
The Potential of a Pakistan-Türkiye-GCC Trilateral within the Framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

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Abstract

The transformative shift towards a multipolar global order has significantly reshaped international relations, enhancing the emphasis on economic diplomacy, notably in regions such as the Middle East and South Asia. Within this context, Pakistan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Türkiye have undergone adaptations in response to these evolving dynamics. While Türkiye and the GCC wield influence in the Middle East, Pakistan holds a distinctive position within the Muslim world. Islamabad's deep-rooted connections with the GCC and Türkiye, initially stemming from religious commonality, have evolved to encompass political, security, and economic dimensions, exemplified by robust defence collaborations and the substantial presence of Pakistani expatriates in these regions. By using the regional integration theory, this research scrutinises the possibility of potential trilateral cooperation, particularly in domains such as energy and food security, within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The research findings highlight the alignment of interests and offer a comprehensive scrutiny of Pakistan's associations with the GCC and Türkiye, accentuating the potential for a more robust trilateral alliance within the context of the CPEC initiative

Key Words: GCC, Türkiye, economics, CPEC, energy, food security

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Introduction

The transformation of the global order into a multipolar landscape has ushered in a new era where economic diplomacy has emerged as a foundational pillar of foreign policy. The fast changes in the Middle East and South Asia, particularly in terms of economics, have not only caused differences but have also made security issues more serious in these regions. These transformations have exerted a profound influence on the interests of key players such as Pakistan, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Türkiye. While the latter two wield direct influence in the evolving dynamics of the Middle East, Pakistan assumes a pivotal role not only in its immediate region but also as a significant actor in the Muslim world. At its heart is a rebalancing of geopolitical and geo-economic influence, with a notable shift of global power from the West to the East, particularly focusing on the strategically important and economically significant oil-rich monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula. Additionally, the need to address the evolving dynamics arising from the global economic and financial crisis, in addition to the emergence of new international actors, has compelled all three parties to reconsider their roles on the global stage within a fluid and evolving global landscape.

Simultaneously, China's remarkable economic growth has driven its pursuit of essential natural resources. China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-billion-dollar project, revolves around enhancing connectivity through diplomatic and economic means, aiming to strengthen trade and commercial relationships between China and its partner countries. The BRI signifies a noticeable shift in China's foreign policy from its previous stance of 'biding time and keeping a low profile' to a more proactive approach to development. The exponential growth of China's economy has resulted in an increased need for essential natural resources. Consequently, the fundamental aim of the BRI is to foster connectivity by generating prospects, both diplomatically and commercially. This effort has two

primary sections, namely land-based and marine routes, which are pursued concurrently. China's BRI encompasses many continents and serves as a strategic long-term investment plan to promote economic cooperation among countries, reminiscent of the historical significance of the Silk Road. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was presented by Chinese President Xi Jinping in April 2015, positioning it as the primary initiative of the BRI. CPEC comprises a comprehensive infrastructure network consisting of roadways, railways, and oil pipelines. These components are strategically developed to augment Beijing's sphere of influence in the regions of South and Central Asia.

During the preceding decade, CPEC has assumed a crucial position in mitigating a range of predicaments encountered by Pakistan, encompassing insufficiencies in energy provision, deficient infrastructure, and restricted capabilities for social welfare initiatives. As China and Pakistan strengthen their economic ties, joint efforts are being made to address a range of issues. Notably, Pakistan's thriving agriculture sector and the proposed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC have become focal points for Chinese investments in the coming years. Several initiatives have been undertaken to modernise Pakistan's agriculture sector with Chinese support, exemplified by the launch of an online platform in January 2021 to facilitate agricultural and industrial cooperation. Similarly, in recent years, Türkiye and the Gulf countries have increasingly engaged with China, largely due to the latter's rapid emergence as the world's leading economy. Chinese investments in the Gulf region have predominantly focused on energy, infrastructure, construction, agriculture, and finance.¹

Islamabad maintains close ties with both GCC countries and Türkiye, initially founded on religious affinity but subsequently encompassing political, security, and economic dimensions. Notably, they have significantly cooperated within the defence sector, engaging in defence production, training, and military consultations.

