PAKISTAN INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT ECONOMICS

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



Policy View point: NO.84: 2026

BEYOND THE CORRIDOR Positioning Pakistan as Eurasia's Land-Sea Gateway Under China's 15th Five-Year Plan

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Executive Summary

China's 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030) does not name CPEC or Gwadar as a strategic centrepiece. That absence provides the appropriate starting point: it avoids attributing to Beijing a commitment that the Plan does not make, while highlighting the opportunity the Plan does create for Pakistan. Xinjiang, the Chinese province connected to Pakistan through the CPEC overland route and ultimately to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar, is flagged in the Plan for new strategic transport investment alongside China's other western corridors (Xinhua News Agency, 2026). Whether Pakistan turns that adjacency into economic advantage is a matter of policy choice, not of what Beijing has written down.

Pakistan and China have, independently of this Plan, already built the mechanism to make that choice: CPEC 2.0, agreed at the 14th Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) in September 2025 and organised around five development corridors, of which the Openness Corridor carries the connectivity and trade-facilitation mandate (China Daily, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2026). This brief sets out where Pakistan's route advantage is actually evidenced, what the Khunjerab constraint means for it, what Gwadar's current commercial activity looks like against the airport handover that is usually cited on its own, and five priority actions — each with a named institution, a deadline, and an indicator — to move the Openness Corridor from communiqué to operating platform.

1. Why China's 15th Five-year Plan Matters for Pakistan

The Plan's own review of the previous five years states that "a new open economic system has been rapidly formed, and high-quality Belt and Road cooperation has been deepened and solidified," against a backdrop it describes as one of "intertwined turmoil and intensified instability" (Xinhua News Agency, 2026). For the transport sector specifically, the Plan calls for strengthened cross-regional planning and multimodal integration and for China to "establish a diversified and resilient system of international transport channels" — the official English rendering used by China's State Council Information Office, not a third-party republication of the Chinese text (State Council Information Office, 2026; Liu, 2026). Strategic transport investment in Xinjiang and Tibet is named as a priority for 2026–2030 in the same passage.

None of this makes Pakistan part of China's Western Land-Sea New Corridor, which links Chongqing, Guangxi and the Beibu Gulf to ASEAN markets and does not run through Pakistani territory. The evidence supports a more specific claim: the Karakoram Highway through the Khunjerab-Sost crossing provides the established ov-

erland connection between Xinjiang and Pakistan, linking western China to Pakistan's road network and, ultimately, the Arabian Sea through Gwadar. Pakistan and China had already reached the same conclusion before the Plan was published. At the 14th JCC in September 2025, the two sides agreed to move CPEC into a second phase built around five corridors — Growth, Livelihood, Innovation, Green and Openness — aligned with URAAN Pakistan (China Daily, 2025; The Express Tribune, 2026). The Openness Corridor, covering regional and global market integration, connectivity, logistics and trade facilitation, provides the institutional mechanism through which Pakistan can respond to the Plan's western build-out without waiting for Beijing to name it.

Table 1: What the 15th Five-year Plan Commits to, and Where Pakistan Fits

Plan Commitment	Documented Scope	Relevance to Pakistan
Western Land-Sea New Corridor	Chongqing–Guangxi–Beibu Gulf–ASEAN rail-sea network	A template for converting inland provinces into maritime traders, not a direct link to Pakistan
Strategic routes into Xinjiang and Tibet	New backbone transport investment, named alongside the Western Land-Sea New Corridor	Direct: Xinjiang is CPEC's Chinese anchor province
High-quality Belt and Road cooperation	Deepened trade, investment and infrastructure cooperation with BRI partners	CPEC is China's own stated flagship BRI project
World-class port and airport clusters	National target for modern port infrastructure	Directly relevant to Gwadar's development trajectory

Source: Author's synthesis of the 15th Five-Year Plan, based on Xinhua News Agency (2026) and State Council Information Office (2026).

2. Where The Potential Route Advantage Comes from

CPEC's potential route advantage can be assessed by comparing distance, transit time and cost with the routes currently used for Chinese cargo. Two studies provide complementary evidence on these dimensions. Alam et al. (2019), published in the *Journal of Advanced Transportation*, estimated that a standard 40-foot container moving from Kashgar to Gwadar by road covers approximately 2,800 kilometres, against roughly 5,100 kilometres from Kashgar to Shanghai. A more recent route-based simulation, currently available as a preprint under journal review, models the full door-to-door journey to Gulf ports and finds an average simulated cost reduction of approximately 48 percent and an average simulated transit-time reduction of approximately 58 percent for the Gwadar route relative to the Shanghai route, driven mainly by the shorter sea leg from Gwadar to the Gulf than from China's eastern seaboard (Abed et al., 2026).

