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CPEC AND REGIONAL TRADE INTEGRATION: INFRASTRUCTURE, CUSTOMS, AND CONNECTIVITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract
The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the key projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at enhancing economic cooperation, improving transportation connectivity, and promoting trade integration in the region. This study analyzed the impact of CPEC on infrastructure development, trade facilitation, customs harmonization, and regional trade governance to evaluate its role in facilitating regional trade integration in South Asia. The study also assessed the fit of CPEC-related trade practices with the principles of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and regional trade agreements such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA). It is a qualitative and comparative research methodology, and the secondary information was gathered from academic literature, policy documents, institutional reports, trade statistics, and publications of international organizations. Comparative policy analysis was used to analyze regional trade agreements, customs modernization, and models of global economic corridors such as ASEAN and European transport corridors. The results showed that CPEC substantially enhanced transportation infrastructure, logistics efficiency, and market accessibility in the regions by investing in highways, railways, ports, and special economic zones. Steps taken to enhance customs facilities and digital trade minimized trade delays and facilitated cross-border trade operations. Customs modernization and measures for digital facilitation of trade ensured reduced delays in trade and improved facilitation of cross-border trade operations. The study also revealed that CPEC has significant potential to improve supply chain integration and economic cooperation between South Asian economies and neighboring countries. But the study also uncovered issues such as political tensions, security concerns, institutional weaknesses, and a lack of coordination in regional trade that remain hurdles to moving forward with better regional integration. The study has found that the CPEC has significant potential to reshape the region's trade landscape if appropriate measures are taken to strengthen institutional cooperation, trade governance mechanisms, and regional diplomatic coordination.

Introduction

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) became one of the most significant regional connectivity initiatives within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). To enhance the economic cooperation between Pakistan and China, CPEC was officially inaugurated in 2015 with the objective of investing in infrastructure, energy,

transportation, and trade (Javed & Ismail, 2021). This corridor linked the Xinjiang region of China to the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, on the shores of the Arabian Sea, thus providing an alternative trade and energy corridor that would reduce transportation distances and enhance market access. However, CPEC gradually gained greater regional significance due to its potential to integrate transportation and logistics across South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Western China. Trade integration at the regional level has become an integral part of the international economy, especially for developing regions aiming to grow, become more competitive, and industrialize. Despite close geographic proximity and shared economic interests, trade in South Asia remained relatively low (Mahmood et al., 2020). Historically, expansion of intra-regional trade was constrained by political tensions, underdeveloped infrastructure, weak institutional coordination, and non-tariff trade barriers. As such, cooperation among the regions within SAARC and the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was less than successful.

In this context, CPEC was seen as a game-changing solution to solve the existing infrastructure gaps and enhance connectivity in the region. Highways, railways, special economic zones, and modern port facilities under CPEC raised the level of trade facilitation and economic integration (Hussain et al., 2023). The corridor also served as a foundation for the development of customs modernization, efficient trade through transit, and cross-border commercial communication. These developments engendered the potential for regional supply chain integration and trade interdependence among neighboring States.

Concept of Regional Trade Integration

Regional trade integration is defined as the practice of economic cooperation among neighboring nations through the lowering of trade barriers, increasing trade connectivity, and coordinating trade policies (Ali, 2021). The main goal of regional integration is to boost economic interdependence, market access, and overall economic development in the region. It can include free trade agreements, customs unions, harmonized regulations, infrastructure building, and coordinated institutional mechanisms to help the movement of goods and labor across borders (Mahmood, Ali, et al., 2026). Regional trade integration has emerged as a key policy tool to enhance competitiveness and to attain sustainable development in a global economy, where it has now gained significance. Regional cooperation is often sought by countries to lower transportation costs, improve supply chains, and attract more foreign investment. The effective integration of the region also encourages political cooperation, institutional coordination, and economic stability among the parties involved.

Trade corridors and connectivity projects are essential for regional integration as they connect markets and enhance logistical efficiency. Economic corridors such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aim to promote trade by upgrading infrastructure, streamlining customs procedures, and enhancing transportation links (Rab et al., 2023). These schemes promote regional production networks and cross-border trade. South Asia has always lagged behind in regional integration, especially compared to Europe and Southeast Asia. Economic cooperation in the region was hindered by political tensions, weak infrastructure, and restrictive trade policies. Therefore, transport connectivity and trade facilitation are becoming important tools to boost regional integration.

Historical Context of South Asian Trade Relations

South Asia has had long historical ties of trade and culture, as it is geographically close and has mutually interacting economies. The region was linked to Central Asia, the Middle East and East Asia by both maritime and overland trade routes (Khan et al., 2024). The colonial era, however, changed regional economic arrangements as trade shifted from regional cooperation to the imperial market. After independence, the new South Asian states implemented protectionist policies that cut off their economies from one another and favored local industrialization. Economic cooperation within the region was further undermined by political squabbles and territorial disputes

(Mahmood, Ali, et al., 2026). In particular, relations between Pakistan and India were strained, seriously affecting the formation of regional trade agreements. This, in turn, resulted in the least economically integrated region in the world, despite the common cultural, historical, and economic ties in South Asia.

An important step towards promoting regional cooperation, however, was the formation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. Eventually, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was established to reduce tariffs and promote intra-regional trade. However, political trust was low, non-tariff barriers were present, and a lack of infrastructure and institutional coordination posed difficulties for the implementation of these initiatives (Yaseen et al., 2024). Trade integration in South Asia has been revived in the last few decades due to globalization and regional connectivity programs. Infrastructure development and regional connectivity were also driven by China's growing economic interest in the region, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative and the CPEC.

Despite the enormous economic potential, strategic geographical location, and large population of South Asia, the level of trade integration has remained limited. Intra-South Asian trade was also relatively low compared to other regional trade organizations, such as the EU and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Abdullah et al., 2021). This situation was due to several factors, including political tensions, inadequate transportation infrastructure, non-tariff trade barriers, inefficient customs processes, and poor institutional coordination among the region's member States. Existing regional cooperation and trade frameworks such as SAARC and SAFTA were established for economic cooperation and trade liberalization, but their impact was limited due to implementation hurdles and ongoing political disagreements. As a result, South Asian economies remained less integrated with markets, faced high transport costs, and had poor regional supply chain linkages. These led to weak economic development and less chance for regional commercial cooperation (Bano & Batool, 2024).

