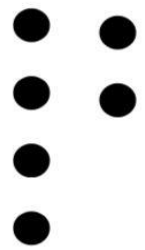




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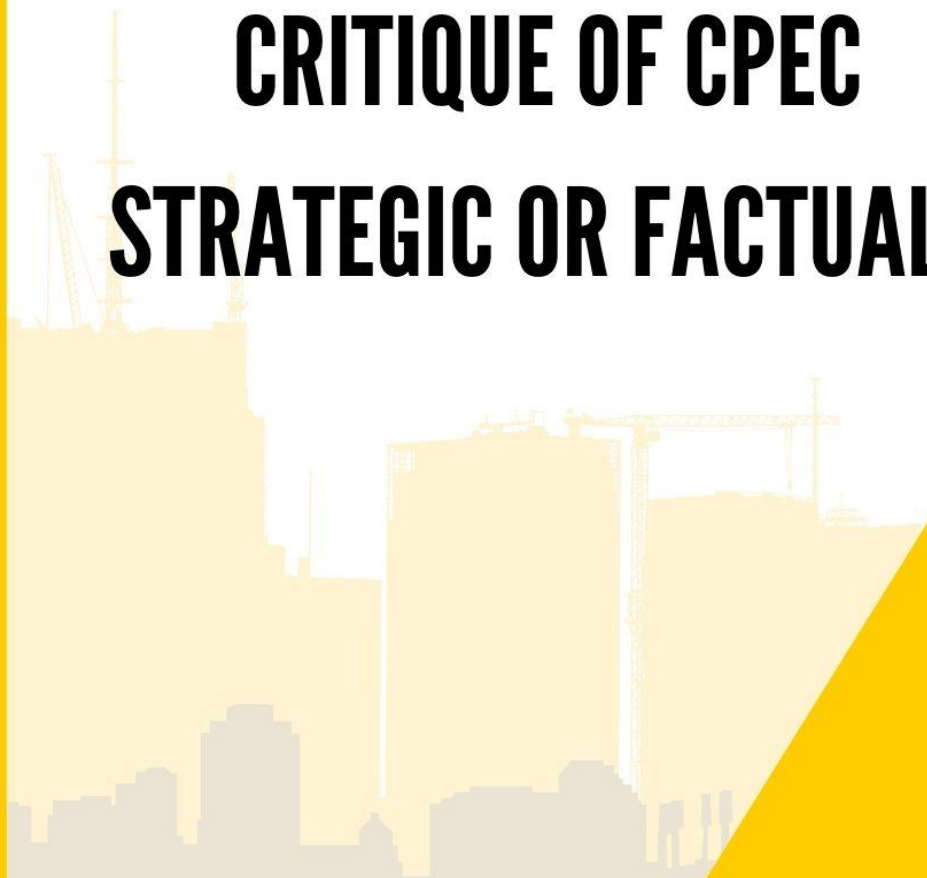
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ANNUAL WORKING PAPER SERIES

DECONSTRUCTING THE SKEPTICAL NARRATIVE:

IS INDIA'S & THE WEST'S CRITIQUE OF CPEC STRATEGIC OR FACTUAL?



Deconstructing the Skeptical Narrative: Is India's & the West's Critique of CPEC Strategic or Factual?

Jauhar Saleem¹

Abstract

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been projected as a 'game changer' for both China and Pakistan, in terms of their shared regional connectivity vision, since its very inception. However, at the same time, the project has been under serious scrutiny by India and the West, particularly the US. This study aims to critically evaluate whether the Indian and Western critiques of the CPEC are strategic or factual. In doing so, the paper takes a qualitative approach, using both primary and secondary sources. It breaks down and compares the skeptical and factual narratives methodically in order to generate a nuanced discussion on the topic. The paper concludes that while some concerns such as environmental impacts of CPEC, and the need for transparency and equitable resource distribution do constitute bare factuality, much of the skeptical narrative is grounded in the domain of strategic objectives and national interests of the states promoting such skepticism.

Key Words: China, CPEC, India, US, Pakistan, skeptical narrative.

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1. Introduction and methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach. The primary data in this context includes official statements, policy prescriptions, and minutes of Sino-Pak meetings on CPEC. The secondary data includes academic articles from credible journals and reports from various think tanks and research centers. Both streams, in composite, lay the foundation of a nuanced debate on the *constructed* narratives while analyzing the probable motivations. Section 1 of the paper introduces the subject and methodology employed. Section 2 discusses the politico-strategic narrative of Pakistan and China while Section 3 discusses the politico-strategic motives of India and the West for demonizing the CPEC and discusses practices of use of disputed territories, indigenous beneficiaries of the project and the significance of the project in enhancing development. Sections 4 and 5 dwell on strategic and socio-economic optimism on one hand and skepticism on the other, to critically analyze the claims about Chinese intent of expansion and juxtaposes it with Chinese practices. Section 6 analyzes the critical lens employed for the environmental concerns of the project. Section 7 concludes the findings and analyzes where criticism needs to be seen as constructive and where it is based on the strategic interests of the critics.

