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Economic Integration under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Comparative Analysis of the Western and Eastern Routes

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Abstract

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is widely regarded as a transformative initiative for Pakistan's economic integration; however, its internal route configuration has generated significant political and developmental debate. This study examines economic integration under CPEC through a comparative analysis of its Eastern and Western routes, conceptualizing them as distinct yet interconnected development pathways. Using a qualitative, comparative research design supported by descriptive quantitative indicators, the study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from official government reports, international development institutions, parliamentary records, and peer-reviewed academic literature. The analysis demonstrates that the Eastern Route, aligned with Pakistan's established urban industrial core, has delivered faster infrastructure completion, higher investment concentration, improved trade facilitation, and short-term efficiency gains. In contrast, the Western Route traversing historically marginalized regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ex-FATA, and Balochistan has progressed more slowly due to security, terrain, and institutional constraints, yet exhibits stronger potential for inclusive growth, regional equity, and long-term national integration. Comparative evaluation reveals that policy prioritization of efficiency has reinforced existing core periphery disparities, while underinvestment in the Western Route has constrained its integrative capacity. The findings highlight that CPEC's developmental outcomes are shaped not only by infrastructure economics but also by political economy dynamics, federal–provincial governance asymmetries, and spatial justice considerations. The study concludes that sustainable economic integration under CPEC requires a recalibrated corridor strategy that balances efficiency-driven growth with equity oriented regional development. By integrating both routes within a unified national framework, Pakistan can transform CPEC from a connectivity project into a mechanism for long-term economic cohesion and stability.

Keywords: China–Pakistan Economic Corridor; Economic Integration; Eastern Route; Western Route; Regional Development.

Introduction

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a central component of China's Belt and Road Initiative and represents a major infrastructure-led development effort aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and economic integration. Linking China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Gwadar Port through road, rail, energy, and industrial projects, CPEC has been framed as a transformative corridor capable of addressing Pakistan's infrastructure deficits and stimulating long-term economic growth (Ali, 2018; Summers, 2016). As a development model, economic corridors combine physical connectivity with industrial and trade facilitation policies to generate spatial economic spillovers and regional integration (Brunner, 2013). In Pakistan, CPEC was initially presented as a mechanism for promoting balanced national development by integrating historically marginalized regions into national and regional markets. Infrastructure connectivity plays a foundational role in economic integration by reducing transaction costs, facilitating trade, and enabling the spatial reorganization of economic activity (Balassa, 1961; World Bank, 2009). However, insights from new economic geography caution that improved connectivity often strengthens existing economic cores due to agglomeration economies, unless accompanied by deliberate redistributive policies (Krugman, 1991). Within this framework, CPEC presents a dual dynamic: while enhanced north–south connectivity can improve market integration and trade efficiency, uneven spatial allocation of infrastructure and industrial investments may reinforce regional inequalities (Nabi, 2019). The debate over the Eastern and Western routes of CPEC reflects these underlying political economy dynamics. While early policy narratives emphasized inclusive development through the Western route, implementation patterns prioritized the Eastern route, which passes through Pakistan's most developed industrial regions (Wolf, 2017). This prioritization generated political contestation, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and ex-FATA, where stakeholders viewed the route selection as reinforcing historical marginalization (Yousaf, 2019). Consequently, the route debate transformed CPEC into a contested development project, raising critical questions about equity, federal cohesion, and the corridor's capacity to foster genuine national economic integration. This study addresses these concerns through a systematic comparative analysis of the economic integrations of the Eastern and Western routes.

Research Objectives

- To compare the economic integration of the Western and Eastern routes of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor.
- To assess the regional development impacts of route-based infrastructure and investment under CPEC in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Infrastructure corridors have emerged as a central mechanism for promoting economic development and regional integration in both developed and developing contexts. Economic corridors, defined as integrated networks of transport, logistics, and economic activities aligned with coordinated policy frameworks, are designed to reduce transaction costs, improve market accessibility, and stimulate clustered industrial growth (ADB, 2013; Brunner, 2013). Global experience with corridor development illustrates that while such initiatives can catalyze trade and mobility, they often generate uneven geographic outcomes that reflect existing disparities between core and peripheral regions. For example, in the ASEAN Economic Community's Master Plan, transport corridors such as the North-South and East-West Corridors have facilitated cross-border connectivity and intraregional trade, but economic gains have been unevenly distributed, favoring urban agglomerations and borderland entrecotes over rural

hinterlands (Pholsena & Kim, 2019). Similarly, Africa's Trans-African Highways initiative has encountered implementation challenges related to financing, governance, and cross-border coordination, resulting in mixed evidence on integration outcomes (Chakwizira et al., 2015). In Central Asia, the Silk Road Economic Belt components of China's Belt and Road Initiative have underscored the potential for corridor planning to stimulate regional production networks, yet they also highlight the risk of amplifying core–periphery disparities if industrial location decisions cluster around established urban centers (Rakhmatullin & Kokaisl, 2018). Across these cases, scholar emphasizes that corridor infrastructure alone does not guarantee equitable regional development; corresponding policy support for human capital, institutional capacity, and spatial planning is crucial (Kanbur & Venables, 2005; World Bank, 2009). Within Pakistan, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) occupies a unique position as a high visibility, high-investment corridor. Early policy narratives and planning documents framed CPEC as a transformative initiative capable of addressing systemic infrastructure deficits, facilitating export-oriented growth, and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) into key sectors such as energy and manufacturing (Planning Commission of Pakistan, 2017). In the academic literature, authors have highlighted the ambitious scope of CPEC projects as well as the anticipated linkages between enhanced connectivity and broader economic transformation (Ali, 2018; Hussain, 2019). Empirical investigations of CPEC's economic impacts, however, emphasize a gap between projected expectations and realized outcomes. Trade intensity effects, while positive in some sectors, remain constrained by non-tariff barriers and limited productive capacity in export oriented industries (Hameed & Khan, 2020). FDI inflows into Pakistan have shown correlation with major CPEC investment announcements, but investments have been unevenly distributed across sectors and regions, privileging energy and transport over value-added manufacturing (Kumari & Anwar, 2021). Some studies note that while initial phases of CPEC have improved logistical performance and expanded capacity, the link between corridor infrastructure and sustainable industrial development remains contingent on complementary policies such as skill development and regulatory reform (Nabi, 2019). A growing strand of the literature focuses specifically on the differential implications of the Western and Eastern routes of CPEC. Scholars on the Western route highlights its developmental promise for historically marginalized provinces such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Analysts argue that improved connectivity could reduce regional isolation, facilitate market access for agricultural and mineral producers, and support localized industrial clusters (Sial, 2014; Yousaf, 2019). At the same time, the literature underscores substantial challenges associated with the Western route, including difficult terrain, security constraints, and institutional capacity deficits that may impede project implementation and dampen private investment responses (Ahmed & Mustafa, 2016). These studies suggest that without targeted economic and governance interventions, the Western route risks remaining underutilized, limiting its integration potential.

