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# OPTIMIZING PAKISTAN'S BLUE ECONOMY: STRATEGIC MARITIME GROWTH THROUGH CPEC AND COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE

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**Abstract**

This study critically examines the growth trajectory of Pakistan's blue economy, situated within the strategic framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative. Grounded in Keohane and Nye's theory of Complex Interdependence, the research utilizes a robust qualitative discourse analysis to investigate how asymmetric bilateral engagements can catalyze sustainable maritime economic development. The findings indicate that CPEC presents a pivotal opportunity for Pakistan to optimize key maritime sectors, including marine transport, shipping, fisheries, aquaculture, and coastal tourism. However, the realization of this immense economic potential is significantly hampered by domestic infrastructural deficits, environmental degradation, and external geopolitical rivalries in the Indian Ocean region. To navigate these hurdles, the paper proposes a comprehensive policy overhaul, emphasizing the urgent need for integrated maritime governance, enhanced public-private partnerships, and robust environmental sustainability frameworks. Ultimately, the study concludes that strategically leveraging CPEC through an inclusive blue economy model will not only alleviate domestic socio-economic challenges but also elevate Pakistan's geostrategic position, fostering long-term regional stability, security, and interdependent sustainable economic prosperity.

**Keywords:** Blue Economy, Complex Interdependence, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Sustainable Maritime Development, Geostrategic Integration

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## Introduction

The Blue Economy is a model of sustainable growth with three main pillars: environmental, economic, and social sustainability (World Bank Group, 2017). Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below the Sea), various states have come together to harness the blue economy's potential for sustainable growth. The United Nations has identified several blue economy sectors for coastal/littoral states, including fisheries, maritime/coastal tourism, maritime transport, ports, and shipping, to support economic development by harnessing marine resources (UNDP, 2023). As the concept has gained increasing relevance in international politics, there is a need to examine the subdivisions that fall under the blue economy umbrella and can contribute to national growth.

Pakistan is exceptionally positioned to capitalize on these resources, sharing a 1,046 km coastline and ranking 74th among the 148 coastal states. According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Pakistan is granted a long Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of approximately 240,000 square km (Nordquist, 1985). Furthermore, the extension of the continental shelf to 50,000 square km was approved by the United Nations Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (UNCLOS) in 2015, bringing the total maritime area to 290,000 sq. km. Despite these geographic advantages, the maritime sector has historically been neglected. The maritime sector in Pakistan remains commercially and technically concentrated, requiring substantial investment to build, operate, and make it economically lucrative. While these maritime sectors collectively have the potential to be worth more than \$100 billion, Pakistan currently generates only \$4-7 billion in revenue.

The landscape of Pakistan's maritime potential shifted significantly with the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI visualizes an interconnected network of land routes and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) to promote balanced, interdependent, sustainable development (Hussain et al., 2020). One of the most crucial development corridors of this megaproject is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC has a unique feature: it connects the road belt to the Maritime Silk Road at its most important port in Pakistan's northwest region, Gwadar (Dinesh, 2021). Incorporating infrastructure projects, port facilities, and special economic zones (SEZs), CPEC has become a beacon of success, presenting an array of unprecedented opportunities for Pakistan's blue economy. The development of ports and infrastructure under this corridor will enhance trade, transportation, and tourism, contributing significantly to national growth.

In light of this stark economic contrast and the emergence of bilateral mega-projects, this study seeks to highlight the maritime sectors that can contribute to national economic growth. The study auxiliary fills the gaps in the theoretical underpinnings by critically examining the link between the blue economy and regional activities through the lens of the complex interdependence principle, aiming to enlarge the discourse on sustainable growth mechanisms in Pakistan. Ultimately, this research seeks to address a fundamental research question: how has the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) effectively opened doors of sustainable economic development for Pakistan's maritime sector?.

## Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### The Theory of Complex Interdependence

In the contemporary era, the multi-dimensional and multifaceted engagements among states and transnational actors have significantly evolved the nature of the international system. Because novel issues require novel solutions, the concept of the blue economy is increasingly being adopted by various countries to align with their modern strategic interests. To critically examine this paradigm, this research draws on Keohane and Nye's (2012) theory of complex interdependence. Originally detailed in their 1977 seminal work, "Power and Interdependence," this theory transformed the dimensions of international relations from a

state-centric, military-focused approach toward the inclusion of non-state actors, economic development, and telecommunication.