In this context, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) emerged as a significant connectivity project that can bring a new revolution to the region's trade landscape. CPEC was designed to enhance trade facilitation and regional connectivity via investments in road, rail, ports, energy, and logistics infrastructure projects. But there was still some doubt about CPEC's potential to meaningfully support regional trade and integration beyond bilateral trade between China and Pakistan (Mahmood, Baig, et al., 2026). In addition, issues related to customs harmonization, compatibility with international trade rules, geopolitics, and institutional governance posed additional challenges. Previous research has mostly examined the economic and geopolitical aspects of CPEC, and comparatively little work has examined its integration of regional trade and trade governance. Hence, the main objective of this study was to critically analyze the role of CPEC in promoting regional trade integration in South Asia, particularly in customs cooperation, trade facilitation, and regional economic connectivity (Imran et al., 2024).

Significance of the Study

The study is important because it highlights the role of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in regional trade integration in South Asia. CPEC, one of the largest infrastructure and connectivity projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has attracted considerable academic, political, and economic interest. The study helps advance knowledge of the role of Economic Corridors in regional trade cooperation, customs harmonization, and cross-border connectivity in developing regions. The research is academically significant for its examination of the relationship between CPEC and South Asian trade integration, a topic that has been studied and developed in the literature but not addressed explicitly. The significance of CPEC in the context of customs coordination, trade facilitation, and regional institutional frameworks was insufficiently explored in previous studies, whereas most focused on the project's geopolitical

and economic aspects. Hence, this study fills an important gap in the literature by offering a comparative and policy analysis.

The study also has implications at the policy and regional institutional levels. The results of its work could help governments, trade practitioners, and regional institutions to grasp the opportunities and challenges of regional connectivity projects. A study of WTO compliance, customs procedures, and regional trade arrangements can help strengthen trade governance and institutional coordination, which can be targeted in policy. In addition, the research identifies the broader economic ramifications of regional integration and of facilitating trade and transport. The study's findings shed light on the potential of CPEC to improve transport logistics, supply chain connectivity, and regional market access, which are relevant to broader debates on sustainable economic growth and regional cooperation within South Asia. The study thus provides useful lessons for the region's future trade planning and policymaking.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study seeks to understand the role of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in regional trade integration in South Asia. The major focus of the research is on the economic, legal, and institutional aspects of CPEC, including its role in trade facilitation, customs harmonization, transport connectivity, and regional economic cooperation. The study examines the impact of CPEC on regional trade arrangements, such as the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), and on relevant World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. Geographically, the study focuses primarily on the dimensions of the research corridor, particularly the Pakistani, Chinese, and South Asian region, with consideration of the corridor's potential links to Central Asia and Middle Eastern countries. The analysis is largely undertaken by secondary data, comprising primarily policy reports, trade statistics, academic articles, government publications, and international institutional documents. The study does not include a detailed analysis of the military, strategic, or security-related aspects of the CPEC and, as such, only standardizes the trade integration and economic cooperation components of the CPEC. Likewise, primary data collection, such as surveys and interviews, is excluded from the study due to the time and resources required. Some findings may be long-term, and changes in the geopolitical climate and regional policies might affect their continued applicability. The study remains informative in its scope and in its detailed examination of the importance of CPEC for trade integration and economic connectivity in the region, despite its limitations.

Literature Review

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed at boosting economic cooperation and regional connectivity between China and Pakistan. CPEC, officially inaugurated in 2015, is a cluster of infrastructure, energy, transportation, and industrial development initiatives that connect the province of Xinjiang in China to the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea in Pakistan (Shahzad et al., 2024). The corridor will enhance the region's modern connectivity system, lower transportation costs, and facilitate trade routes (Mahmood, Baig, et al., 2026). The CPEC comprises highways, rail lines, pipelines, SEZs, and energy ventures to address Pakistan's infrastructure and energy crises. Gwadar Port is an integral part of the corridor because it connects China and the regional states to international maritime trade routes (Yasin, Munir, Shehzadi, & Saleem, 2026). It is expected that the establishment of logistic networks and transport infrastructure under the CPEC will promote regional trade and ease cross-border trade. The scholars have classified CPEC as an economic and geopolitical project that will have an impact beyond the bilateral China-Pakistan relations (Fazal et al., 2023). The corridor can be a catalyst for business sector development, attract foreign investment, and enhance the regional supply chain. At the regional level, CPEC can enhance connectivity among South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Although opportunities exist, a number of concerns about debt sustainability,

political and governance issues, and regional security remain to be taken into account in academic and policy discourse on the corridor (Khan, Munir, & Ahmed, 2020).

WTO Framework and Trade Compliance

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the key body that sets the rules for international trade, ensuring transparency, non-discrimination and fair trade practices among its member countries (Fazal et al., 2023). The focus of the WTO agreements is to eliminate trade barriers, streamline trade documentation, and facilitate trade liberalization to integrate the world economy. As part of the region's connectivity drive, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), WTO compliance is significant for ensuring consistency between trade-related activities and international legal and economic norms (Mahmood et al., 2024). The Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) is one of the most relevant WTO instruments for regional trade integration, addressing the facilitation of customs operations, the minimization of customs delays, and the enhancement of border management systems. To ensure the economic corridors are successful, efficient customs operations and harmonized trade regulations are key factors that affect the efficiency of transport and cross-border businesses. Several scholars have suggested that CPEC-related trade operations can help achieve the goals of the WTO by developing infrastructure, reducing logistical issues, and facilitating regional trade flows (Tahir & Askari, 2022). Transport network investment, construction of digital customs systems, and trade connectivity investments can help improve the efficiency of trade and economic cooperation. Some studies, however, also suggested issues with transparency, preferential treatment, and adherence to principles such as non-discrimination and equal market access.