In contrast, research on the Eastern route points to its alignment with Pakistan's existing industrial base, particularly in Punjab and Sindh, where transportation corridors intersect with dense networks of manufacturing, services, and urban markets. This has led some scholars to characterize the Eastern route as exhibiting an "industrial concentration" bias, whereby efficient connectivity reinforces existing economic cores rather than extending benefits to peripheral regions (Wolf, 2017). The literature also highlights the efficiency-driven logic embedded in Eastern route investments, which prioritize rapid corridor development and export-oriented infrastructure. However, critics contend that such an approach risks perpetuating regional inequalities unless accompanied by policies that deliberately redistribute growth benefits (Nabi, 2019; Zaidi, 2015). The political economy of the route controversy is another recurrent theme in the literature. Federal–provincial power asymmetries have shaped debates over route

prioritization, with critics arguing that political influence and economic clout in central policy circles have steered investment toward the Eastern corridor at the expense of more equity-oriented planning (Yousaf, 2019). Parliamentary debates and policy documentation reveal contested narratives regarding national cohesion, provincial development rights, and the distributive logic of CPEC investments (Raza & Waheed, 2021). These political dimensions underscore that corridor implementation cannot be disentangled from broader governance dynamics in Pakistan's federal structure. Despite this growing body of work, key research gaps remain. Most studies to date focus on descriptive accounts of individual route developments or on high-level economic projections without systematically comparing the integration outcomes of the Eastern and Western routes. Moreover, there is limited scholars that bridges political economy analysis with spatial justice frameworks to assess how corridor infrastructure affects regional inequality and social inclusion. Addressing these gaps requires a comparative analytical lens that considers both economic outcomes and the institutional contexts in which corridor investments are embedded.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative dominant comparative research design, supported by descriptive quantitative indicators, to examine economic integration outcomes under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The analysis is comparative in nature and focuses on the Eastern and Western routes as two analytically distinct yet interconnected cases within a single national corridor framework. The research relies exclusively on secondary data, Secondary data are drawn from a wide range of sources to ensure analytical breadth and rigor. These include official government publications such as Planning Commission of Pakistan reports, particularly the Long-Term Plan for CPEC (2017–2030), documents from the Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, provincial development reports, economic surveys, and parliamentary debates and committee proceedings related to CPEC. In addition, reports and working papers from international organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and UNESCAP are utilized to contextualize infrastructure connectivity and regional development trends. Peer-reviewed academic literature from Scopus-indexed journals, along with books and edited volumes on political economy, infrastructure development, and spatial planning, further inform the analysis. Research outputs from national and international think tanks, including the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics and the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, are also incorporated. To operationalize economic integration and regional development outcomes, the study employs a structured analytical framework grounded in the corridor development literature. Key indicators include infrastructure connectivity measures such as road and motorway length, transport network coverage, and project completion status; economic integration indicators such as market accessibility, logistics efficiency, and improvements in regional connectivity; investment and industrial indicators including the spatial distribution of Special Economic Zones, sectoral investment patterns, and industrial clustering; and socioeconomic indicators such as employment trends, urbanization patterns, and regional income disparities. These indicators are examined comparatively across the Eastern and Western routes to identify divergences in development trajectories and integration outcomes.

Data analysis combines comparative qualitative assessment with descriptive statistical interpretation. Policy documents and parliamentary records are examined through content analysis to identify dominant narratives, development priorities, and governance dynamics shaping route-based planning and implementation. Economic and infrastructure data are synthesized through descriptive comparisons and tabular analysis to highlight spatial and sectoral variations between the two routes. Rather than isolating single-variable effects, the analysis

emphasizes pattern recognition, contextual interpretation, and cross-source triangulation, reflecting the holistic approach typically adopted in research on complex, multi-causal development processes. To ensure validity, data are cross-verified using multiple independent sources, including official government documents, international organization reports, and peer-reviewed academic studies. Reliability is enhanced by prioritizing officially published statistics and well-established research outputs. Methodological triangulation integrating policy analysis, economic data review, and scholarly interpretation further strengthens the credibility of the findings and minimizes the risk of source bias. Despite these strengths, the study acknowledges limitations inherent in secondary-data research, including variations in data availability across regions and potential gaps between policy intentions and implementation outcomes. These limitations are addressed through cautious interpretation and transparent contextualization of the findings.

Economic Integration under the Eastern Route of CPEC

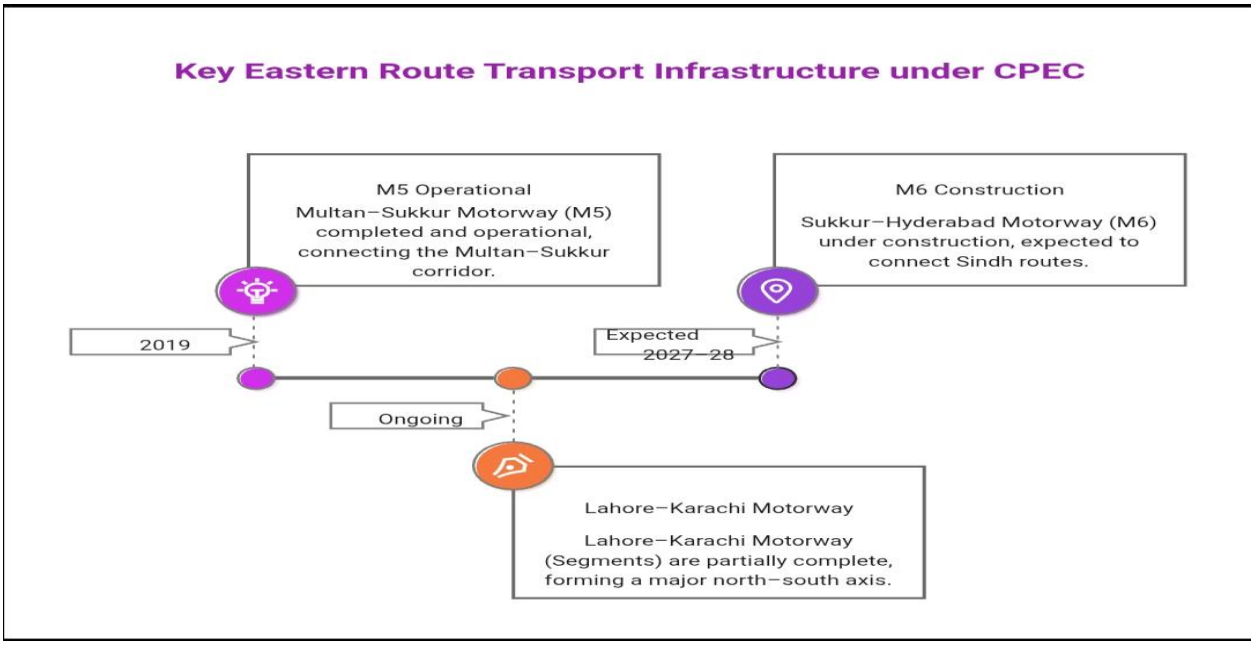
The Eastern Route of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emerged as a primary vector of economic transformation within Pakistan's national development strategy. Traversing the densely populated and industrialized provinces of Punjab and Sindh, this corridor connects major urban centers including Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur, Multan, and Islamabad, thereby integrating regional markets, stimulating investment, and facilitating trade through enhanced infrastructure and industrial linkages (CPECinfo, 2024). The route's strategic alignment provides the shortest and most economically vibrant corridor from the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar to the Khunjerab Pass on the China–Pakistan border, positioning it as a central spine for north–south connectivity and economic integration. The Eastern Route stretches approximately 1,419 kilometers, linking multiple industrial hubs across Punjab and Sindh. Its relatively flat terrain, fertile agricultural base, and dense urban clusters facilitate rapid infrastructure delivery and enable stronger market integration compared to other alignments. This corridor capitalizes on existing economic capacities while enhancing accessibility to previously isolated markets, which is critical for reducing transaction costs and fostering regional economic cohesion (CPECinfo, 2024). Infrastructure development along the Eastern Route demonstrates the depth of investment under CPEC. By 2024, approximately 79 percent of motorway work and 68 percent of highway construction along the route had been completed, reflecting rapid progress in key transport projects (CPECinfo, 2024). Major components include the Multan–Sukkur Motorway (M-5), a 392-kilometer six-lane controlled-access motorway inaugurated in 2019, connecting industrial regions of Punjab to northern Sindh (Wikipedia, 2025). Other critical segments, such as the M-3 (Lahore–Abdul Hakeem) and M-4 (Pindi Bhattian–Multan), further enhance intercity connectivity and integrate previously fragmented transport networks.

