

CHALLENGES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR IN MEDIA: AN EIGHT-YEAR ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The assessment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reveals a landscape marked by both commendations and criticisms regarding its construction. Within this spectrum, criticisms vary widely, spanning negativity, unsubstantiated claims, inquiries, constructive feedback, and calls for expedited completion. This diverse array of viewpoints creates an atmosphere of discord and disorder. In light of these observations, this study aims to probe into the underlying reasons driving criticism of the China-Pakistan economic corridor. It seeks to conduct a detailed analysis to unearth the objective challenges and genuine issues embedded within the corridor's construction, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of its complexities and shortcomings.

Keywords: Mega Project, China, CPEC, Belt and Road, SEZ, Trade and Cooperation, Conspiracy theory,

Introduction

Over the past eight years, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has achieved significant progress at both national and international levels despite facing criticisms. Being a pilot

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project, CPEC is anticipated to hold a crucial position in the future development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), contributing significantly to infrastructure as well as diplomatic relationships. There is the question: does CPEC truly matter? If so, then why is there a polarized opinion regarding this significant project? Throughout the last eight years, a range of macro and micro projects have reached its completion, including initiatives such as Port Qasim 2x660 MW, Sachal 50 MW Wind Farm, Zonergy 300 MW solar park(China-Embassy, 2018), 50 MW Dawood Wind farm, Sahiwal 2x660MW coal-fired power plant, Jhimpir UEP wind power project (See Figure,2), and a significant milestone the infrastructure completion of Rashakai Special Economic Zone.

CPEC is commonly perceived as an economic and trade corridor extending from Kashgar in China to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan. However, this simplistic view falls short in defining the comprehensive scope of CPEC. To present a more comprehensive perspective, a clear and multifaceted definition of CPEC becomes imperative. The Belt and Road Initiative officially defines CPEC as a means to foster the economic development of Pakistan through mutually beneficial cooperation, encapsulating the essence of an enduring friendship. The Pakistan Embassy in Beijing characterizes CPEC as an economic partnership aimed at transforming Pakistan into a geo-economic hub, encompassing a network of highways and motorways to ensure robust connectivity between China and Pakistan(Pak-Embassy, 2023).” The United States Institute of Peace defines CPEC as follows: "It connects China and Pakistan through a route from Xinjiang to Balochistan, marking one of the largest initial attempts to strengthen economic ties between Islamabad and Beijing following decades of diplomatic relations(Rafiq, 2017)”.

As mentioned above, after 8 years of construction and development, the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor has made a series of outstanding progress and important achievements. At the same time, the corridor has been subject to various criticisms from different quarters. In this regard, it is necessary for us to restore a more realistic picture of the corridor construction and make a fair judgment on the effectiveness of the corridor construction in the past eight years. On the one hand, it is necessary to carefully examine the political motives behind the criticisms (whether they are for the sake of promoting the corridor construction in a stable manner or for obstructing and destroying the corridor construction); on the other hand, it is more important to analyze the deep-rooted problems that exist in the corridor construction and are faced with by the corridor construction, based on the spirit of accountability and correctness of names, in order to promote the corridor construction in a better way, and to use this as a mirror for the benefits of the "belt and road". In order to better promote the quality and efficiency of corridor construction, and use it as a mirror to help the high-quality development of the "BRI".

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects are the micro foundation of the construction of the Corridor. Specifically, there are two main types of projects in the Corridor: the projects set up by China, Pakistan and third parties specifically for the Corridor (e. g., the Kalot hydroelectric power plant project), and the Sino-Pakistani and Sino-Pakistani bilateral and multilateral projects (e.g., the Azad Patan hydroelectric power plant project), which have later been incorporated into the framework of the Corridor. According to Pakistan's Ministry of Planning and Development, as of 1 January 2010, the total number of projects in the Corridor had increased to 1.5 million. As of 24 May 2023, there were 95 cooperation projects under the

framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (see Figure, 1). Of course, there are also a number of cooperation projects on corridor construction that are not included in the official China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Programme.

