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# PAKISTAN AND THE BELT & ROAD INITIATIVE

A Journey through  
Politics & Economy

**CHINA STUDY CENTRE**  
Karakoram International University  
Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

## **The Promise and Peril of CPEC: Navigating Security Challenges in Regional Connectivity**

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South Asia Times

### **Abstract**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) stands as a cornerstone of regional connectivity, aiming to bridge Central and South Asia, facilitating economic recovery and development in these historically strife-torn regions. The corridor promises all-encompassing economic benefits not only to China but also to underserved communities in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including those in the historically isolated regions of Wakhan, Badakhshan, Chitral, and Ghizer. This chapter examines CPEC's dual role as a catalyst for regional economic prosperity and as a springboard for geopolitical shifts from traditional geopolitics to geo-economics. However, it also unpacks the complex security landscape that challenges this vision, primarily due to persistent terrorism threats from organizations like Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) after the Taliban's reconquer of Kabul. Strategically, CPEC's expansion into Afghanistan presents a paradoxical scenario where economic ambitions are continuously threatened by the very instability caused by the terrorist operating under the shadows of Afghan Taliban. Further, this chapter delves into the nexus between various terrorist groups that jeopardize not only the economic potential of CPEC but also the broader regional stability under the patronage of Afghan Taliban. Additionally, it discusses the complex relationships and operational alliances between TTP, ETIM, and other separatist movements, which collectively pose significant security risks to the corridor's success. Also, the chapter highlights the geopolitical and socio-economic implications of integrating the historic Wakhan Corridor into CPEC, potentially transforming it into a vital link that could enhance regional connectivity and economic integration, despite the formidable challenges posed by the harsh terrain and persistent security threats. Through a comprehensive analysis, this chapter features the critical need for robust, collaborative security strategies to harness CPEC's full potential while mitigating the persistent threats that loom over this ambitious transnational project.

## **Introduction**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the nucleus of regional connectivity. Through CPEC, the energy-rich Central Asian states would be connected to the energy-thirsty South Asian nations such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. This connection would not only amass economic benefits from China's colossal consuming market but also bestow its economic benefits upon historically underserved regions and communities. These include those residing in Wakhan, Badakhshan, Chitral, and Ghizer of Pakistan and Afghanistan, who have endured centuries of economic challenges due to the aloofness and unapproachability of mainstream metalead roads. CPEC promises to transform their lives and bring them economic prosperity. Yet the main hiccup in advancing the CPEC remains the security concerns in the region.

Economically, regional connectivity is the only way forward to attain economic prosperity for Central and South Asia's war-shattered states. In the former region, the decade of the 1990s was bloodied – civil wars wreaked havoc all across the region (Cooley, 2019). Now, CPEC offers an opportunity for the landlocked countries to access the navigational water that will ultimately allow them to connect with the outer world (Qaddos & Waheeda, 2023). In South Asia, Pakistan and Afghanistan remained mired in the vicious trap of terrorism for decades. As a result, the perpetual streak of terrorism and violence created a yawning gap between economic prosperity and human development. Considering history, it is justified that regional connectivity, using CPEC as a springboard, is the key to unlocking the doors of prosperity and progress in both regions. This is also tantamount to shifting the radar of policies from geopolitics to geo-economics on practical grounds.

Strategically, it is noteworthy that terrorism is the bane of regional connectivity. Terrorist organizations such as Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), and Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), among others, are currently based in Afghanistan (Jan, 2022) and pose serious security threats to the CPEC. However, on May 6, 2023, during the fifth China-Pakistan-Afghanistan Foreign Ministers Dialogue held in Islamabad, a significant event occurred when it was announced (Helštynová, 2023) that the CPEC would be extended into Afghanistan. This development creates a unique and complex conundrum because Afghanistan is a stronghold for the main strategic dangers to the CPEC and has expressed a strong desire to play a vital role in this paradigm-changing and transformational initiative. Therefore, it is fair to say that the Taliban must step out from the bubble of duplicity to harness the fate-changing benefits of CPEC.

Notably, regional connectivity spearheaded by CPEC involves time, resources, and patience testing for participating states. Above and beyond, the strategic challenges posed by the thick terrorist landscape of South and Central Asia are significant obstacles. Moreover, the terrorist organizations operating from Afghanistan are laced with the Balochistan separatist outfits (Khan, 2023) to target the Chinese to foil the multi-billion-dollar CPEC project. They do not operate independently; they cooperate and coordinate in ambushing their expected targets. Further, TTP, ISKP, ETIM, and Baloch separatist groups do not spare a chance to attack either Pakistan or China. The underlying collaboration among these four organizations orchestrates the actual security concerns in completing CPEC. Consequently, it is paramount to delve into the differing layers of nexus between ETIM and TTP, TTP and ISKP, and TTP and Baloch separatist organizations.