Moreover, within the economic sphere, the GCC and Türkiye have hosted a substantial number of Pakistani expatriates who have made significant contributions to the development of their host countries across various domains. Historically, trade has played a pivotal role in driving economic growth for countries at various stages of development. This phenomenon is not merely confined to the efficient allocation of resources within countries but extends to the transmission of growth from one part of the world to another. The economic theory of 'comparative advantage', originally formulated by David Ricardo, elucidates why countries engage in international trade even when one nation's workforce and resources outperform others. The fundamental principle of comparative advantage underscores that under conditions of free trade, countries should specialise in areas where they possess a competitive edge. This concept has become a cornerstone of international trade theory, guiding nations to optimise their economic strengths.²

In today's complex world order, characterised by intricate interdependencies, countries with robust economic foundations are positioned for success. Political and strategic objectives now necessitate the establishment of a *sound* economic framework. Michael Beckley, in his article titled *Economic Strength and Military Effectiveness*, asserts a positive correlation between a country's security and its economic prowess. He cites examples from the Indo-Pacific region, where countries, owing to their economic development, possess greater capabilities to counter potential adversaries than they did three decades ago.³ Consequently, most nations have recalibrated their national security strategies, placing greater emphasis on bolstering economic security. CPEC represents a significant opportunity to enhance economic cooperation among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC. Amidst the ongoing economic challenges in all three regions, Chinese investments offer an ideal prospect for revitalising economies adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the article *Evolving Strategic Landscape: Exploring Opportunities for Pakistan*, the authors assert that the global strategic landscape in the 21st century is undergoing a rapid transformation, shifting away from the established dominance of unipolarity towards the rising influence of multipolarity. The article urges a departure from Cold War-era zero-sum thinking and emphasises the importance of collaborative efforts to achieve shared development goals. It suggests that Pakistan's ability to make the correct strategic choices, position itself effectively, and leverage its strengths intelligently are pivotal in fulfilling its historical promise in this evolving global landscape.⁴

While individual studies have explored the dynamics of Pakistan-Türkiye relations and Pakistan-GCC relations separately, there is a notable gap in the literature where these three entities are examined in conjunction. This research primarily utilises secondary data analysis as the chosen research methodology. Secondary data refers to existing data collected by other researchers, organisations, or agencies for purposes other than the current study. In this case, the secondary data will be derived from a range of sources including academic journals, newspaper articles, reports, and relevant publications about the topic. This article provides insights into the relationships among Pakistan, the GCC, and Türkiye, emphasising the imperative of their cooperation in an attempt to identify the potential benefits of enhancing cooperation between the three within the framework of CPEC and how this triad can fortify its economic ties by leveraging respective comparative advantages, notably in the realms of energy and food security.

Regional Integration Theory

Regional integration theory has evolved through contributions from scholars like Ernst Haas, Bela Balassa, and Robert Keohane. Ernst Haas emphasised economic interests, shared values, and institutional frameworks in promoting regional cooperation, while Bela Balassa focused on economic aspects, like trade liberalisation and economic

convergence. Robert Keohane extended the theory by exploring the role of institutions in conflict management and trust-building. Collectively, these scholars laid the groundwork for the regional integration theory, which combines insights from economics, political science, and international relations. It provides a lens to analyse the potential of a trilateral alliance within the framework of CPEC for fostering economic cooperation, enhancing political stability, and strengthening security in the region. In the context of CPEC, the regional integration theory highlights how shared economic interests can drive cooperation among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC. It suggests that the alliance can intensify economic ties, promote infrastructure development, facilitate trade and investment, and foster regional economic integration. Additionally, the theory underscores the importance of reducing trade barriers, harmonising policies, and creating common institutions to aid integration efforts, which can be explored within the trilateral alliance.

Furthermore, Regional Integration Theory acknowledges the contributions of collective security arrangements to regional stability. The alliance can collaborate on security initiatives, share intelligence, and address common security challenges, enhancing stability and ensuring the success of CPEC. By applying the foundations of the regional integration theory, the article offers a nuanced analysis of the potential benefits of and challenges to the Pakistan-Türkiye-GCC trilateral alliance in CPEC. It provides a theoretical framework to examine the economic, political, and security dimensions of the alliance within the broader context of regional integration efforts, contributing to a deeper understanding of its potential outcomes and implications.

Bilateral Relationships

Pakistan-Türkiye Relations

Ever since Pakistan's emergence as an independent country, Islamabad and Ankara have shared a consistently warm and cordial relationship. Initially, their ties were rooted in common cultural and religious practices, as well as shared geopolitical circumstances. The historical foundations of Pakistan-Türkiye relations can be traced back to the Khilafat Movement of the 1920s. These ties have evolved and strengthened over time, particularly after Pakistan's unwavering support for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during the failed coup attempt in 2016. Today, the two countries collaborate extensively across political, strategic, and economic domains, driven by shared challenges and mutual interests.