This also means that not all China- Pakistan co- operation projects belong to the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In this regard, the way to evaluate the effectiveness of the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor from a micro perspective is to look at the construction and operation of specific projects along the corridor.

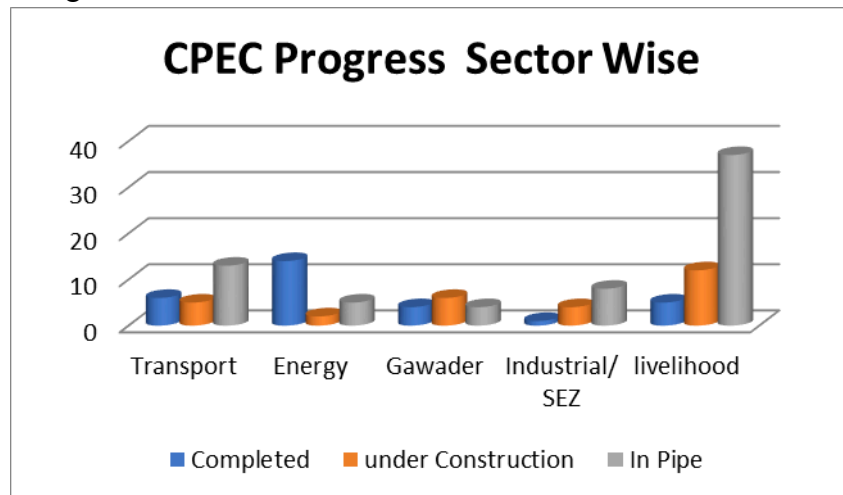


Figure. 1 Progress of Construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects

After the official launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China, and Pakistan formulated the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor vision plan and short-term action plan to promote the construction of the corridor permanently. Also called the 1 + 4" economic cooperation blueprint (with the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, focusing on Gwadar port, transport infrastructure, energy, and industrial cooperation).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative was initially conceived to foster connectivity between China, Pakistan, South Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia. As it gained traction, leaders from both countries elevated its significance within their development strategies and key decisions, positioning the corridor as pivotal in their respective national development. The corridor embarked on a mission to lead the advancement of China-Pakistan relations and nurture a closer China-Pakistan community, reflecting the visionary aspirations of a new era. Recognized as a crucial pilot and landmark project within the broader Belt and Road Initiative, the CPEC holds strategic importance for both China and Pakistan. It stands as a testament to high-quality development within the Belt and Road, playing a central role in its co-construction and serving as a benchmark for early and exemplary initiatives (M. Ali, 2023; Feng & Ali, 2023; Zhong et al., 2022).

Reflecting on eight years of high-quality development and upgrades, this analysis revisits the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), considering the three defined dimensions of the project. The achievements of the corridor construction can be summarized in the following three aspects.

First, a large number of important projects have been completed in key areas. According to the statistics of Pakistan's ministry of planning and development, as of 24 May 2023, 29 CPEC projects have been completed, another 29 are under construction, and 37 are under progress. Among them, the completed projects are mainly in the key areas of energy (21, See Figure, 2), transport infrastructure (6), Gawader port (4), and social and livelihood (5) (see Figure, 1). It is worth mentioning that, in the face of the challenges caused by the new coronavirus epidemic, China has promised "not to withdraw Chinese personnel, not to lay off

Pakistani employees, and not to stop the project construction", and to work together with the Pakistani side to ensure that the project construction and operation are basically normal (Zhong et al., 2022). The evident reality remains that the collective advancement of industrial cooperation within the corridor trails behind progress in other essential domains. This observation underscores the corridor's transition from singular project construction to a phase focused on systemic integration and holistic augmentation of the corridor's industry and value chain status. Furthermore, it has significantly contributed to driving economic and social development in Pakistan (Le, 2023). Overall as a general framework and important platform leading China-Pakistan all-round practical co-operation, the CPEC has injected strong impetus into Pakistan's national development and laid a solid foundation for its sustainable economic and social development (T. Ali, 2021).