Table: Key Eastern Route Transport Infrastructure under CPEC

Project	**Length (km)**	**Status**	**Completion Year**	**Primary Connectivity Function**
Multan–Sukkur Motorway (M-5)	392	Operational	2019	Connects Multan–Sukkur corridor
Lahore–Karachi Motorway (Segments)	1,111.7*	Partially Complete	Ongoing	Major north–south axis
Sukkur–Hyderabad Motorway (M-6)	306	Under Construction	Expected 2027–28	Connects Sindh routes

*Includes segments of M-2, M-3, M-4, M-5, M-6 and M-9 along the north–south axis.

Sources: National Highway Authority; CPECinfo.



Rail connectivity is also being strengthened through the Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway upgrade, designed to modernize the Peshawar–Karachi rail corridor, significantly enhancing freight capacity and reducing transit times along the Eastern Route. Complementary energy and logistics infrastructure projects further support industrial and trade activities, facilitating more efficient movement of goods and services. Industrialization along the Eastern Route has been bolstered through the development of multiple Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Nine SEZs have been identified to attract domestic and foreign investment, promote industrial clustering, and integrate Pakistan into global value chains. These zones are expected to attract over US$8 billion in foreign direct investment and generate up to 500,000 jobs by the mid-2020s (Eurasia Review, 2025). Among these, the Islamabad Model Special Economic Zone, inaugurated in 2023 and covering more than 1,000 acres, is projected to attract approximately US$2.5 billion in investment and create around 1,000 jobs in low-carbon industries (Wikipedia, 2023). However, while many SEZs have been announced, operationalization and tenancy rates remain uneven, particularly outside initial pilot zones. The Eastern Route has also strengthened trade facilitation and market integration. Improved expressways and motorways have reduced logistics costs and travel times between production hubs, ports, and regional markets, with estimates suggesting a 10–15 percent reduction in trade costs (JALT, 2025). This infrastructure enables better domestic distribution and enhances Pakistan's competitiveness in regional and international trade networks, particularly through Karachi and Gwadar ports. Investment flows along the Eastern Route have concentrated in transport and industrial projects, with the M-5 Motorway alone requiring US$2.9 billion in investment and creating thousands of construction-related jobs (Wikipedia, 2025). Overall, CPEC projects along the Eastern Route have generated significant employment opportunities, both directly through construction and indirectly through ancillary services, logistics, and urban labor absorption. Socioeconomic outcomes reflect accelerated urbanization and service sector growth along the corridor. Cities such as Multan, Sukkur, and Lahore have experienced increased economic activity, population inflows, and diversification of services. Agricultural producers benefit from improved market access, which reduces inefficiencies and enhances rural incomes. Nevertheless, regional disparities persist: urban

centers continue to grow faster than peripheral rural areas, highlighting the need for policies that promote inclusive development across the corridor.

Governance along the Eastern Route involves coordination between federal ministries, provincial authorities, and public–private entities. The Planning Commission of Pakistan, National Highway Authority, and provincial planning departments manage project execution, while joint working groups with Chinese partners oversee technical and financial aspects. Despite progress, bureaucratic delays and regulatory bottlenecks occasionally slow implementation, emphasizing the need for strengthened governance frameworks to maximize developmental impacts. In summary, the Eastern Route has delivered significant growth-oriented successes through infrastructure development, industrialization, trade facilitation, and investment stimulation. However, these achievements are accompanied by challenges related to regional imbalances and the over-concentration of economic activity in already developed provinces. While the Eastern Route efficiently promotes national economic integration, complementary policies are required to ensure broader geographic inclusion and sustainable development outcomes.

Economic Integration under the Western Route of CPEC

The Western Route of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents Pakistan's most strategically important yet underdeveloped corridor, intended to integrate the country's western periphery with national and regional economic systems. Running approximately 1,153 kilometers through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan, and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (ex-FATA), this route aims to confront deep-seated regional inequality, enhance cross-border connectivity, and unlock economic potential in historically marginalized zones (Bloom Pakistan, 2025). Although conceived as a development lifeline that could link China's Xinjiang region with Pakistan's Arabian Sea access at Gwadar, progress along this route has been uneven, reflecting the interplay of geography, security challenges, governance limitations, and investment dynamics.

Geographic and Strategic Overview of the Western Route

Unlike the Eastern Route's passage through dense urban and industrial belts, the Western Route spans sparsely populated and economically lagging regions of KP and Balochistan. This alignment passes through places including Peshawar, Burhan/Hakla, Dera Ismail Khan, Zhob, Quetta, Sorab, Basima, Hoshab, and ultimately Gwadar (Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, 2025). Stretching across arid plateaus, rugged mountains, and frontier territories, the Western Corridor is strategically envisioned to not only promote internal national cohesion but also to enable trade links with Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran, anchoring Pakistan as a gateway for regional commerce. The corridor's completion is seen as critical to integrating the western periphery's economic potential with broader national development, particularly through increased market access and cross-border logistics.