SAARC and South Asian Trade Agreements

In 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed to facilitate the economic, social, and political cooperation among South Asian countries. Member countries of the association are Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and Afghanistan (Nadeem et al., 2025). A key priority of SAARC has been to improve the region's economic integration by increasing trade cooperation and coordinating trade policies. Despite geographical and cultural linkages, South Asia has been one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Member states launched the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) in 2006 to enhance trade within the region (Mahmood et al.). The mandate of SAFTA was to lower tariffs, remove trade barriers, and promote integration of South Asian markets.

The agreement aimed to establish conducive conditions for trade liberalization and economic cooperation in the region. However, it came with many challenges, including political disagreements, trade restrictions, non-tariff barriers, and insufficient institutional arrangements. It was noted that the political conflicts, especially between India and Pakistan, had a negative impact on the working of the SAARC and SAFTA programs. Poor transport facilities and inefficient customs clearance processes also affected the growth of intra-regional trade (Ismail & Husnain, 2022). As a result, intra-regional trade within the South Asian region remained relatively low compared with other regional groupings such as ASEAN and the European Union. In this regard, CPEC has become a significant opportunity for a transport-oriented connectivity corridor that can complement regional trade agreements through transport infrastructure, trade facilitation, and economic connectivity in South Asia (Bensadi, 2024).

Trade Facilitation and Customs Harmonization

Trade facilitation is the process of streamlining and modernizing the procedures for international trade, including customs clearance, border crossing, transportation, and documentation. Its main purpose is to facilitate the free movement of goods at borders by limiting delays, transaction costs, and administrative formalities. Customs harmonization is an important element of trade facilitation, the process of harmonizing customs documentation, procedures, and regulations

among trading states to facilitate trade (Mahmood et al., 2025). For regional trade integration, customs systems and coordinated border procedures must be efficient to improve trade competitiveness and logistical efficiency. Reduced cost and reliability of cross-border transportation, due to delays at border crossing sites, lack of uniformity in border crossings, and over-documentation, negatively impact regional trade. Thus, the harmonized customs practices play an important role in easing trade barriers and boosting economic connectivity (Hussain et al., 2021).

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) involves implementing trade facilitation measures, including smart transportation infrastructure, digital customs systems, and integrated logistics networks (Ahmad et al., 2024). These efforts aim to enhance the efficiency of moving goods by transit in the region and to boost connectivity in the regional value chain. Investment in roads, railways, and port facilities could also shorten transportation time and increase market access to regional economies. Some studies suggest that the development of the customs process within the CPEC could promote other areas of economic integration in the region, including cross-border trade and institutional cooperation (Muhammad et al., 2026). Regulatory issues, political sensitivities, administrative inefficiencies, and other obstacles still impact the successful implementation of harmonized trade and customs environments in South Asia.

Economic Corridor Models in Global Perspective

Economic corridors are cohesive networks of infrastructure, trade routes, industrial zones, and logistics hubs, designed to promote regional economic growth and connectivity. Economic corridor models have been applied to enhance trade efficiency, accelerate regional integration, and promote cross-border investment worldwide (Muhammadi et al., 2022). The corridors are typically designed to integrate transportation and industrial/commercial development plans to enhance the regional supply chain and economic cooperation. A single example in Southeast Asia is the ASEAN Economic Corridor model. ASEAN connectivity programs on transportation, trade facilitation, and institutional coordination among ASEAN member countries. The East–West Economic Corridor increased trade mobility and enhanced regional production systems. Over the course of ASEAN corridors' success, coordinated policies, harmonization of customs regimes, and political cooperation have proven vital to regional integration (Aziz & Naufaldi, 2025).

Likewise, the European Union created the trans-European transport network to facilitate the efficient transport of goods and people by rail, road, and sea, while promoting economic integration. These corridors facilitated the free flow of goods and services and enhanced the competitiveness and institutional cooperation of European states in the region. China also strengthened economic corridor development under the Belt and Road Initiative, including the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Corridor (Ahmad et al., 2025). The projects were designed to enhance the connectivity between Asia, Europe, and the Middle East by modernizing infrastructure and improving trade facilitation. In contrast to the above, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a strategic corridor linking Western China to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. CPEC aims to increase the efficiency of transportation, connectivity, and regional economic integration, as other global corridor models do. However, political insecurity, security concerns, and institutional issues remain to impact its implementation and regional effectiveness (Ullah et al., 2024).

Previous studies on CPEC have focused on its economic, geopolitical, and strategic importance to China and Pakistan. A number of studies analyzed the infrastructure development, energy investments, security environment in the region, and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in connection with CPEC (Ismail et al., 2023). Little, however, had been investigated the role of the corridor in fostering South Asia regional trade integration. The focus of most earlier studies was on bilateral economic cooperation between China and Pakistan, rather than on regional connectivity

and institutional integration. Lack of focus on customs harmonization, trade facilitation, and compatibility of policies relating to the CPEC with the existing world trade and trade among the countries of the South Asian region under the umbrella of South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) (Lateef & Riaz, 2023). Thus, the legal and institutional aspects of CPEC was not sufficiently discussed in academic forums.

Moreover, there was relatively little comparative examination of the outcomes of regional integration under CPEC, as well as of the governance of trade, compared with other international economic corridor models. Previous research was also limited by the lack of extensive analysis of the impact of transportation infrastructure and logistics modernization within the CPEC framework on the effectiveness of cross-border trade and regional supply chains. One key challenge was the lack of integrated, policy-oriented economic, legal, and institutional analysis (Anwar & Atif, 2025). A number of studies concentrated on theoretical or geopolitical issues, without critically assessing practical mechanisms of trade integration. The study thus fills these gaps by focusing on the contribution of CPEC to regional trade integration, customs cooperation, and trade governance in the South Asian region.

