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The geopolitical significance of the CPEC in strengthening the BRI toward the west

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This paper examines the strategic importance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) within the larger framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While much research has focused on the bilateral aspects of CPEC, there is a significant gap in understanding its emerging extensions into Afghanistan and Iran, and how these extensions collectively strengthen the BRI's westward expansion. To address this gap, the paper poses the research question: "What is the role of the emerging extensions to Iran and Afghanistan in strengthening the BRI's westward expansion?" To answer this question, a qualitative research methodology is employed, guided by a theoretical framework that views geopolitics and geoeconomics as interconnected. This is complemented by a systematic analysis of official documents, policy statements, and expert commentaries from 2016 to 2024. The findings indicate that CPEC serves as the central artery of the BRI, transforming Pakistan into a crucial hub and extending its influence across South, Central, and West Asia. The Afghan sub-corridor offers a vital southern route for the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to access a warm-water port. Meanwhile, the connection to Iran creates an essential link to West Asia and Europe. These extensions allow China to diversify its trade and energy routes, mitigate vulnerabilities such as the "Malacca Dilemma," and contribute to a more multipolar world order.

KEYWORDS

Afghanistan, BRI, CPEC, geopolitics-geoeconomics, Iran, regional interconnectivity

1 Introduction

The 21st century represents a significant shift in global dynamics, as the emergence of influential regional powers challenges the unipolar order, potentially leading to a multipolar world (Degtarev, 2019; Peters, 2023). This shift has accelerated economic globalization and prompted states to realign their geostrategic and geo-economic priorities in response to new global challenges (Butt and Butt, 2015). In this changing landscape, economic corridors have become essential tools for competition in the international market. They play a crucial role in facilitating trade, enhancing economic relations, and promoting regional integration. China has been one of the first Asian countries to recognize these changing dynamics and has developed a strategy of interconnectivity in the wake of the Cold War to strengthen its position as a regional power (Degtarev, 2019; Costa, 2023b). Early initiatives, such as the Central Asian Republics Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program and the New Eurasian Land Bridge, were designed to extend China's influence beyond its traditional areas in East and Southeast Asia. These foundational connectivity strategies ultimately culminated in China's announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a comprehensive global strategy in 2013.

The BRI represents China's ambitious effort to strengthen its global standing by revitalizing ancient trade routes and establishing new ones, thereby enhancing inter-regional connectivity (Costa, 2020). The initiative's initial goal was to create a major project that would link China to Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and Russia through the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (21st MSR; Waqas and Majid, 2020; Wolf, 2020). This vision reflects the spirit of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) in extending influence westward. Since its inception, the BRI has evolved and successfully expanded globally to include Africa, Latin America, and the South Pacific, significantly surpassing its original goals. The number of countries signing Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) related to the BRI grew from 8 in 2013 to 151 by 2023. Among this expansive initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was launched as a flagship project in 2013. Positioned as a crucial component of the BRI's westward expansion, CPEC is strategically located; particularly, the positioning of Gwadar allows for important connectivity between the SREB and the 21st MSR. This provides China with direct access to vital global energy routes and addresses its longstanding "Malacca Dilemma" (Bhattacharjee, 2015; Amir, 2016). With substantial Chinese investment totalling USD 55 billion to date (Hong and Malik, 2024), CPEC has become a strategic corridor that enhances China's access to major energy markets in Central and West Asia. Crucially, it also facilitates the BRI's expansion into new regions, especially Iran and Afghanistan.

While existing scholarship on the BRI has extensively explored its global reach, economic implications, and geopolitical challenges (Zhang, 2021; Beeson and Crawford, 2023; Bhuiyan, 2024), the CPEC has garnered significant attention as a flagship project focusing on its economic benefits, security concerns, and India's perspectives (McCartney, 2020; Shafqat, 2022; Akhtar, 2023; Alam et al., 2023). However, a notable gap remains in the comprehensive analysis of CPEC as a primary driver and geopolitical catalyst for the BRI's strategic westward expansion, particularly through its emerging sub-corridors into Afghanistan and Iran. Many studies treat the connections with Afghanistan and Iran as two distinct routes with different objectives (Wolf, 2020; Ali, 2021; Hussain et al., 2021; Naz and Parveen, 2022; Qadri et al., 2023), overlooking a systematic examination of how CPEC's established and potential extensions to these two pivotal nations collectively enhance the BRI's long-term geopolitical and geoeconomic reach—not only toward Central Asia and the broader Middle East but also toward Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea. In this context, the expansion of CPEC serves as a strategic counterweight to rival regional connectivity architectures, such as India's International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and its development of the Chabahar port. This paper aims to bridge this gap by providing an integrated perspective on both corridors and addressing the specific mechanisms and implications of CPEC's role in forging these essential westward linkages. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate how the BRI can become a more concrete and strategically vital network for China's global positioning. Building on this premise, the paper critically examines the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of CPEC in strengthening the

BRI's westward expansion, particularly as it promotes regional interconnectivity across South, Central, and West Asia through its emerging extensions into Iran and Afghanistan. Thus, this paper addresses the central research question: "What is the role of the emerging extensions to Iran and Afghanistan in strengthening the BRI's westward expansion?"

The relevance of this study lies in its focus on a timely yet understudied topic. While the broader initiatives of the BRI and the CPEC have been extensively researched, there is little comprehensive analysis of the interconnected relationship between CPEC and its emerging extensions into Afghanistan and Iran as part of a parallel and strategically complementary multi-vector design. Understanding this specific dynamic is essential, as it evaluates the impact of China's initiatives on regional power dynamics. This analysis primarily highlights the relationship between China, a key player in the BRI, and Pakistan, its most significant stakeholder in the region, while also considering two other important stakeholders: Iran and Afghanistan. This approach offers a nuanced perspective on how infrastructure and economic integration serve as tools of statecraft to reshape regional alignments in a multipolar world.