Grounded in the neoliberal perspective, the theory posits that heightened interdependence fosters multidimensional collaboration, which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of conflict through multilateral organizations and mutually agreed-upon principles (Rana, 2015). A defining characteristic of this interdependence is reciprocity, which can be either symmetric or asymmetric. Symmetric ties imply approximately equal shares in trade, whereas in an asymmetric relationship, one partner is the major beneficiary while the other compensates in a different dimension. In such asymmetrical dynamics, the lesser beneficiary often gains leverage to bargain more effectively out of the relationship (Michalak, 1979). Consequently, a policy change by one state will inevitably affect the other, either directly or indirectly.

### **CPEC through the Lens of Asymmetric Interdependence**

This theoretical framework provides a perfect lens for understanding China-Pakistan relations under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its implications for the blue economy (Inayat, 2025). Through the CPEC project, both states share an asymmetric interdependence. China is investing heavily in Pakistan's economy to advance its global interconnectivity network, while Pakistan holds an advantageous position given its geostrategic location. By signing the CPEC agreement, Pakistan has begun to realize the profound significance of integrated infrastructure, most notably its ports (Butt et al., 2024).

The project focuses holistically on augmenting the economy and developing the state, encompassing economic integration, infrastructure development, poverty alleviation, regional interconnectivity, joint industrial hubs, and people-to-people bonds (Parveen & Shah, 2019). In this way, both states share complex, interdependent relations across an array of dimensions. Furthermore, the asymmetry in the relationship gives Pakistan a crucial edge in bargaining over development initiatives, facilitated by loans, aid, and funds from China.

### **Complex Interdependence in Pakistan's Blue Economy**

The blue economy is not solely a sub-sector of the national economy; it is intrinsically associated with the blue policies and strategies of other regional states. The success of Pakistan's blue economy will, therefore, generate spillover benefits for adjacent landlocked countries, such as Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. Through CPEC, Pakistan and China are creating multiple avenues to augment their economies by integrating specific blue economy sectors into their interdependent relationship (Sajjad, 2020):

- 1) Seaports and Shipping: Global trade and economic stability depend heavily on shipping, making the protection of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) a common objective for all states. The development of ports along Pakistan's coastline strategically benefits both the state itself and its international partners, specifically China.
- 2) Fisheries and Aquaculture: The global seafood industry relies on an interdependent network of exports and imports to meet protein demands. Recognizing this, China and Pakistan are jointly investing in the seafood industry and adopting modern aquaculture techniques to generate substantial mutual revenue.
- 3) Coastal Tourism: As an interdependent sector that facilitates the movement of people across borders, coastal tourism requires secure environments. The success of CPEC aims to establish coastal areas as safe zones, thereby attracting international tourists and bolstering the regional economy.
- 4) Renewable Marine Energy: Exploiting the seabed for renewable energy—which offers significantly more output than terrestrial sources—demands undisturbed infrastructure connections to share power with regional countries. Fulfilling these energy burdens paves the way for holistic regional sustainable development.
- 5) Marine Biotechnology: Driven by global research and development (R&D) trends, Pakistan's dependence on developed countries for biotechnology estimation is reciprocated by

the eventual export of environmentally friendly production, reinforcing the interdependence model.

All sectors of the blue economy exemplify interdependence by accounting for sustainability. Ultimately, CPEC not only strengthens bilateral economic relations but also improves political, cultural, and environmental cooperation across the region.

## Methodology

This study employs an exploratory research design, coupled with a top-down, deductive approach, to illustrate the applicability of complex interdependence theory to the blue economy and to examine the economic growth opportunities associated with the CPEC project. To systematically address the research queries, a refined qualitative methodology is used to capture the subject's wide-ranging dynamics. Specifically, the research adopts a qualitative discourse analysis to comprehensively investigate and interpret the relevant data.

Due to logistical limitations in travel and arranging in-depth interviews with primary policymakers in the maritime sector, the research relies exclusively on secondary data. Data collection is based on open-source materials, including books, academic journals, online reports, and published documents on Pakistan's policy shifts and maritime potential. Furthermore, the study's scope is temporally bounded by the developments since the onset of the "Asian Century." This specifically covers the era in which China is envisaged as an emerging global and regional economic power through global connectivity initiatives, most notably the CPEC project in Pakistan.

