



RESEARCH PAPER

Reshaping of Pakistan's Demographic Landscape by the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Comprehensive Review of Migration, Labor and Settlement Shifts

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has transformed Pakistan's demographic landscape, focusing on migration trends, labor mobility, and settlement realignments between 2015 and 2024. As a central project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC has stimulated infrastructure growth, industrialization, and regional connectivity, resulting in significant population shifts and employment transitions. Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on policy documents, demographic data, and interviews with community members, officials, and labor representatives from key CPEC regions. The findings reveal large-scale internal migration toward industrial hubs, rapid expansion of semi-urban settlements, and rural depopulation. These changes have diversified labor markets while also creating socio-economic disparities and cultural integration challenges. The study recommends inclusive urban planning, community-based employment initiatives, and equitable policy interventions to manage demographic transformations effectively and ensure that CPEC-driven development contributes to balanced and sustainable growth across Pakistan.

KEYWORDS CPEC, Demographic Landscape, Labor Markets, Settlement Shifts

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is largely recognized as an important development in global connectivity infrastructure and trade routes. CPEC is a segment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which China has been developing since 2013 (Nadeem et al., 2025; Shah, 2025). Being a flagship BRI project, CPEC would bridge the Western part of China, Xinjiang, and the Gwadar Port in the Arabian Sea, which is more than 3000 kilometers long in terms of highways, railways, pipelines, and energy projects. As a part of the larger vision of transcontinental integration by the Chinese, CPEC can have both economic and geopolitical implications in the connection of landlocked areas of western China with the global market (Zaheer et al., 2025; Ullah, 2024 Ahmed, et. al., 2025; Muzaffar, et. al., 2018).

Strategic Significance of CPEC to the Economy of Pakistan: CPEC is a strategic project that is expected to combat structural problems in the form of energy inadequacies, infrastructural underdevelopment, and geographical imbalances (Afzal et al., 2025). The corridor has seen a foreign direct investment in the tune of billions of dollars especially in the fields of energy and transport (Wolf, 2019). CPEC will boost industrialization, enhance exports, and create job opportunities by developing road systems, modernizing roads, and establishing Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Researchers claim that the program can boost the economy of Pakistan as it becomes more involved in the global value chains (Rafiq, 2020; Rahim, et. Al., 2018).

Connectivity and Regional Integration CPEC is also known to increase strategic connectivity in Pakistan in addition to the economic aspect (Khan, 2025). Gwadar Port will be projected as an international shipping point connecting South Asia, Central Asia, Middle East and Africa, which will enhance the geostrategic location of Pakistan. Better connection with improved CPEC projects is not only allowing trade but also enables people- to people interaction, migration, and labor movement between different regions. This fact transforms CPEC into more than an economic project, as it is also a source of social and demographic transformations in the human geography of Pakistan (Ain& Muzaffar, 2025; Ali, 2020). The focus on CPEC in literature has been on its economic benefits and geopolitics, whereas not much has been done on the human geography effects. Human geography dwells on spatial, demographic and cultural aspects of development i.e. migration, labor mobility and settlement shift. The infrastructure projects developed by CPEC are associated with high inflows of labor force and rural-urban migration as well as the development of new urban centers in the jurisdictions of SEZs and transport corridors. The neglect of these dynamics may lead to disregarding the first-hand experience of the local communities which have a direct contact with CPEC projects (Rahman, 2018).

The Migration, Labor and Settlement Shifts CPEC-led initiatives will transform the demographic situation in Pakistan by redistributing labor and affecting settlement levels (Lu and Iqbal, 2025). With SEZs being constructed, it promotes migration of the rural populations to the industrial hubs to find employment. In the same measure, better transport corridors ensure inter-provincial migration and increase labor mobility. These changes are, however, also associated with apprehensions of unbalanced advantage, territorial variations and the danger of societal relocation among populations that are already underprivileged. Migration, labor and settlement within the CPEC framework are, therefore, crucial areas to be analyzed so that the effects of the whole project on the Pakistani society can be comprehended (Shah, 2025).