The findings of this research provide valuable insights for policymakers and academics who seek to understand the evolving geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of Central and West Asia. Therefore, in light of the identified literature gap and the significance of this study, this paper aims to contribute several key insights to the existing body of work:

- Firstly, by emphasizing the role of the Afghan and Iranian extensions as parallel and strategically complementary components of CPEC's strategic design, it enhances our knowledge of the corridor's multi-vector impact beyond its immediate bilateral framework.
- Secondly, it sheds light on how these specific pathways serve to mitigate China's strategic vulnerabilities, such as the "Malacca Dilemma," by offering a structural alternative to rival connectivity architectures, such as the INSTC. Furthermore, by diversifying access to vital resources and markets, China can reduce its dependence on this strategic chokepoint, thereby enhancing its energy security.
- Finally, this paper contributes to the broader academic discourse on the BRI and the evolving global power dynamics, demonstrating how targeted infrastructure development and economic integration play a significant role in shaping the geopolitical landscape in a multipolar world.

In the following sections, we organize the paper into four distinct parts. In the subsequent section, we delineate the employed methodology and the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis. In **Section 3**, we conduct a thorough investigation into the expansion of the CPEC to achieve regional interconnectivity. In this section, the focus is on Iran and Afghanistan, with an in-depth examination of the development and strategic rationale behind CPEC's extensions into these countries, as outlined in **Sections 3.1** and **3.2**, respectively. In **Section 4**, we provide an analysis of the connections between the various elements mentioned, as well as an assessment of the geopolitical significance of CPEC in relation to

the BRI's westward expansion. Finally, the final section of the study synthesizes the main conclusions and addresses the key findings.

2 Theoretical framework and methodology

This paper's analysis is guided by a theoretical framework that views geopolitics and geoeconomics as fundamentally intertwined concepts rather than competing paradigms. It argues that in the 21st century, the strategic pursuit of a state's security and power (geopolitics) increasingly relies on economic instruments (geoeconomics). This framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how infrastructure projects, such as the CPEC, serve not only commercial purposes but also strategic statecraft.

Traditionally, geopolitics emphasized the importance of territory, military capabilities, and strategic geographic control for the survival and competition of states. Classical geopolitical theories, like those of Mackinder (1904) and Mahan (1890), focused on the necessity of controlling strategic land and maritime areas to secure dominance, often viewing state interactions as a zero-sum contest. However, with the rise of globalization and technological advancements, economic interdependence and global supply chains have diminished the direct role of military confrontation. This shift has prompted scholars to reconsider how power competition among states functions. In response to these changes, the concept of geoeconomics emerged, notably articulated by Luttwak (1990). Geoeconomics describes how economic means are strategically deployed to achieve geopolitical ends, encapsulated in the phrase “the logic of conflict in the grammar of commerce.” It highlights that economic statecraft—encompassing trade policy, investment flows, financial measures, and control over key technologies and resources—can be employed to exert influence without direct military conflict. Almujeem (2021) argues that geoeconomics is not a replacement for geopolitics but rather a modern manifestation of it, where economic power serves as a means to achieve geopolitical objectives. Scholars like Blackwill and Harris (2016) further elaborated on this integrated perspective, asserting that economic statecraft is a critical extension of traditional geopolitical strategies, enabling states to protect their security interests through economic leverage. Within this framework, political commitment and diplomatic alignment can function as a “placeholder strategy”—a form of geoeconomic preparation that de-risks future connectivity even when physical infrastructure is delayed by external constraints. Thus, this paper adopts the view that geoeconomics and geopolitics are complementary, with economic power often being the means to accomplish specific geopolitical goals. This integrated approach allows for a more comprehensive analysis of contemporary statecraft.

This theoretical framework is particularly useful for understanding China's grand strategy. The BRI is widely viewed as a key example of a state using a significant geoeconomic strategy to further its geopolitical interests, particularly in terms of achieving regional and global leadership. As Beeson and Crawford (2023) observe, the BRI represents an ambitious manifestation of a state's geoeconomic power, employing infrastructure investments and

financial tools to enhance China's geopolitical influence while managing its regional and global relationships. Additionally, Abels and Bieling (2024) argue that large-scale infrastructure projects within the BRI are driven by a deeper political-economic rationale. These projects serve not only as instruments of strategic influence but also as means to address internal economic challenges by externalizing capital and production. Thus, infrastructure becomes both a driver and a result of strategic competition among great powers. This perspective is supported by Costa's (2023a; 2023b) analysis, which demonstrates how China strategically utilizes economic development, multilateral forums, and regional organizations to achieve political, economic, and security objectives. This reflects a broader trend of securitising economic relations, where states exploit economic dependencies to advance their geopolitical goals and manage competition with rival regional powers.

Applying this integrated framework to the CPEC and its extensions into Afghanistan and Iran allows for a deeper understanding of their significance. These projects are not just commercial ventures; they represent a strategic combination of economic and political objectives. This paper utilizes a geoeconomic-geopolitical framework to illustrate how the extensions of CPEC are a concrete manifestation of China's westward strategic expansion. By fostering economic and infrastructural interdependence, these initiatives address China's geopolitical vulnerabilities, such as the “Malacca Dilemma,” while simultaneously advancing its long-term vision of a more interconnected and multipolar world order.

