

“AT ALL COSTS”: HOW PAKISTAN AND CHINA CONTROL THE NARRATIVE ON THE CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China’s 15-year, \$62 billion investment in Pakistan and the flagship project of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), took the five-decade long strategic alliance between the two countries to the economic sphere in 2015. CPEC is best seen as the economic peg in the wider strategic relationship between Pakistan and China.

While the plan’s details — the terms of the investments and loans, the full extent of the projects, and the overall cost to Pakistan — remain opaque, the Chinese and Pakistani governments have together zealously aimed to control and drive the narrative on CPEC, aggressively stamping out criticism.

Zhao Lijian, formerly China’s deputy chief of mission (DCM) in Islamabad, was a central character in China’s control of information on CPEC, hitting back against critics on social media from his perch at the Chinese Embassy. His success in that sphere saw him promoted to Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, and he is now a key player in China’s “wolf-warrior diplomacy” on the coronavirus pandemic.

In Pakistan, Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government sought a reset of CPEC, which was seen as closely aligned with the previous government, when it came into office in 2018. It saw swift pushback from China and from Pakistan’s military, with the chief of army staff issuing a telling statement from a visit to Beijing: “BRI with CPEC as its flagship is destined to succeed despite all odds and Pak Army shall ensure security of CPEC at all costs.”

The U.S. Department of State has spoken out in recent months against what it sees as China’s predatory lending to Pakistan. It argues that the plan’s terms benefit Chinese companies and workers, and are unsustainable for Pakistan, leading to its rising debt burden. China and Pakistan have both pushed back concertedly on the criticism. The strength of Pakistan’s pushback is notable in the context of Pakistan’s improving relations with the U.S. since 2018 through the Afghan peace process, and its reliance on the International Monetary Fund.

In the end, the tight control of the narrative on CPEC by both China and Pakistan and a lack of transparency on its terms prevents proper accountability of the venture. It would benefit Pakistan to allow some transparency on CPEC that might pressure both parties to move to terms that are equally beneficial to Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the flagship project of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, was announced with great fanfare in Pakistan in April 2015 during Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s tenure, and was inaugurated by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Islamabad that month. It promised \$46 billion in infrastructure and energy projects in the form of loans and investments over 15 years; the total was later revised upward to \$62 billion. About two-thirds of the project is said to be in terms of foreign direct investment, one-fourths in terms of concessional loans.¹ But the plan’s details — the terms of the investments and loans, the full extent of the projects, and the overall cost — were not revealed to the Pakistani parliament (which had not voted on it nor seen any planning documents), nor to the public.

Sharif had vowed to fix Pakistan’s acute energy shortages during his 2013 election campaign, and infrastructure had been a key component of each of his previous two terms in office. Accordingly, some key CPEC ventures that were announced at the time included a metro line in Lahore; the continued development of Baluchistan’s prized Gwadar port (which was the initial driver of the partnership); power generation; and road and rail connectivity.

CPEC is the largest economic venture that China (or, for that matter, any other country) has embarked on in Pakistan, capping a relationship that had been close for decades, one its leaders liked to describe with hyperbole as “higher than the highest mountain, deeper than the deepest ocean, and sweeter than honey.”² 82% of the Pakistani public said they had favorable views of China in 2015, the highest percentage of respondents in any country surveyed by the Pew Research Center that year.³ This is despite few cultural similarities. In interviews I conducted in high schools for my book, *Pakistan Under Siege*, in 2013-14, I asked students who Pakistan’s friends were. China was always a response — despite them not being able to elaborate on why that was the case.

The beginnings of the relationship were strategic: it was set into motion in the 1960s by a shared rivalry with India — specifically, by the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965. A few years later, Pakistan played an important role in the resumption of diplomatic ties between the United States and China: Pakistan facilitated National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger’s secret July 1971 trip to Beijing, which paved the way for President Richard Nixon’s official visit in 1972. China and Pakistan solidified their military partnership in the following decades, with China helping Pakistan significantly in terms of military aid, and also supporting Islamabad with its nuclear program. In 2015, CPEC rounded out the relationship by adding an economic dimension, which did not exist in any significant form before then.