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is of vital importance to both China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Pakistan's infrastructural development goals. CPEC was conceived as an initiative poised to transform the state of regional integration by increasing trade and connectivity between Western China and Pakistan, on the one hand, and between Central Asia and South Asia on the other, connecting the landlocked Central Asia and Western China to some of the busiest shipping lanes in the Arabian Sea; through mutual investment by China and Pakistan. However, since its inception, the project became a target of severe criticism from India and the West, particularly the United States, on the reasoning that the initiative may be aimed at wider geopolitical and strategic ends. These concerns often are, and have been, a mixture of security and geostrategic concerns; some real and some designed to mask strategies put in place to halt China's ingress into South, West and Central Asia.

Such discourses surrounding CPEC, meant to influence regional and global perceptions of the multi-billion-dollar project, can be categorized into two major strands:

Firstly, the critique directed at Pakistan, accusing that the project violates international law and conventions relating to the use of a disputed territory, i.e. Jammu & Kashmir, and lacks *environmental feasibility*, while also questioning whether this huge investment could bring *equitable economic* benefits, or instead benefit a limited number of businesses and individuals in an economy suffering from the so-called *elite capture*.

Secondly, the Chinese economic ambitions and activities within the ambit of BRI. In general, and CPEC, in particular, are highlighted as part and parcel of an *expansionist policy*. Examining these narratives, which call for the recipients of BRI investment to approach the project financing made available under its umbrella with extreme caution and scrutiny will help in clarifying the ambiguities and misconceptions surrounding CPEC. The deconstruction of these narratives will also counteract any misperceptions intended to sabotage the project, besides identifying the windows of opportunity that can make the ambitious project more viable economically.

So far as the Chinese project financing under its BRI initiative -- of which CPEC is an integral part -- is concerned, Giles Mohan (2020) terms the Chinese developed infrastructure as the *technologies of territorialization*. According to Hurley, Morris, and Portelance (2019), Pakistan is one of eight countries that are reported to be most susceptible to ‘Debt Trap Diplomacy’ in the Chinese BRI project. Some analysts claim that CPEC could substantially lower China’s dependence on the Malacca Strait to ensure existing and future energy supplies for her booming economy. The strait is considered a military choke point for the Chinese as well because of the increased US presence in its neighborhood (McCartney 2020). It is claimed by some analysts that as observed in the South China Sea, there is a probability of China disrupting the freedom of navigation for other states in the Indian Ocean as well (Small 2019).

As for CPEC’s *environmental impact*, a report by Erica Downs (2019) doubts the practicality of achieving the emissions targets in the Paris Agreement with such projects in progress. The project is also scrutinized for its *unequitable resource distribution*. Gao (2023) suspects the long-term sustainability of the CPEC due to its role in aggravating the *relative deprivation* within the various strands of Pakistani society. Thus, these western policy analysts depict BRI as a milestone towards the Chinese version of colonialism that aims at creating economic dependence of the world on China.

India perceives CPEC as a threat to its strategy for building influence in Afghanistan and Iran. India aims to utilize the Chabahar Port in the Chabahar Special Economic Zone vis-a-vis the North-South Trade Corridor, which, via Afghanistan, connects India with Central Asian Republics.² However, with the development of Gwadar as a trade and naval port with People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) fleets operating in the Arabian Sea, just 72 kilometers away from Chabahar, Indian ambitions for this region can be challenged by Chinese competition. No wonder, India has been reported to have active cells operating within Balochistan with the target of hindering CPEC development.³ The year 2024 witnessed seriously impacted security situation in Balochistan, with the resurgence of violent, and non-violent liberation movements gaining momentum. Through various means available to it, India aims to contain China's competing influence in the region to materialize its goal of becoming an unequivocal regional power.⁴ India and China have had their share of historic animosity based on territorial disputes. This project adds a new dimension to the Indo-Chinese rivalry and offers credible context for the skeptical Indian narrative on CPEC.