Pakistan and Türkiye confront similar issues with comparable nuances, including internal secessionism and terrorism. Pakistan firmly supports Türkiye in its dispute with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and reciprocally, Türkiye has been vocal in expressing its support for Kashmiri self-determination. This alignment of interests extends into the realm of defence cooperation, where Pakistan and Türkiye have maintained a robust relationship. Both governments collaborate on the development and production of aerial vehicles, aircraft, and shipbuilding; the latter encompasses the construction and modernisation of various types of naval vessels, including frigates, corvettes, and patrol boats. Through joint ventures and technology transfer, the two countries have enhanced their shipbuilding capabilities, developed indigenous designs, and incorporated advanced technologies. Joint intelligence-sharing and training techniques further strengthen their military cooperation, exemplified by their joint military drill in April 2019. Furthermore, discussions have surfaced regarding the establishment of a joint patrolling force in Islamabad, mirroring a force in Lahore that received partial training from Türkiye. Ankara has also endorsed Pakistan's bid for membership

in the Nuclear Suppliers Group, emphasising that Pakistan's inclusion would enhance global non-proliferation efforts. In 2017, Türkiye made a noteworthy announcement on a substantial advancement in its military cooperation with Pakistan, signifying a remarkable achievement in their respective defence industries. The present communication provides a comprehensive account of the execution of an agreement of cooperation between the two countries, including the procurement of four corvette warships manufactured in Türkiye and 52 training aircraft created in Pakistan for the military forces of Ankara. Significantly, this was considered to be the most significant military export agreement for Türkiye at the time. The execution of the legal document for this agreement took place in 2018. The last corvette vessel planned for the Pakistani Navy was completed in August 2023. The completion of this project has strengthened the strong defence connections between Ankara and Islamabad. The official unveiling of the fourth MILGEM corvette, known as PNS Tariq, took place in the port city of Karachi, signifying the successful outcome of their joint efforts.

Both Pakistan and Türkiye actively participate in various multilateral organisations, such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Over time, these two countries have engaged in numerous agreements, including the signing of the Economic and Technical Cooperation Agreement in 1976. This pivotal agreement led to the establishment of a Türkiye-Pakistan Joint Economic Committee Mechanism. Furthermore, the Türkiye-Pakistan Business Council was established in 1988, aiming to strengthen private sector investments from both sides. Currently, Islamabad and Ankara are in the process of finalising a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which, upon implementation, is expected to substantially boost trade between the two countries, with a target of reaching \$5 billion by 2022. In 2019, they also reached an agreement to establish a dedicated office for the implementation

of the Strategic Economic Framework (SEF), focused on enhancing bilateral relations across various sectors, including trade, tourism, and healthcare. As of 2020, the trade balance between Pakistan and Türkiye leans in favour of Türkiye, resulting in a trade surplus of approximately \$190 million. Notably, in August 2022, Pakistan and Türkiye signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) to further strengthen trade in goods between the two countries. It is worth mentioning that an estimated 1,7000 Pakistanis were employed in Türkiye as of 2021.¹ Beyond bilateral engagements, cooperation extends to international platforms, with Türkiye, Malaysia, and China collaboratively assisting Pakistan in avoiding potential blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). This collaborative approach underscores the multifaceted nature of Pakistan-Türkiye relations and their joint commitment to regional and international cooperation.

In December 2021, a noteworthy development in Pakistan-Türkiye relations occurred with the revival of the Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) cargo train service, which connects Pakistan, Iran, and Türkiye. After a hiatus of a decade, this initiative has the potential to yield annual earnings of \$32 million for Pakistan.⁵ The prospects of this initiative could even double if the ITI is seamlessly integrated with other major railway stations in Pakistan, including Lahore, Karachi, Faisalabad, and Sialkot. Such an expansion would facilitate the efficient transportation of goods not only to Türkiye but also to Europe and Central Asia, further enhancing economic cooperation. A pivotal moment in the strengthening of bilateral relations between Pakistan and Türkiye was marked by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif's visit to Türkiye in 2022. During this visit, both countries inked six bilateral memoranda of understanding encompassing diverse domains.⁶ These areas of collaboration included public debt management, cooperation between credit guarantee institutions to support SME financing,

¹ Please see <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=The-Results-of-Address-Based-Population-Registration-System-2021-45500>.

housing initiatives, public-private partnership models (with a particular focus on transportation and healthcare), knowledge sharing in economic and social policy planning, and technical cooperation in highway engineering. This visit was widely hailed as a success and served to underscore the deepening and broadening of ties between Pakistan and Türkiye across various sectors, promising further collaborative efforts in the future.