Infrastructure Development along the Western Route

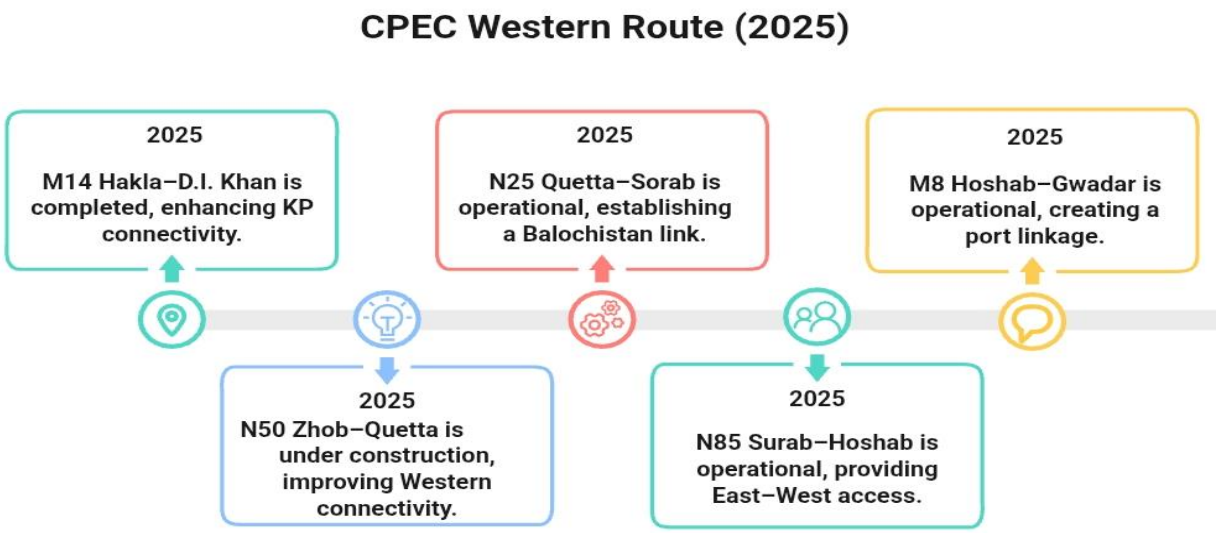
Progress on the Western Route's infrastructure has been markedly slower than on the Eastern alignment, primarily due to geographical and security challenges. As of 2025, major segments such as the M-14 Hakla–D.I. Khan motorway (285 km)**,** N-25 Quetta–Sorab (235 km)**,** N-85 Surab–Hoshab (449 km), and M-8 Hoshab–Gwadar (193 km) have been completed or are operational, while crucial segments like N-50 Zhob–Quetta (305 km) and additional links such as Basima–Khuzdar and Nokundi–Mashkhel–Panjgur remain under construction (Bloom Pakistan, 2025). These infrastructural investments aim to reduce the physical isolation of remote regions and to lay the groundwork for future economic activities. However, significant gaps remain in

both road and rail upgrades, and rail connectivity for the western corridor is still largely absent, delaying potential gains from integrated freight and passenger services. Despite periodic statements by government authorities that work is "progressing gradually," critics argue that many infrastructure pledges have yet to materialize in measurable progress, especially on segments critical for linking Balochistan's interior with Gwadar (Dawn, 2025). Such delays reflect broader patterns wherein early feasibility and design approvals (e.g., the Yarik/D.I. Khan–Zhob section approved in 2017) have not translated into sustained construction or completion (Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, 2025). This infrastructure lag directly constrains economic integration potential, as reliable transportation networks are foundational for market connectivity, industrial development, and trade facilitation.

Table: Key Western Route Infrastructure Segments under CPEC (as of 2025)

Project / Segment	Approx. Length (km)	Status (2025)	Key Function
M-14 Hakla–D.I. Khan	285	Completed	KP connectivity
N-50 Zhob–Quetta	305	Under Construction	Western connectivity
N-25 Quetta–Sorab	235	Operational	Balochistan link
N-85 Surab–Hoshab	449	Operational	East–West access
M-8 Hoshab–Gwadar	193	Operational	Port linkage

Source: Bloom Pakistan (2025); Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives (2025).



Industrial and SEZ Development Challenges

While transport infrastructure lays the physical foundation for integration, the Western Route suffers from limited industrialization and under-operationalized Special Economic Zones (SEZs) compared with the Eastern Route. SEZ development remains concentrated in areas like the Rashakai SEZ in KP, which despite its potential, has historically attracted more investor interest than immediate industrial activity (Pakistan Today, 2021). The western periphery's SEZs and industrial parks, planned to stimulate manufacturing and export-oriented enterprises, face constraints related to insufficient capital inflows, a limited base of skilled labor, and weak linkages to established supply chains. The absence of integrated power, logistics, and technological infrastructure further undermines the zones' competitiveness. Local enterprises in Western regions, predominantly based on agriculture, livestock, and small-scale trade, lack the capacity to immediately absorb large capital inflows or compete with established industrial hubs

in Punjab and Sindh (Manzil Pakistan, 2025). As a result, industrial development under the Western Route has lagged, exacerbating spatial economic disparities and limiting the corridor's ability to generate transformational employment and productivity gains.

Trade Connectivity and Regional Markets

One of the aspirations of the Western Route is to activate intra-regional trade flows, particularly with neighbouring Afghanistan and beyond to Central Asia and Iran. Improved road networks such as the Nokundi–Mashkhel–Panjgur Road aim to enhance access to Iran, potentially positioning Pakistan as a regional trade hub. However, trade connectivity remains constrained by incomplete infrastructure on key corridors and by non-infrastructure barriers such as customs procedures, border security tensions, and regulatory complexities. Despite these challenges, enhanced access to Gwadar Port through the Western Route holds the promise of facilitating export and transit trade, particularly for landlocked regions and neighboring countries. Effective realization of this potential would require synchronized infrastructure development, harmonized border procedures, and institutional cooperation with partner countries in the wider region.

Investment and Employment Outcomes

Investment flows into the Western Route have been significantly lower than on the Eastern alignment, reflecting investor preferences for more accessible and economically vibrant regions. While the Eastern Route has attracted concentrated foreign investment and large-scale industrial projects, the Western Route's economic environment characterized by higher risks, lowers existing market activity, and weaker institutional capacity — has discouraged substantial capital inflows. The lack of robust investment has directly impacted employment creation, with local populations reporting continued reliance on traditional agriculture, livestock, and informal trade for livelihoods. Labor statistics from baseline studies prior to major CPEC implementation reveal that sectors such as agriculture, wholesale trade, construction, and manufacturing predominate, accounting for significant shares of employment across Western districts, but these sectors have not experienced transformational growth due to infrastructure-linked development yet (Manzil Pakistan, 2025). Limited job creation has implications for migration patterns, with many young workers moving toward urban centers or seeking opportunities along the Eastern corridor, further entrenching regional imbalances.

Security, Terrain, and Institutional Constraints

Security concerns represent a profound impediment to infrastructure development and investor confidence in the Western Route. Balochistan, in particular, has faced decades of insurgent activity and separatist movements, with periodic attacks affecting civilian and infrastructure targets. Analysts note that sustained insurgency, political instability, and militant threats have elevated security expenditures and created a risk premium for private investment (World Geostrategic Insights, 2024). This environment has contributed to cautious investor behavior and to government prioritization of security logistics rather than purely economic infrastructure delivery. Terrain and climatic conditions further complicate construction and maintenance costs, increasing logistical challenges and reducing project feasibility in isolated stretches. Institutional gaps in project management, procurement, and coordination between federal and provincial authorities have also impeded progress, causing delays in project approvals, financing arrangements, and implementation timelines.

Local Perceptions and Developmental Expectations

Local perceptions in Western regions often reflect a narrative of marginalization, rooted in historical underdevelopment and perceptions that federal planning favors core economic areas.

While CPEC projects offer visible prospects for connectivity and potential economic activity, skepticism persists about whether these benefits will materialize equitably. Local populations note that while foreign workers and capital circulate through these regions, tangible benefits for villagers and small business owners remain minimal, fostering a "trust deficit" toward federal and provincial planning bodies (World Geostrategic Insights, 2024). This sentiment underscores the importance of inclusive policies, community engagement, and benefit sharing to ensure that corridor development resonates with local aspirations.