Literature Review

The demographic composition of any nation encompasses the spatial organization of people and the connection among them and surrounding resources (Qasim et al., 2024; Muttarak, 2021). It examines population changes, labor market as well as the transformation of the geography of population distribution and its socio-economic structures. The study of such landscapes can be used to analyze the way infrastructural megaprojects transform societies. It entails not merely the demographic and labor shifts but also the assimilation of many cultures, as well as the settlement inequality. In the example of Pakistan, the socio-economic and demographic shifts, which occur with the mobility and settlement geography shifts that CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) project makes possible, directly overlap with these aspects. CPEC alters the socio-cultural and demographic structures of the country, alongside industrial and transport centers.

Though most of the literature characterizes CPEC simply as an economic corridor and focuses on the trade, infrastructural and energy development it entails, the CPEC ramifications go beyond economic development. The construction of roads and railways, and the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) entails special connectivity, and also internal migration, labor mobility, and the opening of new settlement areas (Hussain and Ali, 2019). In the process, new urban areas are created, and rural and urban regions of the country are more deeply integrated. Local cultures are also transformed and new and different people are introduced to a locality through cross-regional interpersonal relationships, which expose them to new behavioral norms. From this perspective, CPEC is also a social corridor that integrates societies and, more profoundly, alters the cultural and demographic relationships within Pakistan (Ali and Rehman, 2020). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a fundamental project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is changing the socio-economic landscape of Pakistan by developing the country's

infrastructure, opening new trade routes, and addressing energy deficits (Burfat, Oad, & Talpur, 2024).

As a consequence of infrastructural development, industrialization, and urbanization, the socio-spatial configurations of CPEC contribute to altered population flows, and thus, altered movement migration patterns under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The development of Gwadar into a strategic hub, the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and the construction of large-scale construction projects have resulted in the new economic opportunities, which led to rural-to-urban migration as well as the attraction of labor to underdeveloped regions. Circular and seasonal patterns of migration have also been enhanced in which workers migrate temporarily to CPEC construction areas whilst permanent resettlement is documented around industrial centres and transport corridors. Such migration flows do not only point out the economic hopes, but also raise those very important questions of cultural assimilation, social solidity and unevenness in the distribution of development benefits arising among the provinces, and migration, therefore, is one of the most significant dimensions of human geography of CPEC.

The direct population effects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) include the rapid increase in rural-urban migration in Pakistan. Development of infrastructure, energy projects and the development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) provide job opportunities which entices the labor force in the rural and semi-urban areas to urban locations (Hussain & Ali, 2019). The trend augments the already existing trends of urbanization, especially in the cities that are interconnected by the corridors like Gwadar, Faisalabad, and Karachi. Researchers claim that although this movement can contribute to improving the level of income, building human capital (Qasim et al., 2024), it also raises questions about overpopulation in cities, slums, and unequal access to basic services (Ullah et al., 2024). Therefore, CPEC can remake the urban environment in Pakistan by increasing the rate of development of the industrial centers at the cost of the rural stability.

In addition to domestic processes, CPEC has an impact on cross-border migration and security issues. The Gwadar and other cities along the corridor are strategically located along international frontiers, with increased opportunities of transnational labour mobility and undeterred migration threats. Authorities have also expressed fears that more flow of workers such as Chinese workers could increase security threats in areas that already have ethnic and political conflicts. Cross-border flows are strictly regulated in the border provinces like Baluchistan or Gilgit-Baltistan as a result of fears of smuggling, militancy and irregular migration. Therefore, although CPEC will lead to increased connectivity in the region, it will need sound policies to control migration to lessen security threats and make sure that mobility will benefit socio-economic growth in Pakistan (Ahmad, 2024; Hanif, 2024; Shah, et. al., 2020).