Pakistan-GCC Relations

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), established in 1981, comprises six nations: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. Over the years, the GCC states have emerged as influential international players, particularly in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Spearheaded by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE, they have significantly expanded their engagement in global affairs, spanning from energy governance to climate change politics and reforms in the global financial system. Pakistan's longstanding relationship with the Gulf countries has its roots in religion and strategic alignment and has gradually encompassed economic dimensions. Historically, Pakistan's Gulf policy emphasised cultural and religious affinities over building sustainable economic linkages. Islamabad frequently offered to mediate tensions between regional powerhouses like Riyadh and Tehran while striving to avoid entanglement in ongoing conflicts. Although energy resources remained a priority, efforts to bolster economic ties with the Gulf have been somewhat lacklustre. Pakistan is now striving to leverage its geopolitical and geo-economic positioning in the Gulf by actively pursuing regional connectivity, trade, and enhanced economic relations. This shift aims to capitalise on geopolitical shifts to strengthen its geo-economic advantages, as Pakistan faces pressing economic needs on the domestic front.

While the bedrock of Pakistan-GCC relations remains religious affinity, the relationship has evolved to encompass strategic, political,

and economic facets. Bilateral visits between Pakistan's leaders and those of the GCC countries are frequent. Strategic connections include several forms of cooperation, such as cooperative military exercises, training initiatives, collaborative deployments, and weapons trade. Among the most notable instances are the Joint Gulf Shield military exercises, in which Pakistan partnered with twenty-four nations, including Bahrain, the Emirates, and Jordan.⁷ In the year 2011, Pakistan extended its support to Prince Bandar bin Sultan's appeal for aid in quelling a Bahraini anti-government rebellion, which had significant geopolitical importance since Bahrain was a crucial ally of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, despite a historical association characterised by strong connections, many obstacles have emerged, mostly attributable to divergent sets of expectations held by each party involved.

It is worth noting that the extent of bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, notably Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has not yet reached its maximum capacity. The aforementioned connections are deeply entrenched in religious and historical contexts, although they are further propelled by the significant representation of the Pakistani expatriate workforce in these countries. Despite being politically secure, these connections have not yet fully realised their economic promise. Islamabad has continued to adopt measures to assist and support its workers in the Gulf region, who also serve as substantial contributors to foreign remittances. The Pakistani migrant labour force in the Middle East assumes crucial responsibilities in areas such as transport, building, sanitation, and a range of other industries, including both manual and professional occupations. The COVID-19 pandemic presented significant difficulties for these individuals since a considerable number of them encountered unemployment and wage decreases.⁸ Pakistan's shift towards geo-economics has seen an increased emphasis on the rights of workers in

the Middle East, evidenced by official bilateral engagements with Gulf countries. This shift is reflected in the remarkable growth of remittances from Pakistan's top two source countries, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which witnessed 187 per cent and 135 per cent growth, respectively, between FY11 and FY21.⁹ In terms of trade, Pakistan's leadership has actively engaged with Gulf countries, prioritising economic cooperation. Notably, visits in 2021 and 2022 including meetings with the highest echelons of Saudi, Qatari, and the Emirati leadership, all with a strong focus on enhancing trade links.

In June 2023, a collaborative effort was undertaken by the leadership of Pakistan's civil and military sectors, resulting in the establishment of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC).¹⁰ The primary purpose of this organisation was to function as a centralised access point, streamline investor connections, foster coordination among government departments, and expedite project development processes. The SIFC is composed of the Chief of the Armed Forces, provincial governors, and federal ministries, with the Prime Minister as its leader. A comprehensive and cooperative approach including all branches of government and relevant stakeholders was developed to streamline protracted business procedures. The primary objective of this initiative was to leverage domestic and foreign investments to tap into the untapped potential of Pakistan's key sectors, such as military manufacturing, farming, mineral extraction, technological innovation, and energy. It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made commitments to invest \$25 billion in Pakistan during the next two to five years.¹¹