Second, as a result of the corridor projects, Pakistan's macroeconomic situation, infrastructure, and well-being have improved significantly, and some of the long-standing constraints to its economic and social development have been effectively addressed and resolved. For example, in January 2022, Khalid Mansoor, special assistant to the prime minister on CPEC affairs, said in an exclusive interview with Xinhua news agency that the construction of the CPEC has transformed Pakistan from a power shortage country to a power surplus country, met Pakistan's energy demand, lowered the cost of electricity production and overall electricity prices, and freed Pakistan from the plight of prolonged power cuts (See Figure, 1). It has lowered the cost of electricity production and the overall price of electricity in Pakistan, thus freeing the country from long power cuts. During the new coronary pneumonia epidemic, the construction achievements of the corridor in related fields played an important

role in supporting the local fight against the epidemic, stabilizing the economy and protecting people’s livelihoods, and became an important guarantee for the promotion of Pakistan’s economic and social development, of course, the achievements of the corridor are still far from the goal of building a modern industrial system and realizing balanced regional development as expected by the Pakistani side.

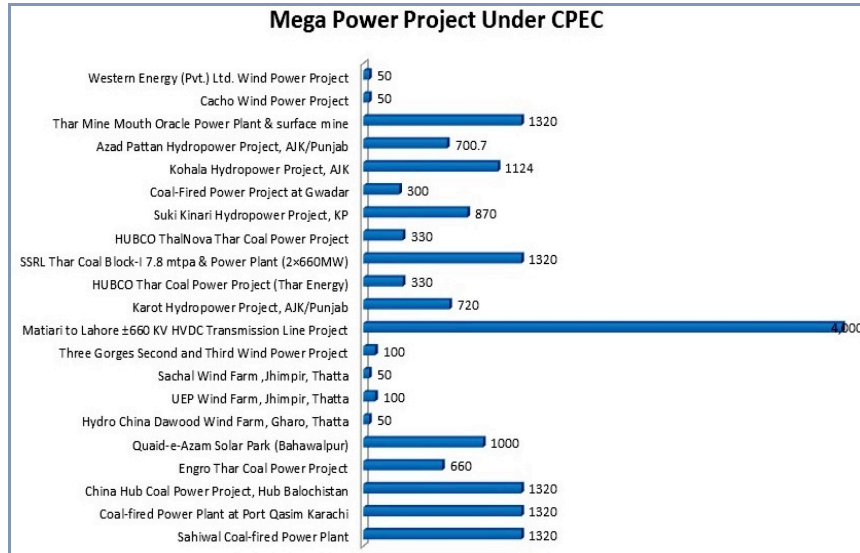


Figure 2. Completed Projects under CPEC Source:
<https://cpec.gov.pk/energy>

Thirdly, CPEC has become an important link in the all-weather strategic partnership between China and Pakistan and in the China-Pakistan community of destiny, and can be called a model for the joint construction of BRI. Since its inception, the China-Pakistan economic corridor initiative has always endeavored to enrich and enrich the contemporary connotation of the all-weather strategic partnership between China and Pakistan and the China-Pakistan community of destiny. After a decade of construction, the corridor has become an iconic symbol

of the strong friendship between the Chinese and Pakistani peoples over the generations and continues to provide a driving force and a solid guarantee for the development of a higher level of partnership and the building of a closer community of destiny between the two countries(M. Ali, 2023). During the construction of the corridor, the Chinese and Pakistani governments, political parties, parliaments, enterprises and social organizations have jointly constructed a multifaceted cooperation system for the China-Pakistan economic corridor which is an example of the multifaceted co-construction of the belt and road initiative(M. Ali, 2023).