CPEC has induced a radical settlement and urban change in Pakistan, with Gwadar being the most notable example that has undergone significant expansion as a small fishing town into a fast-growing port city that has seen it attract migrants throughout the country (Dikshit, 2025). New settlements have formed along the corridor routes around Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along highways and industrial centers like Faisalabad and Rashakai as part of an alternative model of urbanization that is propagated by corridors, where economic activity and population increase around transport infrastructure instead of centering around traditional metropolitan areas (Rahman, 2018; Abbas, et. al., 2020). Although these changes provide the opportunity to integrate economically and enhance the development of the regions, they also introduce prominent challenges, such as congestion, slumming, and overloading of the social services, not to mention the cultural integration problems that emerge due to the convergence of various ethnic and linguistic communities (Qureshi, 2020).

Material and Methods

The research design used in this study is qualitative research design that seeks to undertake an extensive review of how China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is transforming the demographic landscape of Pakistan. The methodology is systematic in nature in order to have a comprehensive study of available research and data. The initial one was a systematic search of the academic databases, government resources, and publications of the think tanks to find peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and official data. The search terms that were used to access a variety of sources are CPEC, Demography, Pakistan migration, labor mobility, set up shifts, and Gwadar development. It was narrowed down to the literature that explicitly covers the socio-spatial, demographic, and labor relationships that are created due to the infrastructure projects by CPEC.

The critical review and synthesis of the chosen works was the next step after gathering the first pool of literature. The selection of studies included relevant and valuable studies that have led to the comprehension of the human aspects of CPEC. The themes that were examined during the review included migration between urban and rural areas, cross border labor, the growth of new urban settlements and the threat of regional socio-economic disparities. Particular care was taken regarding the papers that drew the connection between extensive infrastructure construction and the lived experiences of the local population.

Results and Discussion

The Gwadar has turned out to be the center of the settlement change because of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Gwadar is a small apprehensive town but is currently under development as a deep-sea port city, with massive commercial, residential, and industrial facilities (Wolf, 2019 ; Hatim et al., 2025). Its growth has brought migrants not only all over Baluchistan, but also other provinces to form a multi-ethnic and multi-language urban center. Researchers claim that the metamorphosis of Gwadar can be viewed as general patterns of port-led urbanization, in which infrastructural development leads to the intensive development of settlements and the modification of the socio-economic environment in the area (Markey & West, 2016). Nevertheless, the arrival of foreigners has also led to the growth of the concerns of local communities regarding marginalization, distribution of resources, and cultural displacement (Hussain & Ali, 2019).

Table 1
Major Development Projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Gwadar

S.No	Project Name	Project objective	Estimated Cost (M\$)
01	Development of Port and Free Zone	To create a backup port industry for Gwadar Port.	300
02	Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan	Creating the vision and guiding strategic objectives for Gwadar City.	04
03	Pak-China Technical and Vocational Institute at Gwadar	Creating state-of-the-art vocational and technical training institute in the port city of Gwadar.	10
04	Pak-China Technical and Vocational Institute at Gwadar	Eastbay Expressway is the main artery of Gwadar Port through which the entire traffic of the port will flow.	179
05	Pak-China Friendship Hospital	Creating a state-of-the-art medical facility in the port city of Gwadar.	100
06	1.2 MGD Desalination Plant	to supply potable water to Old city area along with GPA requirement.	12.7
07	New Gwadar International Airport	Domestic as well as international airport	230

Source: <https://cpec.gov.pk/gwadar>

New Settlements along the CPEC Route

Outside of Gwadar, CPEC has contributed to the development of new settlements along its transport corridors, industrial zones and Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The location of SEZs and the industries they create have also become the causes of inflows of population in such cities as Faisalabad, Rashakai, and Dera Ismail Khan (Ali & Rehman, 2020). Correspondingly, cities are appearing around major motorways and railways, where roadside markets, petrol stations and housing groups are offering services to transit communities and workers. This is an exemplar of a corridor-based model of urbanization, when economic development and settlement growth proceed in linear patterns along transport networks and are not limited, as traditional metropolitan centers (Rahman, 2018). Not only these new settlements transform the demographic geography in Pakistan, but also bring new socio-spatial inequalities between the corridor and non-corridor areas.