Furthermore, the Pakistan Minerals Summit, held in August 2023, titled "Dust to Development: Investment Opportunities in Pakistan," was organised via a collaboration between the SIFC and the Barrick Gold Corporation, a Canadian-based firm. The effective establishment of this collaboration was facilitated by the Ministry of Petroleum in Pakistan. It was highlighted that Pakistan is a country

with substantial untapped mineral reserves, an invaluable asset estimated to be valued at over \$6 trillion. The Reko Diq gold and copper mines, situated in the southwestern part of Balochistan, have significant strategic importance. These mines, anticipated to commence operations in December 2023, are now poised for progress. In the same month, a group of investors from Saudi Arabia visited Pakistan and expressed a notable interest in exploring potential business prospects within the mining sector. Additional strategic efforts by Islamabad include the assignment of airport management responsibilities to Qatar and the UAE speeding the privatisation process of the national airline, and progressing extensive deliberations on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), with the UAE. Furthermore, a notable event took place in June 2023, when Pakistan concluded a big investment agreement with AD Ports Group, a prominent Emirati port operator based in the United Arab Emirates. This bilateral agreement aimed to reinforce the marine industry connections between the two countries, with a specific emphasis on augmenting trade and commerce. The management and operation of the Karachi Gateway Terminal Limited (KGTL) at the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) was assumed by the AD Ports Group under a 50-year concession deal. Henceforth, as the GCC states continue to navigate a changing global landscape, fostering robust economic relations is poised to be a central theme in their evolving partnership with Pakistan.

Türkiye-GCC Relations

Since the early 2000s, relations between Türkiye and the GCC monarchies have experienced significant improvement, resulting in a gradual deepening of cooperation across various domains. This emerging partnership between Ankara and the Gulf rulers can be attributed to pivotal changes in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The relationship between Türkiye and the GCC countries operates on multiple complex fronts, with the Gulf Arab states largely viewing Türkiye as an indispensable partner in addressing crucial

regional issues. Furthermore, the economic dimension of this partnership holds substantial significance and exhibits a complementary nature. The GCC countries rank among the most prosperous in the Middle East, while Türkiye boasts one of the strongest industrial economies in the region.

It is essential to view the Türkiye-GCC relationship within the broader context of Türkiye's growing engagement with other Middle Eastern and Asian organisations. Türkiye actively participates in groups like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), where it holds membership, and the Arab League, where it enjoys observer status. Additionally, Türkiye plays a pivotal role in NATO's Middle East cooperation through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI). The cooperation between Türkiye and the GCC encompasses several dimensions, including political/geopolitical, economic, and cultural aspects.¹² While Türkiye may not be abundant in fossil fuel reserves, it possesses a developed industrial economy characterised by construction (residential and commercial buildings, infrastructure projects), manufacturing (textiles and automotive industries), and various services (such as tourism and financial services). Similarly, the GCC states have witnessed growth in the construction and tourism industries. Collectively, their economic structures compensate for each other's resource limitations. Since the inception of the strategic dialogue between Türkiye and the GCC, trade flows have steadily increased, with Türkiye receiving approximately \$30 billion worth of investments from the Gulf region since 2001.

The establishment of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC) in 2008 was a notable diplomatic endeavour undertaken by Türkiye and GCC. The framework established a basis for conducting their relationship in a multilateral way, indicating the GCC countries' intention to raise Türkiye to the position of a strategic partner. This particular advancement represented a noteworthy achievement in the bilateral relations between the two parties. In

2010, both sides subsequently created an action plan to enhance their bilateral cooperation in several industries. The sectors included under this framework are investment, trade, communication, transportation, agriculture, and energy. The action plan highlighted the dedication of Türkiye and the GCC members to strengthen their collaboration across several sectors. The aforesaid efforts have led to the development of a complex relationship between Türkiye and the GCC nations, including several aspects such as politics, economics, and culture. This relationship is based on a shared recognition of the importance of tackling regional difficulties and taking advantage of emerging possibilities. The economic synergy between Türkiye and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states has emerged as a significant catalyst for the establishment of this alliance, resulting in a notable surge in trade and investments. Moreover, the increasing involvement of Türkiye in regional organisations has strengthened its status as a crucial participant in the Middle East. This has been achieved by enhancing its cooperation with the GCC countries and reaffirming its commitment to promoting peace and advancement in the area.

Türkiye, GCC, and the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was conceptualised and spearheaded by China, encompasses a comprehensive endeavour aimed at augmenting worldwide interconnectivity. This initiative revolves around two principal elements: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). The primary goal of the MSRI is to develop maritime pathways that facilitate connectivity between China, Europe, and Africa, including strategically significant areas like the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Aden, and the Suez Canal.¹³ Simultaneously, the terrestrial Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) attempts to establish resilient connections between China and Europe through Central Asia, with certain facets expanding into the Middle East. The BRI comprises four primary sectors: industrialisation, construction of infrastructure, energy, and

finance, leveraging China's substantial expertise in economic governance and reform. China's considerable reliance on Middle Eastern energy resources, notably accounting for nearly half of its crude oil imports and a substantial portion of natural gas imports in 2013, underscores the pivotal role of the Middle East in the MSRI.¹⁴ Energy security is thus paramount for China's economic stability and development. Moreover, a secure energy supply in the Middle East is vital not only for China's energy needs but also for fostering a conducive environment for business and tourism in the region.