### **Wakhan Corridor – Bridging Regions Together**

In the wake of regional connectivity, the historic Wakhan corridor has the potential to work as a fulcrum of enhancing regional connectedness. The strategic importance of the Wakhan corridor has been acknowledged for centuries, thus called the “Strategic Linchpin” (Ahmad & Jamil, 2023). Wakhan corridor is 350 KM and 16 KM wide. Geographically, it is extended to four countries: Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan. Particularly, 300 km of the Wakhan corridor borders Pakistan, followed by 260 km with Tajikistan and 74 km with China (Munir & Shafiq, 2018).

Historically, the Wakhan corridor remained integral to the Silk Route for centuries (Malik, 2014). Later, it is believed that Marco Polo crossed this strip to reach China (Sparavigna, 2017). In addition, in the 19th century, Russia and the British made this location a buffer zone to avoid direct confrontation.

Particularly, the well-known Broghal Pass (Chitral), Pakistan's main entry point into the Wakhan Corridor, is vital. Since the Wakhan Corridor will offer a second or auxiliary route to the Arabian Sea in addition to the Karakoram Highway (KKH) through Pakistan, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance will rise with its opening.

Technically, it might be challenging and expensive to create infrastructure in the Wakhan due to the location of the Pamir Mountains. Nevertheless, numerous projects have been successfully finished in the region's comparable and much more complicated geographical terrains. The Pamir Mountains, where the Wakhan Corridor is located, and the Karakorum Mountains, into which the KKH was built (using 1960s and 1970s technology and taking 20 years to finish), are in the same region and have comparable topography.



Geopolitically, if the Wakhan Corridor project is successful in becoming operational, it will aid in thwarting India's intention to isolate Pakistan in the region. To accommodate its geopolitical situation, Pakistan can open all Hindu Kush Mountain range passages that provide access to the Wakhan Corridor, including the Ochhili Pass, Khun Pass, Broghal Pass, Darwaz Pass, and Karambar Pass. Nonetheless, opening these passes without strict security checks is cumbersome, providing that terrorists can sneak into Pakistan using these passes.

Socio-economically, the Wakhan Corridor is a need of the hour for local people living in and around the Wakhan Corridor. The people living in Wakhan need access to education and health, and food availability is also limited (Hassan, Khan, & Ismail, 2023). The infrastructure and the paucity of communication facilities push the people of Wakhan to ride on Yaks, Horses, and Donkeys. Additionally, connecting Wakhan Corridor to CPEC would not only bring socio-economic prosperity to the people living at Wakhan Corridor but also to the people living around its vicinity, such as the people of Chitral and people of Ghizer district of the Gilgit Baltistan. In Ghizer and Chitral, the remoteness and inaccessibility cause ascendance in the poverty pie. Inaccessibility and remoteness could be addressed in a single stroke with the construction of the Wakhan corridor and its connection with the mighty KKH.

In addition to Chitral and Ghizer, the miseries of the Chupursan valley of upper Hunza, connected to the Wakhan corridor through Irshad pass, would decrease as soon as the KKH and Wakhan corridor are linked. The Irshad Pass has been a trading artery between Hunza and Wakhan since the Silk Road (Rasheed & Ali, 2023). Demographically, it is to find people of the same ethnicity, language, and culture on both sides. This demographic homogeneity buttresses the possibility of the success of road construction between Upper Hunza and Wakhan. People would enjoy meeting each other by traversing through a black carpeted road instead of donkeys, horses, and yaks.

Notwithstanding, terrorism is the major obstacle to completing the Wakhan Corridor. In the presence of terrorist organizations in northern Afghanistan, it is an uphill battle for China and Pakistan to connect the Wakhan Corridor with the KKH. The Afghan Taliban are trying to brush aside the potential threat of terrorism to the Wakhan Corridor and CPEC, thus working against ISKP while TTP and ETIM are enjoying a honeymoon episode with the Afghan Taliban. So, without adequately apprehending and addressing the menace of terrorism, the Wakhan Corridor in general and CPEC in particular would remain a distant dream for all participating states.

## **Terrorists Nexus Threatening CPEC and China: A Complex Puzzle Unveiled**

China and CPEC have not been spared from Islamic Jihad and have been diligently addressing the threats posed by religious-driven terrorist organizations, both within its territory and abroad, for many years. It is to note here that The ETIM and Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) were initially the primary concerns. However, now the TTP, in partnership with ETIM, ISKP, and Baloch separatist groups, poses a significant danger to Chinese interests. Among these four organizations, three are dwelling in Afghanistan. Even ETIM and TTP are the ideologically closest organizations to the Afghan Taliban.