Cultural Integration, Informal Housing, and Urban Congestion

Settlement in CPEC is accompanied by economic opportunities, and such urban challenges have been created by it. The population moving rapidly to growing urban areas such as Gwadar, Karachi, and towns along the corridor is usually beyond the capacity of local governments to house, sanitize, and transport them (Qureshi, 2020). This leads to informal settlements and slums where migrant laborers only have precarious lives. Additionally, cultural integration concerns also arise as various populations mix up, and this comes with varying ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage. Even though these interactions can lead to the cultural exchange, they can also give rise to tensions when residing in the regions with weak social cohesion (Rahman, 2018; Iram et al., 2025). These urban issues need to be solved via the investment of infrastructure and the policies which are aimed at inclusive urban planning, housing and social integration.

Opportunities and challenges

There are challenges and opportunities of CPEC to the socio-spatial development of Pakistan. On the one hand, it can increase socio-economic inequality between provinces when those areas that are directly linked to the corridor like Punjab and Sindh can receive more investments than the marginal regions like Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, and increase discrepancies among regions (Akhter, 2018; Qadri, Habib, and Salim, 2023). With high urbanization rates and the growth of industries, there are other pressures on the available resources and the environment, such as water shortage, deforestation, and increased transport and energy infrastructure emissions (Rahman, 2018). Conversely, CPEC presents great opportunities of regional connectivity, integration, and balanced development as it connects Pakistan closer to China, Central Asia, and the Middle East by means of Gwadar Port and enhanced transport systems. When managed in an inclusive and sustainable way, these opportunities can alter the economic geography of Pakistan, and decrease the imbalances between provinces and promote the improvement of social cohesion (Khan, Ahmad, and Xing, 2018).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has a complicated set of issues that concern international, national, financial, security, and environmental factors (Youseftzai and Ashraf, 2023). Other countries in the world are also looking on CPEC as a tactic to fight regional influence and bring up the issue of sovereignty over its path through the disputed states. On the national level, the project has generated tension among the provinces of Pakistan and organizations such as the Baloch have been dissatisfied with the unequal allocation of resources and the absence of the provincial voice in the decision making process. On the financial side, the issues of the debt sustainability are of great concern, which are supported by the increasing fiscal deficit, falling revenues, and the risks of contingent government borrowing that CPEC can trigger (Mushtaq and Mirza, 2022). Another significant challenge is the security situation where threats of Baloch separatists,

the Pakistani Taliban and other militant groups that act in areas that are key to CPEC linking land connections are a threat to Chinese investment and staff. Lastly, the project also raises environmental concerns, because the impetus behind the growth of the economy and the infrastructure development poses a threat of severe environmental damage in a country that is already struggling with severe issues of sustainability and environmental conservation (Khan et al.2022).

Provincial socio-economic inequalities

Among the most hotly debated issues about CPEC is the unequal allocation of the benefits in the provinces of Pakistan. Though Punjab and Sindh, with their more developed industrial complexes and developed structure, stand a chance of gaining more investment and jobs, the peripheral areas, including Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, will risk being marginalized despite having important routes of corridors and strategic positions like Gwadar (Hassan, 2024).

This imbalance supports historical trends of regional inequalities with the less developed provinces contributing important resources and land but getting very low socio-economic returns. Opponents have noted that in the absence of fair planning, CPEC can create more grievances in already marginalized areas, possibly leading to ethnic tensions and political instability (Rafiq, 2020). In its turn, the supporters opine that, in case of more inclusive allocation of resources and development projects, CPEC may turn into the tool of diminishing the historical disparities by elevating stagnant areas and making them a part of the national economy (Ali & Rehman, 2020).