## Result

### Strategic Opportunities in Pakistan's Maritime Sectors

The bilateral partnership under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has inaugurated substantial avenues for the comprehensive development of Pakistan's blue economy. Often recognized as a "game changer" (Iqbal,2025; Sharif & Mansoor, 2025), CPEC's multifaceted infrastructure projects—particularly the strategic construction of Gwadar Port, the extensive enhancement of transportation connectivity, and deeper maritime security collaboration—have effectively positioned Pakistan as a critical node of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Saeed, 2016). This positioning facilitates a logistical network connecting Asia to the Middle East and Africa. However, global data highlights a stark contrast between Pakistan's maritime potential (estimated at 100 billion USD) and its current revenue generation of merely 4-7 billion USD. This massive disparity between global estimations and domestic extraction is comprehensively detailed in Table 1, which outlines the current standing and future limits of various maritime subdivisions.

**Table 1** Blue Economy Sectors with their potential and status

| Sectors                            | Global Potential | Status            | Pakistan's Potential | Status            |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Overall blue economy</b>        | \$24 trillion    | \$2-4 trillion    | \$100 billion        | \$4-7 billion     |
| <b>Shipping Industry</b>           | \$900 billion    | \$650 billion     | \$5-8 billion        | \$2-3 billion     |
| <b>Fisheries &amp; Aquaculture</b> | \$500 billion    | \$150-200 billion | \$2.8-3.5 billion    | \$350-400 million |
| <b>Marine Tourism</b>              | \$4-5 trillion   | \$1-2 trillion    | \$4 billion          | \$0.3 billion     |
| <b>Maritime Resources</b>          | \$1 trillion     | \$834 billion     | \$6-7 billion        | \$1-1.8 billion   |

To further contextualize this stark economic contrast, Figure 1 visualizes the specific sub-sectors where the gap between realized revenue and future potential is most pronounced.

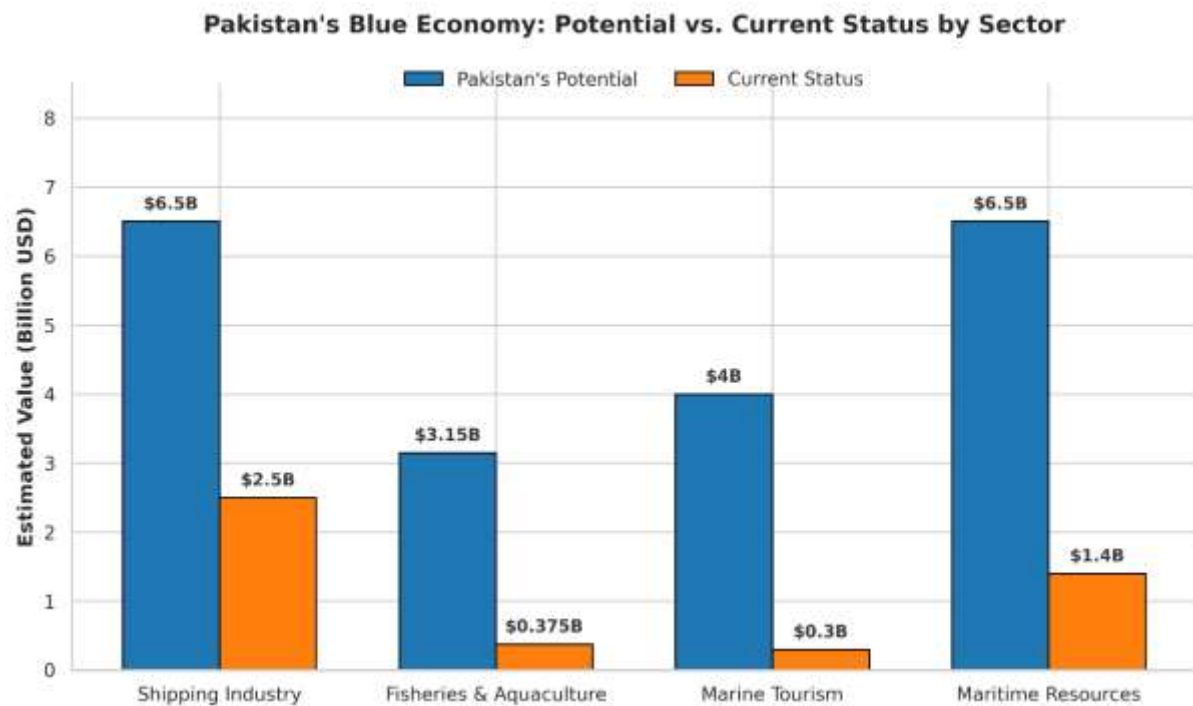


**Figure 1** Comparison of Pakistan's Blue Economy Potential vs. Current Status by Sector

As illustrated in both Table 1 and Figure 1, this unrealized potential spans several key sectors, requiring tailored strategic interventions. In marine transport and shipping, for instance, Pakistan is heavily dependent on seaborne trade, which currently handles 95% of its overall trade and 100% of its petroleum imports. While Karachi Port presently manages approximately 60% of the country's cargo (Pakistan Navy War College, 2018) and Port Qasim handles the remaining 40%, the development of Gwadar Port near the globally significant Strait of Hormuz remains the strategic crown jewel of CPEC. Improving this infrastructure will not only boost maritime trade by reducing logistical costs and transit times but will also revitalize the weakened national shipping industry.