Table 2: Evidence-Based Route Comparison, Kashgar to Selected Destinations

Route Segment	Modelled Distance	Modelled Transit Time	Modelled Cost	Source for figures
Kashgar → Gwadar (road)	2,800 km	2.9–4.1 days incl. delay	US$1,260 road leg	Distance: Alam et al. (2019); transit time and cost: Abed et al. (2026) [preprint, under review]
Kashgar → Shanghai (road)	5,100 km	5.3–7.1 days incl. delay	US$2,295 road leg	Distance: Alam et al. (2019); transit time and cost: Abed et al. (2026) [preprint, under review]
Gwadar → Gulf ports (sea)	880–2,370 nm	3.5–9 days	US$360–635 per port pair	Abed et al. (2026) [preprint, under review]
Shanghai → Gulf ports (sea)	5,380–6,580 nm	19–23 days	US$1,100–1,250 per port pair	Abed et al. (2026) [preprint, under review]

Source: Distances for the Kashgar–Gwadar and Kashgar–Shanghai road legs from Alam et al. (2019); transit-time, road-cost and sea-leg figures from Abed et al. (2026), a Research Square preprint under review (base-year 2023 freight quotations).

Note: Abed et al. (2026) is a Research Square preprint and remains under journal review; its figures are presented as modelled scenario estimates, not established commercial performance.

The comparison combines evidence from a peer-reviewed study and a newer route-based simulation. Alam et al. (2019) provide the peer-reviewed benchmark for the Kashgar-CPEC route and estimate substantial reductions in distance, travel time and transport cost for Middle Eastern destinations. Abed et al. (2026) provide a more recent route-based simulation, specifically comparing Kashgar-Gwadar-GCC and Kashgar-Shanghai-GCC scenarios. Because the latter remains a preprint, its results should be interpreted as scenario estimates rather than established commercial performance. Neither study provides a live freight quotation; actual route competitiveness will depend on border delays, road conditions, vessel schedules, handling charges, customs procedures and cargo volumes.

This advantage runs through a single road connection with a significant operating constraint: the Karakoram Highway through the Khunjerab Pass, linking Xinjiang with Gilgit-Baltistan. The pass is located at roughly 4,700 metres above sea level and historically operated seasonally because of severe winter conditions. Since December 2024, Pakistan and China have operated the crossing on a year-round basis. China's official government reporting notes that the pass previously closed from December to March because of high altitude and harsh weather (Xinhua News Agency, 2026), while Pakistan's authorities reported that year-round trade continued through the second winter in 2025-26. The change improves the route's reliability, but it does not eliminate the physical risks associated with snowfall, extreme temperatures, road maintenance and border logistics. The policy challenge is to turn formal year-round access into predictable freight operations through winter maintenance, coordinated customs staffing, digital documentation and contingency arrangements.

3. From CPEC 1.0 to CPEC 2.0

CPEC's first phase targeted energy and physical infrastructure. According to a factsheet released by the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad to mark 75 years of China-Pakistan diplomatic relations, the programme has brought more than US$25.9 billion in direct investment, over 260,000 jobs, more than 8,000 megawatts of added power-generation capacity, over 510 kilometres of road infrastructure and 886 kilometres of core transmission lines (Independent News Pakistan, 2026). An earlier version of the same set of figures, cited by the Chinese Ambassador in August 2024, put investment at US$25.4 billion and jobs at 236,000 (The Express Tribune, 2024) — the difference reflects continued project implementation between the two reporting dates rather than a discrepancy between the figures.

Table 3: CPEC 2.0 — The Five Corridors

Corridor	Mandate
Growth	Industrial expansion, trade facilitation, and Special Economic Zone operationalisation
Livelihood	Vocational training, healthcare, clean water, and community-level social development
Innovation	Digital cooperation, technology transfer, and industrial upgrading
Green	Renewable energy, climate-resilient infrastructure, and sustainable project design
Openness	Regional and global market integration — connectivity, logistics, and trade facilitation

Source: 14th CPEC Joint Cooperation Committee outcomes (Beijing, September 2025); China Daily (2025); The Express Tribune (2026).