Critical Analysis of Criticism

In assessing the effectiveness of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), there are both commendations and criticisms regarding its construction. The criticisms encompass a spectrum of perspectives, including negativity, baseless criticism, inquiries, constructive feedback, and a push for swift completion. This amalgamation of viewpoints seems noisy and chaotic. In view of this, it is necessary to discuss the reasons for the "criticism" of the China-Pakistan economic corridor and further analyze the objective and actual problems of the corridor.

Criticism Based on Political Interests:

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is of significant symbolic and iconic importance in promoting relations between China and Pakistan as well as building the broader "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI). Certain political entities have taken advantage of this, using it as an opportunity to portray the importance of these corridors in a negative light(M. Ali, 2022). There are articles, both journalistic and investigative, with the intention of creating an atmosphere of public opinion against CPEC cooperation and BRI cooperation through a propaganda

campaign. Specifically, the "criticism" of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, which is based on narrow political interests, is mainly aimed at confusing the public by means of fabricating lies, turning black and white into black, and labeling the construction of the corridor with various offenses and negative labels. We are taking the so-called "debt trap theory" of Brahma Chellaney in an op-ed entitled "China's debt trap diplomacy"(Chellaney, 2017). He threw out the so-called "debt trap theory," accusing China of supporting those countries that are favorable to China's economic infiltration and its own strategic interests by providing huge loans for infrastructure construction to the countries concerned in the process of building the BRI. In the course of the construction of BRI "China was accused of providing huge infrastructure loans to the countries concerned in order to support projects that favored China's economic infiltration and its strategic interests. Still, it yielded little result for the host countries, which in the end led to the heavy debt burden of these countries(Himmer & Rod, 2022)."

Subsequently, the "debt trap theory" became a vital discourse tool for international anti-China forces to attack China's foreign economic cooperation. Among them, some members of the United States government are keen to label the construction of CPEC/BRI as opaque or unsustainable. As the State Department's Acting Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, Alice G. Wells criticized China for the high costs, low returns, and lack of transparency in constructing CPEC. She slammed the high price, low yield, and lack of transparency of the Chinese loans given to Pakistan to build the CPEC(ANI, 2019). In a speech at the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad, Pakistan, on January 21, 2020, he once again described the corridor as adding to Pakistan's debt burden. She reminded Pakistan to "beware" as a buyer. The financial

assistance given for road construction was maligned by the so-called "debt trap"; in fact, there is no debt trap in CPEC. The so-called "debt trap theory" of CPEC does not stand up to scrutiny in terms of positioning and evaluation of the corridor's construction or the scale and effectiveness of loans for corridor projects(Le, 2023).

Responding to various allegations, Professor Lee, 2023 replied that firstly, the construction of CPEC incorporates the standards of international development cooperation and international trade cooperation and is basically a comprehensive economic cooperation arrangement. Most of the corridor projects have adopted the Commercial Mode of Operation (CMO). CMO is an approach used to manage commerce in industrial and commercial power management. In the energy sector, its sole purpose is to provide greater security of energy supply at the lowest cost(Franklin, Fraenkel, Yendell, & Apps, 2022) , while in the tourism industry, it means ticketing, disembarking passengers, boarding, To manage receiving, distribution of goods, storage, and delivery of consignments(Yi, 2018).

Hence, it is unreasonable for critics to merge direct investment projects, concessional loans, development assistance endeavors, and other non-aid initiatives—comprising the bulk of corridor projects with the criteria of non-repayable aid. It's particularly ironic that some critics deem corridor projects economically unsustainable for not adhering to commercial principles, even suggesting ulterior political motives. Simultaneously, these critics allege that commercially operated corridor projects have failed to yield substantial benefits to local communities, citing instances like the so-called 'escalation of electricity prices from the Corridor Power Project,' contributing to increased debt service for the Pakistani government, concluded by Committee for the abolition of illegitimate Debt (Khaliq, 2023). The Chinese

government rejected such allegations and clarified that CPEC is not burdening Pakistan with debt, as these are investment projects. These are energy projects that Chinese companies will invest in Pakistan without burdening Pakistan with debt, Zhao said(Hanan, 2021).

