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Development corridors as security buffers: Conceptualising the China–Pakistan economic corridor as a security practice

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Abstract

This article conceptualises development corridors as security buffers and uses the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as an illustrative case to examine how infrastructure connectivity can operate as a security practice. It addresses a conceptual gap between accounts that treat CPEC primarily as an economic development project and those that reduce it to a geoeconomic or strategic instrument. The article develops a conceptual framework by synthesising literature on the security–development nexus, infrastructure politics, geoeconomics, and China's Belt and Road Initiative/CPEC studies. It draws on official CPEC documents, project information, public security-risk reporting, and CPEC-related security-governance materials. CPEC is treated as an illustrative case rather than a full empirical test, allowing the article to trace the concept across project materials, security incidents, and governance arrangements. CPEC operates as a security buffer through two mechanisms: stabilisation through development and strategic access through connectivity. These mechanisms also produce a corridor security paradox: strategically valuable infrastructure becomes vulnerable to militant violence, local resistance, protection burdens, and geopolitical contestation. The article contributes to security studies by showing that security practices may operate through infrastructure, logistics, project protection, and supply-chain management rather than through military instruments alone. It also explains why development corridors may become both buffers against insecurity and targets of insecurity.

Keywords:

China–Pakistan economic corridor, development corridors, security buffer, infrastructure connectivity, security–development nexus

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Introduction

Infrastructure is commonly understood as an instrument of economic development, with roads, railways, ports, energy facilities, industrial zones, and logistics networks treated as material conditions for trade, investment, employment, market access, and regional growth (Calderón and Servén, 2010; Graham and Marvin, 2001; World Bank, 1994).

Yet in contemporary international politics, infrastructure increasingly performs security functions. It does not merely connect markets but also reshapes corridors, borderlands, supply-chain resilience, and geopolitical influence, thereby operating as a security practice (Cowen, 2014; Easterling, 2014; Larkin, 2013).

The existing debates on the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) often frame it either as an economic connectivity project or a geoeconomic instrument of strategic competition (Garlick, 2018; Markey, 2020; Rolland, 2017; Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). This article argues that both perspectives miss an intermediate layer: the corridor as a security buffer. CPEC not only connects western China, Pakistan's interior and Gwadar Port in economic space but also reorganises security space by linking borderland stability, port protection, personnel security, energy vulnerability, and cross-border logistical risk.

This shift is particularly visible in the ways major powers use infrastructure to organise space and manage risk (Blackwill and Harris, 2016; Scholvin and Wigell, 2018; Wigell, 2016). Ports, railways, highways, energy projects, and industrial zones can reshape maritime access, state capacity, and peripheral integration. Infrastructure is therefore not only a development tool but also a form of spatial governance. Studies of infrastructure politics already have shown that infrastructure is not a neutral technical system, but a material arrangement through which power, governance, and political imagination are organised (Easterling, 2014; Larkin, 2013). Logistics and supply-chain networks are likewise not merely commercial infrastructures but they may also become objects of security governance and targets of organised violence (Cowen, 2014; Schouten, 2022).

CPEC is a useful case to examine this transformation. According to the *Long-Term Plan for the China–Pakistan economic corridor (2017–2030)*, China and Pakistan established a "1+4" cooperation model, with CPEC as the core and Gwadar, energy, transport infrastructure, and industrial cooperation as priority areas (Government of Pakistan and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2017). This indicates that CPEC is not a single transport project, but a cross-border development–governance arrangement composed of energy facilities, port development, roads, industrial zones, and policy coordination.

To treat CPEC only as an economic project would therefore obscure its security dimension. The corridor connects western China, Pakistan's interior, Balochistan, and Gwadar Port across a space shaped by terrorism, separatism, local grievances, port security, energy vulnerability, and Indian Ocean geopolitics (Montesano, 2016; Siddiqui, 2023). It not only concerns Pakistan's national development but also relates to China's western borderland stability, the diversification of energy and logistics routes, the protection of Chinese personnel and overseas assets, and the strategic imagination of access towards the Indian Ocean (Markey, 2020; Montesano, 2016; Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). CPEC is therefore not a project in which security simply follows development; the two have been intertwined from the outset.

The 2024 attack near Gwadar illustrates the resulting tension: infrastructure intended to improve connectivity and stability may itself become a focal point of violence (Reuters, 2024a).