Gwadar's commercial record now provides a more useful baseline than the airport handover alone. PIDE reports that Gwadar handled approximately 8,300 containers during 2025 and about 11,000 containers in April 2026 alone, indicating a sharp but partly disruption-driven increase in activity (Anwar & Zubair, 2026). Gwadar Port Authority's vessel records also show recent handling of large bulk and general-cargo vessels, including a May 2026 call involving approximately 53,277 metric tonnes of steel billets. These developments demonstrate that the port has handled meaningful commercial cargo, but they do not yet establish a stable, diversified long-term cargo base. Publicly available evidence does not provide a consistent, independently verifiable time series for berth utilisation or Free Zone occupancy. These two indicators should therefore be treated as priority data fields in the proposed quarterly Gwadar performance dashboard, alongside container throughput, cargo tonnage and vessel calls. The recent surge should be treated as evidence of operational capacity rather than proof of sustained hub status.

4. Pakistan's Connectivity Gap

Geography and even a real cargo baseline do not by themselves determine Pakistan's logistics performance. The World Bank's Logistics Performance Index (LPI) placed Pakistan at 68th in 2016 but at 122nd out of 160 countries in 2018, with an overall score of 2.42 out of 5 (World Bank, 2018). Pakistan does not appear in the 2023 survey-based LPI results, leaving 2018 as the latest verified overall score and rank for the country. The World Bank has since moved to LPI 2.0, which uses shipment-level operational data and reports 21 country-level indicators rather than a single overall country ranking, making direct comparison with the earlier survey-based rankings inappropriate (World Bank, 2023; World Bank, 2025). This gap in internationally comparable logistics data creates a separate policy problem: Pakistan needs a more consistent evidence base for measuring whether investments in ports, roads, railways, customs and border facilitation are actually improving its position in regional and global supply chains.

Two existing policy frameworks already address important parts of this agenda, so the priority is to operationalise them rather than create parallel institutions. Pakistan Single Window (PSW) provides a single digital entry point for import, export and transit-related regulatory requirements and is designed to reduce paper-based procedures and transaction costs. The National Freight and Logistics Policy already calls for streamlined customs and border controls, stronger transit trade, better multimodal linkages, improved logistics data and eventual rail connectivity to Gwadar. The implementation gap is more specific: these frameworks need to be translated into operational arrangements for Khunjerab transit, Gwadar-bound freight, port-community data and multimodal movement. The recommendations below focus on those implementation gaps rather than proposing a new national logistics framework.

Table 4: Key Connectivity Challenges Facing Pakistan

Area	Major Challenge
Logistics performance	According to the World Bank's 2018 Logistics Performance Index, the last survey-based year in which Pakistan received an overall LPI score and rank, Pakistan ranked 122nd of 160 countries, with a score of 2.42 out of 5 (World Bank, 2018).
Rail infrastructure	Capacity and connectivity constraints remain important for multimodal freight. Preparation for the Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway improvement project is now being supported through Asian Development Bank project-readiness financing (ADB, 2025).
Customs procedures	Pakistan has digitised a substantial part of cross-border trade documentation through the Pakistan Single Window, but further integration of transit-specific processes is needed for a seamless China–Pakistan freight corridor (Pakistan Single Window, n.d.).
Border management	Cross-border freight through high-altitude crossings such as Khunjerab requires more predictable coordination among customs, border agencies, transport operators and digital documentation systems (Ministry of Communications, 2021; Pakistan Single Window, n.d.).
Trade facilitation	Pakistan's existing trade-facilitation architecture provides a basis for reducing documentary and administrative barriers, but implementation needs to be extended more systematically to transit and corridor-specific movements (Ministry of Communications, 2021; Pakistan Single Window, n.d.).
Logistics services	The development of a competitive gateway requires stronger value-added logistics capabilities, including warehousing, freight forwarding, multimodal coordination and related supply-chain services (Ministry of Communications, 2021).

Source: World Bank (2018); Asian Development Bank (2025); Ministry of Communications, Government of Pakistan (2021); Pakistan Single Window (n.d.).

The Policy Viewpoint draws on different types of evidence according to the question being examined. Peer-reviewed research is used where established academic evidence is available; official government and institutional sources are used for policy commitments, administrative arrangements and infrastructure data; and reputable news and specialist trade reporting are used selectively to document recent 2025-2026 developments for which peer-reviewed evidence is not yet available. These reports are used to document current events and reported administrative or commercial developments, rather than as substitutes for peer-reviewed evidence on causal relationships or established policy effects.