Secondly, in Pakistan's debt framework, major creditors consist of international financial institutions like the Paris Club and the International Monetary Fund. According to information disclosed by the government of Pakistan in May 2019, the combined project loans linked with the CPEC and others amount to \$106 billion. Noor Ahmad, the Secretary of the Economic Affairs Division of Pakistan, highlighted that Chinese loans constitute a mere 10 to 11 percent of this total debt. In contrast, the remaining 90 to 89 percent originates from sources such as the IMF, Paris Club, and other entities(INVEST, 2019).

Third, the early harvest of the Corridor project has already generated tangible economic and social benefits, favoring a good cycle of "investment-growth-debt servicing" for Pakistan. On the contrary, some countries avoid contributing to the sustainability of development and are also doing it in debt sustainability. For example, in July 2018, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that its bailout loan to the new Pakistani government should not be used to pay off Pakistan's Chinese debts. It should be done. Thus, the claim of critics that "the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is adding to Pakistan's debt burden" may sound plausible, but they are inverting black and white(Le, 2023).

Fourthly, Pakistan's debt problem has multiple and complex causes, historical and practical, domestic and international. CPEC, as a leading framework for cooperation, cannot by itself assume the responsibility for the debt of Pakistan. Nor is it in a

position to assume the political and economic responsibility of addressing the root causes of Pakistan's debt problem and, at a deeper level, promoting domestic reforms in the country. Therefore, it is unfair for critics to blame CPEC for Pakistan's debt difficulties and the potential debt crisis it may cause. Taken together, the advocates of the "debt trap theory" of the corridor are not really concerned about the success of the corridor. Rather than genuine critique, it's an attempt to use political speculation to cast doubt on the governments of China and Pakistan, aiming to tarnish the international perception of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the broader 'One Belt, One Road' initiative. The so-called 'debt trap theory' associated with the CPEC isn't an isolated instance; similar unfounded arguments aim to portray the CPEC as an economic infiltration, market distortion, resource exploitation, and pollution exportation project. These 'noises' and 'murmurs' surrounding the CPEC, fueled by narrow political interests, serve more as political attacks on the corridor itself rather than genuine criticisms of its construction(Le, 2023).

Criticism stemming from misconstrued positioning is expected. Undoubtedly, both the BRI and the CPEC, a crucial component of the 'Belt and Road Initiative,' remain relatively novel concepts on the global stage. Consequently, involved parties are gradually acquainting themselves with and comprehending the implications, reach, rationale, and objectives of the CPEC and the broader 'Belt and Road' while refining them through practical exploration. Throughout this process, it's inevitable for the CPEC and BRI to face scrutiny or even rejection due to misunderstandings about these initiatives. Particularly, criticisms arising from misconceived notions about the corridor can be categorized into two levels: international and domestic(M. Ali, 2023).

The construction of the China- Pakistan Economic Corridor aims to promote connectivity and common development between China and Pakistan, as well as south, central and west Asia(Zhong et al., 2022). In this regard, the China- Pakistan economic corridor and the belt and road initiative are essentially development- oriented cooperation initiatives. However, some countries in and outside the region, such as India and the United States, are full of misgivings about them. After a period of trial and error, India and the United States still insist on looking at the China-Pakistan economic corridor from the perspective of geopolitics and strategic competition. Specifically, the criticisms of the corridor based on such political thinking include two aspects(M. Ali, 2023). Firstly, it crosses the disputed territories. The Indian side believes that the route of the China- Pakistan economic corridor passes through the disputed Kashmir region between India and Pakistan, and accuses the construction of the corridor of interfering with the dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan and undermining the territorial sovereignty of India. The United States also said that the “one belt, one road” through the disputed territories and showed its operational vulnerability. Secondly, the expansion of its sphere of influence, India believes that the 21stcentury maritime Silk Road initiative exposes China's strategic ambitions in the Indian Ocean region and poses a challenge to India's existing strategic presence(M. Ali, 2023). Third, CPEC is not just economic cooperation but an important part of China's String of Pearls strategy to encircle India. Incidentally, the US has also linked the construction of the BRI to the so-called dual expansion of China's land and sea power, claiming that Pakistan is building China's economy(Gul, Munir, Shafiq, & Imran, 2022).