This article therefore conceptualises "development corridors as security buffers" as an intermediate form of security practice in which corridor-building is used to govern fragile spaces, strategic access, and cross-border risk. The concept neither treats development corridors as disguised military projects nor reduces them to ordinary economic cooperation.

CPEC is used as an illustrative case rather than a full empirical test, showing how a development corridor may perform security-buffer functions under specific geopolitical and local conditions. The central argument is that when an infrastructure corridor is used to stabilise fragile spaces, create strategic access, and govern cross-border risks, it begins to move from a development project towards a security practice.

Methodologically, the article follows a conceptual synthesis and illustrative case approach. The conceptual synthesis draws on three bodies of literature: the security–development nexus, infrastructure politics, and geoeconomics and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/CPEC studies. The illustrative case is not used for causal testing but to trace the concept across project materials, security incidents, and governance arrangements. This design is appropriate for a conceptual paper because the objective is not to test causal effects but to clarify the conditions under which corridor-building becomes security practice. The article therefore aims to contribute not by providing a comprehensive empirical account of CPEC but by developing a portable conceptual framework for analysing how development corridors may become both buffers against insecurity and targets of insecurity.

Infrastructure, development, and security: A conceptual gap

The first body of literature concerns the security–development nexus. It shows that development and security have increasingly been treated as interdependent rather than separate policy domains. Poverty, weak state capacity, borderland governance failures, and social instability may therefore be framed as potential security risks (Chandler, 2007; Duffield, 2001; Stern and Öjendal, 2010).

Within this logic, development policy can acquire a preventive security function. Infrastructure, employment, and governance programmes are expected to reduce instability before it escalates into open conflict. This perspective is relevant to CPEC because its energy, transport, industrial, and port projects may operate not only as economic cooperation but also as development-based risk governance.

The second body of literature concerns infrastructure politics. This scholarship rejects the assumption that infrastructure is a neutral technical system. Infrastructure shapes spatial order, political authority, and social relations (Barry, 2013; Easterling, 2014; Larkin, 2013). Logistics and supply chains can similarly become objects of security governance (Cowen, 2014), while networked infrastructures reorganise patterns of connection and exclusion (Graham and Marvin, 2001).

This literature directs attention to who builds, protects, benefits from, and bears the risks of infrastructure. In CPEC, these questions structure relations among Pakistan's central government, Balochistan's local society, foreign investors, and security institutions (Boni and Adeney, 2020).

The third body of literature concerns the BRI, geoeconomics, and China's external development strategy. Geoeconomic studies examine how states use trade, investment, finance,

and infrastructure to pursue strategic objectives (Blackwill and Harris, 2016; Scholvin and Wigell, 2018; Wigell, 2016). Studies of Chinese infrastructure frequently analyse these projects through the lenses of influence, Global South cooperation and great-power competition (Garlick, 2018; Jones and Hameiri, 2020; Rolland, 2017).

Similarly, CPEC scholarship emphasises the corridor's strategic significance within China–Pakistan relations and Eurasian geopolitics (Markey, 2020; Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). Yet these approaches leave an intermediate question underdeveloped: how the corridor form itself embeds development and security through the governance of unstable spaces, strategic routes, and transnational risks.

Therefore, CPEC cannot be adequately captured as either a purely economic–technical project or a conventional military-security project. The concept of development corridors as security buffers shifts the analysis from classifying CPEC to examining how corridor-building produces security functions, protection requirements, and new forms of exposure.

Development corridors as security buffers

This article defines "development corridors as security buffers" as a form of security practice through which cross-border infrastructure and institutional coordination transform fragile borderlands, strategic nodes, and logistical risks into more governable spaces. A development corridor is not a single road or an isolated project, but a cross-border spatial arrangement combining transport infrastructure, energy projects, port development, industrial zones, logistics networks, finance, and policy coordination.

Compared with ordinary infrastructure projects, development corridors have a stronger spatial-integrative function. A single power plant may ease energy shortages, and a single road may improve mobility. A development corridor, however, seeks to combine multiple infrastructures, industrial plans, logistical nodes, and policy arrangements into a wider structure of regional governance. It reorganises space by linking territories, resources, and governance institutions into a formation that can be planned, financed, narrated, and protected.

The term "security buffer" is usually associated with border zones, strategic depth, buffer states, or demilitarised areas. In traditional security studies, buffers are often understood in relation to geography, military defence, and spheres of influence (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). In contemporary political economy, however, buffers may also be infrastructural. Ports can buffer supply-chain risks; roads can reduce borderland isolation; energy corridors can mitigate route vulnerability; and industrial zones can address social instability linked to unemployment or marginalisation. A security buffer therefore need not be militarised; it can also be constructed through development and connectivity.