Pakistan and China have consistently stated that CPEC is primarily aimed at promoting economic development. However, it also allows for the use of Pakistan's strategic location to China to strengthen its regional influence by promoting regional cooperation through its Constructive Engagement Policy.⁵ As part of this strategy, China's White Paper, issued in March 2015, outlines the objectives of BRI as: "... it aims to *“enhance connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa, strengthen partnerships, and promote sustainable, balanced development among participating countries”*⁶ Shi Yuanqiang, the current Deputy Chief of Mission at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, recently stated that the CPEC has transformed Pakistan, making it an attractive destination for foreign direct investment, since over the last 11 years the project has managed to

² Wajid Ali, "Strategic and Socio-economic Importance of Gwadar and Chabahar Ports," *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2020.v2.i1a.25>.

³ Fatima JJaved Chaudhry, "India's Curious Strategic Obsession with China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)," *Global Change, Peace and Security*, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14781158.2024.2405143?needAccess=true>.

⁴ Nimra Sajjad, Tajjalla Munir, and Sharmeen Batool, "Indian Hegemonic Design in South Asia: Implication for Regional Stability," *Global International Relations Review* V, no. III (September 30, 2022): 28–34, [https://doi.org/10.31703/girr.2022\(v-iii\).04](https://doi.org/10.31703/girr.2022(v-iii).04).

⁵ Hongsong Muhammada, and Iqtidar Hussain, "The Emerging Dimensions of China-Pakistan Economic Cooperation and CPEC: Significance and Challenges," *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 15 (September 2022): 531-551, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40647-022-00354-w>.

⁶ Zhixin Zhang, "The Belt and Road Initiative: China's New Geopolitical Strategy?" *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies* 4, no.3 (2018): 327-343, <https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740018500240>.

bring \$25 billion in direct investment, and now it has entered a new phase of development.⁷ The Pakistani government expects CPEC to create over 2 million jobs by 2030, thus contributing greatly to the country's economic stability.⁸

Notwithstanding the skepticism from India and the West, Pakistan, and China continue to emphasize the mutual benefits of CPEC. Both states stress that the project will enhance economic stability in Pakistan and provide advantages to the broader region, including India, through improved infrastructure and trade routes.

2. Sino-Pak Politico-Strategic Narratives

With estimated outlays projected to exceed \$65 billion in the long term, CPEC has not only advanced economic ties, but also solidified the bilateral cooperation between China and Pakistan in other areas. Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2015 visit to Pakistan marked the beginning of an *all-weather strategic cooperative partnership*,⁹ underscoring this collaboration. The mutual goal of building on regional peace and stability has been further strengthened by frequent summits and high-level meetings and extensive diplomatic engagement. From Pakistan's standpoint, CPEC presents a unique opportunity to enhance regional connectivity and cooperation. The development of Gwadar Port under CPEC is aimed at strengthening Pakistan's connectivity with Central Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East, positioning it as a key regional player.

Despite India's opposition, particularly regarding the projects in Gilgit Baltistan and Balochistan – based on the strategic significance of Gwadar Port for providing China with direct access to Arabian Sea -- Pakistan maintains that CPEC will promote regional integration and peace, thereby improving its geopolitical standing.¹⁰ Pakistan considers the joint endeavor with China as a window of opportunity for regional connectivity, infrastructure development, and economic

⁷ "CPEC made Pakistan attractive destination for investment: Chinese envoy," *Dawn*, December 17, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1879166/cpec-made-pakistan-attractive-destination-for-investment-chinese-envoy>.

⁸ "Pakistan Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) 2021. Bonn: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)," *Government of Pakistan*, (2021), <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/Pakistan%20Updated%20NDC%202021.pdf>.

⁹ "CPEC made Pakistan attractive destination for investment."

¹⁰ "Pakistan and China agree on five new corridors: Ahsan Iqbal," *The Express Tribune*, June 21, 2024, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2472866/pakistan-and-china-agree-on-five-new-corridors-ahsan-iqbal>.

progress.¹¹ From China's perspective, the corridor provides a secure and shorter route to the Arabian Sea. By granting access to the Middle East, the expansion of Gwadar Port also contributes to China's energy security.¹² Also, it is noteworthy that for China, the Corridor is a cornerstone in her greater BRI project aimed at global connectivity. And CPEC will aid China to pursue its policy of String of Pearls and ambitions to further create maritime silk routes.

3. Indo-US Politico-Strategic Narratives

CPEC is perceived as a threat to the US' interests in the South-Asian and Indian Ocean Region. US policymakers speculate that the Gwadar Port, now under the control of the Pakistan Navy, is a potential naval base for People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).¹³ Their concern is that PLAN's existing military base in Djibouti and a potential base in Gwadar, in tandem with its presence in Maldives and Sri Lanka, may provide China with a substantial existence in the Indian Ocean.¹⁴ The region is also in proximity to the Persian Gulf. As per reports, a bulk of Chinese trade goes through the Persian Gulf, making it a strategic location for China,¹⁵ and a crucial strategic point globally.