It bears mention that the Taliban's interest in pulling CPEC to its territory and using it as the springboard to beef up regional connectivity could be materialized if and only if it starts abandoning the internationally outlawed terrorist organizations such as TTP and ETIM. These two organizations are venomous for CPEC and regional connectivity in particular. Before the Taliban's reconquer of Afghanistan, Chinese and Pakistan officials collectively reiterated (Iqbal, Shoaib, & Bakhsh, 2024) that the Taliban must break its ties with the globally outlawed terrorist organizations such as ETIM and TTP, considering both the perilous for regional connectivity led prosperity and economic aggrandizement. Although, for the Taliban, it is not a long-hanging fruit to bottle up TTP and ETIM in a single wrap, the Taliban are not showing intentions in their pursuit to address TTP and ETIM's plight.

The TTP and ETIM alliance is not a novel development. For instance, according to (Rehman, 2014) Mufti Abu Zar al-Burmi said, "Let's disrupt China." Intriguingly, Al-Burmi has taught Qari Hussain Ahmad Mehsud (cousin of TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud and responsible for leading the TTP's suicide bombing squad). The ETIM, officially established in 1997 (Xu, Fletcher, & Bajoria, 2014), is a separatist movement that aims to liberate Xinjiang from China's administration and establish the autonomous state of East Turkestan. Moreover, in April 2013, the ETIM propaganda outlet Islami Awazi release a video on social media showing young boys receiving training in North Waziristan, Pakistan, under the umbrella of the TTP. Previously, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, the TTP leader in North Waziristan, had allowed (Qazi, 2011) Uyghur militants to operate in the region. Once the TTP observed the ideological appeal of the ETIM, they kidnapped (Rehman Z. U., 2014) the Chinese tourist Hong Xu Dong from Dera Ismail Khan on May 19, 2014. Later that year, the TTP claimed (Syed, 2020) responsibility for the killing of a Chinese tourist and her interpreter in Peshawar, stating that it was a reprisal for the "atrocities" committed by Chinese security forces in Xinjiang. With the

help of historical untoward incidents, it is to understand that since its inception, the TTP has consistently embodied and embraced an inherent anti-China rhetoric that courses through the ideological veins of its adherents. Additionally, fast forward to 2021, when nine Chinese engineers were killed in a bomb blast at Dasu hydropower dam project. The joint Pakistan-China investigation revealed (Larres, 2022) that ETIM and TTP perpetrated the attack in unison under the supervision of TTP commander Tariq Swati.

Once the then DG ISPR has underscored (Mujahid, 2022) the supporting hands of anti-Pakistan terrorist organizations in the following words, “the leadership of all these [terrorist] networks are sitting across the border [in Afghanistan] and have the support of [India’s spy agency] Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).” This statement is the testimony that the anti-CPEC terrorist organizations are backed by the intelligence agencies of rogue states, which fear losing their self-proclaimed regional hegemony when other regional states become economically prosperous.

### **TTP and ETIM after Taliban’s Take Over of Kabul**

Soon after the Taliban’s reconquer of Kabul, both ETIM and TTP commenced their meetings in northern Afghanistan. According to the security experts (Personal Communication [Personal Interview], 2023) in the second week of November 2021, the ETIM and TTP held a series of meetings in Parun town, Nuristan province, Afghanistan, shortly after the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Mullah Faqir Muhammad and Mufti Yasir led the TTP delegation, while Haji Furqan represented the ETIM. The two parties reached an agreement on the following points during these meetings:

- East Turkestan Islamic Movement and TTP will conduct joint operations.
- The TTP will assist the ETIM in the operations, and ETIM will assist TTP in the operations against Pakistan.
- The TTP will support the ETIM In operations against China and Pakistan joint projects.
- The TTP will assist ETIM in the current situation and shelter them.
- The TTP will provide arms to the ETIM.
- TTP and ETIM will share the spoils of any joint operations conducted.
- TTP will be the mediating party between the Baloch extremist groups and the ETIM. Resultantly, Baloch extremist groups, with the help of ETIM, will target CPEC projects and joint Pak-China ventures.