The concept of a buffer is used here deliberately. Unlike terms such as "tool," "platform," or "instrument," a buffer does not imply the complete removal of threats. Instead, it refers to the absorption, redistribution, and governance of risk. A security buffer may not eliminate insecurity, but it can change where risks appear and how they are governed. CPEC illustrates this logic by bringing risks in Balochistan and around Gwadar into a more visible, governable, and contested corridor-governance framework.

This concept differs from the general security–development nexus. The literature shows how development policies are securitised, or how security problems are addressed through

developmental means (Duffield, 2001; Stern and Öjendal, 2010). By contrast, the concept of development corridors as security buffers highlights a more specific spatial-infrastructural form. Development is not treated as an abstract policy field but as a security practice materialised through corridors, nodes, routes, and logistical lines. A corridor is not simply a policy space; it is a route-based governance arrangement that connects unstable territories, strategic nodes, and logistical vulnerabilities.

The concept also differs from the idea of a geoeconomic corridor. Geoeconomic approaches explain how economic instruments are used to pursue power and strategic objectives (Blackwill and Harris, 2016; Scholvin and Wigell, 2018). The security-buffer concept, by contrast, focuses on how infrastructure corridors govern risk, stabilise borderlands, organise access, and produce new forms of security exposure.

To avoid conceptual overextension, three boundaries are necessary. First, a development corridor is not equivalent to a military base or an alliance arrangement. Its security function operates mainly through infrastructure, connectivity, finance, and development narratives rather than through direct military deployment. Second, it is not equivalent to an ordinary economic development project. A corridor becomes a security buffer only when it is used to manage borderland, route, supply-chain, or geopolitical risks. Third, the concept does not assume that development corridors necessarily succeed. They may stabilise space, but they may also generate new conflicts, exposures, and governance costs.

The concept contains two mechanisms and one internal tension. The first mechanism is stabilisation through development. Development corridors may integrate fragile regions into denser economic and administrative networks through energy, transport, employment, and industrial cooperation. The underlying logic is that infrastructure can serve as a preventive form of security governance where poverty, energy shortages, weak governance, and local exclusion generate security risks.

The second mechanism is strategic access through connectivity: roads, railways, ports, and energy routes extend security beyond territorial defence to route protection, port access, market connection, and logistical resilience. For China, the significance of CPEC lies not only in investment and trade but also in its long-term corridor-planning role as a potential link between western China and the Arabian Sea.

The internal tension is the corridor security paradox. Development corridors do not automatically produce security. On the contrary, the more strategically valuable an infrastructure project becomes, the more likely it is to attract the attention of armed groups, local protesters and geopolitical competitors. Ports, roads, engineers, energy facilities, and construction sites can become concentrated sites of security risk. Corridor security is therefore not a linear process of "build and secure." It is better understood as a cycle of construction, exposure, protection, and governance.

The framework is portable, but its application requires specific scope conditions. It is most useful where a corridor crosses fragile or politically contested spaces, connects development objectives to route, energy, port, or supply-chain security, creates dedicated coordination or protection arrangements, and redistributes rather than eliminates risk. Comparative research could therefore examine BRI corridors in Central Asia and Southeast Asia, port-and-logistics networks in the Indian Ocean and East Africa, or non-BRI transnational transport and energy corridors. The comparative question is not whether these cases replicate CPEC but whether stabilisation through development and strategic access through connectivity are present, and whether they generate similar patterns of local resistance, protection burdens, and geopolitical exposure. Such comparison would test the

Table 1. Development corridors as security buffers: conceptual mechanisms and CPEC illustrations.
Source: Author's own elaboration based on Boni (2019); Boni and Adeney (2020); CPEC Authority (2024a, 2024b); CPEC Secretariat (2017); Government of Pakistan and Government of the People's Republic of China (2017); Reuters (2023, 2024a, 2024b); Siddiqui (2023); Wani (2021).