India, on her part, sees the Pak-China Corridor through the lens of her insecurities. India's ambition of becoming a Regional Hegemon in South Asia is at risk with China's long-term ventures in the shape of BRI.¹⁶ Since the CPEC and the BRI projects span across continents, India perceives it as a threat to its regional influence. States like Nepal which once used to depend on India alone for trade, are also signing off on the BRI project, the implications of which are bound to raise India's

¹¹ Syed Tanveer Shah, Muhammad Muzaffar, and Dr. Zahid Yaseen, "Debunking Concerns of New Delhi over CPEC," *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review* 4, no. 1 (2024): 33-46, [http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2020\(4-1\)2.03](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2020(4-1)2.03).

¹² "CPEC made Pakistan attractive destination for investment."

¹³ Joshua T. White, "China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage," (2020), *Brookings Institution*, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf.

¹⁴ Andrew Small, "Strategic Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *United States Institute of Peace*, (2019), https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/sr_459-strategic_implications_of_the_china_pakistan_economic_corridor.pdf.

¹⁵ Bahreh Sazmand and Ahmad Ramezani, "The Importance and Challenges of the Persian Gulf for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies* 4, no. 1 (2021): 75-108, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369685193>.

¹⁶ Muhammad Ahmed Khan and Sania Khan, "India's Rhetoric on Gilgit Baltistan under the BJP," *South Asian Voices*, June 5, 2024, <https://southasianvoices.org/https-southasianvoices-org-geo-c-pk-n-indian-rhetoric-gilgit-baltistan-bjp-06-05-2024/>.

hackles.¹⁷ Further fanning the flames is India's maritime insecurity in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). China's practices in the South China Sea lead to conjectures that China may violate the UNCLOS and freedom of navigation in IOR, disrupting large volumes of trade.¹⁸ After the construction of the Gwadar port, the Strait of Hormuz will only be 400 km away from China's reach, adding another layer to India's insecurity.¹⁹

Tying into the Indian resentment is the territorial dispute over Gilgit Baltistan (GB). One of India's concerns is that the CPEC undermines its claim to the Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK) region, of which it asserts GB is an integral part, and thus belongs to India - as repeatedly affirmed by Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar, have publicly expressed discontent with the involvement of GB in such a large-scale economic project led by the Chinese. Prime Minister Modi even hinted that CPEC was violating India's territorial sovereignty, while speaking at the inaugural session of the Raisina Dialogue (17-19 January 2017) stating that: "Respect for sovereignty is important for regional connectivity to improve. [...] In the management of our relationship, and for peace and progress in the region, both countries need to show sensitivity and respect for each other's core concerns and interests."²⁰ According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India, "Any project in the Indian territory of Jammu and Kashmir, including Gilgit-Baltistan, is illegal and unacceptable." India has consistently held this position, as it claims the entire Jammu & Kashmir region is essential to its territorial integrity.

From a politico-strategic or legal perspective, the Indian criticism does not seem fair; especially since it is carrying on with various infrastructure development projects on the Jammu & Kashmir

¹⁷Soumya Awasthi, "China-Led Bri And Its Impact On India With Specific Reference To CPEC," *Journal of International Affairs* 2, no.1 (2018), https://portal.tu.edu.np/publications/117/JOURNALOFINTERNATIONALAFFAI_2023_09_11_21_49_38.pdf#page=101.

¹⁸ Chase M. Seymour, "Navigating The South China Sea: Analyzing The Current Dispute Over Sovereignty, Maritime Zones, And Maritime Rights," *South Carolina Journal of International Law and Business* 19, no.1 (2023), <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scjilb/vol19/iss2/9>.

¹⁹ Zia Ur Rehman, Muhammad Ishaq, and Muhammad Naeem, "A critical analysis of Gwadar port in the changing maritime scenario," *Australian Journal of Maritime & Ocean Affairs*, (2024), <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ramo20?src=pdf>

²⁰ "China defends CPEC; India claims it passes through its territory," *Dawn*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1309370>.

region under its military control, and has been inviting national and international investment to that region.