Further, to strengthen their operational ties, the ETIM and the TTP have undertaken efforts to foster interpersonal connections through matrimonial alliances. Intriguingly, members affiliated with the ETIM and TTP have been engaging in marital unions within the northern regions of Afghanistan. An illustrative instance occurred in April 2023, where a marriage ceremony was solemnized between individuals hailing from households associated with the TTP and ETIM, specifically in the Urdoj area of Badakhshan. When examining the historical and contemporary developments surrounding the complex interplay between the ETIM and the TTP, a revealing pattern emerges, underscoring that the TTP serves as a pivotal nucleus of multi-faceted threats. It becomes abundantly clear that the ramifications of TTP's actions extend far beyond the boundaries of Pakistan, further emphasizing its potential as a potent force capable of exerting its destabilizing influence on a broader scale. TTP's linkages and collaborations with the ISKP even double fold the threat spectrum.

Undoubtedly, the TTP, known as the mother organization, was pivotal in providing initial leaders and members for the ISKP. The very same ISKP mercilessly gunned down (Amin & Siddique, 2022) two Chinese teachers in Baluchistan in 2017. Moreover, Afghanistan has witnessed a surge in aggressive attacks and the dissemination of propaganda targeting China by the ISKP. A significant incident occurred on December 12, 2022, when ISKP specifically targeted (Verma, 2023) Chinese citizens within the vicinity of Kabul. In parallel with the kinetic means, the ISKP is active on a non-kinetic front through its propaganda apparatus. For instance, demonstrating their propaganda efforts, ISKP featured an article titled "China's Daydream of Imperialism" in their publication, the "Voice of Khorasan" magazine. Though the Afghan Taliban's iron-handed dealing with the ISKP has limited its threats, however, the TTP-ISKP relationship is still alive. In the latest issue (19) of the TTP magazine, Mujalla Taliban, features (Diary, 2023) a key article about the life of Sheikh Rahimullah Haqqani, an Afghan Taliban scholar who was killed by the ISKP in Kabul in 2022. This article shows that TTP has skillfully chosen not to denounce ISKP strategically. This discernible observation suggests that members of the TTP perceive the ISKP as a fallback option to be employed in situations where potential pressures arise from both the Afghan Taliban and the Pakistani authorities.

Concomitant with the presence of the ETIM and the ISKP, the TTP has emerged as yet another strategic threat for both Pakistan and China due to its growing proximity to Baloch insurgents. Notwithstanding the stark ideological disparities between the TTP and Baloch insurgents, with the former adhering to a religiously driven jihad and the latter representing a more liberal-oriented separatist entity or entities, they find common ground in their

shared adversaries: Pakistan and China. Consequently, from a strategic standpoint, aligning against these common foes is mutually advantageous. This convergence was succinctly highlighted when the TTP orchestrated an ambush (Mahmood & Shah, 2023) on Chinese nationals at the Serena hotels in Quetta, effectively showcasing its presence in Baluchistan and aversion towards Chinese interests.

Baloch insurgents, who were previously enjoying safe havens in Afghanistan have lost this privilege after the Taliban's resurgence to power in Kabul. Under such circumstances, it is a strategic exigency for the Baloch insurgents to maintain good relations with TTP. Driven by the need of the hour, the Baloch insurgents are giving space for the TTP to mushroom its influence in Baluchistan. For instance, since July 2022, the TTP has witnessed a notable expansion in its operational reach within Baluchistan, primarily attributed to the inclusion of four Baloch militant groups. These groups are spearheaded by Aslam Baloch, Mazar Baloch, Akram Baloch, and Asim Baloch, who were initially engaged (Sayed & Hamming, 2023) in combat against the U.S.-led NATO alliance in Afghanistan and have now aligned themselves with the TTP. This marks a significant development, as it represents the first known instance of the TTP establishing a presence in the ethnic Baloch regions of Baluchistan province. According to (Khan, 2023) TTP has established its organizational structure in 70 percent of Baluchistan province. Even some security analysts believe (Basit Khan, 2023) that the process of suicide bombing by Baloch insurgents is taught by the TTP fighters in Afghanistan.

Additionally, there has been a noticeable escalation in the frequency of attacks perpetrated by the TTP within the province of Baluchistan. In the initial three months of 2023, TTP claimed (Sayed & Hamming, 2023) 11 attacks in Baluchistan, whereas seven attacks were recorded in 2020, followed by 17 in 2021 and only 12 in 2022. Also, on the propaganda front, TTP produced (Sayed, 2023) its first-ever Balochi video in April 2021 to galvanize the support from the Baloch population. On January 26, 2023, Umar Media, TTP's propaganda mouthpiece (UmarMedia, 2023) released its inaugural propaganda documentary centered on Baluchistan, titled "A Glimpse of the Current Suppression of the Baloch People in Baluchistan." Reportedly, from 2015 to 2020, when both TTP and Baloch separatist groups were dwelling in Afghanistan, they came together and started cooperating (Bezhan & Khattak, 2021). Beyond technical cooperation, the TTP trained the Baloch insurgents in Afghanistan. Ultimately, this training made the Baloch separatists launch its bloodletting thread through suicide bombings.