Conceptual element	CPEC illustration	Security function
Stabilisation through development	Energy projects, transport corridors, industrial cooperation, and local development narratives.	Reduces governance pressure, energy vulnerability, and the risk of borderland marginalisation.
Strategic access through connectivity	Gwadar Port, road connectivity and the long-term corridor plan linking western China with the Arabian Sea.	Creates potential alternative access and logistical depth while remaining constrained by security costs and local politics.
Corridor security paradox	Attacks near Gwadar, attacks on Chinese personnel, Baloch resistance, and project-protection requirements.	Turns infrastructure into both a buffer against risk and a target of risk.

concept's portability across different host-state capacities, benefit-distribution arrangements, and geopolitical settings.

China–Pakistan economic corridor as an illustrative case

CPEC is a useful illustrative case because it is widely regarded as a flagship BRI corridor, crosses an unstable geopolitical space involving Balochistan, Gwadar, Pakistan's interior, and China's western borderlands, and combines energy, transport, port development, and industrial cooperation.

Official CPEC project information lists multiple energy projects, including coal, hydropower, wind, solar, and transmission facilities (CPEC Authority, 2024a). Duan *et al.* (2022) similarly link these investments to Pakistan's long-standing electricity shortages, limited generation capacity, and energy-security challenges. Economically, these projects aim to ease electricity shortages, support industrial activity, and improve infrastructure conditions; from a security perspective, they may also strengthen state capacity, reduce social discontent, and support borderland integration.

Transport infrastructure illustrates CPEC's strategic access function. Official CPEC materials list highways and road-connectivity projects, showing how the corridor reorganises spatial distance and logistical routes (CPEC Authority, 2024b). Transport infrastructure has security relevance because roads, ports, and logistic nodes reshape routes, access points, and logistical options, although this capacity remains constrained by security costs, local politics, and regional competition.

The connection between western China, Pakistan's interior, and Gwadar Port is central to this logic. It supports domestic connectivity within Pakistan while also providing China with a potential land–sea access framework towards the Arabian Sea. Montesano (2016) notes that CPEC's strategic value lies in its imagined role as an alternative energy route, a mechanism for western regional development, and a component of broader Eurasian connectivity. This article does not claim that CPEC has solved China's route vulnerability,

but that it reflects strategic-access logic at the level of long-term corridor planning and imagination.

Gwadar Port is the clearest expression of CPEC's security-buffer logic. It is both a port-development project and a strategic node in the Indian Ocean region. The CPEC long-term plan identifies Gwadar as one of the corridor's priority areas (Government of Pakistan and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2017). This dual character is central: the same infrastructure appears as both a local growth opportunity and a strategic asset.

Industrial cooperation is also important for CPEC's stabilisation function. The long-term plan identifies industrial cooperation as a priority area alongside Gwadar, energy, and transport infrastructure (Government of Pakistan and Government of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Its importance lies in the attempt to convert transport and energy projects into sustained economic activity. Roads and ports alone cannot stabilise a region unless they are connected to employment, local industry, governance capacity, and benefit distribution.

This is particularly important in Balochistan. Local grievances, distributional disputes, and separatist narratives show that infrastructure may be interpreted as external control or resource extraction when communities do not perceive shared benefits. Boni and Adeney (2020) demonstrate how CPEC is shaped by Pakistan's federal politics, institutional arrangements, and distributional tensions. At the local level, Wani (2021) shows how Baloch nationalists associate Chinese investment and Gwadar's development with exclusion, resource deprivation, and demographic anxieties, thereby turning Chinese assets and personnel into symbolic targets. Whether a development corridor can function as a security buffer therefore depends on its integration into local governance and benefit-distribution arrangements, rather than on cross-border logistical connectivity alone.

CPEC's security governance is also visible in project protection and personnel security arrangements. Pakistan has established dedicated security mechanisms to protect CPEC projects and Chinese personnel. Official CPEC reporting in 2017 documented the role of a special security division in coordinating security arrangements for CPEC projects, Chinese personnel, and participating companies (CPEC Secretariat, 2017). Similarly, Boni (2019) argues that CPEC security relies heavily on host-state military capacity and dedicated project-protection arrangements.

Once a development corridor is treated as strategic infrastructure, it produces continuous protection requirements. Corridor security is therefore not achieved automatically after construction, but it requires ongoing military, police, and administrative coordination.

Taken together, these components show that CPEC's security relevance derives not from any single project but from the corridor form itself: the combination of energy supply, transport connectivity, port development, local development narratives, and project-protection mechanisms. Its security-buffer function depends on whether these components can address local grievances, project security, benefit distribution, and cross-border risks.