China has long been characterized as an “all-weather friend” to Pakistan — especially drawing a contrast with what Pakistan perceived was an opportunistic, on-again, off-again relationship with the United States, its “fair-weather friend.” But the relationship is not wrinkle-free: Pakistan, with its security concerns, is not

always a convenient friend for China to support; and from China’s side, the help to Pakistan has not always been absolute. In 1971, as East Pakistan fought to secede from Pakistan, China did not come through as the Pakistani government had hoped. This set the tone for the relationship since then: “the oscillation between hope, self-deception, public exaggeration, and resigned realism on Pakistan’s part, and on China’s, a blend of tempered support, gentle scolding, and steely pragmatism,” as Andrew Small notes.⁴ Still, China became “Pakistan’s only reliable diplomatic, economic and military backer.”⁵



The Chinese and Pakistani governments have together zealously aimed to control and drive the narrative on CPEC, stamping out criticism, while providing little in the way of transparency or details on the project to the Pakistani public.

As CPEC was inaugurated in 2015, both sides heaped glowing praise upon each other. Since then, beyond the economic partnership visualized by the project has been another kind of collaboration: the Chinese and Pakistani governments have together zealously aimed to control and drive the narrative on CPEC, stamping out criticism, while providing little in the way of transparency or details on the project to the Pakistani public. This policy brief illustrates how they have done so.

THE “EXPOSÉ” OF CPEC’S MASTER PLAN

In May 2017, Pakistan’s premier English-language newspaper, Dawn, obtained a never-before seen copy of CPEC’s “long-term master plan.” In its reporting, Dawn highlighted the sectors beyond energy and infrastructure included in the plan — especially agriculture, fiberoptics and surveillance, and tourism and recreation. Dawn’s report also described China’s proposed involvement in Pakistan’s agricultural sector as something that hinged on complete Chinese control

of the agricultural supply chain in Pakistan. The report highlighted visa-free entry for Chinese nationals to Pakistan as well as a goal to disseminate Chinese culture as part of the long-term master plan.

All in all, Dawn asserted that the true scope of CPEC as revealed by this document was much wider than had been previously understood: “The plan envisages a deep and broad-based penetration of most sectors of Pakistan’s economy as well as its society by Chinese enterprises and culture. Its scope has no precedent in Pakistan’s history in terms of how far it opens up the domestic economy to participation by foreign enterprises.”⁶

The exposé set off alarm in Pakistan. The government counterpunched immediately: Ahsan Iqbal, the planning minister of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government, said that he was “appalled” by the story, that Dawn’s report was “one-sided and factually incorrect,” and that there was “definite angling in [the] story to malign CPEC by promoting fears.”⁷ He added that the long-term CPEC document that Dawn had referenced was “live” and subject to modifications, and that it reflected “aspirations” rather than actualities.⁸

There were genuine questions about the terms of CPEC investment and loans — one of the criticisms of the project is that the terms are favorable to China at the expense of Pakistan — and about the distribution of the project within the country, but the PML-N government’s response was to engage in aggressive damage control. Any questions raised were left unaddressed.

THE FAILURE OF IMRAN KHAN’S ATTEMPTED RESET

CPEC was originally meant to be inaugurated in the fall of 2014; opposition politician Imran Khan’s protests against Sharif’s government pushed the launch back to spring 2015. By Khan’s election as prime minister in the summer of 2018, Pakistan was in the middle of a debt crisis, necessitating a bailout. In the run-up to the election, a number of damaging reports had linked Pakistani debt to CPEC loans coming due.⁹ The reports were met with categorical denials from both the Chinese and Pakistani governments, long on rhetoric and short on details.

During his electoral campaign, Khan had promised he would review the terms of CPEC, and had linked CPEC projects with the ruling PML-N’s corruption; after his election, he said he would realign some of CPEC’s priorities.¹⁰ Khan at that point seems to have seen CPEC as more of a PML-N project, something he could roll back and redesign to his liking, and he may have underestimated the Pakistani military’s absolute backing of the venture.