Strains on resources and environment

The accelerated growth of infrastructure, as well as industrial activity, within CPEC, creates severe pressures on Pakistani natural resources and environment. Highways, dams and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are among major construction initiatives that have heightened pressure on scarce land, water and energy, and carbon emissions have also been associated with coal-based energy projects, which are inconsistent with Pakistani pledges of sustainable development and climate resilience. Furthermore, the increased rates of urbanization along the pathways of the cities have amplified the pressure in waste handling, air contamination, and water shortage, which impact vulnerable groups more significantly (Kamran et al., 2021). Although, CPEC is a promising economic boost, the mentioned environmental trade-offs show that we must develop stronger regulation measures, increase investments in renewable energy, and introduce sustainable urban planning to achieve a balance between development and ecological protection (Rehman, 2020).

Regional connectivity, integration, and development prospects

CPEC presents tremendous opportunities of regional connectivity, integration and balanced growth as it connects the economy of Pakistan further to China, Central Asia and the Middle East with an integrated set of roads, railways and Gwadar Port (Markey and West, 2016). Supply chain connectivity will boost trade, cross-border investments, and role as a regional transit hub, thus diversifying the economy of Pakistan (Rafiq, 2020). Domestically, the corridor can help incorporate other underdeveloped provinces like Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to national and international markets, eliminating spatial inequalities, and promoting inclusive growth in case of equitable investments (Ali and Rehman, 2020). In addition to this, cross-regional connections could facilitate the social cohesion process by fostering inter-provincial cooperation, cultural interaction, and common development projects. Therefore, CPEC can become a turning point towards a balanced regional growth and the stability in the long term, provided that the policy planning is conducted with care and that the resources are allocated equally (Qureshi, 2020).

Conclusion

As a project of the Belt and Road monumental initiative, CPEC is transforming the socio-spatial landscape of Pakistan in a way that stretches much beyond the economic prospects of the project. CPEC is a demographic and cultural change factor, which has risen the rural to urban migration rate, creating seasonal and circular labour migration and developing new settlements along the transport corridors and Special Economic Zones. Such aspects of human geography reveal that an infrastructure-based growth can not be explained simply by the flows of investments, by the volumes of trade but also taking into account the experience of the people and the alteration of social and spatial relations.

CPEC builds channels of social and human growth and economic growth. Although there is the risk of increasing the socio-economic inequalities between the provinces and the strain on the environment, the potential benefits in terms of the cross-regional inter connectivity are enormous and need to be exploited. Findings indicate that the fruits of CPEC need equity in returns and the policy makers need to be involved in the control of migration, urban sprawl and labor density.

CPEC is more than an economic corridor; it is a corridor of social, spatial, or geopolitical dimensions radically altering the population layout of the country. Within the larger framework of human geography and development studies, the author advocates for an inclusive and wide-ranging, yet equitable, development policy that simultaneously addresses the economic, demographic, and socio-cultural dimensions and complexities. Such an integrated approach is the only means to fulfill CPEC's promise as a catalyst for enduring national development and geopolitical harmony.

The interrelatedness of economy, space, and culture is confirmed through the changes which were introduced by CPEC. The movement of people, the creation of new settlements, and the primitive integration of the informal socio-cultural systems and structures of the urban scattered populations bring the phenomenon of inter-civilizational concord in conflict in the form urban of stagnation and congestion, informal housing, and socio-cultural conflict accommodation. The disproportionate of the advantages in the different provinces also exacerbates the situation and increases the risk of socio-economic disparity inequity and regional disproportionate threat. The exacerbation of the violation of the sustainability principle of the socio-economic systems and the unsustainable use of natural resources also raises sustainability issues of considerable importance. The economic growth is in greatest part the issues indicate that the stability can not be attained without consequently advanced systemically sustainable socio-economic inequity, and unsustainable inclusive human policies of social disintegration, informal environmental inequation, and development cross border resource integration.