The risk paradox of corridor security

CPEC illustrates the corridor security paradox: development corridors are designed to buffer insecurity, yet their strategic visibility also creates new security requirements. This paradox is most visible in Gwadar. As a key node of CPEC, Gwadar Port is not only presented as an economic development opportunity but it is also treated as a strategic

asset. Precisely because of this strategic value, Gwadar becomes more vulnerable to attacks by armed groups and local resistance movements, as illustrated by the 2024 attack near the port (Reuters, 2024a).

The paradox also appears in the protection of personnel and projects. In 2023, militants attacked a military convoy escorting Chinese nationals near Gwadar (Reuters, 2023). In 2024, Pakistan's prime minister linked a series of attacks in Balochistan to attempts to disrupt CPEC (Reuters, 2024b). These incidents show that corridor security extends beyond ports and roads to personnel, project sites, and cooperation networks. More broadly, CPEC faces overlapping pressures from Baloch militancy, instability in Afghanistan, local politics, and regional rivalry (Rehman and Wang, 2024; Siddiqui, 2023).

Balochistan's instability, however, cannot be reduced to terrorism. It also reflects distributional conflict, limited local participation, and the political effects of development governance. Ahmed (2024) shows that security-centred project governance may leave everyday grievances and political exclusion unresolved. These dynamics can lead local actors to interpret infrastructure as exclusionary rather than stabilising.

Therefore, CPEC shows a recursive relationship between development and security: infrastructure is built to reduce risk; however, it also creates new exposure—the more important a corridor becomes, the more protection it requires; and expanded protection reinforces the corridor's strategic significance.

This paradox has three implications. First, infrastructure security is not an issue that arises only after construction; it is an internal component of corridor governance. Second, development narratives cannot fully dissolve local political conflict. If benefits appear unfairly distributed, infrastructure may become a symbol of exclusion rather than stability. Third, the more strategic a corridor becomes, the more likely it is to be drawn into regional and great-power competition.

The corridor security paradox is therefore a part of the concept itself: development corridors become security buffers because they concentrate risk, visibility, and governance resources within infrastructural spaces that can be identified, protected, and contested.

Theoretically, this paradox helps to avoid two simplified readings. The first is an optimistic developmentalist reading, which assumes that infrastructure automatically produces stability. The second is a one-dimensional strategic-expansion reading, which treats infrastructure only as a tool of geopolitical control. CPEC shows that development corridors may contain genuine developmental content while performing security functions, stabilising space while generating new risks as both buffers against insecurity and targets of insecurity.

Conclusions: Conceptual contribution and policy implications

This article has introduced the concept of "development corridors as security buffers" and used CPEC to show how infrastructure connectivity can turn development policy into a mode of risk governance in which development and security are closely intertwined.

The article's core argument can be summarised as two mechanisms and one paradox. First, CPEC reflects stabilisation through development by using energy, transport, and

industrial cooperation to incorporate fragile spaces into wider networks. Second, it reflects strategic access through connectivity by linking Gwadar Port, road infrastructure, and the long-term corridor imagination between western China and the Arabian Sea. Third, it generates a corridor security paradox: strategically valuable infrastructure may also become a target of attack, local resistance, and protection requirements.

As a conceptual paper, the article does not seek to prove that all CPEC projects have security purposes. Its contribution lies in developing a middle-range concept for analysing China's infrastructure practices beyond labels such as "geoeconomic instrument," "debt trap," "military expansion," or general development cooperation. It also extends the study of security practice beyond military deployment, deterrence, alliances, and sanctions. Security governance may also operate through roads, ports, energy projects, industrial zones, project protection, and supply-chain management.

The policy implication is straightforward: corridor security should not be treated as a technical matter of project protection alone. It also requires attention to local grievances, benefit distribution, and the political effects of infrastructure.

The article has clear limitations. It does not claim that all CPEC projects have security intentions or that development corridors necessarily stabilise fragile spaces; its aim is concept-building rather than causal testing. Future research should operationalise these scope conditions through structured comparison across BRI and non-BRI corridors. Such research could examine how host-state capacity, local inclusion, benefit distribution, protection arrangements, and geopolitical contestation determine whether a corridor functions as a security buffer or instead generates additional insecurity.

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Yang Li: conceptualisation, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources, and data curation. Ting Long: writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, visualisation, supervision, project administration.

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AI Use Disclosure

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepSeek for language editing and stylistic refinement. All AI-assisted text was subsequently reviewed and revised by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final content.

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