In September 2018, with Pakistan’s external debt having mounted to \$96 billion, Khan’s minister for commerce, industry, and investment, Abdul Razzak Dawood, told the Financial Times: “The previous government did a bad job negotiating with China on CPEC [the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor] — they didn’t do their homework correctly and didn’t negotiate correctly so they gave away a lot.”¹¹ Dawood said that Khan had established a committee to “think through CPEC — all of the benefits and the liabilities. I think we should put everything on hold for a year so we can get our act together. Perhaps we can stretch CPEC out over another five years or so.”

This interview set off a firestorm, and Dawood was forced to quickly recant, saying his statements had been “taken out of context and distorted.”¹² He added: “Pakistan-China relations are impregnable and the government’s commitment to the CPEC is unwavering.”

In response to Dawood’s September 2018 interview, Shehbaz Sharif, Nawaz’s younger brother and the former chief minister of Punjab — whose main achievements and focus while in office centered around building infrastructure in his province — wrote on Twitter: “People of Pakistan are shocked at the irresponsibility of PTI [Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, Khan’s party] government, which is trying to undermine Pakistan-China strategic partnership, by speaking in the voice of our enemies on CPEC! We will resist & reject such conspiracies, our Chinese friends should rest assured.”¹³

Ten days after Dawood’s interview was published, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan’s chief of army staff (COAS), took a previously unannounced trip to China “on special invitation” from Xi, ostensibly for damage control. The military’s powerful public relations arm, Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR),

issued this statement after Bajwa’s meeting with Xi: “BRI with CPEC as its flagship is destined to succeed despite all odds and Pak Army shall ensure security of CPEC at all costs. COAS said that while we work for peace we need to stay strong to thwart designs of all inimical forces challenging our resolve and we greatly value Chinese support in this regard.”¹⁴ Khan didn’t end up making his first trip to China as prime minister until six weeks later, in November.

The language used by both Bajwa and Shehbaz Sharif is striking — the sense that “enemies,” “inimical forces,” and “conspiracies” were targeting CPEC and had to be countered “at all costs.”

After the backlash to Dawood’s comments, Khan’s government was not able to make or announce any fundamental changes to CPEC. By 2019, Khan had set up a CPEC Authority to work out details for a “timely completion of projects.”¹⁵ Retired army general Asim Bajwa (no relation to COAS Bajwa), who had been the head of ISPR when CPEC was inaugurated, was named the head of the CPEC Authority — no coincidence. Interestingly, Asim Bajwa has since also been named the special assistant to the prime minister on information, a cabinet level position. The joint portfolio of CPEC and information is striking.

A BLIND EYE TO THE UIGHURS

Pakistan’s control of information on matters related to China extends beyond CPEC. As international reporting has unveiled a disturbing picture of Chinese “re-education” and internment camps for Muslim Uighurs in China’s southern province of Xinjiang, Pakistan has turned a blind eye to the issue. For a country that claims to speak up for the rights of Muslims worldwide, especially for Palestinians and for Kashmiris, Pakistan’s silence has been notable. It makes the government vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, damaging its credibility. In a January 2020 interview with Deutsche Welle, prompted about human rights abuses in Xinjiang, Khan said: “We do not talk about things with China in public right now because they’re really sensitive. That’s how they deal with issues.”¹⁶ In this, he essentially acknowledged that remaining silent was a choice that Pakistan had made out of deference to China — which seems to have demanded that deference.

In a previous interview, Khan had claimed not to have heard much about the Uighur issue. There is no media coverage of the issue in Pakistan either — again, likely no accident. When Khan’s interviewer mentioned that Khan talked repeatedly about Muslims in Kashmir but not in Xinjiang, Khan argued that the scale of policies targeting Muslims in Kashmir and in India more broadly was far larger than in China.