This paper employs a qualitative research method to explore the complex geopolitical significance of the CPEC and its westward expansion. The primary focus of this study is the strategic evolution and implications of CPEC's connectivity projects, particularly its emerging extensions into Afghanistan and Iran, within the broader context of the BRI from 2016 to 2024. This temporal scope is based on two key factors. First, 2016 marked the year when Afghanistan joined the BRI, and Iran began discussions to join the initiative. Second, 2024 serves as a cut-off date for acquiring comprehensive annual data, which is essential for ensuring that the analysis remains cohesive and factual. To support the research, a systematic analysis of approximately 60 official documents and policy statements was conducted. This included documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MFAPRC), the State Council of the People's Republic of China (SCPRC), as well as official reports from the ministries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. These documents, primarily sourced from official government websites, were chosen for their explicit mentions of the BRI, the CPEC and its extensions, and related infrastructure, energy, and diplomatic projects and forums (including the trilateral consultations), thereby ensuring the analysis was grounded in primary source material that directly reflects the official positions of the countries involved. Additionally, data were collected through the examination of reports from international organizations, reputable news analyses, and expert commentaries sourced from academic databases, think tank publications, and reliable news archives. News analyses were obtained from reputable media outlets such as Anadolu Agency, Reuters, VOA News, and the

South China Morning Post. Expert commentaries were drawn from think tanks and publications, including the Lowy Institute, the International Crisis Group, and Brookings. The main method of data extraction was thematic analysis, focusing on key themes such as infrastructure development, energy cooperation, trade facilitation, diplomatic engagements (such as MoUs and forums), and security considerations relevant to CPEC's extensions within the specified time frame. To support this qualitative analysis and provide concrete evidence of diplomatic activity, two descriptive tables have been created and are presented in the [Appendix](#) (see [Appendix I](#) for Afghanistan and [Appendix II](#) for Iran).

3 Expanding CPEC to achieve regional interconnectivity: Iran and Afghanistan

The CPEC is a project that enhances the BRI by promoting connectivity between the SREB and the 21st MSR. It aims to foster regional interconnectivity and provide a viable alternative for economic and political practices in Asia ([MPDR NDRC, 2017](#)). Launched in 2013, the corridor consists of transport infrastructure, pipelines, and fiber optics that connect Gwadar in Pakistan to Xinjiang in China. One of the key benefits for China is the opportunity to become a two-ocean nation, which helps mitigate its Malacca Dilemma by diversifying its energy import routes. This diversification addresses one of China's greatest vulnerabilities—its dependence on energy imports. While China has been moving toward a green energy transition, its current reliance on fossil fuels to meet domestic demands and maintain energy security underscores the importance of establishing more viable connections to West-Central Asian markets ([Kemp, 2022](#); [Nakhle, 2023](#)). Moreover, the CPEC offers a shorter and more cost-effective route for trade, enabling China to lessen its reliance on the Malacca Strait. For instance, the CPEC reduces the travel distance for trade between China and both Europe and West Asia from 3,000 to 10,000 km, depending on the specific Chinese province or municipality of origin and the destination. This routing can also lead to cost reductions as low as USD 2,000 for shipments departing from Xinjiang ([Alam et al., 2023](#)).

For Pakistan, the expansion of the CPEC is considered vital for national security, particularly with regard to economic security. This is reflected in Pakistan's first-ever National Security Policy for 2022–2026, which emphasizes the need to leverage Pakistan's strategic location to become a hub for trade, investment, and connectivity ([GPNSD, 2022](#)). CPEC plays a significant geostrategic role within China's BRI global governance strategy and offers regional partners an opportunity for mutual development. The layout of the corridor indicates that it facilitates connectivity not only between China and Pakistan but also extends to Afghanistan, the Central Asian Republics (CARs)¹, Iran, Oman, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. In practical terms, the countries that stand to gain directly from CPEC are numerous and diverse. In practical terms, numerous and diverse countries stand to benefit directly from CPEC, largely due to the corridor's enhancement of land connectivity and the importance of Gwadar as a deep-water port. This port opens up new trade opportunities for countries engaged

in commerce in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Indian Ocean.

However, it is important to note that while both Afghanistan and Iran are official partners in the BRI, the projects linking them to the CPEC are not part of the initial framework of this corridor. Instead, these projects are ongoing extensions aimed at strategically integrating these nations in the future. This complex situation often highlights the lack of transparency surrounding Chinese-led projects, particularly concerning the definition of what constitutes a BRI project and how it differs from traditional economic and diplomatic agreements ([Oliveira et al., 2020](#); [Komakech and Ombati, 2023](#); [Hu, 2024](#)). Moreover, even when a BRI project can be identified, it is usually unclear which corridor the project belongs to. This ambiguity often forces academics and the media to piece together information to understand the project's motivations. Additionally, this vagueness allows for a flexible approach, with China's political principle of non-interference playing a crucial role. By not officially designating these projects as components of the CPEC, Beijing can adopt a more pragmatic approach, unburdened by political constraints, in the unique geopolitical contexts of each country.

3.1 Afghanistan²

Despite being landlocked, Afghanistan has abundant mineral resources, making it an area of interest for major global powers ([O'Donnell, 2022](#)). This was highlighted by the Afghan government's signing of USD 6.5 billion in mining deals with China, Iran, Turkey, and the UK in 2023 ([Gul, 2023](#)). Furthermore, Afghanistan's geostrategic location presents the potential to become a regional transit hub, which could facilitate new connectivity opportunities for the CARs and lead to the establishment of new trade routes. In this context, China proposed in 2016 to include Afghanistan in the BRI by signing an MoU on jointly promoting its construction. Subsequently, in 2017, China suggested the development of a regional sub-corridor under the CPEC to enhance trade and connectivity opportunities. However, this initial approach faced challenges primarily because, until 2021, Afghanistan was under direct US influence, with India holding a prominent position as the main regional partner for the US, by utilizing Afghanistan as a strategic gateway to Central Asia to bypass Pakistan ([Hussain et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, the development of CPEC-A represents a strategic shift that challenges India's previous role as the primary facilitator of Afghan connectivity.