Critical Assessment: Unrealized Potential and Peripheralization Risks

Despite its high strategic relevance, the Western Route's promise of economic integration remains partially unrealized due to the interplay of infrastructure gaps, limited industrial activity, security constraints, and institutional deficiencies. While completed road segments and planned connections lay important foundations, they are insufficient without parallel investments in rail connectivity, SEZ operationalization, trade facilitation mechanisms, and human capital development. The route's developmental trajectory continues to lag relative to the Eastern Corridor, highlighting persistent risks of peripheralization and the reinforcement of core–periphery disparities. Achieving the Western Route's full integration potential therefore requires targeted policy interventions, enhanced governance capacity, and sustained investment in both physical and socio-economic infrastructure.

Comparative Analysis of Eastern and Western Routes

A comparative analysis of the Eastern and Western Routes of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reveals stark differences in infrastructure investment patterns, industrialization dynamics, economic integration outcomes, socioeconomic impacts, governance structures, security conditions, and implications for spatial justice. While the Eastern Route has benefitted from concentrated investment, early operational gains, and stronger private sector engagement, the Western Route continues to face challenges related to implementation delays, limited industrial activity, and persistent structural constraints. This chapter synthesizes empirical evidence and theoretical insights to assess these divergences systematically.

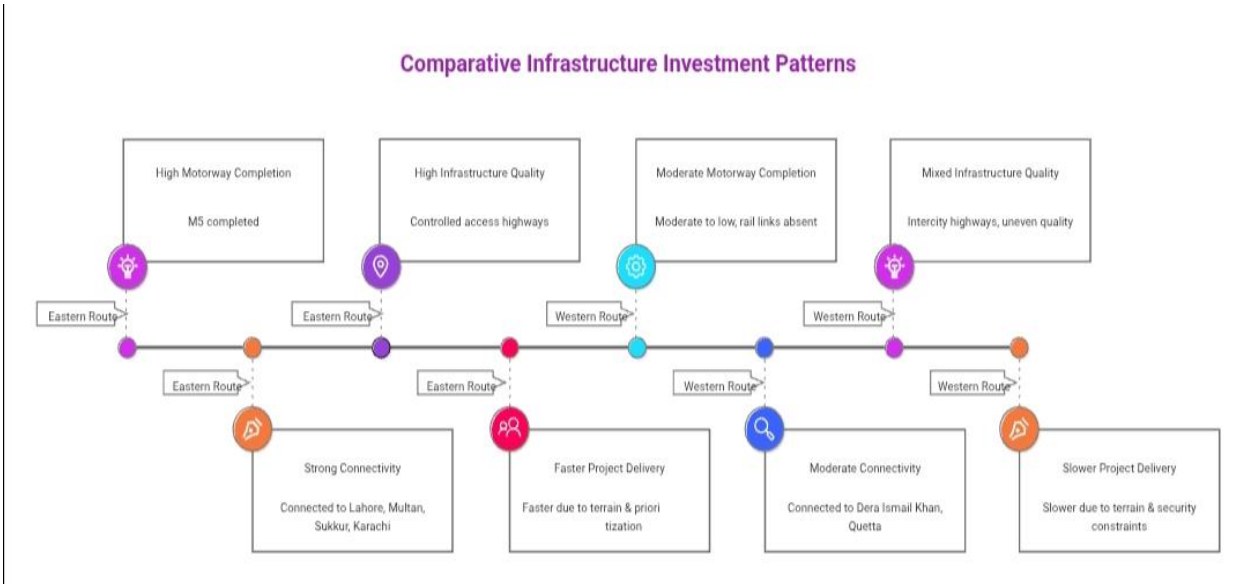
Comparative Infrastructure Investment Patterns

The most tangible divergence between the Eastern and Western routes lies in infrastructure investment patterns. The Eastern Route has received a higher share and faster delivery of major transport infrastructure projects, reflecting both its strategic economic potential and relative ease of construction. For example, major north–south segments such as the Multan–Sukkur Motorway (M-5) and segments of the Lahore–Karachi Motorway have been completed or are operational, significantly improving connectivity between industrial clusters and ports. In contrast, the Western Route's infrastructure network, including the Zhob–Quetta corridor and feeder links connecting remote districts, has lagged in both scale and timing of delivery, reflecting logistical, security, and financing constraints (Bloom Pakistan, 2025). The quality of infrastructure also varies. Most Eastern Route projects are designed to global highway standards with controlled access and higher design speeds, enhancing logistics efficiency dramatically. The Western Route, while advancing on major road segments, still includes stretches of primary highways with lower capacity and limited ancillary infrastructure such as weigh stations, rest stops, or integrated logistics hubs.

Table: Comparative Infrastructure Investment Patterns

Indicator	Eastern Route	Western Route
Major Motorway Completion (%)	High (e.g., M-5 completed)	Moderate to low (rail links absent)
Connectivity to Mega Cities	Strong (Lahore, Multan, Sukkur, Karachi)	Moderate (Dera Ismail Khan, Quetta)
Transport Infrastructure Quality	High (controlled access highways)	Mixed (intercity highways, uneven quality)
Project Delivery Speed	Faster due to terrain & prioritization	Slower due to terrain & security constraints

****Data from Bloom Pakistan (2025) and national planning sources.***



The evidence suggests that scale and timing of infrastructure investments have been more conducive to economic integration on the Eastern Route, providing it with a significant developmental edge.

Comparative Industrialization and SEZ Distribution

Industrialization and the distribution of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) highlight another critical divergence. The Eastern Route has been anchored by several SEZs strategically positioned near population centers and industrial clusters designed to attract investment and generate employment. According to policy estimates, up to nine SEZs have been established with the expectation of attracting over US$8 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) and creating approximately 500,000 jobs by the mid-2020s (Eurasia Review, 2025). These zones leverage agglomeration dynamics, pooling labor, inputs, and infrastructure to enhance value-chain integration. In contrast, the Western Route's industrialization remains nascent, with SEZs either in planning or early implementation phases. Investors have been reluctant to commit capital at scale due to weak local supply chains, limited human capital, and slower infrastructure connectivity. This has resulted in a dispersed rather than concentrated industrial footprint along the Western corridor, undermining its potential to trigger localized economic clusters. Eastern

Route SEZs benefit from proximity to established markets and export corridors, enhancing their attractiveness for export-oriented industries. Western Route SEZs, while conceptually important for inclusive development, have faced challenges in operationalization, reflecting broader issues of market access and integration.

Economic Integration Outcomes

Market access and trade facilitation outcomes also differ significantly between the two corridors. The Eastern Route's integrated road network combined with planned rail improvements (e.g., Main Line-1 upgrades) has enhanced accessibility to national and international markets, including direct connections to Karachi and Gwadar ports. Reductions in transport time and logistics costs along this corridor have contributed to increased trade volume, with trade through CPEC corridors reportedly rising from approximately US$4.8 billion in 2015 to over US$16 billion by 2023, demonstrating increased flow of goods and integration of regional markets (Eurasia Review, 2025). By contrast, the Western Route's incomplete networks and weaker logistics infrastructure have limited its contributions to trade facilitation. Although routes such as the Nokundi–Mashkhel–Panjgur Road improve connectivity to neighboring regions and potential trans-boundary links, incomplete mainline sections and lack of efficient customs and logistics facilities diminish their immediate impact on inter-regional trade. Consequently, regional connectivity improvements on the Western Route remain significantly lower than on the Eastern alignment, constraining its inclusion in national and transnational trade networks.