A BLIND EYE TO PAKISTANI HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Disturbingly, Pakistan has also willfully ignored crimes committed against its own citizens through the human trafficking of young Pakistani women who have married Chinese men. The Associated Press reports that more than 600 Pakistani women have fallen victim to trafficking networks after marrying Chinese men, but Pakistan’s government has pressured the media to not report on this and has directly asked investigation officials to lay off the cases. An official interviewed by the AP said: “No one is doing anything to help these girls. The whole racket is continuing, and it is growing. Why? Because they know they can get away with it. The authorities won’t follow through, everyone is being pressured to not investigate.”¹⁷

AN AMBITIOUS, “WOLF WARRIOR” DIPLOMAT

China’s former deputy chief of mission at its embassy in Pakistan, Zhao Lijian, played a central role in the propagation of narratives on CPEC, as he perfected an aggressive social media fight-back strategy against criticisms of the venture. He started his tenure as DCM soon after CPEC was inaugurated, and would take on reporters and analysts who criticized or questioned aspects of CPEC projects directly on Twitter, calling out their “dirty lies.”¹⁸ Zhao acknowledged as much publicly: social media, he said, was “a weapon to counter these negative narratives [against CPEC].” His success in this role in Pakistan — and a viral Twitter spat with former U.S. National Security Advisor Susan Rice in July 2019 — saw him promoted to spokesman at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in August 2019. Zhao’s approach has been emblematic of a turn in China’s diplomacy — which some have termed “wolf-warrior” diplomacy — one clearly apparent in China’s

aggressive messaging on the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, Zhao came to global attention when he took to Twitter with a conspiracy theory pointing the finger away from China and at the United States for the emergence of the coronavirus. It is notable, of course, and not coincidental, that he honed these skills in his position at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, defending CPEC.¹⁹

THE BROADER MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Pakistan — which has controlled its narrative domestically on various fronts over the decades, especially for nationalist purposes — has had to “step up” its game on CPEC in its tight control of the narrative, ostensibly at least partly under China’s influence. In some ways, Pakistan seems to have adopted China’s model of controlling the press in its own approach to damage control on CPEC. This also coincides with increased curbs on its own media on domestic issues — especially on coverage critical of the military, on media outlets deemed generally unfavorable to the government, and on coverage of human rights abuses of its own citizens at the hands of the state.²⁰

THE STATE DEPARTMENT OFFENSIVE

Unsurprisingly, given its sharpening competition with China, the United States is wary of CPEC and the BRI, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR). In recent months, it has stepped up its criticism. In November 2019, the principal deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells, spoke in unusually strong terms about the negative impact of CPEC on Pakistan during a speech at the Wilson Center in Washington. She issued a statement at the same time in a Twitter thread: “OBOR is far from responsible in its economic practices. OBOR lacks transparent financing practices. Failure to repay can lead to unsustainable debt burdens, which can result in surrendering of assets and diminishing sovereignty.”²¹

She continued:

“The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a main initiative of OBOR intending to bring Pakistan closer to China by addressing infrastructure

needs, but potentially at an unsustainable cost to Pakistan. Inflated pricing of power & development projects isn’t good for the Pakistani people. CPEC almost always takes the form of burdensome loans or financing with Chinese state-owned enterprises and the Chinese government profiting. This is hardly the ‘peace and win-win cooperation’ OBOR is supposed to facilitate.”²²

Wells’ main criticisms center around the unsustainability of Chinese loans, and the argument that projects would primarily use Chinese workers and supplies, and that Chinese enterprises and the Chinese government would profit at Pakistan’s expense. Wells also drew a sharp contrast with U.S. investments in Pakistan, which she said help build local capacity and sustainable growth.

