Regional Inequality

The relationship between the environment and social inequality within the context of CPEC is complex. The negative impacts of environmental degradation, including pollution, land-use change, and resource depletion, are not just environmental concerns; they directly affect peoples' lives, livelihoods and well-being.³⁰ Furthermore,

these concerns exacerbate health disparities and create inequality within regions. For example, coal-fired power plants create environmental degradation such as air and soil pollution and community health concerns for those living nearby. Workers employed by the power plants face a direct trade-off: although the employment provides income, the exposure to pollutants creates health-related challenges.

This is particularly evident in Pakistan's Thar region. There, coal mining and related infrastructure development have generated significant conflict over land acquisitions, forced relocations and concerns over air and water quality. Although researchers differ in their estimates of the scale of potential harm, studies modeling the effects of large-scale coal production generally agree that increased pollution exposure is likely to result in heightened public-health risks.³¹

In Gwadar, the relationship between environmental change and social welfare is equally apparent. Water scarcity and declining fish stock have directly impacted the daily lives of people in the area. While desalination plants could alleviate some of the water shortages, they do not provide an answer to the many problems experienced by fishing communities due to port expansion and restricted access to coastal systems.³²

These environmental factors exacerbate pre-existing regional inequalities caused by the unequal distribution of CPEC projects. According to government documents, energy and infrastructure projects are mainly located in Punjab and Sindh provinces and fewer projects were initiated and/or completed in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.³³ The consequences of this unequal distribution can be observed throughout each province. Although Gwadar in Balochistan has received significant amounts of funding for in-

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infrastructure development, local residents state that there have been numerous disruptions to their fishing activities, land disputes, unemployment and underemployment among Gwadar's population, and inadequate job creation and skills training.

In contrast, Sindh has had numerous energy projects since the beginning phases of CPEC. The province has experienced rapid economic growth through industrialization and logistical development. However, these gains have been accompanied by forced relocations (resettlements), environmental degradation (coal producing areas), and uneven accessibility to benefits, especially in regards to health. The full extent of these environmental impacts remains difficult to assess because systematic data regarding pollution across all project sites still not fully available.

Similar to Sindh, Punjab has received substantially greater investment in infrastructure development than Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or Gilgit-Baltistan. Despite receiving more financial support, Punjab still faces challenges similar to Sindh in terms of job creation and access to project related benefits. Large-scale urban projects have also led to displaced populations and localized environmental concerns.

CPEC has provided improved connectivity and digital infrastructure in Gilgit-Baltistan. However, these improvements have introduced new environmental vulnerabilities and climate related risks. Increased tourism, migration and land use changes have transformed the local economy. Additionally, increased militarization of border areas has impacted mobility and accessibility for locals. Much of the available literature is based on small-scale case studies, making it difficult to build a comprehensive region-wide picture of CPEC's social and environmental effects in Gil-

git-Baltistan.³⁴ Environmental stress is not evenly distributed. It tends to affect most severely those communities with the fewest resources to adapt. Farmers dealing with soil degradation or water shortages, and low-income households living near highways or industrial zones, experience these changes as immediate threats. The risks include respiratory illness, unsafe water, and the loss of productive land. Even where economic benefits are acknowledged, concerns about long-term sustainability remain strong.³⁵

Research is increasingly showing gaps in environmental governance frameworks surrounding CPEC. Environmental impact assessments are often treated as procedural requirements; however, their quality, follow-up and enforcement remain uneven. Affected communities also have limited access to information and few meaningful opportunities to participate in decision-making. Policy frameworks linking infrastructure development with climate and environmental safeguards remain fragmented, even though Pakistan has adopted national climate policies and international climate commitments. As a result, accountability mechanisms remain weak, and mitigation efforts vary considerably across projects and regions.³⁶

Collectively these trends indicate that CPEC's socio-economic impacts cannot be dissociated from either its ecological footprint or its uneven spatial distribution. Infrastructure-driven development has produced obvious increases in economic activity; however it has also revealed underlying inequalities in governance systems as well as environmental risks faced by local communities. The challenge is not only to manage environmental risk but also to ensure that development benefits are more evenly distributed and that local communities are not left to bear disproportionate costs.

Security of CPEC and Securitizing Everyday Life

CPEC has significantly reshaped Pakistan's security environment. The corridor is treated as a high-value strategic asset. As a result, the state has expanded its security apparatus, including the creation of dedicated forces to protect infrastructure and foreign personnel. This growing security presence is not limited to strategic sites. Increasingly, this expanding security apparatus is becoming an integral component of everyday life, especially in locations directly affected by CPEC projects.

For local communities, securitization is experienced in routine and visible practices. Checkpoints, surveillance, and restrictions on movement have become regular features of citizens' interactions with the state.³⁷ In certain areas, the restrictions placed upon mobility have caused changes to patterns of resource access.

For example, in Gwadar, the installation of fences and controlled zones has denied coastal communities access to the sea, directly affecting fishing communities. These daily intrusions have generated frustration, particularly in areas where CPEC related financial benefits have yet to be realized or have been inequitably shared.³⁸

These tensions are not new. Rather, they are closely tied to longer-standing political and economic grievances, especially in Balochistan. Large-scale development projects often intensify conflict if local populations are excluded from benefits. Protest movements in Gwadar reflect this trend. Local residents have mobilized around immediate and practical issues such as illegal trawling, shortages of water and electricity, lack of employment opportunities, and restrictions created by security arrangements. These protests are not simply reactions to development; they represent attempts to assert local priorities

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against a development model seen as imposed from above.