China has actively engaged with the Middle Eastern countries through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), with a primary focus on energy collaboration and infrastructure development. This engagement has manifested in the construction of seaports and transportation networks. The "1+2+3 cooperation formula"¹⁵ outlined in the Arab Policy Paper released by the Chinese Government in 2016 underscores the core role of energy cooperation, complemented by infrastructure development and trade facilitation. The third facet involves future collaboration in nuclear energy, clean energy, and space technology. China and Türkiye solidified their partnership within the BRI and the Middle Corridor Initiative (MCI) in November 2015 during the G-20 summit in Antalya, Türkiye.¹⁶ Türkiye's connection to the BRI includes the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Corridor (BTK) and a proposed high-speed railway linking Kars to Edirne through Georgia.¹⁷ While the BTK is operational, discussions on the high-speed railway's construction are ongoing. This collaboration presents opportunities for enhanced market connectivity and commercial cooperation, but it may also stimulate competition for market access.

Within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Saudi Arabia stands out as China's foremost trading partner in the Middle East, primarily involving Saudi oil and petrochemical exports and Chinese machinery and consumer goods imports.¹⁸ Chinese investments in petrochemical facilities in Saudi Arabia indicate a strategic drive to

secure alternative power sources amid domestic energy demand growth and hydrocarbon reserve decline. Subsequently, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerged as China's second-largest trading partner in the Middle East due to its strategic location and advanced infrastructure. This partnership is characterised by the export of UAE oil and gas and the import of Chinese textiles and light industrial products. Notably, 2019 witnessed agreements worth \$3.4 billion between the UAE and China, aimed at strengthening Dubai's role as a regional hub for Chinese goods and enhancing Dubai's Jebel Ali Port.¹⁹

The BRI's presence in the GCC encompasses comprehensive strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia (2016), Iran (2016), and the UAE (2018), along with strategic partnerships with Qatar (2014), Kuwait (2018), and Oman (2018). Diverse projects, such as Kuwait's Silk City and Five Islands Project, Saudi Arabia's Jizan Industrial Park, Oman's Duqm Port Project, the UAE's Khalifa Port and Khalifa Industrial Zone of Abu Dhabi (KIZAD), and Qatar's New Port, fall under the MSRI framework and are supported by various financial instruments, including the \$100 billion Silk Road Fund, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and multiple state-owned Chinese banks like the China Development Bank.²⁰ In summary, the BRI, particularly the Maritime Silk Road Initiative, plays a pivotal role in shaping China's engagement with the Middle East. Beyond addressing China's energy security concerns, it fosters economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and trade connectivity. The multifaceted interactions within this partnership have significant implications for the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and China, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the region and the global economic order.

Opportunities for Türkiye and the GCC in CPEC

It is suggested that Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf states collaborate to develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at strengthening mutual collaboration. This may be achieved by

strategically using Special Economic Zones (SEZs) as a central component of this initiative. The SEZs, which have been formed as a component of the CPEC, provide a distinctive prospect for fostering cooperation and facilitating economic development. They serve as designated regions specifically designated to foster industrial and economic growth. China and Pakistan need to proactively pursue partnerships with Türkiye and the Gulf countries to fully exploit the economic opportunities presented by these regions. Several Gulf countries have shown their inclination towards such projects, as seen by Saudi Arabia's proposition to develop an oil refinery at Gwadar in the year 2019.²¹ This proposition offers a favourable opportunity for the augmentation of economic connections.

A dual-tiered strategy should be used when making investments in SEZs. First, investments should focus on constructing and developing the SEZs themselves, providing the necessary infrastructure to attract businesses and industries. Second, emphasis should be placed on industrial development within these SEZs, fostering growth across various sectors. This holistic approach can inject vital momentum into Pakistan's domestic economy while creating profitable opportunities for all participating nations. In 2022, Prime Minister Sharif proposed the idea of transforming CPEC into a trilateral project involving Pakistan, Türkiye, and China.²² Such a trilateral initiative holds immense potential for regional cooperation and development. It can bolster defence arrangements, enhance connectivity, boost trade, deepen economic partnerships, nurture cultural ties, strengthen political and diplomatic relationships, and collectively work towards the welfare of the public and the development of tourism facilities. Furthermore, Türkiye's expertise in the construction sector positions it as a valuable partner for infrastructure projects linked to CPEC, strengthening economic bonds among these nations.