Pakistan and China immediately reacted to Wells’ speech. The Chinese ambassador in Islamabad called on Pakistan’s planning minister Asad Umar the next day, ostensibly to discuss the response to the speech. Pakistan’s foreign minister said that Pakistan “rejected that [Wells’] view... We do not think that the burden of CPEC will increase our debt burden.”²³ The strength of Pakistan’s pushback is notable in the context of Pakistan’s improving relations with the U.S. since 2018 through the Afghan peace process, and its reliance on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for funding. Umar acknowledged Pakistan’s debt had mounted, but asserted “that has nothing to do with China.” The Pakistani government presented some numbers to justify its statements — debt owed to China (\$18 billion) as a fraction of Pakistan’s overall public debt (\$74 billion), for one, noting that the CPEC debt amounted to \$4.9 billion²⁴ — but still no complete picture of costs and projects. A Bloomberg report at the time noted that Pakistan owed China \$6.7 billion in commercial loans through 2022; it owed the IMF \$2.8 billion in that same time period.²⁵

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Geng Shuang, spoke out against Wells’ speech in harsher terms: he said that it was a “repetition of old slander” against China, CPEC, and the BRI, and that America was “misguided by evil calculations.”²⁶

AFTER COVID-19

Earlier this year, before the novel coronavirus spread from China to other countries, Pakistan showed a willingness to abandon its own citizens in a bid to keep Beijing happy. As many other nations evacuated citizens from China, up to 800 Pakistani students in the epicenter, Wuhan, were left stranded there by Pakistan. Not wanting to embarrass China, its key partner, seems to have been a key factor in this decision — as was Pakistan’s poor health system and its inability to handle coronavirus cases at home.²⁷

In mid-March, with COVID-19 cases rising in Pakistan, President Arif Alvi visited China on Xi’s invitation. The two men spoke about the lessons learned from China’s fight against the coronavirus, and Beijing pledged to offer Pakistan support as it deals with the coronavirus. China has since stepped in to provide Pakistan with masks and medical equipment. A plane carrying one million masks, including N-95 masks, arrived in Pakistan on March 25. (Notably, America has also offered support, including \$7.5 million dollars to help with Pakistan’s coronavirus relief program, which disburses cash to needy families.) On May 15, Pakistan’s Senate adopted a resolution thanking China for its help in Pakistan’s fight against the coronavirus. At least 200 of the students stranded in Wuhan were also repatriated to Pakistan in mid-May.

In April, facing the economic fallout of COVID-19, Pakistan asked China for easier repayment terms for \$30 billion worth of power project loans. Imran Khan also made an appeal to wealthy countries and multilateral institutions for debt relief for all developing countries; the G-20, including China, has agreed to freeze debt for debtors including Pakistan for the rest of the year.

Meanwhile, in a discussion at the Atlantic Council on May 20, Wells reiterated U.S. concerns about CPEC and argued Pakistan should attempt to renegotiate the terms of CPEC with China (or that China should waive off the debt) in light of the economic hardship caused by COVID-19, once again calling the terms of the lending “predatory, unsustainable, and unfair” and calling out its lack of transparency.²⁸ The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad promptly responded that Wells’ comments were “another doomed attempt to defame Sino-Pak relations.”²⁹

WHAT SUSTAINS THE CHINA-PAKISTAN PARTNERSHIP

Without CPEC’s complete scope and full set of terms available for the public to see, it is difficult to draw conclusions about benefits and costs to each of the parties. But if one were to conjecture about the balance between the two countries: given that the stronger of the two countries (by far) in the relationship is China, and that it is the investor and Pakistan — which certainly has infrastructure and energy needs — is on the receiving end, it would seem that China has set the terms of the venture to favor itself. From the Chinese side, then, CPEC would bring economic benefits (for Xinjiang province, in particular), along with other advantages. China’s domestic narrative on CPEC is that “making Pakistan a successful model friend is a way of bolstering China’s international image” and it helps “prove that China’s development model can be exported.”³⁰ The relationship with Pakistan, and thus CPEC, benefits China in its strategic competition with the United States and India.³¹ China can also gently pressure Pakistan on terrorism concerns, especially to control attacks against Chinese workers — though the pressure is limited, and not always successful — and hopes to use this to allay its own fears of extremism in Xinjiang.

What benefits does CPEC provide to Pakistan? Why does Pakistan want to control the narrative on CPEC, at the expense of transparency — “at all costs”?



The Pakistan-China alliance continues to serve strategic goals, helping the two countries counter the growing relationship between the U.S. and India — and as such, Pakistan hopes that CPEC’s economic goals will have strategic spillover benefits.