Despite these local concerns, the dominant state response has largely been shaped by security thinking. The Pakistani government views CPEC as a target for militant groups, including Baloch separatist organizations and, to a lesser extent, the Pakistani Taliban. In response, it has built a substantial security structure around the corridor. This includes the Special Security Division, which consists of around 15,000 personnel drawn from the army and paramilitary forces. Repeated attacks targeting Chinese nationals and project sites in recent years has reinforced this security-first approach and strengthened the perception that protection of the corridor must take priority.³⁹

That said, this type of response has significant

implications for governance. One central issue revolves around how official narratives link development and security. When criticisms directed at CPEC projects are framed as threats to national security, they reduce the space available for citizen participation. Citizens experience difficulty articulating legitimate complaints without being perceived as suspicious. This establishes a self-sustaining cycle. Limited opportunity for participation fosters resentment. Resentment increases the probability of unrest. The risk of unrest is subsequently used to justify additional securitization. Increased securitization limits opportunities for participation. Ultimately, this cycle deepens distrust between citizens and the Pakistani state.

Examples of this dynamic can be seen in every day social/economic interactions taking place along CPEC routes. Residents often report that routine activities such as travel, trade, and social interactions require constant negotiations with security authorities. The presence of security personnel becomes a normative component of residents' lives rather than an exception. Although intended to promote order, these measures can generate a sense of control and exclusion. Many analysts believe that development implemented through excessive militarization undermines stability rather than promoting it. Instead of resolving grievances, development through force can reinforce them.⁴⁰

Security concerns also guide state behavior in ways that raise fundamental questions about civil rights and accountability. Some analysts suggest that greater levels of cooperation with China increases incentives for enhanced control over sensitive areas such as Balochistan. Reports have documented allegations of heavy-handed security tactics, including enforced disappearance and the treatment of dissent as a security threat. Such actions may achieve short term control, they can

also increase alienation among local populations. Over the long term, this risks institutionalizing a model of development based on coercion rather than democratic participatory mechanisms.

Concurrently, continued attacks against Chinese nationals and CPEC-related infrastructure has produced additional pressure from Beijing. Chinese officials have repeatedly urged the Pakistani government to enhance protections for Chinese nationals and investors.⁴¹ This has only reinforced the existing security-orientation policy in Pakistan. However, there exists a debate within Pakistan whether this orientation can resolve the underlying causes of conflict. The fundamental question remains unanswered. While military action may provide temporary protection, long-term stability will depend on resolving political grievances, providing equitable benefit sharing, and establishing legitimate space for meaningful community participation.

In this sense, the securitization of CPEC is not only about protecting infrastructure. It is about how development is governed and experienced by affected populations. The challenge for Pakistan is not simply to secure the corridor, but to ensure that the process of securing it does not deepen the very tensions it seeks to manage.

Conclusion

What emerges from this study is a consistent pattern. The central question regarding CPEC is no longer merely if it creates growth. Rather, it is how that growth is organized; who makes the decisions regarding the organization and control of that growth; and who receives the benefits from it? As demonstrated in each of the five dimensions discussed above, the evidence points toward a centralized model of development, characterized by unequal distribution and low levels of participation.

CPEC has to be understood not only as a collection of roads, ports, power plants and industrial zones. It is also a social and political process that is reshaping Pakistan's internal balance of power, patterns of development and relations between the state and local communities. CPEC has not broken with Pakistan's older patterns of uneven development. In many ways, it has reproduced them. Punjab and parts of Sindh have gained more from infrastructure and energy projects, while Balochistan, Gwadar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan continue to raise concerns about exclusion, displacement, environmental stress and limited participation.

The debate surrounding debt and transparency reveals a similar dynamic. CPEC is not the only cause of Pakistan's economic difficulties. Fiscal weakness, low tax base, energy sector losses and poor export performance are long-standing structural problems. Still, the secrecy around CPEC agreements, repayment obligations, sovereign guarantees and power-sector liabilities has weakened public trust. Transparency is not a technical matter alone; it is central to political

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legitimacy. Without greater disclosure and public accountability, doubts about dependency on China will continue to shape domestic perceptions of the corridor.

The gendered effects of CPEC also show that infrastructure by itself does not create inclusion. Women may benefit indirectly from improved roads, markets and services. But without safe transport, skills training, childcare, workplace protection and participation in local decision-making, they will remain outside the main economic gains of the corridor. In such a situation, CPEC may increase the burden on women rather than expand their choices. A gender-sensitive approach is therefore not an optional add-on; it is necessary if CPEC is to produce wider social benefits.

Environmental concerns raise another serious challenge. Coal-based energy projects, land-use changes, water scarcity, pollution, fisheries depletion and climate pressures are already affecting vulnerable communities. These costs are not spread evenly. They fall most heavily on those with the least capacity to adapt. Farmers, fishing communities, low-income households and people living near industrial or transport sites face the most direct risks. Weak environmental impact assessments and limited involvement of affected communities make this problem worse.

The securitization of CPEC presents a particularly difficult paradox. The corridor does face real security threats. Chinese nationals, infrastructure sites and transport routes have been attacked. Pakistan has responded by expanding security arrangements around CPEC. But when development is governed mainly through checkpoints, surveillance, fencing and restrictions, it can deepen rather than alleviate mistrust. Security may protect infrastructure in the short term, but it cannot produce consent.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that CPEC is as much about governing as it is about growth. CPEC demonstrates how infrastructure corridors are simultaneously projects of economic development, state-building, and territorial governance. The project's long-term significance lies not only in the infrastructure it builds but also in the institutions, power relations, and development patterns it reinforces. Without reforms aimed at improving participation, transparency, accountability, and the equitable distribution of benefits, CPEC may exacerbate the same inequalities it is intended to reduce. While short term gains may be achieved, long-term stability and sustainability will likely remain uncertain.

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Endnotes

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