China is using equality of opportunity tenet in its favor; a freedom that is strengthened on the basis of principles of liberal economy. Also, the Chinese practices do not observe any form of coercion in building economic partnerships abroad. Rather, these are based on mutual understanding and the consent of the host governments. For instance, Indonesians managed to employ Chinese engineers temporarily and tasked them with the transfer of knowledge to the locals, while putting in place an export ban on mineral ore to prevent any exploitation of Indonesian resources. This depicts an informed approach where host states can bargain the terms, and stay vigilant about any exploitative agenda, while not forgoing the opportunity the joint projects would provide for development.²¹,

In the context of BRI, it is also notable that China does not have any acknowledged substantial military base anywhere around the globe except in Djibouti.²² The case of Djibouti must be observed in the context of the presence of Somali Pirates in the area which may affect smooth trade.²³ This argument could be supported by the existence of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (SDF) in Djibouti despite Japan's extreme anti-militarist policies.²⁴ Hence, while the Chinese may potentially take offensive measures where required, but, neither Chinese history nor Confucian beliefs or any recent practices suggest a proclivity for coercion or use of force, if not compelled by the circumstances. The focus is rather on internal stability, morality, and harmony.²⁵

Secondly, the Indian skepticism, although significant in New Delhi's narrative, is often viewed as a continuation of India's attempts to counter China's expanding regional influence by portraying

²¹ Yose Rizal Damuri et. al., "Perceptions and Readiness of Indonesia Towards the Belt and Road Initiative: Understanding Local Perspectives, Capacity, and Governance," *Jakarta Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, (2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25409.5>.

²² Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker, and Patrick deGategno, "China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base," *CNA Analysis and Solutions* July 1, 2017, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1038215.pdf>.

²³ Mahmoud Aden and Robert McCabe, "Djibouti: Ports, Politics and Piracy." In *Capacity Building for Maritime Security*, Christian Bueger, Timothy Edmunds, and Robert McCabe (eds.), (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50064-1_9.

²⁴ Hiromi Nagata Fujishige, Yuji Uesugi, and Tomoaki Honda, "Japan's Peacekeeping at a Crossroads: Taking a Robust Stance or Remaining Hesitant?" *Sustainable Development Goals Series*, (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88509-0>.

²⁵ Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

CPEC as detrimental to regional stability. Pakistan, on the other hand, strongly emphasizes economic goals that aim for regional development, especially in regions like GB and Balochistan. Since GB is a vital route for the Corridor and Balochistan offers key access to the Arabian Sea through Gwadar Port, therefore the development of both areas is critical for the CPEC. India's concerns about sovereignty in Jammu and Kashmir are not historically valid either. Gilgit-Baltistan willingly acceded to Pakistan in 1947.²⁶ Besides, under the UNSC Resolution 47 (1948), the territorial dispute is yet to be resolved through a plebiscite. Pakistan has maintained its inclination towards implementing this and other relevant UNSC resolutions, while India has gradually moved away from the dispute resolution mechanism provided by the UNSC resolutions and has unilaterally claimed sovereignty over the entire Jammu & Kashmir, fueling Anti-Pakistan politics that rejects integration of GB in Pakistan, which it claims is a part of Kashmir.²⁷ This has also been in response to the GB assembly unanimously voting for a provisional provincial status.²⁸ The provisional provincial status in reality will not affect UNSC Resolution 47, i.e., GB will remain a disputed territory, and only be given a *de facto* provincial status which will allow it to have representatives in the Parliament. As such, Indian concerns of Pakistan taking over the GB region vis-a-vis CPEC lack solid footing.

There are contrasting narratives at play, reflected not only by the statements of Indian and Pakistan officials, but also in their respective media portrayals of CPEC. On the one hand, the Indian media, like *The Hindu*, draws attention to the strategic ramifications of the CPEC, especially its passage through GB and its possible military and sovereignty impacts, as well as its sizable infrastructural projects, accounting for 33.33 per cent of the total media coverage of CPEC. It also frames CPEC through a political lens; around 22.22 per cent of media coverage projects a geopolitical threat to Indian sovereignty. On the other hand, Pakistani media outlets, like *Daily Dawn*, adopt a predominantly optimistic tone, with an emphasis on infrastructure and development (22.73 per cent), the security of Chinese workers (20.45 per cent), and international collaboration (20.45 per

²⁶ Yaqoob Khan Bangash, "Three Forgotten Accessions: Gilgit, Hunza and Nagar," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38, no.1 (2010): 117-143, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530903538269>.

²⁷ Muhammad Ahmed Khan and Sania Khan, "India's Rhetoric on Gilgit Baltistan under the BJP."