Although Pakistan has maintained friendly relations with Türkiye and the Gulf countries, the true potential of trade and economic ties remains untapped. The potential in this context has largely remained untapped primarily due to bureaucratic obstacles from the Pakistani side coupled with issues related to political stability. Furthermore, up until 2021, the predominant focus had been on geopolitics, with Pakistan consistently viewing matters through the prism of its rivalry with India. Evolving geopolitical dynamics have shifted the focus from politics to economics. As a result, Pakistan recognises the significance of fostering economic activities in the region and beyond. Geo-political shifts have created opportunities for geo-economics to thrive, with infrastructure investments serving as catalysts for economic progress. In sum, cooperation between Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf nations holds immense promise across various domains. The SEZs within the CPEC framework and the exploration of trilateral initiatives can unlock opportunities for mutual growth and prosperity. These efforts bridge the gap between geo-economics and geopolitics, addressing challenges and nurturing economic development in the region.

Food Security: A Potential Area of Cooperation

Collaboration in the agriculture sector represents a promising avenue for Pakistan, China, and the Gulf countries to further their cooperation and capitalise on their respective strengths. Building upon existing MoUs, this multifaceted partnership can address food security challenges and boost agricultural productivity. Pakistan and China have a foundation for agricultural cooperation, and extending this partnership to include the Gulf countries could yield substantial benefits. The agriculture sector is particularly conducive to collaboration because Pakistan possesses vast arable lands, Türkiye boasts the necessary industrial infrastructure, and the Gulf countries offer essential resources. Notably, the arid climate in the Gulf countries has historically limited their agricultural capabilities, making them

reliant on food imports to meet their needs. However, recent global events, such as the Russia-Ukraine standoff, have underscored the vulnerability of relying solely on international markets for food security.

In recent years, Pakistan has become a food-insecure state, mainly due to the underutilisation of the export industry and a lack of legislation aimed at enhancing productivity. Simultaneously, Pakistan seeks substantial investments to modernise its agriculture sector. Expanding the existing MoU framework can transform these challenges into mutually beneficial opportunities. Collaboration among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf countries within the context of the CPEC has the potential to help reduce reliance on Western markets and enhance domestic capabilities. Türkiye, as the seventh-largest global agricultural producer,²³ is well-positioned to provide assistance and knowledge in enhancing Pakistan's research capabilities. Furthermore, Türkiye has the potential to provide grants to Pakistani students and establish exchange programmes that specifically concentrate on agricultural studies, therefore facilitating the interchange of information and the enhancement of skills. The establishment of a strategic alliance that encompasses the agricultural sector has the potential to make significant contributions to the domains of food security, economic development, and self-sufficiency. Agriculture plays a significant role in the CPEC as it presents substantial opportunities for both Pakistan and China. The agricultural sector holds immense potential for growth, employment generation, poverty alleviation, and food security. Under the framework of CPEC, several agricultural projects and collaborations have been initiated to enhance productivity, improve infrastructure, and promote agribusiness between the two countries. These initiatives include the establishment of SEZs for agro-processing, modernisation of irrigation systems, introduction of advanced farming techniques, and exchange of agricultural research and technology. Additionally, CPEC aims to

promote agricultural trade, particularly in high-value agricultural products, by improving transportation networks and reducing logistical barriers. Through the use of the unique capabilities possessed by each involved country, this collaborative effort has the potential to effectively address disparities in the production of food and significantly augment agricultural efficiency. Moreover, it is per the overarching objectives of the CPEC, which prioritises the advancement of economic growth, enhancement of regional interconnectedness, and promotion of sustainable cooperation.

Hence, the establishment of agricultural collaboration among China, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the countries of the Gulf presents a strategic avenue for tackling food security issues and harnessing the latent capabilities of Pakistan's agricultural industry. By capitalising on established MoUs and harnessing the distinct strengths possessed by each partner, this collaborative effort corresponds with the broad goals of CPEC and makes a valuable contribution to regional development and the attainment of self-reliance.