CPEC is best seen as the economic peg in a wider relationship between the two countries. In 2015, as Pakistan was beginning to climb out of years of terrorist

violence, few countries were willing to invest in the country; China did, and no doubt economic imperatives — the desperate gaps it had in power generation and the need for investment at a time when it was seeing dwindling aid from the rest of the world — played an outsized role in Pakistan signing on to CPEC. Beyond that, a close alliance with a great power is of obvious benefit to Pakistan, as it also puts pressure on the United States to maintain a relationship with Pakistan given U.S.-China competition. The Pakistan-China alliance continues to serve strategic goals, helping the two countries counter the growing relationship between the U.S. and India — and as such, Pakistan hopes that CPEC’s economic goals will have strategic spillover benefits.

Pakistan’s military no doubt plays a role, as the security side of the relationship has long been crucial. There are concerns that Pakistan’s military, which controls a number of industries in the country, along with prized land in urban centers and across the country, would stand to financially benefit from CPEC. The New York Times went as far as to claim that it “stands to fill its coffers with millions of dollars through CPEC as the military’s construction companies win infrastructure bids”³² — a story that DCM Zhao, it should be noted, attacked on Twitter as the “joke of the year.”³³ Recent reporting notes that in May 2020, Pakistan’s government awarded a \$5.8 billion dam-building contract to a joint venture of a Chinese state-owned company with the commercial unit of the Pakistani army.³⁴ This, along with the strategic spillovers to an economic partnership, helps explain the strength of Pakistan’s support for the venture. It also explains the appointment of Asim Bajwa — formerly best known as a highly effective spokesman for Pakistan’s military — as chairman of the CPEC Authority in 2019.

Pakistan also hopes for a number of tangible benefits in the near term from its close relationship with China — including a favorable turn in Pakistan’s status with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international watchdog that combats money laundering and terrorist financing. Pakistan has been on the FATF “greylist” for insufficient action on these fronts since 2018, and a blacklisting would deal a major blow to Pakistan, including by reducing investment and growth. As of 2019, China is the president of FATF, and Pakistan hopes that China can help remove Pakistan’s name

from the greylist. At its FATF status review in February 2020, Pakistan was granted additional time to show that it had met the benchmarks set by FATF to be removed from the greylist. China acknowledged Pakistan’s progress to date, and it encouraged it to do more to meet the benchmarks, in a move that perfectly encapsulates Small’s summation of the relationship between the two countries: “would [China] be there for Pakistan in its hour of need? The answer in 1971, and ever since, has been: only up to a point.”³⁵ For Pakistan, this seems to be good enough.

AN OVERRIDING FOCUS ON CONTROLLING INFORMATION

Perhaps nothing better illustrates how closely CPEC and information are tied together than the appointments of two men mentioned during the course of this paper: Asim Bajwa, the former military spokesman of Pakistan, appointed director of the CPEC authority last year, and special assistant to Prime Minister Khan on information and broadcasting this year; and Zhao Lijian, the former DCM of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, famous for his Twitter clapbacks on CPEC, appointed spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in 2019, who has taken his approach to a global stage. Neither is a coincidence; each illustrates how important an effective control of information is to both sides on this issue. For Beijing, this is part of a larger strategy and approach; in Pakistan, it has found a malleable, all-too-willing partner.

In the end, the tight control of the narrative on CPEC by both China and Pakistan, and a lack of transparency on its terms, prevents proper accountability of the venture. It would benefit Pakistan to allow some transparency on CPEC that might pressure both parties to move to terms that are favorable to Pakistan — but I suspect allowing such transparency is not in Pakistan’s hands, and it seems to be a cost that Pakistan is happy to bear for the strategic goals that CPEC serves for it. The COVID-19 moment, however, has offered Pakistan a crucial and unforeseen opportunity to try and renegotiate its CPEC loans, and the renewed global spotlight on China’s role as creditor to struggling economies across Asia and Africa affords the Pakistani government a rare chance to be more transparent with the Pakistani public on the terms of its partnership with China. It should take it.

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