To promote the CPEC extension, China recognized the need for improved relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 2016, Pakistan was included in a key initiative aimed at facilitating peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan: the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, which includes China, the US, and Afghanistan. Following 2017, China also encouraged several trilateral forums for discussion

¹ Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

² The data collected by the authors on China-Afghanistan relations since the signature of the BRI MoU, in 2016, is presented in [Appendix I](#), therefore every time a forum and agreement are mentioned that is not directly cited, the [Appendix I](#) should be consulted as the reference.

on cooperation and security involving Pakistan and Afghanistan. These discussions not only focused on trilateral cooperation concerning border security and counter-terrorism but also explored collaboration under the BRI framework through the CPEC. In the absence of immediate large-scale infrastructure projects, these trilateral engagements serve as a “placeholder strategy,” maintaining the political momentum necessary for future connectivity. The ongoing high-level engagements and the formalization of cooperation are further elaborated in the [Appendix](#), emphasizing a sustained diplomatic effort (see [Appendix I](#)). Additionally, Pakistan committed to embracing China’s principles of peaceful coexistence in its relations with Afghanistan and other regional partners. This commitment aimed to reassure Afghanistan that Pakistan’s intentions were entirely economic and not an attempt to influence its internal politics ([Wolf, 2020](#)).

In addition, Pakistan has launched a comprehensive economic initiative aimed at developing transport infrastructure and energy projects to improve Afghanistan’s connectivity and security. At the regional level, Pakistan has committed to two non-Chinese-funded projects: the Central Asia-South Asia (CASA-1000) power project³, which was formally inaugurated in 2016, and the Khyber Pass Economic Corridor (KPEC)⁴, which commenced in 2019 ([Amir, 2016](#); [Abrar, 2019](#); [Wolf, 2020](#)). While these projects did not receive direct financing from China, they were integrated into the CAREC framework, a Chinese-led initiative. This inclusion allowed for the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor-Afghanistan (CPEC-A) extension without the need for direct Chinese investment. This approach illustrates how CPEC-A functions as a strategically complementary component of the broader BRI architecture, utilizing existing regional frameworks to advance its goals. For instance, the KPEC project involves the construction of the Kabul-Peshawar-Islamabad-Gwadar Road, which was first announced in 2016 and is a key segment of the proposed CPEC-A. Furthermore, these projects have facilitated Afghanistan’s integration into the Pakistani railway system, ensuring energy security and intermodal access not only to Gwadar but also to the secondary ports of Karachi and Qasim ([Ebrahim, 2022](#)) ([Figure 1](#)).

China adopted a direct approach to secure internal support in Afghanistan by investing in the country’s development, particularly in the energy, infrastructure, and metallurgy sectors. This strategy aimed to lay the groundwork for Chinese business investments through the CPEC and individual BRI projects ([Hass, 2021](#); [Trakimavičius, 2021](#)). These efforts significantly improved Afghan perceptions of China, the CPEC, and the BRI, contributing to Afghanistan’s acceptance of the CPEC-A extension. This progress became evident following a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) less than a year after the US withdrawal in 2022. During this meeting, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Afghan Foreign Minister Amir Muttaqi agreed to enhance cooperation under the CPEC framework ([ul Khaliq, 2022](#)).

Subsequently, Afghanistan was included in China’s State Council Tariff Commission announcement regarding the implementation of a zero-tax policy on 98% of tariff items for products originating from ten developing countries⁵ ([SCPRC, 2022](#)). Moreover, China expressed its readiness to resume visa processing for Afghan citizens seeking education, employment, or residency in China. At that time, Wang Yi attributed these advancements to the mutual benefits of the cooperation, acknowledging: “*Afghan interim government’s unrelenting efforts in overcoming the four challenges posed by the winter, earthquake, flood and sanctions, in reconstruction and recovery and the improvement of people’s livelihood, and its steady progress toward the goal of lasting peace and stability*” ([MFAPRC, 2022](#)).

In recent years, Afghanistan has significantly engaged in collaboration with China and Pakistan on regional connectivity and energy projects. While some of these initiatives are developed under the CAREC framework rather than the BRI, they all involve the three parties and aim to advance the development of the CPEC-A. In 2023, several key projects emerged, including the revival of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline⁶, in which China has expressed interest in participating since 2018. Additionally, a 25-year, USD 540 million oil extraction contract was signed between China’s Xinjiang Central Asia Petroleum and Gas Co. (CAPEIC) and Afghanistan for the exploration of the Amu Darya basin ([Dawi, 2024](#)). Construction has also commenced on the Pakistan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan Railway Project (PAURP), which is part of the Trans-Afghan Corridor initiative under CAREC ([Rabbani, 2022](#); [Latif, 2023](#)). These projects demonstrate the ongoing development of CPEC-A, a commitment reiterated by Hafiz Zia Ahmad, deputy spokesperson of Afghanistan’s interim Foreign Ministry. In a speech following the 5th China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Foreign Ministers’ Dialogue, Ahmad stated, “CPEC will help us become part of the BRI and will bring various projects in energy, railways, and other sectors to Afghanistan” (See [Appendix I](#); [Uddin, 2023](#)).

The ongoing emphasis on regional connectivity remains evident despite existing political and security challenges, as demonstrated by the numerous forums and MoUs signed among the involved parties. In 2024, China aimed to expand its economic influence while highlighting the benefits of enhancing connectivity with regional partners in Afghanistan. During this year, bilateral trade saw remarkable growth, increasing from USD 600 million in 2022 to USD 1.6 billion in 2024. China continued to invest significantly in Afghanistan, contributing USD 510 million, primarily focused on infrastructure-related projects. This investment included USD 145 million for the Logar Cement Project and also supported mineral exploration, with four exploration rights deals signed. Notably, the USD 310 million Takhar Gold Mine exploration deal stands out ([EPRCIRA, 2024](#); [Parkin et al., 2024](#); [TOLO News Staff, 2024a,b](#); [Godek, 2025](#)). Furthermore, China also conducted two significant tripartite visits in recent months: one involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran in February,

3 Funded by the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Development Office (UK) and the US Agency for International Development.