²⁸ Omer Farooq Khan, "Gilgit-Baltistan house passes joint resolution for interim provincial status for region," *Times of India*, March 10, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/gilgit-baltistan-house-passes-joint-resolution-for-interim-provincial-status-for-region/articleshow/81418389.cms>.

cent), highlighting the economic advantages of the project, such as trade and infrastructure development.²⁹

To sum it up, it appears that India's opposition to CPEC is rooted purely in its strategic aims reflecting the ongoing rivalry between India and Pakistan and the broader geopolitical tensions in South Asia concerning China. India believes Gwadar could become a military base in China's *String of Pearls* strategy.³⁰ Overall Chinese access to the Indian Ocean is a cause of concern for India since it may tip the scale in South Asia, and India's status as the Net Security Provider in South Asia may be challenged due to Chinese ambitions.³¹ The prevalent Indo-Pacific strategy employed by the West and India is part of a greater containment strategy of Chinese soft power in Asia and beyond.³² India's posturing as a great American ally in its strategic struggle against China in the Subcontinent and peripheral areas helps boost the Indian hegemonic plan in return.³³

4. Socio-Economic Optimist Narratives

While Pakistan has maintained a security-centric approach in its foreign policy, the need for a geo-economic pivot has been looming on the horizon.³⁴ CPEC heralds such a shift for the economically struggling state with the promise to boost Pakistan's economy as China develops trade hubs.³⁵ As per Minister of Planning and Development, Ahsan Iqbal: "CPEC corridor is very well aligned with our 5Es (development) framework and is helpful in its implementation."³⁶ The Planning Commission of Pakistan estimates that the CPEC will create more than 800,000 jobs between 2015

²⁹Waleed Ahmad and Zarmina Gul, "Comparative Analysis of Daily Dawn and The Hindu: Examining CPEC Narratives," *International Journal of Contemporary Issues in Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2024): 2807-2817. <https://ijciss.org/index.php/ijciss/article/view/1476>.

³⁰ Muhammad Akhtar, "Navigating India's Counter Narrative over CPEC," *Global Foreign Policies Review* VI, no. 1 (2023): 28-38, [http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023\(VI-I\).03](http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gfpr.2023(VI-I).03).

³¹ Subhadeep Bhattacharya, "India's evolving role as the 'net security provider' of the Indian Ocean region," (2023), <https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17487.2>.

³² Aima Tahir, Aima, and Khushboo Ejaz, "India-United States Strategic Partnership in the Indian Ocean Region and Its Implications for Pakistan," *Journal for Indian Studies*, (2020), <https://jis.pu.edu.pk/44/article/view/942>.

³³ Sufian Ullah and Zeeshan Hayat, "India as a Net Security Provider in Indo-Pacific and Implications for the Region," *NUST Journal of International Peace and Stability*, (2021), <http://dx.doi.org/10.37540/njips.v4i1.77>.

³⁴ Iqra Fazal, Waheed Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Irfan Ali, "Geo-Economic Benefits of the CPEC Project for Pakistan," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 7, no. IV (December 4, 2023), [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2023\(7-iv\)52](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2023(7-iv)52).

³⁵ "CPEC to Turn Pak-China Ties into Long Term Strategic Economic Partnership: Ahsan," *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Secretariat Official Website*, <https://cpec.gov.pk/news/79>.

³⁶ "News Article Title," *Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Official Website*. <https://www.moib.gov.pk/News/65165>.

to 2030.³⁷ Similarly, various Pakistani news outlets regularly publish articles purporting the development of the country through the CPEC projects. Pakistan Observer, a Pakistani English newspaper published an article titled “CPEC: A Decade of Hope, Progress and Prosperity” claiming that over the past decade, CPEC has significantly transformed the socio-economic landscape, and that the upcoming decade will witness the efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability of the project.³⁸ It has also been projected that GB’s inclusion in CPEC will improve connections, reduce energy shortages, and lower transport costs by 35 per cent.³⁹ Additionally, it is expected to create over 50,000 jobs just in GB, boosting trade between China, Pakistan, and Central Asia.⁴⁰ The wide scope of the projects, whether completed, or in progress, or under planning, includes the sectors of health, education, water, infrastructure, agriculture, green energy, rural development, and poverty alleviation. This is a comprehensive manifestation of the claimed inclusive economic and social uplifting of the society in its entirety.⁴¹

From a Chinese perspective, Gwadar bears the potential to serve as a more efficient route to access the Middle East.⁴² Furthermore, by promoting regional economic cooperation, CPEC contributes to the economic stabilization of China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The economic footprint of Pakistan and China cooperation, specifically in the Xinjiang region, GB, and Balochistan is expected to elevate as new avenues for bilateral relations will open up through CPEC.⁴³

³⁷ Muhammad Zia and Shujaa Waqar, "Employment Outlook of China Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Meta-Analysis," *Center for Excellence China – Pakistan Economic Corridor*, (2024), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333421520>.