Socioeconomic Impacts

In terms of employment generation and poverty reduction, the Eastern Route has delivered more visible outcomes due to its greater volume of infrastructure projects and industrial investment. Construction, logistics, and related service sectors have absorbed significant labor, while the presence of SEZs has begun to catalyze formal employment opportunities. Urban centers along the Eastern Route have experienced accelerated economic diversification and service sector growth, contributing to higher income levels and lower local unemployment rates.

Meanwhile, the Western Route continues to struggle with limited employment gains. Labor markets in KP and Balochistan remain heavily dependent on agriculture, small-scale commerce, and informal sectors, with formal employment opportunities generated by CPEC projects still relatively limited. As a result, poverty reduction impacts have been modest, and regional inequality persists, reinforcing core–periphery economic divisions.

Political Economy and Governance Comparison

Decision-making processes and governance structures have shaped divergent developmental trajectories along the two routes. The Eastern Route has benefited from stronger political consensus and prioritization within federal planning frameworks, enabling smoother coordination between federal, provincial, and local authorities. Additionally, its alignment with existing economic hubs has reduced intergovernmental friction over resource allocation.

In contrast, governance challenges have beleaguered the Western Route. Federal–provincial power asymmetries and competition over resource allocation have slowed decision making and project implementation. Disputes over funding priorities and concerns over equitable development have contributed to delays and have occasionally heightened regional tensions.

The political economy of route prioritization reflects patterns of historical regional inequality, where developed provinces exert greater influence over national planning, further reinforcing investment concentration in the East (historical analysis of resource distribution; Tribune analysis, 2014). This dynamic underscores the significance of governance frameworks in shaping economic integration outcomes.

Security and Risk Management

Security considerations have been a critical differentiator in the development of CPEC's two routes. The Eastern Route, despite intermittent security concerns, operates in relatively stable environments with lower risk levels, allowing for steadier project implementation and reduced security expenditures relative to Western alignments. The Western Corridor, particularly through Balochistan and frontier districts of KP, has faced persistent security challenges, including insurgent activity and militant threats, which have elevated security costs and affected investor confidence. These differential security burdens have contributed to varying rates of project completion and investment attraction.

Spatial Justice and Inclusive Development

The debate between equity and efficiency in corridor development is central to understanding the long-term implications for national cohesion. The Eastern Route's emphasis on efficiency and rapid economic returns has delivered quicker integration outcomes but risks deepening regional inequality by concentrating benefits in already developed provinces. This raises concerns about spatial justice, where underdeveloped areas, despite their inclusion in corridor plans, continue to lag in meaningful economic participation.

The Western Route, though slower to develop, embodies the promise of inclusive development by targeting historically marginalized regions. However, without commensurate investment and integration strategies, this promise remains unrealized, potentially exacerbating feelings of exclusion and undermining national cohesion. Effectively balancing equity and efficiency will be crucial for CPEC to fulfill its integrative ambitions, requiring deliberate policy interventions that prioritize distributive outcomes without sacrificing economic viability.

Summary Comparative Matrix

Table: Comparative Matrix of Eastern and Western Routes

Dimensions	**Eastern Route**	**Western Route**
Infrastructure Investment Scale	High, fast delivery	Moderate, slower implementation
Industrialization & SEZs	Active, clustered, export-oriented	Limited, dispersed, early stage
Market Access & Trade Facilitation	Enhanced, strong port links	Limited effects due to incomplete networks
Employment Impacts	Significant construction & service jobs	Modest, informal sector reliance
Poverty Reduction	Emerging impact	Limited impact
Governance Dynamics	Coordinated, prioritized	Fragmented, contested
Security Risk	Lower relative risk	Higher security burden
Spatial Justice Implications	Efficiency-driven, potential inequality	Equity-oriented, yet unrealized

The comparative analysis indicates that while both routes are integral to CPEC's overarching objectives, the Eastern Route has thus far delivered more immediate and quantifiable economic integration outcomes. Its superior infrastructure, connectivity, and industrial agglomeration have translated into greater market access, employment generation, and trade facilitation. By contrast, the Western Route's unrealized potential reflects structural constraints that require targeted

interventions, including enhanced investment, improved governance, and security stabilization strategies.

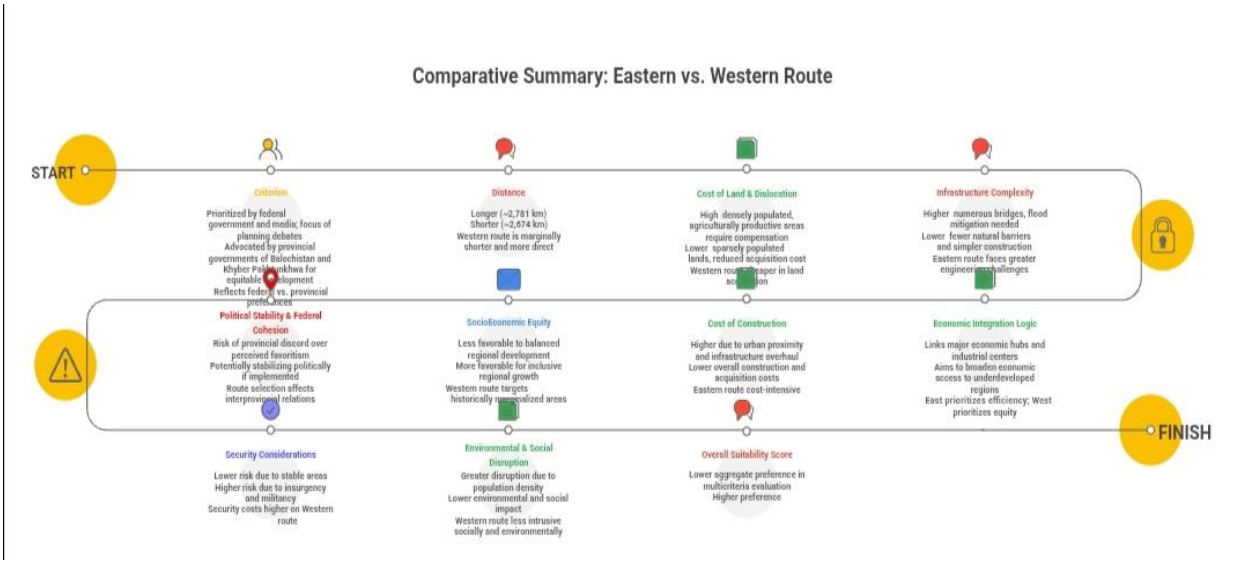
From an integrative perspective, the success of CPEC cannot be gauged solely by the rapid gains of one corridor; rather, the corridor must function as a cohesive network that reduces national disparities and fosters inclusive development. Addressing the Western Route's developmental bottlenecks is therefore crucial for ensuring that economic integration under CPEC extends beyond spatial concentration and contributes to balanced national growth.