4 Funded by the World Bank.

5 The other countries included in this list were: Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Malawi, Sao Tome and Principe, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

6 Funded by the Asian Development Bank and the Islamic Development Bank.



FIGURE 1

The KPEC within current connectivity projects between China and Pakistan (© Mapcreator © OpenStreetMap. This software is made available under the Open Data Commons Open Database License (ODbL) by the OpenStreetMap Foundation (OSMF): <http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/odbl/1.0/>. Any rights in individual contents of the database are licensed under the Database Contents License: <http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/dbcl/1.0/>).

and another with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan in November. The purpose of both visits was to promote cooperation at various levels. Although they both focused on Pakistan and Afghanistan, the key difference was the participation of Iran and Turkmenistan. This distinction is highlighted by Iran's involvement in various CPEC projects, as well as Turkmenistan's status as an energy-rich country in Central Asia.

Over the past 8 years, trilateral cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China has evolved since the first BRI MoU was signed, demonstrating that the CPEC-A extension is already well-established. However, international media have

expressed doubts regarding the sustainability of this partnership, especially in light of recent tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan near the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa border, primarily related to cross-border terrorism. This situation has led Pakistan to close vital trade routes between the two countries and expel Afghan refugees. While some view the tension between these two nations as an irreversible disaster detrimental to the CPEC-A extension, this perspective neglects the historical context of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, which have often experienced tensions that were ultimately resolved through diplomatic means or changing geopolitical realities. Moreover, since the Taliban's rise to power

in 2021, Afghanistan has strategically pursued a foreign policy focused on integration within the emerging multipolar order, aiming for international recognition and regional connectivity (ICG, 2024). For Afghanistan, which prioritizes these goals, engaging in prolonged disputes with essential regional partners like Pakistan and China—both of whom provide crucial pathways for economic integration, market diversification, and diplomatic support—would be counterproductive to its strategic objectives and the broader future of the CPEC-A extension.

It is clear why the Taliban regime has been vocal about recognizing the importance of the CPEC and its extension for Afghanistan's economic integration and market diversification. The CPEC has primarily benefited the country by attracting foreign investment and financing for infrastructure and energy projects. Additionally, due to Afghanistan's geographical location and the nature of recent transport infrastructure projects, the CPEC enables the country to become a regional hub for CARs by providing secondary routes to and from Gwadar, while also giving it access to a deep-water port. In the political arena, China has been a key supporter of Afghanistan. In January 2024, it recognized a Taliban envoy as an official Afghan representative (Kumar, 2024). Although Chinese officials later clarified that this recognition did not equate to an endorsement of the Taliban government, it represented a diplomatic victory for the Taliban, who have been seeking international recognition. Therefore, the significance of the CPEC extension for Afghanistan is evident, as it supports infrastructure and energy development, enhances interconnectivity, and aids in building international political relationships.

The Afghan extension is vital for both China and Pakistan, albeit for different reasons. For China, the CPEC-A extension enhances border security and energy access. It allows China to pressure the Taliban to exert better control over militant groups within Afghanistan that could pose a threat to China's national security. Additionally, it helps China diversify its energy supply by improving direct access to the oil and gas reserves of Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea. For Pakistan, the CPEC-A extension presents an opportunity to diversify its markets and attract new investors. This is particularly important as Pakistan seeks financial independence in managing the CPEC project and aims to bring in investors from various sectors. A more direct route to the Caspian Sea would enable Pakistan to tap into new markets and solidify its position as an inter-regional hub, enhancing access to Central Asia and the Caspian region. Thus, including Afghanistan in this framework would further bolster the CPEC's role as a key component of the BRI, establishing it as a multidimensional and multi-regional connectivity project.

3.2 Iran⁷

Unlike Afghanistan, which is a purely continental state, Iran is situated in a geostrategic area where the Persian Gulf and the Gulf

of Oman meet. It also has access to the Caspian Sea and shares borders with several countries, including Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, and Turkey. This unique positioning makes Iran a crucial player in the CPEC, as it provides an alternative route for the 21st MSR project while complementing the SREB. As a country rich in energy resources, Iran holds significant importance in the regional context. Its involvement in CPEC would ultimately benefit China and Pakistan by improving access to Middle Eastern markets (Amir, 2016). With its extensive coastlines and land borders connecting South Asia to Turkey, along with its energy wealth, Iran is strategically poised as a vital node in the westward extension of the BRI through CPEC. This makes it a natural partner for China's energy security objectives, which are crucial for finding alternatives to the Strait of Malacca. This strategic alignment has been further solidified by Iran's formal integration into Chinese-led multilateral institutions, marking a transition from bilateral cooperation to a broader regional institutionalization (Seiwert, 2025).

China's formal engagement with Iran under the BRI framework began significantly in 2016. During a state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Tehran in January of that year, China and Iran signed an important MoU on Co-Building the "Belt and Road." This agreement marked a pivotal moment, officially integrating Iran into the expanding BRI network and establishing a foundation for enhanced cooperation on connectivity projects. The volume and frequency of these initial and subsequent diplomatic engagements and agreements regarding the BRI are thoroughly documented in the Appendix, illustrating the deepening bilateral commitment (see Appendix II). However, the journey toward this formal engagement and subsequent cooperation was not without initial hesitations. In 2015, when the CPEC was proposed to Iran—then under sanctions—the Iranian side expressed reluctance regarding the project. This apprehension stemmed from concerns over how the CPEC would affect Iran's regional role, particularly due to the strong diplomatic relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional rival at the time. Additionally, there were fears that Gwadar's strategic position could diminish the importance of Chabahar Port (Butt and Butt, 2015). At this time, relations between Iran and Pakistan, although centered on regional security cooperation, were somewhat strained due to the Balochistan issue. Additionally, Iran harbored distrust regarding China's intentions related to the BRI and was cautious about the strong relationship between India and Iran, which was evident in the development of the North-South Transport Corridor (THB Staff, 2016; Hussain et al., 2021).