However, CPEC is also an unprecedented long-term development and integration opportunity of Pakistan. Its potential in connecting remote areas to the national and international markets promises to decrease geographic isolation, improve the integration of the region and make Pakistan stronger in transnational trade. CPEC should be made an inclusive initiative so that the marginalized areas like Gilgit-Baltistan and the Baluchistan are included in the national development. Moreover, its possible role of a cultural and social pathway provides the room to establish mutual understanding, ability development, and inclusive representation in the development process.

Altogether, CPEC should be considered as the project that influences not only the economic but also the demographic situation in Pakistan. It is not only important in roads, ports, and industrial zones but also how it transforms the population balance, patterns of work, and settling patterns. To researchers this research paper will help in filling the gap that existed between the field of development studies and human geography as it illuminates the lived experiences of the people who are the result of the transformation of

infrastructure. To policymakers, the results highlight the relevance of assuming integrated approaches in migration management, control of labor, urban planning and governance of resources.

The ultimate result of the CPEC will not be judged by its contribution to the GDP or even trade flows, but by its ability to contribute to inclusive, equitable and sustainable development. With the right policies in place that appreciate the human aspect of geography, CPEC can truly become a wellspring of social cohesion, equitable development and stability of the region in long term within Pakistan and the rest of the world.

Policy Recommendations

Inclusive Regional Development Policies

In order to prevent increasing the regional inequalities, policymakers ought to have CPEC projects distributed fairly across the underdeveloped regions like Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. In order to integrate these areas into the national developmental framework, there should be efforts to the disparities in education, health, and basic amenities. Equitable provision of these facilities will also increase nationhood and local grassroots support for the corridor.

Sustainable Urban Planning

There is an urgent need for proactive urban planning in Gwadar and other settlements related to the CPEC, given the rapid urban growth. To prevent urban overcrowding and the formation of slums, the development of low-cost housing, affordable and efficient public transport systems, and proper sanitation are crucial. Without consideration for urban design, it will also be problematic for the cultures of the migrant workers to be incorporated and assimilated into the host society.

Skill development and Labor Market Regulation

The projects that are brought about by CPEC demand a very competent work force, which Pakistan has a skills gap in the construction, technology and logistics field. The creation of technical training centers and vocational centers along the corridor can enable the locals to have marketable skills hence limited reliance on foreign or non-local labor. This will not merely improve on the employment opportunities but will also help in development of human capital.

Resource and Environmental Management

The sustainability of the environment is a burning issue with the escalation of industries, highways, and settlements creating pressure on natural resources. The policymakers are required to embrace renewable energy projects, reinforce environmental impact assessment, and institute regulations against ecological degradation. There must be a balance between the development and the ecological protection since it will only guarantee that CPEC is a long-term asset and not a liability.

Migration and Social Cohesion Policy

The increasing rural to urban migration and seasonal labor patterns, social tension is bound to happen unless it is addressed. The migration policies are to be directed towards the formalization of the labor movements, the equal access to housing and services, and the enhancement of the dialogue between the cultures in order to find the means of social cohesion. These measures will assist in reducing the conflict and the integration of the migrant populations into the host communities will turn out to be easier.

In order to ensure that CPEC might achieve its socio-demographic benefits and reduce its risks, the policymakers must consider a multi-dimensional approach, which incorporates the economic, social, and environmental priorities. The provincial development system should be balanced whereby marginalized areas like the Baluchistan and Gilgits Baltistan are accorded equal share in investment to decrease the inter-provincial disparities. Meanwhile, experts in urban planning in emerging hubs such as Gwadar are needed in handling the rapid urbanization, residential as well as infrastructure demands. An overall national migration and labor mobility policy must be implemented that will control rural-to-urban and seasonal labor flows as well as vocational training centres along the CPEC routes will be able to train the local population on skills needed in the industrial and service sector. Strict Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), adoption of renewable energy sources are important to cell ecological risks.

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