Energy Security

Energy security is a key focus of CPEC. CPEC involves the development of energy infrastructure, including the construction of power plants, transmission lines, and pipelines, aiming to address Pakistan's energy deficit and promote sustainable energy generation. This focus on energy security presents an opportunity for a potential partnership between Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC. Collaboration among Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC can enhance energy security within the CPEC framework in several ways. Firstly, Türkiye and the GCC possess significant expertise in energy production, particularly in the fields of oil and natural gas. These countries can provide technical know-how, investment, and resources to support Pakistan's energy sector, facilitating the development of diverse and reliable energy sources.

Pakistan has the potential to gain advantages by procuring economically viable sources of energy from the Gulf countries. The Gulf states possess substantial reserves of energy, making them dependable providers of cost-effective energy for Pakistan. Moreover, Turkish enterprises exhibit a robust presence within the alternative energy industry of Pakistan and have a keen interest in allocating investments towards solar energy initiatives. Türkiye's advancements in the field of hydro and renewable energy make it a significant potential collaborator for Pakistan in the pursuit of sustainable energy options.²⁴

Diversification of markets, trading partners, and energy sources has significant importance for Türkiye. The country has entered into reciprocal trade agreements with several Arab countries, demonstrating its dedication to fostering economic partnerships in the Middle Eastern region. Türkiye has progressively seen the Gulf economies as a favourable prospect for its expanding economy. The GCC members provide appealing opportunities owing to their vast oil resources, resilient banking institutions, and sound public finances. The economies of the Gulf monarchies continue to heavily rely on the energy industry, though they have implemented diversification policies to mitigate their reliance on earnings derived from oil and gas.²⁵ These initiatives cover investments in many areas such as industry, infrastructure, finance, tourism, commerce, health, and education. Consequently, the Gulf states have generated prospects for Türkiye, a country that has a very resilient industrial economy in the Middle East. This economy is distinguished by its compatibility with the economies of the Gulf region. This collaborative effort is in line with the changing energy environment, characterised by the increasing significance of renewable energy sources. Türkiye's proficiency in energy from renewable sources and the Gulf countries' dedication to expanding their energy portfolios provide a promising opportunity for collaborative endeavours in clean energy initiatives.

These programmes have the dual benefit of enhancing energy security and addressing environmental issues while also fostering sustainable economic development.

In sum, the establishment of energy collaboration between Pakistan, Türkiye, and the Gulf nations has the potential to facilitate energy commerce, promote the development of renewable energy projects, and strengthen economic relations. Pakistan has the potential to avail advantages from the import of energy at a lower cost, whilst Türkiye can use its proficiency in renewable energy and access the markets in the Gulf region. The Gulf states, via the implementation of their diversification programmes, have favourable prospects for fostering economic partnership. The establishment of this cooperation is in line with the global objectives of sustainability and represents a viable trajectory towards a more robust and sustainable energy future for all stakeholders, as the globe undergoes a shift towards cleaner energy sources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the shifting global dynamics towards a multipolar order have necessitated adaptations in international relations, with economic diplomacy emerging as a crucial aspect, particularly in regions like South Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan's unique position within the Muslim world, combined with its historical and religious ties with Türkiye and the GCC, has fostered various dimensions of collaboration encompassing politics, security, and economics.

Through the lens of regional integration theory, this research scrutinized the potential for trilateral cooperation, with a specific focus on domains such as energy and food security within the CPEC framework. The findings highlight the convergence of interests among the three entities and provide a comprehensive analysis of Pakistan's associations with Türkiye and the GCC. The research accentuates the potential for a more robust trilateral alliance, showcasing the

prospects for enhanced cooperation and mutual benefits within the context of the CPEC initiative.

The analysis points to the significance of economic relationships and the leveraging of respective strengths in furthering the objectives of all three entities. By capitalising on the opportunities offered by CPEC and the BRI, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC can reinforce their economic stability, promote industrial diversification, and tackle energy challenges collectively. Such collaboration not only benefits the participating countries but also extends positive implications to the wider geographical areas they reside in. It is imperative for the stakeholders involved to recognise and seize this opportune moment to establish a trajectory towards sustained economic expansion and stability. By embracing this potential trilateral alliance, Pakistan, Türkiye, and the GCC can serve as a prime example of harmonious interaction and joint efforts within an increasingly interconnected global context. Through fostering mutual understanding, strategic partnerships, and institutional frameworks, these entities can contribute meaningfully to regional and global prosperity while exemplifying the value of cooperative synergy. The potential benefits of expanding industrial prospects and diversifying energy sources can be reaped by Türkiye and the Gulf states as well. This trilateral alliance presents an opportunity to establish a framework encompassing stability, security, and economic collaboration, exemplifying collaborative synergy within the evolving global context.

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