With the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, Iran reestablished its position in the international arena, enabling it to seek new opportunities for regional cooperation and reduce its dependence on India (Jin, 2017; Wolf, 2020). At first glance, the JCPOA may not appear directly related to Iran's stance on the BRI or the CPEC. However, it is evident that Iran repositioned itself following the signing of an agreement linked to the CPEC, which included the construction of the Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline (IPI). This project was later revised and became known as the Iran-Pakistan-China Pipeline (IPC), as will be discussed further in this section (AN Staff, 2017; Wolf, 2020; Yildirimçakar, 2023). The shift in Iran's foreign policy toward China and Pakistan can also be seen as a reaction to the

⁷ The data collected by the authors on China-Iran relations since the signature of the BRI MoU, in 2016, is presented in Appendix II, therefore every time a forum and agreement are mentioned that is not directly cited, the Appendix II should be consulted as the reference.

reimposition of US sanctions in 2018 and the recent negotiation of the 2023 reconciliation agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which was mediated by China and supported by Pakistan (Smith, 2019; Fazl-e-Haider, 2023).

The change in Iran's positioning toward cooperation with Chinese-led regional initiatives and Pakistan became evident from 2016 onwards. This was highlighted by the signing of the BRI MoU earlier in this section. In the same month that the BRI agreement was established, China and Iran also signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement. This agreement committed both countries to a series of MoUs aimed at expanding cooperation in political, economic, cultural, and security areas. A significant focus of this collaboration was on the BRI, which included ongoing discussions and some foundational progress in infrastructure projects, particularly in the transportation and energy sectors (Li, 2019). This partnership established a foundation for comprehensive negotiations regarding a long-term cooperation plan. It led to numerous meetings and consultations at various levels to finalize the details of a 25-year roadmap. The draft agreement was signed in 2020, and it was further reinforced a year later with the signing of a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperation Agreement lasting 25 years. Additionally, China announced an investment of USD 400 billion in Iranian projects over the duration of this agreement, primarily targeting the energy and infrastructure sectors (Lons, 2021). This Chinese investment was closely linked to the CPEC specifically, and the BRI more generally, which are the main focus areas. A portion of this investment may also be related to BRI-related projects and the potential extension of CPEC into Iran. This assertion is supported by several Sino-Pakistani development initiatives introduced after 2020, aimed at ensuring connectivity with Iran. Crucially, in the absence of immediate physical infrastructure due to sanctions, this 25-year roadmap—combined with Iran's full accession to the SCO (2023) and BRICS+ (2024)—functions as a “placeholder strategy” that de-risks the environment by securing political commitment for future geo-economic integration.

In the realm of transport infrastructure projects, China and Pakistan have announced two initiatives aimed at enhancing connectivity to Iran, despite the lack of official CPEC-related projects. These initiatives can be considered as potential future CPEC-I projects. Regarding railway connectivity, a notable effort is the Sino-Pakistani initiative to develop a link between the CPEC and the Istanbul-Tehran-Islamabad (ITI) railway corridor. The ITI project was initially launched in 2009 by the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO)⁸, but it was suspended in 2011 due to poor living conditions in Quetta and Taftan (Latif, 2021). However, in 2020, Pakistan introduced a strategy to allocate USD 6.8 billion over 6 years, with China committing to finance 90% of this amount. The focus of this investment is on modernizing the railway network, particularly the underdeveloped sections,

such as the Quetta-Taftan railway line (SCMP Staff, 2020; Siddiqi, 2021). If completed, this project would facilitate faster connectivity between China and the Mediterranean Sea via Turkey, potentially becoming a key route in the CPEC-I network. On the road connectivity front, in 2021, China and Pakistan reached an agreement to initiate the development of the Nokundi-Mashkhel–Panjgur Road under the CPEC framework, with an estimated investment of around USD 25 million (CPEC Secretariat, 2021). This new route enhances time efficiency by improving connectivity between the two main Iran-Pakistan land routes, Gwadar and Taftan. Additionally, the Nokundi-Mashkhel–Panjgur Road will play a crucial role in expanding Gwadar's connectivity to new logistical hubs and routes, thereby strengthening its position as a regional hub (Figure 2).

Beyond road and rail connections, the IPC pipeline highlights the vital energy component of the proposed CPEC-I connectivity. While the IPI pipeline faced significant challenges due to geopolitical pressures and India's withdrawal, the IPC concept, driven by China's strategic energy security needs, has considerable potential. For China, gaining direct access to Iranian natural gas through this pipeline would diversify its energy supply routes, reducing dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints and alleviating the “Malacca Dilemma.” For Iran, the project presents a lucrative market for its vast natural gas reserves, which may help alleviate some of the economic pressures stemming from international sanctions. Pakistan stands to gain from transit fees and a secure energy supply route, enhancing its energy security and solidifying its position as a regional hub. However, despite its strategic advantages, the IPC pipeline remains largely conceptual due to the significant challenge posed by secondary US sanctions on Iran. These sanctions complicate direct investment and operational involvement from key international actors, including Chinese state-owned enterprises and Pakistani companies. This issue was highlighted in 2024 when Iran threatened to pursue international arbitration to resolve disputes with Pakistan related to recurring delays in project implementation. While some of these delays were partially due to the ongoing Saudi-Iranian rivalry until 2023, they were primarily driven by Pakistan's concerns over the extension of US sanctions and their potential impact on Pakistan's vulnerable economy (Kugelman, 2024; Mustafa, 2024).

The prospect of connectivity between the CPEC and Iran highlights the complex relationship with Chabahar Port, located about 100 km west of Gwadar. Initially, Iran was concerned that Gwadar, which is being developed by China, might overshadow its plans for Chabahar, which is being developed with Indian support. However, the realities of international sanctions, combined with the significant scale and strategic importance of China's BRI, indicate a potential for future cooperation rather than direct competition. Chabahar could serve as India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, while a fully realized extension of CPEC could integrate Iran into a broader Chinese-led trade network across Eurasia. In this scenario, both ports could eventually serve different regions or specialized trade routes, contributing to a stronger and more diversified regional logistics framework instead of a zero-sum competition. This outcome would be particularly feasible if a comprehensive agenda for regional peace and economic

⁸ The ECO is a regional intergovernmental organization established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey with the aim of promoting economic, technical, and cultural cooperation among member states. It expanded in 1992 to include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.