The TTP's steady campaigns of ingress in already tenuous Baluchistan mount security problems for Pakistan's security apparatus. The TTP's confidence in



planting its feet in Baluchistan comes from the unwavering support of the Afghan Taliban.

### **TTP: The Hidden Danger for Regional Connectivity and CPEC in the Afghan Taliban's Shadow**

Within hours of the Taliban capturing Kabul, the TTP was the first militant group to celebrate (Mir, 2022) the Taliban takeover publicly. The TTP hailed the Taliban's return to power as a major triumph for the jihadi project in a statement issued on August 17, 2021. In addition, with the release of hundreds (Mehlman & Hess, 2023) of TTP members who had been detained by American forces and the previous Afghan government from prisons throughout Kabul, the Taliban's takeover also gave the TTP an instant boost in power. This includes prominent leaders, including Maulawi Faqir Muhammad Bajauri, the TTP's founding deputy emir, and Mufti Khalid Balti, the group's former spokesperson, who were both apprehended in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Bajauri was observed speaking (UmarMedia., 2021) sizable crowds of TTP fighters in the Kunar region, which is close to his own Bajaur tribal district in Pakistan. He emphasized throughout his speech that the anti-state terrorist battle in Pakistan was still ongoing and exhorted those in attendance to give the jihadi front in Pakistan their full attention. He praised the people's assistance and protection of the TTP and stated that his organization was now aiming for a similar win in Pakistan. According to Pakistan's premier Anwar ul Haq Kakar, since the Taliban's regain of power in Kabul, Pakistan has witnessed a 60% rise in terrorist attacks, a 500% ascendance in suicide bombings, and 2867 fatalities of innocent Pakistanis (Abbas, 2023).

Unfortunately, under the Afghan Taliban's full patronage, the TTP has extended its influence into the GB, the gateway of the CPEC. TTP announced (Mehsud, 2022) its shadow province in GB last week of December 2022. Later, On April 2023, the TTP's Spokesperson, Muhammad Khorasani, confirmed to a Russian media outlet, Nezavisimaya Gazeta, that the members of TTP are spared from the GB to Gwadar. Previously, TTP claimed (Ali, Ali, & Tassarwar, 2024) responsibility for killing nine foreign tourists at Nanga Parbat. This time, the TTP thoroughly enjoys northern Afghanistan as its strategic depth from where it is easy to sneak into the GB cum Chitral and ambush the innocents. Shockingly, more recently, TTP claimed (SAMRI, 2023) responsibility for killing a police officer, Muhammad Alam, in the Bathret Nala Ghizer district. It is worth mentioning that the Ghizer district is connected to the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. The TTP's attack on (Ahmad & Ahlawat, 2023) Chitral on 6 September 2023 succinctly orchestrates the vulnerability of the GB and Chitral as TTP is housing in northern Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

The ship of hopes for the Taliban's practical actions to control the TTP is sinking with every second ambush on Pakistan soil. The appalling performance of the Taliban ostensibly caused strategic impediments in the completion and extension of CPEC. Economically, CPEC-led regional connectivity is the golden opportunity for Afghanistan to address its decades-long socio-economic plights. The extension of CPEC through the Wakhan corridor is not only a delicacy for the people of Pamir, Ghizer, and Chitral but also a long-awaited lucky break for the people of northern Afghanistan to get connected with the outer world and break the shackles of remoteness and inaccessibility.

Acquiring economic muscles for a landlocked state demands pragmatic and foresightedness in leadership. Practically, the CPEC has the potential to connect Afghanistan with China by land and with the rest of the world by the Arabian Sea. To pocket in the benefits, the Taliban has to control the rapidly mushrooming TTP. Currently, TTP enjoys technical-level cooperation with the Baloch separatists. The TTP provided its commanders and low-ranked fighters to the ISKP, resulting in unleashed bloodletting onslaughts by ISKP in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The thread of expanding TTP's allegiances did not stop there. Instead, it went to meetings with ETIM and ensured its assistance in its attacks against China. Therefore, this wave of cooperation and coordination driven by TTP is the most perilous security threat to CPEC and regional connectivity.

## Suggested Citation

Karim, D. (2024). The Promise and Peril of CPEC: Navigating Security Challenges in Regional Connectivity. In *Pakistan and the Belt & Road Initiative: A Journey through Politics & Economy* (pp 47-59). CSC-KIU.

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