Theoretical Foundations of Regional Trade Integration

Economic Integration Theory

Economic Integration Theory is the theory of cooperation among states to reduce trade barriers and create coordinated economic policies to enhance trade and growth in the region (Ahmad et al., 2025). The scholars, such as Bela Balassa, described various stages of integration, including a free trade area, a customs union, a common market, and an economic union. This theory states that regional integration leads to expansion of markets, specialization, efficient use of resources, and economic interdependence among the countries that enter the region. The theory also helps explain the potential to improve regional economic cooperation and cross-border commercial cooperation through infrastructure connectivity and trade facilitation in the context of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Trade Facilitation Theory

The theory of Trade Facilitation focuses on improving the efficiency of customs procedures, transportation infrastructure, and regulatory coordination to boost international trade. The theory suggests that trade competitiveness can be improved and transaction costs can be reduced by reducing delays and logistical barriers in administration (Abdullah et al., 2021). Today's trading systems rely increasingly on digital customs processes, harmonized regulations, and integrated logistics networks. The trade facilitation theory is relevant in the context of CPEC because the program focuses on enhancing the roads, ports, railways, and customs facilities to facilitate the integration of regional trade and establish supply chain connectivity.

New Regionalism Theory

The concept of New Regionalism Theory was developed in response to globalization and the increasing interconnectedness of states. New regionalism encompasses many aspects, such as cooperation in infrastructure, investment, trade governance, political coordination, and institutional cooperation, whereas regionalism as an approach was primarily concerned with tariffs (Aziz & Naufaldi, 2025). The theory acknowledges the importance of regional cooperation initiatives for economic integration and strategic cooperation. CPEC embodies the principles of new regionalism by linking infrastructure, investment cooperation, and trade facilitation to build mutually beneficial regional economic networks.

Connectivity and Corridor Development Theory

Connectivity and Corridor Development Theory is about the economic growth and regional integration effects of transport corridors. This theory states that better infrastructure for transportation and logistics makes markets more accessible, lowers trade costs and fuels industrialization. Economic corridors are also

contributing to supply chain integration and investment opportunities in the region. CPEC is a concrete expression of this theory, connecting markets via new transportation and trade routes among the region (Mahmood et al.).

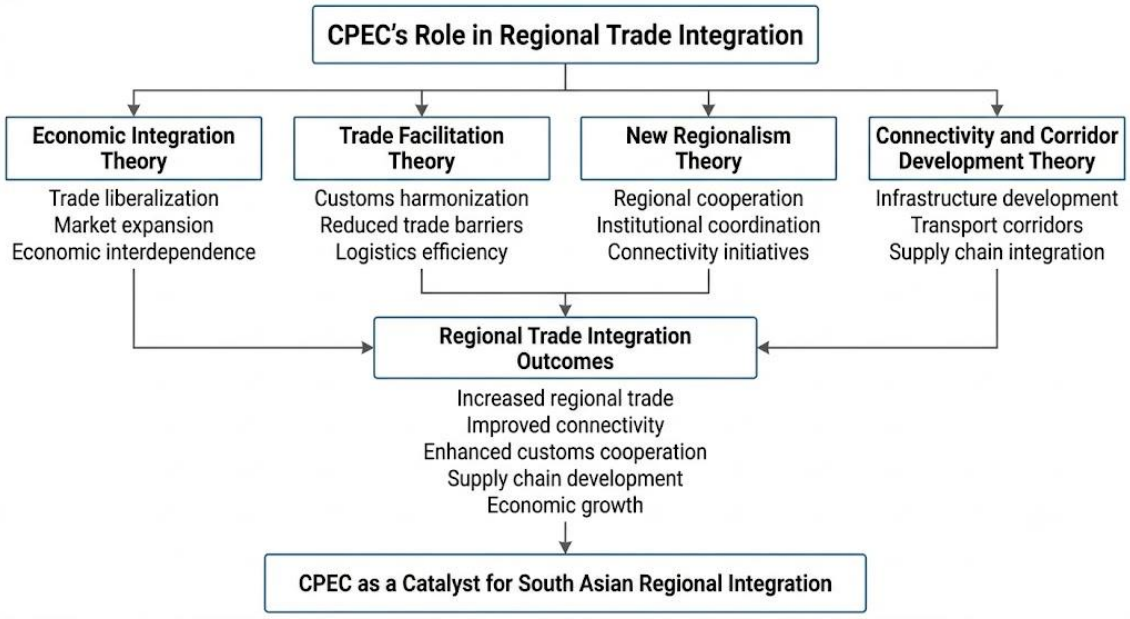


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework Flowchart

Research Methodology

The study designs were qualitative and comparative, exploring the role of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in regional trade integration. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research did not involve numerical experimentation but focused on policy analysis, institutional frameworks, trade agreements, and regional connectivity mechanisms. The comparative analytical approach was also used to assess the relations between CPEC, WTO principles of trade, and the regional trade agreements in the South Asian region. It is pertinent to note that the research design facilitated a critical evaluation of the customs harmonization, trade facilitation measures, and infrastructure connectivity aspects of the regional trade agreements. Second, the chosen design allowed for the interpretation of policy documents, institutional reports, and scholarly literature. In this way, the study has comprehensively investigated the economic, legal, and institutional aspects of regional integration of trade along CPEC.

Nature of the Study

This type of study was descriptive, analytical, and exploratory. The descriptive part emphasized the geographical layout, goals, and impact of CPEC on the region within the framework of South Asian trade integration. Comparative evaluation of customs harmonization, trade facilitation mechanisms, WTO compliance, and regional trade agreements was explored in the analytical dimension. It was significant that the study was exploratory, as there was limited literature on the relationship between CPEC and regional trade governance in South Asia. The study explored the new trade routes, institutionalization, and cooperation plans that happened in connection with the corridor. The study integrated descriptive and analytical approaches, exploring the possible impact of regional infrastructure development on economic cooperation and cross-border trade. This research therefore provided an in-depth analysis of CPEC's contribution to regional integration and trade connectivity.

Sources of Data

Secondary data were the primary source used in the study to assess the role of CPEC in regional trade integration. The information gathered was from academic journals, books, research papers, Government publications, trade reports, and policy documents on regional trade and economic corridors. Various information sources were also consulted, including international institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), as well as United Nations reports, to obtain reliable information on trade facilitation, customs procedures, and regional integration policy. Furthermore, official publications from Pakistan and China on CPEC projects and trade cooperation were examined. Regional trade statistics, transportation connectivity, and infrastructure development statistics were added for analysis. A variety of credible secondary sources were used to add to the reliability, validity, and comprehensiveness of the research findings.