FIGURE 2

The planned routes for the ITI railway corridor and the Nokundi–Mashkhel–Panjgur Road (© Mapcreator © OpenStreetMap. This software is made available under the Open Data Commons Open Database License (ODbL) by the OpenStreetMap Foundation (OSMF): <http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/odbl/1.0/>. Any rights in individual contents of the database are licensed under the Database Contents License: <http://opendatacommons.org/licenses/dbcl/1.0/>).

integration takes shape. Nevertheless, it should also be considered that India's signing of a 10-year contract for the operation of Chabahar in May 2024 simultaneously reinforces its role as a direct competitor to CPEC-I, positioning the Iranian extension as a parallel Chinese-led alternative to the INSTC (Fatima, 2024).

The strategic imperative for closer economic and infrastructural ties with Iran, from the perspectives of China and Pakistan, goes beyond merely establishing transit routes. For China, Iran presents a vast, energy-rich market and serves as a crucial geographical bridge to the Middle East, Caucasus, and potentially even Europe. This allows China to bypass the complexities of Central Asian transit for certain goods. It aligns with China's broader objective of reducing risks in its global supply chains and diversifying its geopolitical influence (Dai and Tang, 2024). For Pakistan, integration with Iran through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC-I) would significantly strengthen its vision of becoming a regional geo-economic hub. This partnership would provide additional avenues for trade, investment, and transit revenues. It would also diversify Pakistan's connections beyond its traditional partners and enhance its strategic importance within the larger Eurasian context. For Iran, engagement with the CPEC and increased Chinese investment represent a crucial lifeline against Western sanctions. This collaboration offers opportunities for economic development, enhances its energy export capabilities, and provides a substantial diplomatic counterbalance to Western influence. Ultimately, CPEC-I represents a strategically complementary extension that secures China's westward reach through deep-rooted political and institutional alignment.

4 Discussion

A comprehensive analysis of various documents, including diplomatic communications, policy statements, and expert analyses, was essential for understanding the strategic rationales and political motivations behind these initiatives during the studied period. The use of qualitative methodology was well-suited to our objectives, as it provided the tools necessary to connect different discourses and comprehend the various aspects of the BRI. This approach also contributed to addressing our central research question regarding the role of CPECs and their impact on the westward expansion of the BRI. Additionally, employing thematic analysis within a geoeconomic-geopolitical theoretical framework was crucial in identifying key patterns of connectivity, cooperation, and competition that define CPEC's role beyond its physical infrastructure. This approach enabled us to synthesize disparate areas, from decision-making and diplomacy to media perspectives, into a coherent argument about how economic projects are being utilized as a central tool of statecraft in a multipolar world. Furthermore, it highlights how normative diplomatic alignment—evidenced by the consistent use of trilateral forums and high-level MoUs—acts as a precursor to physical integration. Finally, the descriptive tables in the Appendix, which were directly derived from this methodology, provide concrete evidence of the diplomatic activity that supports the geopolitical claims made throughout this discussion.

Therefore, it can be argued that our methodological choice lays the groundwork for the central argument of this paper. A thorough examination of the CPEC reveals its crucial role, particularly regarding its early expansions into Afghanistan and

Iran. CPEC is not just a bilateral initiative; it serves as the vital link that connects the land-based SREB with the maritime 21st MSR, effectively transforming Pakistan into an essential gateway for China's expansion into Eurasia and beyond. The Afghanistan sub-corridor, supported by initiatives such as the CPEC-A proposal and infrastructure projects like the KPEC and PAURP, opens up an important southern route for the CARs to access a warm-water port at Gwadar. This route bypasses traditional, more challenging pathways, offering new trade opportunities in the global market. At the same time, the increased connectivity with Iran—through potential projects like the IPC pipeline, the modernization of the ITI railway, and the Nokundi–Mashkel–Panjgur Road—takes advantage of Iran's strategic position. This connectivity aims to create a direct land and sea bridge to the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East, facilitating access to Turkey and Europe. While these two westward advancements operate through distinct bilateral and trilateral mechanisms, they function as parallel and strategically complementary prongs of the same multi-vector design. Together, they establish the foundational infrastructure necessary for the BRI's deeper penetration into Western markets and regions.

The deliberate strengthening of regional interconnectivity through the CPEC and its sub-corridors directly enhances the BRI's reach to the west while also addressing some of China's most critical strategic vulnerabilities. By establishing direct land-based alternatives through Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, CPEC significantly diversifies China's trade and energy routes, reducing its reliance on the vulnerable Strait of Malacca (Alam et al., 2023). The Afghan route opens up new opportunities for resource extraction and trade with CARs. Meanwhile, the Iranian corridor provides direct access to a major energy producer and a large market, further shielding China from external disruptions. Economically, these established and potential corridors are not only pathways for goods but also channels for Chinese investment, technology transfer, and the expansion of China's economic presence into previously inaccessible markets across Central and West Asia. This fosters deeper economic interdependence and greatly enhances Beijing's global economic influence.