Furthermore, the fisheries and aquaculture sector holds significant promise. Boasting 760 recorded fish species, Pakistan exports 71% of its annual harvest; yet, it accounts for a meager 0.25% of global seafood exports, reflecting profound limitations in processing technology and value addition. Recent bilateral engagements, including 64 million USD in B2B MoUs with China, aim to modernize this sector through advanced technology transfers and mitigate existing climate change vulnerabilities.

Additionally, marine tourism and environmental resources offer vast, untapped economic streams. Despite possessing a 1,046 km coastline featuring unmatched picturesque landscapes, coastal tourism remains deeply underdeveloped, historically attracting only 33.5% and 1.5% of foreign visitors to the Sindh and Balochistan coasts, respectively (Pakistan Tourism Facts and Figures, 2006). Strategic CPEC investments can transform these neglected coastlines into lucrative socio-economic hubs through targeted tourism infrastructure development. Similarly, marine resources serve as a vital strategic compass for the nation (Bibi et al., 2024). Pakistan's mangroves, representing the sixth-largest concentration globally, generate 4 billion USD in export revenue in the Sindh province alone. Coupled with the extensive renewable marine energy potential—encompassing wind, tidal, and solar energy—concentrated predominantly in Balochistan, these resources require urgent prioritization in national economic policies to maximize sustainable socio-economic development (Khalil, 2024).

### **Geostrategic and Economic Benefits of Integration**

Strategically, the infrastructural maturation of Gwadar is perceived by global analysts as a core component of China's "String of Pearls" strategy. This development fundamentally enhances Pakistan's geopolitical value in the north-western Indian Ocean. This integration offers highly practical possibilities for broader regional connectivity, specifically the expansion of secure, expedited trade routes to the Middle East and Central Asia through Afghanistan. The trade diversification catalyzed by CPEC will not only significantly benefit Pakistan's domestic economy but also strengthen regional interdependence, effectively transforming historically challenging borders into mutually beneficial economic spaces. Economically, the stimulation of these blue growth activities will generate vital local employment, attract substantial foreign direct investment (FDI), and systematically alleviate poverty among marginalized coastal communities. This inclusive industrial development is essential for reducing long-standing societal grievances and fostering equitable prosperity (Rashid et al., 2022; Ali & Shabbir, 2023).

### **Multidimensional Challenges to Maritime Growth**

Despite these highly promising avenues, the optimal realization of Pakistan's blue economy is constrained by a range of interconnected domestic and external challenges. Domestically, the maritime sector suffers from severe infrastructural deficits, most notably the glaring lack of established, high-capacity road and railway networks necessary to connect rural coastal areas directly to major inland economic hubs. Environmental degradation poses another critical, existential threat; uncontrolled domestic and industrial water pollution, inextricably combined with widespread illegal fishing practices, is rapidly destroying fragile marine biodiversity and rendering vast ocean spaces ecologically unsustainable. Furthermore, periodic socio-political instability, persistent governance gaps across overlapping maritime jurisdictions, and security risks related to regional extremism continue to deter potential international and domestic investors.

Externally, Pakistan's vital geostrategic location simultaneously exposes it to complex and volatile geopolitical rivalries. The long-standing, historical animosity toward India—which aggressively maintains a dominant, and often hegemonic, maritime presence in the broader Indian Ocean—creates persistent security dilemmas and economic strains. Moreover, the overarching great power competition between the United States and China in the Indian Ocean theater further complicates Pakistan's strategic calculus. The US increasingly perceives Chinese infrastructure and development initiatives as a strategic threat. At the same time, China views emerging US regional alliances as direct challenges, effectively trapping Pakistan's sovereign economic aspirations amid profound global geopolitical uncertainty.