Comparative Policy Analysis

A comparative policy analysis method was used to examine trade-related policies, regional agreements, and institutional structures associated with CPEC. The study has compared the trade facilitation measures of the CPEC with WTO principles and South Asian regional trade arrangements such as SAFTA. This approach helped the research to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses among the governance mechanisms in regional trade. The effectiveness of policies on customs harmonization, border management, transportation infrastructure, and transit trade in facilitating regional trade integration was critically assessed. In addition, key models of international economic corridors, such as the ASEAN connectivity program and the European transport network, were compared to identify best practices worldwide. Comparative policy analysis was conducted to gauge the ability of CPEC to serve as a regional integration instrument. The method also helped gain insights into institutional coordination issues and implementation gaps in SA.

Analytical Framework

Theories of regional trade integration, trade facilitation, and connectivity development served as the basis for the study's analytical framework. The framework analyzed the linkage between infrastructure connectivity, customs harmonization, and regional economic cooperation under CPEC. Analytical indicators covered transportation efficiency, trade facilitation measures, border management systems, regional connectivity of supply chains, and institutional coordination. WTO trade principles and South Asian regional trade agreements were also integrated into the framework to assess the legal and policy compatibility. In this multidimensional approach, the study analyzed the impact of infrastructure and trade policies on regional trade and economic integration. Additionally, the framework helped identify opportunities and challenges for the implementation of CPEC. As a result, the analytical framework offered a systematic approach to understanding and analyzing trade governance issues and the role of a corridor in regional integration.

Data Analysis Techniques

Qualitative content analysis and comparative interpretation methods were used for analyzing the collected data. The policy documents, including trade agreements, institutional reports, scholarly literature on CPEC, and regional trade integration, were analyzed using content analysis. Themes and issues relevant to the discussions were identified, examined, and critically interpreted. Comparative analysis was then also performed to assess the similarities and differences between CPEC and other international economic corridor models. The trade statistics and regional economic indicators were analyzed descriptively for policy evaluation and institutional analysis. The study also used interpretative analysis to explore legal and economic implications relating to WTO compliance and regional trade arrangements. The analytical tools helped the research derive comprehensive results on the effectiveness of CPEC in regional trade integration and connectivity.

Limitations of the Study

There were several constraints that limited the scope and interpretation of this research. First, the study used only secondary data sources since there was no time or resources to collect primary data through interviews and surveys. Consequently, the results were based on published literature, institutional reports, and government documents made available. Second, regional trade policies and geopolitical situations are constantly changing, potentially affecting the extent to which some observations and conclusions are applicable over time. Third, the study was mainly centered on trade integration and customs harmonization, and the security and military aspects of CPEC were not discussed in detail. Moreover, there was limited access to more recent trade statistics and confidential policy information, which limited further empirical analysis. Nevertheless, the study provided a focused and systematic assessment of CPEC's contribution to regional trade integration.

Results and Findings

The results of the analysis are presented in this chapter and show how the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can contribute to regional trade integration in South Asia. The findings were gained through comparative policy analysis, trade reports, institutional publications, regional trade statistics, and academic literature on trade facilitation and regional connectivity. The analysis found that CPEC had had a significant impact on the development of energy, road, railway, and port facilities, logistics efficiency, and the region's accessibility, with investments exceeding US$62 billion. It also revealed that the level of regional trade integration under the CPEC was significantly associated with customs modernization, border management reforms, and trade facilitation measures related to transit trade. The chapter also showed that the increased trade connectivity among Pakistan, China, Central Asia, and neighboring South Asian economies was driven by lower transportation costs and improved logistical infrastructure. Furthermore, institutional cooperation, digital customs systems, and other factors improved the efficiency of trade across borders.

CPEC as a Regional Connectivity Framework

Transport Infrastructure and Trade Routes

The study revealed that CPEC had enhanced regional connectivity in transportation by making large investments in transportation infrastructure across the areas, including highways, railways, and logistics. Under the corridor program, over 3,000 km of transport infrastructure was built or improved, such as the Multan-Sukkur Motorway and the Karakoram Highway. One of these projects reduced transportation time from Northern Pakistan to Gwadar Port and enhanced trade connectivity between Pakistan and China. Improved road infrastructure boosted freight traffic and minimized logistical inefficiencies that had previously negatively impacted regional trade. The analysis also found that transport modernization facilitated the integration of the regional supply chain by enhancing cargo accessibility and supply chain reliability.

Table 1: Major CPEC Infrastructure and Connectivity Projects

Project Name	Sector	Location/Route	Estimated Investment (US$ Billion)	Trade Integration Significance	Operational Status
Gwadar Port Development	Port & Maritime	Gwadar, Balochistan	1.62	Enhances maritime trade access and regional shipping connectivity	Partially Operational

Multan–Sukkur Motorway	Transport Infrastructure	Punjab–Sindh Corridor	2.89	Reduces freight transportation time across Pakistan	Operational
Karakoram Highway Phase II	Road Connectivity	Havelian to Thakot	1.32	Improves Pakistan–China overland trade connectivity	Operational
ML-1 Railway Upgradation	Railway Infrastructure	Karachi to Peshawar	6.80	Strengthens freight movement and cargo efficiency	Planned/Partially Initiated
Rashakai Special Economic Zone	Industrial Development	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	0.13	Promotes export-oriented industrial production	Under Development
Hub Coal Power Plant	Energy	Balochistan	2.00	Stabilizes industrial energy supply for trade activities	Operational
Orange Line Metro Train	Urban Infrastructure	Lahore	1.60	Supports urban economic mobility and logistics efficiency	Operational
Gwadar East Bay Expressway	Transport Infrastructure	Gwadar	0.17	Connects Gwadar Port with national highway network	Operational
Port Qasim Coal Power Plant	Energy	Karachi	2.08	Supports industrial production and economic activities	Operational
Allama Iqbal Industrial City	Industrial Zone	Faisalabad	0.25	Encourages industrial clustering and export growth	Under Development