It is claimed that CPEC and BRI both have implicit military intentions and geo-strategic considerations behind them. In his

view, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor can be regarded as the leading edge of China's power expansion in the Eurasian region. Further, through the construction of the belt and road, including the China-Pakistan economic corridor, China aims to enhance its soft and hard power projection (diplomatic, economic, military, and ideological) along the corridors, as well as to increase its influence in the regions (Ittefaq, Ahmed, & Martínez Pantoja, 2023; Nitzka-Makowska, 2022). The criticisms regarding the corridor largely originate from a misunderstanding of its true essence. If these critiques persist based on such misconceptions, the more successful the corridor becomes, the more intense these 'criticisms' are likely to grow. To prevent such misconceptions globally, especially in South Asia, Ali recommended in his thesis to adopt Xi Jinping's 'Community of Shared Future (CSF)' theory (M. Ali, 2023).

At the domestic level according to the joint plan of the governments of China and Pakistan on the China- Pakistan economic corridor, the two sides will work together through the BRI and Pakistan's development vision 2025 (M. Ali, 2022; Feng & Ali, 2023). However, in practice, there is still a certain degree of over-reliance on the corridor construction in Pakistan, and even the belief that as long as there is a China-Pakistan economic corridor, all the problems it faces will be solved. At the same time, some over-hyped propaganda on the China-Pakistan economic corridor (e.g., saying that the China-Pakistan economic corridor will bring about radical changes for Pakistan, a game changer for Pakistan raised Pakistan's domestic expectations of the China-Pakistan economic corridor, leading to higher and even unrealistic expectations of the China-Pakistan economic corridor. In particular, the egalitarianism of the federal government in the layout of the corridor and the grievances of the local governments about the unfairness of benefiting from the construction of the

corridor all reflect in the existing corridor which is more or less a matter of equity than efficiency, and social welfare rather than economic benefits(M. Ali, 2022; Feng & Ali, 2023).

The misinterpretation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan leads to the pursuit of construction activities beyond the intended scope and capacity of the corridor. Consequently, some individuals in Pakistan link ongoing domestic issues to the perceived ineffectiveness of the corridor's construction. Additionally, there is a tendency to attribute the relatively slow progress of the corridor to shortcomings in Chinese contributions. Simultaneously, there's a growing sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction among the public due to the disparity between the actual outcomes of corridor construction and the high expectations set(M. Ali, 2022; Feng & Ali, 2023).

Conclusion

Ultimately, these criticisms of the corridor stem from misperceptions and incorrect positioning. Collectively, both the baseless suspicions about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the overly high expectations surrounding it represent an excessive interpretation of the CPEC's objectives. This has resulted in criticisms of the corridor, alleging that it's either 'offside'—doing more than its intended purpose ('doing too much') or 'missing the mark'—doing less than it's anticipated to achieve ('doing too little'). It's crucial for the construction of the corridor to facilitate a genuine, accurate, objective, and rational understanding of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, particularly clarifying its actual scope and limitations through comprehensive information dissemination to all involved parties. Criticism due to domestic political factors arises from the reality that the bulk of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is situated in Pakistan, encompassing all of its provinces.

Consequently, the construction and development of the corridor inevitably face the influence of domestic political factors within Pakistan. Specifically, these political factors have posed significant challenges to the advancement of the corridor

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