5. Five Priority Actions

The recommendations below focus on those implementation gaps rather than proposing a new national logistics framework.

#	Action	Responsible Institution	Deadline	Indicator
1	Establish an Openness Corridor implementation cell within the existing CPEC coordination structure	Planning Commission/CPEC Secretariat, with Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Maritime Affairs, FBR, Ministry of Communications and Pakistan Railways.	Q4 2026	Notification of the implementation cell, publication of its first delivery matrix, and quarterly progress reporting.
2	Publish a quarterly Gwadar port-performance dashboard covering container throughput, berth utilisation and, where obtainable, Free Zone occupancy	Gwadar Port Authority, with Ministry of Maritime Affairs	End-2026	First baseline dashboard published; quarterly thereafter
3	Integrate Khunjerab/Sost transit documentation into the existing Pakistan Single Window architecture and establish a dedicated electronic workflow for China-Pakistan transit cargo.	Pakistan Single Window Company, with FBR and NHA	By end-2027	Percentage of eligible Khunjerab transit declarations processed electronically through PSW.
4	Establish and publish an Openness Corridor logistics baseline and measurable annual improvement targets.	Planning Commission and CPEC Secretariat, with FBR, Pakistan Single Window, Ministry of Maritime Affairs and relevant border agencies.	FY2026–27	By FY2026-27, publish a verified baseline for (1) median customs clearance time for selected Gwadar cargo, (2) average border-processing time at Khunjerab, (3) number of days of actual border operation, and (4) the share of eligible trade documents processed electronically. From FY2027 onward, adopt and publicly report annual improvement targets against the verified baseline. These should include a minimum 10% year-on-year reduction in median customs-clearance and Khunjerab border-processing times and a minimum 10 percentage-point annual increase in the share of eligible documents processed electronically, subject to the availability of verified administrative data.
5	Implement the Gwadar- and Khunjerab -specific multimodal actions already identified in the National Freight and Logistics Policy.	Ministry of Communications, National Highway Authority and Pakistan Railways, with Ministry of Maritime Affairs.	2028	Publication of a Gwadar multimodal freight plan identifying baseline freight volumes by road and rail, priority cargo categories, required rail-road interfaces and annual modal-shift targets.

Because a consistent public baseline is not currently available for all four indicators, FY2026–27 should be treated as the measurement year. The proposed targets are policy-performance targets rather than estimates of current performance: the implementation cell should first validate the baseline and then report annual progress against the adopted targets. This sequencing avoids treating unverified figures as established performance while still creating measurable targets for improvement in clearance time, border processing, border operating days and electronic documentation.

6. Expected Outcomes

If these five actions are implemented, Pakistan should be able to demonstrate measurable progress in:

A functioning implementation mechanism for the Openness Corridor, with quarterly reporting against agreed milestones.

A regular public evidence base on Gwadar's cargo, vessel and port-performance indicators.

Greater use of electronic documentation for Khunjerab-related transit trade and more predictable border processing.

A published baseline against which customs clearance, border operations and trade-facilitation performance can be measured annually.

A clear multimodal freight pathway connecting Pakistan's road and rail network with Gwadar, with measurable progress in cargo movement and logistics services.

Conclusion

China's 15th Five-Year Plan does not name CPEC or Gwadar as a centrepiece, and this brief has not argued that it does. What the Plan confirms is that Beijing is investing in the western transport backbone that gives its wider Belt and Road commitment physical form, and that Xinjiang — CPEC's anchor province — sits inside that investment. Pakistan and China had already agreed, before the Plan was published, on the mechanism through which Pakistan should respond: CPEC 2.0's Openness Corridor. The evidence assembled here — a modelled but genuine route advantage, a real if partly crisis-driven surge in Gwadar's cargo activity, a Khunjerab crossing that has moved to year-round operation but remains weather-exposed, and a logistics-performance gap that Pakistan has not measured internationally since 2018 — argues that the immediate policy question is therefore how to translate this opportunity into implementation, rather than wait for the next Chinese planning document to name Pakistan.

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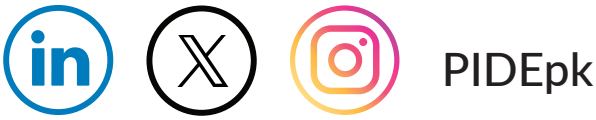
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