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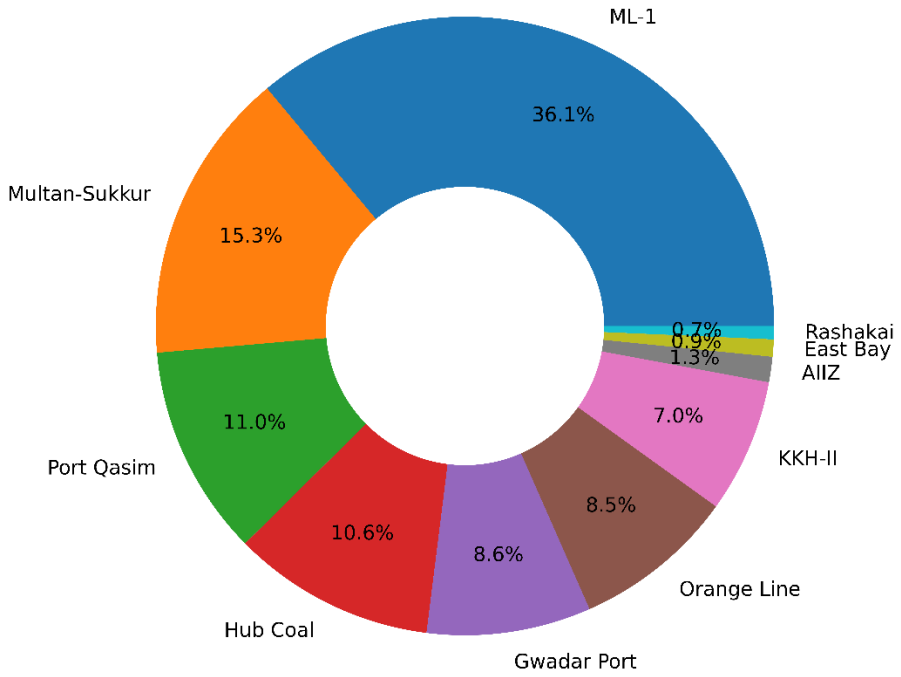


Figure 2 Relative Investment Distribution among Major CPEC Infrastructure and Connectivity Projects

Gwadar Port and Strategic Regional Access

The results revealed that Gwadar Port was one of the most strategic elements of CPEC, as it is located near key international maritime trade routes. The port opened new trade routes for China and potential new landlocked routes for Central Asian states to the outside world. Pakistan was well-positioned to become a regional trade hub due to its increased port development, warehousing facilities, and investments in logistics. Thus, CPEC was more than just an infrastructure project; it was also a regional economic connectivity plan that connected South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Impact of CPEC on Regional Trade Integration

Trade Connectivity and Market Access

The analysis showed that CPEC has a positive effect on the regional integration of trade by easing transportation barriers and enhancing the connectivity of regional economies. Investment in infrastructure under the corridor cut freight transport times by around 30-40 percent on key trade corridors. The developments helped increase market access for industrial and agricultural products and promote the flow of goods along regional supply chains. Bilateral trade between Pakistan and China rose to more than $20 billion, indicating improved economic interaction between the two countries on the back of transport infrastructure modernization and logistics-enhancing efforts.

Table 2: Impact of CPEC on Regional Trade and Logistics Indicators

Indicator	Before CPEC	After Initial CPEC Implementation	Observed Change	Regional Impact	Interpretation
Average Freight Travel Time (North–South Pakistan)	48–72 Hours	30–40 Hours	Approx. 35% Reduction	Improved cargo mobility	Enhanced logistics efficiency
Pakistan–China Bilateral Trade Volume	US$ 12 Billion	US$ 20+ Billion	Approx. 66% Increase	Expanded commercial interaction	Stronger economic integration
Border Customs Processing Time	18–24 Hours	6–10 Hours	Approx. 50% Reduction	Faster cross-border movement	Improved customs efficiency
Industrial Electricity Shortfall	Severe Energy Deficit	Reduced Load Shedding	Significant Stabilization	Increased industrial productivity	Supports export industries
Gwadar Cargo Handling Capacity	Limited Operational Capacity	Expanded Port Operations	Increased Maritime Access	Improved trade accessibility	Strengthened regional connectivity
Foreign Direct Investment Inflows	Moderate	Infrastructure-Led Growth	Consistent Increase	Investor confidence improvement	Economic growth stimulation
Highway Freight Efficiency	Poor Road Conditions	Modern Motorway System	Significant Improvement	Reduced transport delays	Better regional trade mobility
Transit Trade Accessibility	Limited Regional Reach	Improved Trade Routes	Enhanced Connectivity	Greater regional integration	Expanded trade opportunities
Logistics Performance Ranking	Relatively Weak	Moderate Improvement	Improved Efficiency Indicators	Better commercial operations	Competitive trade environment
Industrial Zone Development	Limited Industrial Clusters	Multiple SEZ Initiatives	Expanded Industrialization	Export-oriented growth	Enhanced supply chain integration