### **Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Optimization**

To successfully navigate these formidable challenges and harness the full potential of complex interdependence enabled by CPEC, a comprehensive and visionary policy overhaul is urgently required. First, inclusive governance models must be rapidly established by systematically upgrading and integrating existing maritime governing bodies to permanently bridge the operational gaps between academic researchers, national policymakers, and maritime enforcement agencies. Second, a highly conducive socio-economic environment must be deliberately cultivated to attract both domestic capital and foreign direct investment into foundational blue growth sectors, ensuring robust and transparent public-private partnerships. Third, to unconditionally guarantee environmental sustainability, rigorous community engagement frameworks and "climate citizenship" programs should be implemented to enforce compliance with marine pollution regulations at the grassroots level. Finally, comprehensive nationwide awareness campaigns, fully supported by national educational institutions offering specialized maritime degree programs, are essential for educating the general public about the immense professional and economic opportunities inherent in the blue economy. By actively

learning from the successful regulatory frameworks of Island-Developing States, Pakistan can meticulously map out an integrated National Blue Economy Policy that harmoniously balances robust economic prosperity with uncompromising environmental preservation.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

The findings of this study underscore that the strategic evolution of the relationship between Pakistan and China, primarily facilitated through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), represents a transformative paradigm shift in the region's geopolitical and economic landscape. While the initial phases of CPEC were predominantly characterized by terrestrial infrastructure and energy projects, the current trajectory indicates a critical pivot toward the maritime domain. Through the lens of Keohane and Nye's (2012) theory of complex interdependence, this shift is not merely a bilateral arrangement but a multifaceted integration that allows Pakistan to harness its "Blue Economy" as a primary driver for national growth. The asymmetric nature of this interdependence gives Pakistan significant bargaining leverage to secure the high-level investment and technical expertise required to modernize its maritime infrastructure, as exemplified by the development of Gwadar Port.

### **The Disparity Between Maritime Potential and Sustainable Realization**

A core theme emerging from this research is the profound disparity between Pakistan's estimated maritime potential—valued at approximately 100 billion USD—and its current actualized revenue of only 4 to 7 billion USD. This gap highlights a historical neglect of the maritime sector but also points toward an unprecedented opportunity for sustainable development. However, the path to closing this gap is complicated by a "Complex Interdependence" that involves not only economic cooperation but also volatile geostrategic rivalries. The competition among major global powers in the Indian Ocean creates a delicate environment in which Pakistan must balance its economic aspirations with the need for regional stability. Discussion of these findings suggests that the success of the Blue Economy is intrinsically linked to Pakistan's ability to navigate external pressures while addressing internal infrastructure and governance deficits.

### **The Imperative of Sustainability and Blue Growth**

Central to the optimization of this maritime growth is the concept of sustainability. The Blue Economy model, by definition, must harmonize economic extraction with the preservation of marine ecosystems to ensure long-term viability. This study argues that for Pakistan to achieve "Life Below the Sea" as outlined in UN Sustainable Development Goal 14, it must move beyond traditional extractive practices toward a regenerative maritime strategy. This involves integrating renewable marine energy sources and protecting biodiversity, such as the critical mangrove forests that serve as both economic assets and natural defense mechanisms (Bibi et al., 2024). Sustainability is not merely an environmental constraint but a strategic necessity; without maintaining the health of the maritime environment, the very sectors Pakistan seeks to promote—such as fisheries, aquaculture, and coastal tourism—will eventually face systemic collapse. Therefore, the development toward sustainability requires a shift in national consciousness where marine resources are viewed as finite capital that demands responsible stewardship (Khalil, 2024).

### **Strategic Pathways Toward a Sustainable Future**

To transition toward a fully optimized and sustainable maritime model, several strategic imperatives must be addressed through a cohesive policy overhaul. First, establishing an integrated maritime governance framework is essential to bridge the current operational silos among academic research, industrial application, and legislative enforcement. Second, the cultivation of a conducive environment for "Blue Investment" must be paired with rigorous environmental impact assessments and transparent public-private partnerships. Third, promoting "Climate Citizenship" among coastal communities is vital; by transforming local

populations into active stakeholders in environmental preservation, Pakistan can effectively enforce anti-pollution regulations and combat illegal fishing. Finally, long-term sustainability depends on human resource development. By integrating specialized maritime curricula into the national education system, Pakistan can prepare a skilled workforce capable of leading the next generation of sustainable maritime innovations.

In summary, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor serves as a "silver lining," providing the impetus Pakistan needs to reclaim its maritime heritage. However, the transition from a land-centric economic model to a robust Blue Economy requires more than just physical infrastructure; it demands a visionary commitment to sustainable development and regional cooperation. By viewing CPEC not as an end in itself but as a catalyst for inclusive growth, Pakistan can secure a future characterized by both economic prosperity and environmental integrity, ultimately contributing to a more stable and interdependent regional order.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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