Comparative Summary: Eastern vs. Western Route (Based on *CPEC: The Route Controversy*)

Criterion	Eastern Route	Western Route	Notes/Observations
Route Priority	Prioritized by federal government and media; focus of planning debates	Advocated by provincial governments of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for equitable development	Reflects federal vs. provincial preferences
Distance (Relative)	Longer (~2,781 km)	Shorter (~2,674 km)	Western route is marginally shorter and more direct
Cost of Land & Dislocation	High densely populated, agriculturally productive areas require compensation	Lower sparsely populated lands, reduced acquisition cost	Western route cheaper in land acquisition
Infrastructure Complexity	Higher numerous bridges, flood mitigation needed	Lower fewer natural barriers and simpler construction	Eastern route faces greater engineering challenges
Economic Integration Logic	Links major economic hubs and industrial centers	Aims to broaden economic access to underdeveloped regions	East prioritizes efficiency; West prioritizes equity
Cost of Construction	Higher due to urban proximity and infrastructure overhaul	Lower overall construction and acquisition costs	Eastern route cost-intensive
Socio-Economic Equity	Less favorable to balanced regional development	More favorable for inclusive regional growth	Western route targets historically marginalized areas
Political Stability & Federal Cohesion	Risk of provincial discord over perceived favoritism	Potentially stabilizing politically if implemented	Route selection affects interprovincial relations
Security Considerations	Lower risk due to stable areas	Higher risk due to insurgency and militancy	Security costs higher on Western route
Environmental & Social Disruption	Greater disruption due to population density	Lower environmental and social impact	Western route less intrusive socially and environmentally
Overall Suitability	Lower aggregate	Higher preference based	Western route considered

Score	preference in multi-criteria evaluation	on technical, cost, and equity criteria	more balanced when evaluating multiple criteria

Bengali, K., Baloch, I., Badar-ud-din Khan, M., Tareen, M., Hafeez, M., & Yousuf, S. (2015). **CPEC: The Route Controversy.** ***Pakistan Policy Reform Unit***.



Implications for Pakistan's National Economic Integration

The development of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through its Eastern and Western Routes has far-reaching implications for Pakistan's national economic integration, impacting federal cohesion, spatial equity, long-term growth, and regional stability. While both routes contribute to connectivity and development, the nature and distribution of benefits differ significantly, producing varied outcomes for the country's integration trajectory.

Economic Corridors and Federal Cohesion

Economic corridors such as CPEC function not merely as infrastructure projects but as instruments of national cohesion by linking disparate regions into a shared economic framework (Eurasia Review, 2025). The Eastern Route, connecting industrialized Punjab and Sindh provinces, has delivered high-speed road and rail networks, port access, and industrial clustering, fostering stronger interprovincial trade and economic interdependence. For example, the Multan–Sukkur M-5 Motorway has reduced travel time between major urban centers by 40–50%, facilitating smoother movement of goods and labor (CPECinfo, 2024). This connectivity reinforces federal cohesion by integrating economic activity across provinces and linking rural, urban, and industrial markets. Conversely, the Western Route is designed to connect historically marginalized provinces such as Balochistan, KP, and ex-FATA regions to the national economy. Its slower development and incomplete infrastructure, however, have limited its effectiveness in promoting interprovincial integration, potentially exacerbating perceptions of exclusion. Despite initiatives like the M-8 Hoshab–Gwadar Highway and N-50 Zhob–Quetta upgrade, regional disparities remain evident, highlighting the importance of equitable investment and policy prioritization to maintain federal cohesion.

Core–Periphery Reinforcement vs. Integration

CPEC's corridor design has generated a dual effect on Pakistan's spatial economic structure. The Eastern Route, with concentrated investment in populous and industrialized provinces, reinforces a core–periphery dynamic by accelerating growth in already-developed areas, potentially widening the income gap between core provinces (Punjab, Sindh) and peripheral regions (Balochistan, ex-FATA) (Manzil Pakistan, 2025). In contrast, the Western Route embodies a deliberate effort to promote inclusive integration, targeting remote regions with low historical investment and infrastructure deficits. Yet, due to slow operationalization of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and limited industrial activity, the Western corridor has not fully realized its integrative potential.

Table: Core–Periphery Economic Indicators along CPEC Routes (2025)

Indicator	**Eastern Route**	**Western Route**	**Comment**
Infrastructure Investment (US$ billion)	12	6	East receives double the capital
Industrial SEZs Operational	7 of 9	2 of 5	Eastern route more industrialized
Employment Created (direct + indirect)	~450,000	~110,000	East has higher job absorption
Regional GDP Growth (%)	5.8–6.2	3.2–3.7	Eastern provinces outpace Western ones

****Sources: Eurasia Review (2025); Bloom Pakistan (2025); Manzil Pakistan (2025).***

The table demonstrates that while the Eastern Route achieves efficiency-driven growth, the Western Route's equity-focused objective remains partially unfulfilled, raising critical questions for spatial justice and national economic integration.

Long-Term Growth Sustainability

The sustainability of national economic growth under CPEC depends on balancing efficiency and inclusion. High-density infrastructure, industrial clusters, and port connectivity along the Eastern Route create immediate economic returns and foster sustainable industrial and trade growth. For instance, improvements in logistics efficiency have reduced transport costs by 15% on key industrial corridors, improving profitability for domestic manufacturers (CPECinfo, 2024). The Western Route, while slower to generate returns, has the potential to unlock long-term growth in underdeveloped areas if complemented by enhanced industrialization, skills development, and integrated transport networks. Without targeted interventions, there is a risk that growth remains spatially skewed, with peripheral provinces unable to fully participate in national economic gains, thus affecting the overall sustainability of integration.

Regional Stability and National Security

Economic integration under CPEC also intersects with regional stability and national security. Improved connectivity along the Eastern Route facilitates interprovincial commerce with minimal security expenditures due to stable conditions, enabling uninterrupted economic activity. By contrast, the Western Route passes through security-sensitive areas in Balochistan and ex-FATA, where insurgent activity, militant threats, and political unrest require elevated security investments, reducing the net economic benefit (World Geostrategic Insights, 2024).

The effective completion of the Western corridor can enhance regional stability by reducing economic marginalization, generating employment, and fostering trust in federal governance.

Additionally, the corridor's strategic position enhances Pakistan's access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran, supporting cross-border trade and diplomatic influence, while reinforcing national security through economic development (Bloom Pakistan, 2025).

Synthesis of Implications

In sum, CPEC's dual-route strategy has the potential to transform Pakistan's national economic landscape, but outcomes remain uneven. The Eastern Route exemplifies efficiency-driven growth, high employment absorption, and rapid market integration, reinforcing core economic areas. The Western Route embodies inclusive development, targeting historically marginalized regions, but faces delays in infrastructure, industrialization, and human capital deployment, constraining its integrative impact.