³⁸ Umid Gulab, "CPEC: A Decade of Hope, Progress, and Prosperity," *Pakistan Observer* <https://paobserver.net/cpec-a-decade-of-hope-progress-and-prosperity/>

³⁹ Wajid Ali, Wajid, "Strategic and Socio-economic Importance of Gwadar and Chabahar Ports," *International Journal of Political Science and Governance*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2020.v2.i1a.25>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Social Sector Development Projects," *CPEC Official*, <https://cpec.gov.pk/social-sector-development-projects>.

⁴² Zakir Ullah, Areej Manzoor, Qammar Mehboob and Zhihui Song, "The Strategic Importance of China-Pakistan Corridor (CPEC) and Its Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia," *CARC Research in Social Sciences*, <https://journals.carc.com.pk/index.php/CRISS/article/view/148>.

⁴³ M.A. Shahzad and Umbreen Javaid, "Strategic Significance of CPEC: A Game Changer for Pakistan," *Journal of Political Science* 27, no.1 (2021), <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/jlo27&div=9&id=&page=>

5. Socio-Economic Skeptic Narratives

Besides questioning the strategic intentions behind CPEC, the US and many other Western policymakers and thinkers believe that the BRI project is also an attempt at economic expansionism. Afro-centric, a study by Rapanyane (2021) concludes that China does not intend to aid Africa in development, rather it is interested in gaining unhindered access to African natural resources and minerals. As mentioned above, Pakistan is said to be one of the eight countries that are reported to be most susceptible to Debt Trap Diplomacy in the Chinese BRI Project.⁴⁴ In a US senate hearing in 2019, it was noted that three fundamental threats to the US and its allies are posed by BRI: trade manipulation, economic exploitation, and security erosion. Though it did not explicitly discuss the CPEC, the hearing told the tale well in terms of the general perception of ‘Chinese neo-colonial ambitions’ in Western policy arenas.

India also questions the economic viability of the CPEC, claiming that it could cause economic instability and saddle Pakistan with debt.⁴⁵ It is also alleged that the project will be beneficial for the governments of China and Pakistan, however, due to its exclusionary practices, it marginalizes the indigenous populations.

Such concerns regarding debt traps, exclusionary practices and lack of transparency have been criticized for want of solid evidence and are seen as a component of a larger effort to undermine CPEC’s credibility globally.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it needs to be mentioned that while the government institutions and state media in Pakistani projects CPEC as the game changer for the country’s economy and development, many independent analysts doubt some aspects of such projections. In contrast to the claims of the Planning Commission, ILO estimates that CPEC will create 400,000 jobs.⁴⁷ As per reports, the CPEC has so far been able to generate 236,000 jobs out of which 155,000

⁴⁴ Hurley, John, Scott Morris, and Gailyn Portelance, "Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective," *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development* 3, no.1 (2019):139–175.

⁴⁵ Rajeswai Ragagopalan, "India’s Latest Concerns With the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *Observer Research Foundation*, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/indias-latest-concerns-with-the-cpec>.

⁴⁶ "Debunking Concerns of New Delhi over CPEC," 33-46.

⁴⁷ Zia, Muhammad, and Shujaa Waqar. 2018. "Employment Outlook of China Pakistan Economic Corridor: A Meta-Analysis." Center for Excellence China – Pakistan Economic Corridor. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333421520>.

have been provided to Pakistani nationals.⁴⁸ 35 per cent of the jobs assigned to the Chinese nationals – many at the higher echelons of the employment being generated - do raise concerns among local communities and policy analysts. Also, it questions the credibility of the pledges for the project as a means to create employment.

As regards the debt trap allegations, Islamabad claims that the Chinese debt accounts for just 10 per cent of the entire debt employed by Pakistan. The Chinese debt also has a lower interest rate of just 2.9 per cent on average with a payback time of 20 to 25 years, with a 7-year grace period, which is considerably less burdensome compared to loans received from the Western economic organizations such as the Paris Club and the IMF.

Thus, the economic expansionist claims appear to be strategic. However, concerns raised over equitable resource distribution merit an objective evaluation and cannot be dismissed entirely, since the claimed exclusionary practices, even if unintended, may not only have developed a sense of resentment, but also, may have provided impetus to the activities of insurgents in Balochistan in recent years.⁴⁹

6. Environment Narratives

Increased global awareness about climate change effects and environmental issues pose sustainability challenge for CPEC as for many other largescale development projects. According to Erica Downs, “CPEC aims to meet Pakistan’s energy requirements by exploiting the country’s Thar coal reserves that are estimated to fulfill 75 per cent of energy needs and building new power stations.” Furthermore, there is the complex issue of extensive road networks being built which results in the removal of trees and forest reserves, making carbon emission management within the region a daunting task.