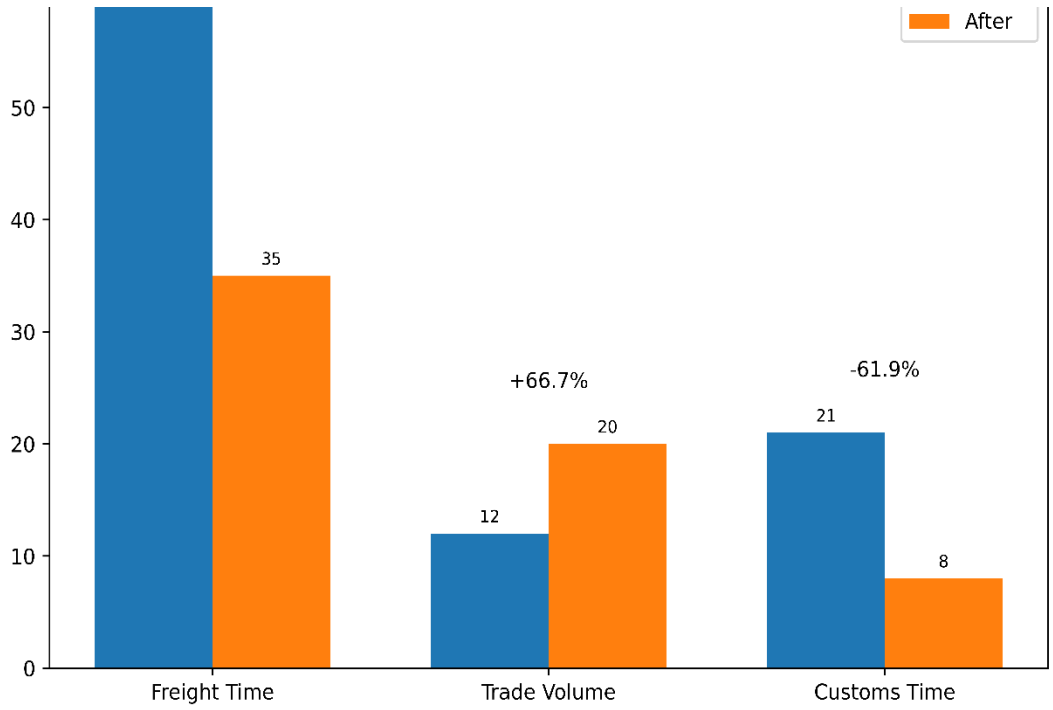


Figure 3 Comparative Assessment of Selected Trade and Logistics Indicators Before and After Initial CPEC Implementation

Industrial Development and Regional Supply Chains

The findings also revealed that CPEC SEZs had helped in industrial clustering and export opportunities. Enhanced connectivity facilitated greater cooperation and promoted integration of the regional supply chain, especially in manufacturing, energy, and logistics. The corridor also provided opportunities to connect South Asia, Central Asia, and Central Europe through interconnected trade routes. But slower regional participation and political conflicts persisted, hindering wider regional trade integration within South Asia.

Customs Harmonization and Trade Facilitation

Customs Modernization and Digital Trade Systems

The results showed that the customs harmonization programs under CPEC increased the efficiency of trade facilitation and border management. Automated and electronic customs processes and documentation significantly reduced administrative delays at trade gateways. The Pakistan Single Window initiative was launched to enhance coordination between customs authorities and trade institutions by streamlining the regulatory process on a single, digitized platform. These changes speeded up customs clearance and improved transparency in customs processing.

Reduction in Trade Costs and Transit Delays

The CPEC provided an opportunity to modernize infrastructure, alleviating logistical constraints in regional trade operations. Better roads, borders, and transportation systems helped reduce transportation expenses and improve cargo transportation efficiency. The results indicated that the efficiency of freight movement increased significantly thanks to the minimization of waiting time at the border crossings and improvement of road conditions. In addition, the initiatives on trade facilitation are underpinned by the goals of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) on procedural aspects and transparency. While these developments have helped, the lack of harmonization between South Asian countries in

customs regulations and the inefficiencies in customs administration continue to loom large as impediments to achieving full customs harmonization in the region.

WTO Compliance and Regional Trade Governance

The results showed that the reforms in trade facilitation that were implemented in the framework of CPEC were generally aligned with some of the WTO principles of trade, such as customs modernization, transparency, and procedural efficiency. The analysis of the cost of digital customs management systems and investments in customs infrastructure indicated that these systems help to streamline border processes and minimize documentary obstacles. These reforms were in line with the goals of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement and facilitated coordination among institutions and reduced trade delays. The study also revealed that CPEC could complement regional trade agreements, such as SAFTA, by enhancing the region's transport connectivity and accessibility. Better transport facilities helped to develop transport cooperation and trade among the regions. The institutional set-up and non-tariff trade barriers, however, continued to adversely affect South Asian trade governance.

Comparative Analysis of Global Economic Corridors

Comparison with ASEAN and European Corridor Models

The comparative findings showed that the CPEC had some common characteristics with the ASEAN Economic Corridors and the European Transport Networks. The development and implementation of coordinated trade policies, customs harmonization, and institutional cooperation have paved the way for the successful development of the ASEAN corridor for promoting intra-regional trade. Likewise, the level of regional integration in transport was high in Europe, thanks to efficient border management systems and harmonized transport regulations. These models showed that effective connectivity with infrastructure is improved by strong institutional coordination and policy consistency.

Table 3 Comparative Analysis of Global Economic Corridors

Corridor Model	Region	Core Objective	Key Strength	Institutional Coordination	Trade Facilitation Level	Major Limitation
CPEC	South Asia	Regional connectivity and trade integration	Strategic maritime access via Gwadar	Moderate	Developing	Political and security challenges
ASEAN Economic Corridors	Southeast Asia	Regional production and trade integration	Strong regional cooperation	High	Advanced	Economic disparities among member states
Trans-European Transport Network	Europe	Integrated transport and logistics system	Harmonized trade regulations	Very High	Highly Advanced	High implementation costs
China–Central Asia Corridor	Central Asia	Energy and trade connectivity	Resource-based trade routes	Moderate	Improving	Geopolitical instability

Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Corridor	South & East Asia	Cross-border industrial cooperation	Large market potential	Low to Moderate	Limited	Political disagreements
North–South Transport Corridor	Eurasia	Intercontinental freight connectivity	Reduced cargo transit time	High	Advanced	Sanctions and political constraints
Greater Mekong Subregion Corridor	Southeast Asia	Regional economic development	Efficient transport integration	Moderate to High	Improving	Uneven infrastructure development
Belt and Road Maritime Route	Asia–Europe	Maritime trade expansion	Strategic port connectivity	High	Advanced	Debt sustainability concerns