The geopolitical implications of the CPEC being central to the BRI are significant, as it directly challenges and reshapes existing regional and global power dynamics. Within South Asia, CPEC enhances Pakistan's geopolitical importance by positioning it as a crucial link in China's westward ambitions. This boost in Pakistan's status challenges India's traditional dominance in the region, intensifying strategic competition. This is evident in India's concerns about the CPEC passing through disputed territories and its efforts to develop alternative connectivity projects, such as Chabahar (Saraswat, 2022; Akhtar, 2023). Critically, CPEC's integrated framework provides a structural advantage over India's more geographically constrained port access, mainly because while India's reliance on the INSTC and Chabahar requires complex multi-modal shifts and maritime dependencies, CPEC-A and CPEC-I offer more direct, land-contiguous alternatives. On a global scale, CPEC exemplifies China's push for a multipolar world order, where the proactive development of infrastructure and economic integration is a primary means of projecting power and shaping geopolitical realities. The success and expansion of CPEC showcase China's ability to provide a viable alternative development

model, influencing countries that seek economic integration and diplomatic ties outside traditional Western frameworks. By establishing these critical westward connections, China is not only increasing its economic influence but also solidifying its long-term strategic presence in areas historically dominated by other major powers.

Despite a strong strategic framework and noticeable advancements in connecting the Afghanistan and Iran sub-corridors—highlighted by consistent diplomatic efforts and formal agreements between China, Pakistan, and their respective partners (as detailed in the [Appendix](#))—the full realization of CPEC's westward potential faces considerable challenges. Concerns over debt sustainability, especially for Pakistan, continue to attract international scrutiny. Security issues arising from various non-state actors and political instability along the proposed routes in both Pakistan and Afghanistan require comprehensive security measures and long-term commitments to stability (Elmali, 2024). Additionally, the ongoing impact of US sanctions on Iran poses a significant barrier, limiting the pace and extent of direct Chinese and Pakistani investments in the CPEC-Iran connection and leading to a more cautious, often indirect approach to project development. However, as established in this analysis, the persistent use of diplomatic forums and long-term roadmaps functions as a de-risking and placeholder strategy, ensuring that the political architecture remains ready for rapid implementation should external constraints ease. The broader geopolitical competition with Western powers adds complexity, often invoking narratives around “debt traps” and a lack of transparency (Brautigam, 2020; Mühleisen, 2023). Nevertheless, China's strong strategic need to secure diversified trade and energy routes, combined with the pressing developmental needs and geoeconomic goals of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, ensures that the westward expansion through CPEC remains a dynamic and evolving geopolitical reality. It continues to adapt to changing circumstances, reinforcing its status as the crown jewel of the BRI.

5 Conclusion

This paper highlights the significant geopolitical importance of the CPEC in enhancing the westward expansion of the BRI. Our analysis confirms that CPEC serves as a crucial artery, transforming Pakistan into a key connectivity hub and extending the BRI's influence across South, Central, and West Asia, particularly through its emerging links to Afghanistan and Iran. These sub-corridors play a vital role: the Afghan connection provides essential access to the CARs and their markets, while the link to Iran creates an important bridge to West Asia and beyond. Together, these routes facilitate vital diversification of China's trade and energy pathways, help alleviate vulnerabilities such as the “Malacca Dilemma,” and significantly enhance China's economic and strategic presence relative to rival regional architectures such as India's development of the Chabahar port. This development also elevates Pakistan's geoeconomic and geopolitical significance. Furthermore, these parallel and strategically complementary extensions reinforce China's role in reshaping the global order, actively contributing to a more multipolar international system through infrastructure and economic interdependence. However,

it is important to note that despite CPEC's solid strategic rationale, realizing its full westward potential faces inherent challenges, including regional geopolitical complexities, security concerns, and the impact of international sanctions on Iran.

In addressing our central research question, "What is the role of the emerging extensions to Iran and Afghanistan in strengthening the BRI's westward expansion?" our empirical findings confirm that the CPEC serves as a foundational and dynamic corridor for the BRI's strategic westward expansion. For example, through an analysis of bilateral and trilateral agreements, as well as tangible infrastructure developments such as the KPEC and the Nokundi–Mashkhel–Panjgur Road, this paper demonstrates that both Afghanistan and Iran are being systematically integrated as key nodes within the broader CPEC and BRI frameworks. This integration reflects China's consistent and long-term vision for regional connectivity, relying on diplomatic forums and political roadmaps as placeholder strategies to maintain momentum even under the pressure of ongoing challenges such as political uncertainty, complex security concerns, and international sanctions.

The core contribution of this paper is the development of an integrated analytical framework that examines the parallel and strategically complementary Afghan and Iranian expansions of the CPEC. Unlike most existing research, which typically studies these expansions in isolation, this paper argues that there is a synergistic relationship between the two that significantly extends the geopolitical influence of the CPEC, highlighting its crucial importance within BRI and how they behave as a structural counter-balance to other regional initiatives such as the INSTC. This paper discusses how China employs economic corridors not only for commercial benefits but also as tools of strategic statecraft, aiming to foster a more interconnected and multipolar world order. It is essential to recognize that, despite the inherent risks and geopolitical tensions in regional dynamics, the fundamental rationale for increased connectivity has demonstrated resilience. Our empirical findings indicate that the continued development of infrastructure, diplomatic initiatives (such as the Iran-China 25-year plan), and trade frameworks within the "CPEC-A" (Afghanistan) and "CPEC-I" (Iran) extensions reflects a growing institutional commitment among the involved states. As a result, this paper also contributes significantly to the broader academic discourse on geopolitical connectivity and China's evolving role on the global stage. Additionally, it offers a forward-looking assessment of how these emerging interdependencies may reshape regional alignments in an era marked by strategic rivalry and great power competition.

It is essential to recognize the limitations of this study and suggest directions for future research. Although it was not our primary focus, we encountered literature and documents that highlight security concerns related to the CPEC. While we did not find direct evidence linking the Uyghur issue to the feasibility of the CPEC lifeline, the security implications merit further investigation. Future studies should delve into the complex security landscape surrounding CPEC, particularly focusing on the situation in Balochistan and its potential influence on the long-term viability of the corridor. Additionally, further research could examine the social and environmental impacts of CPEC extensions, as well as analyse the long-term economic returns on Chinese

investments, going beyond the geopolitical and geoeconomic dimensions addressed in this paper.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

TS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. CC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1672806/full#supplementary-material>

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