⁴⁸ The Stimson Center. 2023. "Ten Years of CPEC: A Decade of Disappointments." The Stimson Center. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/ten-years-of-cpec-a-decade-of-disappointments/>.

⁴⁹ Amna, Nazish. 2024. "Socio-Political and Economic Impacts of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on the Region: A Case Study of CPEC." Master's thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences. no.nmbu:wiseflow:7041574:57766851.pdf

The CPEC envisaged 7000 or so trucks carrying trade per day would emit more than 37 million tons of carbon dioxide.⁵⁰ Similarly, CPEC related thermal power plants have worsened the country's energy mix substantially in terms of environmental repercussions. However, despite such concerns expressed by experts and academics, since the inception of the project, the media has been instrumentalized towards propagating the economic gains and overlooking the environmental impact of the project.⁵¹

Coal-fired power plants, deforestation, and increased vehicle trafficking renders Pakistan more vulnerable to climate change effects by markedly increased emissions with little forests to absorb them.⁵² Ranked 31st in Climate Change Performance Index 2025 list, Pakistan needs to focus on progress towards its self-developed Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) targets, which aim to reduce emissions by 15 per cent and increase renewable energy to 60 per cent by 2030.⁵³ With CPEC projects in progress, the viability of the NDC targets will be seriously impacted. The governments of Pakistan and China must recognize the climate vulnerability factor and endeavor to tailor CPEC's phase 2.0 to a more environment friendly mode, otherwise, its economic sustainability may be compromised due to exacerbating climatic change induced vulnerabilities.

7. Conclusion

The skeptical narratives of CPEC labelling the grand project as a means to increasing Chinese influence in the region in geo-strategic terms, and the notion of Debt-Trap Diplomacy, are strategically aligned with the Indian and Western apprehensions regarding rising global influence of China, and their endeavors towards a 'containment.' New Delhi, as well as many western capitals, see China challenging the status quo -- of a favorable international dispensation -- and therefore a potential threat to their national interests.

⁵⁰ Shahzad Kouser, Subhan Ullah, and Abedullah, "Uncovering Pakistan's Environmental Risks and Remedies under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* 27, (2021):4661–4663. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-019-07428-5>.

⁵¹ Rabia Qusien and David Robbins. "Media Coverage of CPEC in Pakistan: The Case of the Missing Frame," *Climate and Development* 15, no.1 (2022): 30–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17565529.2022.2052258>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Pakistan Updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) 2021. Bonn: United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)," *Government of Pakistan*, <https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/NDC/2022-06/Pakistan%20Updated%20NDC%202021.pdf>.

India's insecurities are tied to its ambitions for territorial and maritime dominance in the South Asian and Indian Ocean regions respectively. Given the international recognition of GB's status as a Pakistani-administered province, India has no locus standi to voice discontent, especially given the scope of its own infrastructural development undertakings in the Indian Occupied Jammu & Kashmir. Conversely, China's potential access to the Strait of Hormuz, proximity to the Persian Gulf, and building an alternative to the Strait of Malacca route could offer it a strategic advantage vis a vis India, which wishes to see South Asia as her sole sphere of influence, not to mention the West. The strategic toll of the Pakistan-China Corridor on the Indian agenda is considerable, hence the narrative portraying it as a geo-strategic rather than geo-economic project.

Chinese diplomacy, political or economic, cannot be compared to forms of coercion practiced by any neocolonial models. It is an inherent right of countries to develop their economic capacity and infrastructure on their own, or through forging bilateral or multilateral arrangements, as borne out by various existing models of regional cooperation. And countries with the capacity to provide economic and technological support through mutually agreed frameworks cannot be maligned for doing so. Promoting connectivity and building on economic linkages can be mutually beneficial when based on mutual consent, and cannot be called into question per se, without any cogent reasons. It is also not uncommon for bigger states to spread their influence through economic assistance or investments; and so far as there is no coercion involved, such endeavors cannot be termed as inherently malignant.

At the same time, the critique of CPEC on grounds of environmental and socio-economic impacts cannot be dismissed as strategic alone and merits detailed evaluation, beyond the scope of this paper. It is suggested that such reasoning should be taken as constructive criticism that could contribute towards making CPEC more benign and productive, by designing its phase 2.0 in a more wholistic and outcome-oriented manner, placing greater emphasis on equitable resource distribution, transparency, environmental sustainability, employment generation, and technology transfer. It is also proposed that a special initiative be launched to develop the required skill set among young Pakistanis to increase the ratio of Pakistanis employed in the CPEC projects, particularly in the technical and managerial cadres. Given the scale of investment and resource input required, CPEC must become a landmark in promoting sustainable development, and a vehicle for accelerating regional cooperation through fostering connectivity.

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