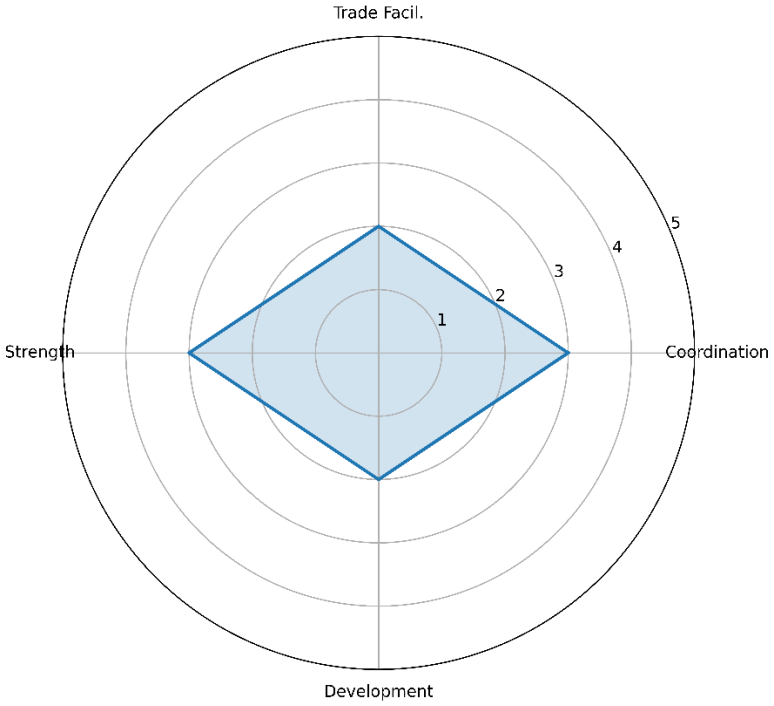


Figure 4 Comparative Performance Profile of Major Global Economic Corridors

Comparative Position of CPEC

The analysis found that, due to its geographical position linking China to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan, CPEC offered significant strategic benefits. Regional connectivity and trade accessibility were enhanced by investments in transport infrastructure, ports, and energy projects. South Asia, however, did not have the peace, harmonious trade policies, or good governance as provided for in ASEAN and European regional arrangements. Implementation of corridors was hindered by security issues and by a lack of harmonization in regional cooperation,

which also compromised the corridors' effectiveness.

Discussions

CPEC and Regional Connectivity

The results of this study showed that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) greatly enhanced connectivity and transportation efficiency in South Asia. Logistics investments, including infrastructure for roads, railways, and ports, improved the mobility of trade and reduced transportation delays along key trade corridors. Gradually, Pakistan's strategic importance as a regional trade route connecting China, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East increased with the development of Gwadar Port and the modernization of the Karakoram Highway (Imran et al., 2024). This result confirmed the theoretical assumption of Connectivity and Corridor Development Theory, which holds that transport capacity strongly influences regional economic integration and market access. The analysis also showed that CPEC enhanced regional economies' connectivity, thereby alleviating logistical constraints and promoting trade exchanges. The shortening of shipping time and the reduction in freight charges resulted in strong export growth and integration into supply chains. Hence, the corridor had the potential to make Pakistan a regional trade and transit hub (Ismail et al., 2023).

Trade Facilitation and Customs Harmonization

The results showed that customs modernization and trade facilitation reforms under the CPEC had a positive impact on regional trade efficiency. The adoption of digital customs systems, electronic documentation processes, and the coordination of customs and border management processes reduced administrative burdens and enhanced the cargo clearance process (Abdullah et al., 2021). Compliance with the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement's principles of transparency and procedural simplification was exemplified by the Pakistan Single Window initiative and process improvements in transit trade. The results were consistent with the Trade Facilitation Theory, which posits that the effective performance of customs systems and the reduction of trade regulations are crucial to lowering transaction costs and boosting trade competitiveness. Refined customs procedures fostered greater institutional cooperation among trade organizations and facilitated easier cross-border trade (Bensadi, 2024). The study also revealed ongoing inefficiencies in the customs sector, differences in regulations and institutional arrangements across regions, and limited coordination among institutions (Khan, Munir, & Riaz, 2020).

Regional Trade Integration and Economic Implications

The study illustrates that the implementation of CPEC has positively affected the regional trade integration by boosting the economic interdependence and market access of the economies involved. The corridor supported industrial development and the expansion of commerce in the region through increased bilateral trade with China, foreign direct investment, and the development of special economic zones (Hussain et al., 2021). The results further indicated that CPEC will enable greater regional integration among South Asia and Central Asia, as well as with international maritime trade routes. However, the analysis revealed that infrastructure alone is insufficient to ensure full integration across the region. The expansion of intra-regional trade was held back by political tensions, security concerns, and the lack of implementation of regional trade agreements like SAFTA. The study also revealed that while physical connectivity is important, so are robust institutional coordination, trade policy harmonization, and political cooperation among the countries involved in regional integration, as demonstrated by comparisons with the ASEAN and European corridors (Ismail et al., 2023). The overall results indicated that, in the long term, the CPEC has strong potential to improve regional trade integration if its institutional framework, trade governance mechanisms, and regional diplomatic cooperation are strengthened effectively.

Conclusion

The study explored the role of CPEC in South Asia's regional trade integration by analyzing connectivity infrastructure, facilitating trade mechanisms, and harmonization of customs and regional trade governance. The results revealed that CPEC has greatly enhanced transportation connectivity, logistics efficiency, and market access by investing in infrastructure, including highways, railways, ports, and energy infrastructure. The Gwadar Port and regional transport Corridor (GPRTC) project and the development of the port further enhanced the country's strategic and geo-economic importance as a hub of trade and commerce among South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East. The successful development of Gwadar Port and the regional transport corridor (GPRTC) further consolidated Pakistan's strategic and geo-economic position as a hub of trade and commerce among South Asia, Central Asia, China, and the Middle East. The research also showed that efforts toward customs modernization and digital trade facilitation systems under the CPEC had a positive impact in reducing administrative delays, transportation costs, and border inefficiencies. Overall, these reforms aligned with the principles of the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement and advanced broader goals of regional trade cooperation. The analysis showed that the infrastructure connectivity models in ASEAN and Europe were ineffective for regional integration without proper institutional coordination, harmonization of trade rules, and political cooperation. Although the economic, connectivity, and development benefits of CPEC have been highlighted, the study revealed that its implementation has encountered a number of recurring issues, including a lack of regional institutional structures, political tensions, security concerns, and inconsistent use of regional trade agreements such as SAFTA. These factors remain to hinder the realization of South Asian trade integration to its full potential. Overall, the study has found that the CPEC has significant long-term potential to transform the regional trade landscape and bolster economic integration among South Asian countries. But healthy trade governance, institutional reforms, diplomatic cooperation, and efficient policy coordination among regional economies are critical to sustainable regional integration under CPEC.

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