Comparative Analysis of Eastern and Western Routes of CPEC

Dimension	Eastern Route	Western Route	Comparative Interpretation
Geographical Alignment	Passes through Punjab and Sindh, connecting Lahore–Faisalabad–Multan–Karachi	Traverses Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ex-FATA, and Balochistan	Eastern Route links already developed regions; Western Route connects historically marginalized areas
Infrastructure Readiness	High readiness due to existing motorways, highways, and rail networks	Low initial readiness; requires new road construction and upgrades	Eastern Route prioritized due to lower initial cost and faster implementation
Economic Efficiency	Higher short-term economic efficiency	Lower short-term efficiency but higher long-term potential	Efficiency bias favored Eastern Route in early planning
Regional Equity	Reinforces existing regional disparities	Promotes balanced regional development	Western Route scored higher on equity and inclusiveness
Industrial Base	Strong industrial clusters already present	Weak or absent industrial base	Eastern Route benefits from agglomeration economies
SEZ Development Potential	High probability of rapid SEZ operationalization	SEZs face delays due to infrastructure and skills gaps	Western Route requires complementary policies to succeed
Employment Generation	Faster employment absorption in urban centers	Gradual employment growth with higher local impact	Western Route employment more transformative at local level
Social Impact	Limited marginal social uplift	Significant potential for poverty reduction	Western Route favored for social development outcomes
Environmental Impact	Higher environmental stress due to population density	Relatively lower environmental disruption	Western Route environmentally less intrusive
Security Conditions	Relatively stable security environment	Higher security risks and costs	Security challenges reduce investor

			confidence on Western Route
Political Acceptability (Federal Level)	Strong federal preference	Initially low federal prioritization	Federal planning favored efficiency over equity
Provincial Support	Limited contestation from Punjab & Sindh	Strong advocacy from KP & Balochistan	Route controversy rooted in provincial grievances
Institutional Capacity	Strong administrative and governance capacity	Weak institutional and implementation capacity	Institutional gaps constrain Western Route progress
Legal & Regulatory Factors	Clearer regulatory environment	Governance ambiguities in merged and peripheral regions	Institutional reform needed for Western Route success
Trade & Connectivity Potential	Focused on domestic and port-centric trade	Strong potential for regional trade (Afghanistan, Iran, Central Asia)	Western Route offers strategic geo-economic depth
Strategic Importance	Commercially oriented	Geopolitically and strategically significant	Western Route enhances Pakistan's regional connectivity
Aggregate Evaluation Score	~0.44	~0.55	Western Route outperforms Eastern Route in overall multi-criteria evaluation
Number of Favorable Criteria	13 out of 38	25 out of 38	Western Route superior in majority of evaluation dimensions
Development Philosophy	Efficiency-driven growth	Equity-driven integration	Core conceptual divide in route controversy
Long-Term National Integration	Limited contribution	Strong contribution	Western Route better aligned with national cohesion goals

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Conclusion

This study set out to examine economic integration under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through a comparative analysis of its Eastern and Western routes, treating them not merely as infrastructure alignments but as competing development pathways with distinct economic, political, and spatial consequences. The findings demonstrate that the route debate within CPEC is fundamentally a debate about the nature of development itself whether national integration should be driven primarily by efficiency and growth concentration or by equity, spatial inclusion, and long-term cohesion.

The analysis shows that the Eastern Route has delivered relatively faster and more visible economic outcomes due to its alignment with Pakistan's existing urban industrial core. Dense infrastructure networks, established industrial clusters, higher administrative capacity, and lower

security risks have enabled quicker project execution, stronger investment inflows, and immediate gains in trade facilitation and employment absorption. From a narrow economic efficiency perspective, the Eastern Route has enhanced connectivity between major markets and ports, reduced logistics costs, and strengthened Pakistan's export-oriented industrial base. However, these gains largely accrue to already-developed regions, reinforcing pre-existing regional asymmetries rather than transforming the national economic landscape.

In contrast, the Western Route represents a structurally different development proposition. Although characterized by slower implementation, limited industrialization, and persistent security and institutional challenges, the Western Route holds substantially greater potential for inclusive economic integration. By connecting historically marginalized regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ex-FATA, and Balochistan to national and regional markets, the Western Route addresses Pakistan's longstanding core periphery divide. The study's comparative evaluation demonstrates that the Western Route performs more strongly across social equity, regional balance, environmental sustainability, and long-term national integration indicators, despite underperforming in short-term efficiency metrics. Its strategic value lies not only in domestic cohesion but also in expanding Pakistan's geo-economic connectivity with Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran.

The comparative findings further reveal that disparities between the two routes are not inevitable outcomes of geography alone but are significantly shaped by political economy dynamics and governance choices. Federal-level decision-making has historically prioritized rapid economic returns and implementation feasibility, favoring the Eastern Route, while provincial actors in less-developed regions have emphasized equity, inclusion, and corrective regional development. This asymmetry in power and planning has contributed to trust deficits, political contestation, and the perception of exclusion among peripheral regions. As such, the route controversy underscores the limits of technocratic infrastructure planning when divorced from distributive justice and federal consensus.

From an economic integration perspective, the study finds that corridor-led growth without balanced spatial planning risks entrenching dual economies an advanced, globally connected core alongside a persistently underdeveloped periphery. Such an outcome may generate aggregate growth but undermines long-term sustainability, social cohesion, and national stability. Conversely, while investment in lagging regions entails higher upfront costs and risks, it yields broader multiplier effects by expanding domestic markets, reducing forced migration, enhancing human capital retention, and strengthening national security through economic inclusion.

Policy Recommendations

1. Adopt a Balanced Route Development Strategy
   Pakistan should institutionalize a dual-track CPEC strategy that simultaneously leverages the efficiency advantages of the Eastern Route and the integrative potential of the Western Route. While the Eastern Route can continue to function as a growth accelerator, a fixed proportion of CPEC-related public investment and financing should be earmarked for the Western Route to correct spatial imbalances. This would ensure that economic integration under CPEC contributes to national cohesion rather than reinforcing core–periphery divides.
2. Prioritize Infrastructure Completion on the Western Route
   Closing missing transport links in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, ex-FATA, and Balochistan must be treated as a national economic integration priority. Federal and provincial governments should fast-track road, rail, and logistics infrastructure through multi-year protected funding, insulated from political cycles. Connectivity gaps undermine market

access, deter investment, and prevent the Western Route from realizing its comparative advantage in regional trade.

3. Reorient SEZ Policy toward Lagging Regions
   Special Economic Zones along the Western Route should be redesigned as development-enabling rather than replication-based zones. Incentive packages must go beyond tax exemptions to include subsidized utilities, skills development programs, infrastructure grants, and guaranteed market access. Linking SEZs to local value chains in agriculture, minerals, and light manufacturing can anchor industrialization in regional comparative advantages rather than forcing premature industrial clustering.
4. Strengthen Federal–Provincial Coordination Mechanisms
   CPEC governance requires a more inclusive and transparent decision-making framework. A permanent inter-provincial CPEC council with binding consultative authority should be established to address planning, sequencing, and resource allocation disputes. Enhanced parliamentary oversight and regular disclosure of route-wise investment data would reduce trust deficits and improve policy legitimacy.
5. Integrate Security and Development Planning
   Security challenges along the Western Route should be addressed through a development-centered security framework rather than purely militarized responses. Investments in education, employment, and local enterprise development can complement security expenditures by reducing grievances and enhancing investor confidence. Community-based security and stakeholder engagement should be mainstreamed into CPEC project planning.
6. Promote Regional Trade Connectivity through the Western Route
   The Western Route should be explicitly aligned with Pakistan's regional connectivity strategy, particularly trade with Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia. Upgrading border infrastructure, simplifying customs procedures, and harmonizing trade regulations can transform the Western Route into a regional trade corridor, thereby multiplying its economic returns and strategic relevance.
7. Enhance Institutional Capacity in Peripheral Regions
   Sustained capacity-building initiatives are essential for Western Route regions to absorb investment effectively. Strengthening local governance institutions, improving regulatory quality, and investing in human capital will reduce implementation delays and improve the long-term viability of corridor-led development.

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