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Global China and Pakistan's federal politics: 10 years of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

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ABSTRACT

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most prominent projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative. While its geopolitical and financial implications have received much attention, CPEC's mediation through the structures of Pakistan's federal system has remained comparatively understudied. To fill this gap, this article analyses CPEC's evolution between 2013 and 2023, revealing both the continuing centralisation of the management of CPEC and the inequitable distribution of projects that have characterised its implementation. The analysis also addresses whether domestic political structures or external pressures explain this inequity. The article draws on a triangulation of official CPEC data collated since 2018, meeting minutes of key decision-making bodies, budgetary analysis and semi-structured interviews. In doing so, this article contributes to understanding global China's encounters with local dynamics.

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Introduction

In early July 2013, immediately after taking the oath for his third tenure as Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif's maiden trip abroad was to Beijing. During the visit, the two countries signed a series of Memorandum of Understandings (MoU) that de facto initiated the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Initially hailed as the 'flagship project' of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and as a potential 'game changer' for Pakistan, CPEC aimed to boost Pakistan's economy through energy generation and a series of infrastructure projects. For many observers it also provided proof of Chinese military ambition – particularly the development of the port of Gwadar – which would give

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China access to the Indian Ocean and increase tensions with Quad members, especially the US, Australia and India.

Given its centrality in the BRI, the importance of CPEC transcends domestic Pakistani politics as it represents an important testing ground for Beijing's ability to navigate and adapt to the complexities of domestic political realities in BRI partner countries. The distributional politics in Pakistan's federal institutional setup and the fragile equilibrium between elected representatives and military officials were all challenges that Beijing had previously engaged with only from afar. CPEC changed all this, bringing China into Pakistan's domestic politics in an unprecedented way. At the same time, CPEC became internalised in Pakistan's governance structure and wider political dynamics.

The scale of CPEC, at least in its initial formulation of US\$46 billion, meant that virtually every geographical area of Pakistan would have reaped the benefits. From fibre optics in Gilgit-Baltistan on the border with Xinjiang, to the development of the port of Gwadar on the Indian Ocean and hydroelectric power plants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) CPEC had the potential to have a truly transformative effect. However, 10 years and US\$25 billion worth of investments later, CPEC's implementation has been less equitably distributed than originally envisaged, increasing centre-province and inter-provincial tensions as domestic political realities have shaped the BRI in important ways.

This article's focus on how local dynamics shape the BRI implementation advances a recent wave of scholarship on China's global infrastructure investments. In the early phases of the BRI, scholars and analysts focused their attention on the geopolitical implications of the initiative (Callahan, 2016; Ferdinand, 2016; Clarke, 2017; Mações, 2018; Shen & Chan, 2018; Zhou & Mario, 2018). It is only more recently that scholarship has started paying closer attention to how domestic politics in BRI host countries significantly shape the implementation of the projects (Liu & Lim, 2019; Rowedder, 2020; Adeney & Boni, 2021; Barton, 2022; Safdar, 2022; van der Zwan, 2022; Abb, 2023; Abb et al., 2024). Situated within this latter strand, our contribution to the burgeoning 'local turn' in BRI studies is two-fold: first, our analysis foreshadows the role that countries hosting Chinese investments play in the making of what is now known as 'global China' (Lee, 2022). Rather than seeing partner countries as passive bystanders in front of a mighty China, through sustained engagement with original data on CPEC since 2008 and multiple rounds of semi-structured interviews¹ we present a more nuanced and granular understanding of how the BRI has unfolded on the ground. This is key as it enables us to ask questions, and provide answers, around 'agency (who), interest (why), method (how) and consequences (so what)' related to China's global engagements (Lee, 2022, pp. 316–317). In so doing, our second contribution is to confirm the dangers of what Henry Hale (2004) has termed a 'core region' within federal systems by demonstrating how the federal and the provincial governments have politicised CPEC,

refusing to distribute projects and resources equitably. Against such a backdrop, our analysis reveals the (still) centralised management of CPEC, the result of civilian political dynamics as much as the military's preferences.

To develop these points, the paper proceeds as follows: the first section contextualises the evolution of CPEC against the backdrop of Pakistan's federalism; the second section analyses the decision-making process, zooming in on the representativeness (or lack thereof) of the institutional mechanisms put in place to steer the implementation of CPEC; the third section focuses on the development of CPEC projects with a particular focus on 'Early Harvest Projects'. It concludes with an assessment of what the 'CPEC dream' reveals about domestic agency in the face of a regional (and global) power like China, how the latter affects intergovernmental relations within federal systems, and how the position of Punjab as the core region of Pakistan has skewed the distribution of CPEC's benefits.

Pakistan's federation: an overview

Before analysing the federal politics of CPEC, it is important to contextualise the dynamics pertaining to the first 10 years of Chinese investments in Pakistan against the backdrop of Pakistan's federalism. Taking a long-term view is crucial to identify dynamics that are specific to CPEC rather than those that pre-date Beijing's entanglement in Pakistan's domestic politics.

Pakistan formally adopted federal institutions in its 1956 constitution. The balance of power between the different provinces was a key reason for the delay in inaugurating the constitution. The western wing of Pakistan sought to curtail the demographic power of East Pakistan. They did so through two mechanisms: creating a federation with only two units – East and West Pakistan – and; creating a unicameral legislative assembly with equal representation of the two units, despite East Pakistan's demographic majority. This was in sharp contrast to India, which also redrew its provincial/state boundaries but did so along linguistic lines. The merger of all the provinces and princely states within the western territory of Pakistan into one unit created a strong counterpoint to East Pakistan but did so by marginalising the linguistic and regional communities living there (Adeney, 2007; Ayres, 2009; Bhattacharyya, 2010). In the 1950s finances were divided between the two provinces based on various criteria. East Pakistan lagged behind West Pakistan in its receipts of central transfers between 1948 and 1971, only receiving over 50 per cent of the transfers in the 1969–1970 fiscal year, despite having over 50 per cent of the population (data adapted from Adeney & Boni, 2022a).

The underdevelopment of the eastern wing coupled with its underrepresentation in key state institutions (Kennedy, 1987; Nawaz, 2008; Adeney, 2009), precipitated calls for more autonomy, culminating ultimately in the

secession of Bangladesh in 1971. The federation of Pakistan that emerged from the ruins included only four provinces (whose borders had been constituted in 1970), a very small number of units in comparative federal terms, and one associated with instability and failure (Watts, 1999; Adeney, 2007). In contrast to the pre-1971 federation, the formula for distributing resources between the provinces was revised to one determined by the population of the provinces. As the province with the majority of the population – Punjab was allocated between 60 per cent (1974) and 56 per cent (2006) of transfers from the centre to the provinces. This meant that the province with the highest Human Development Index (UNDP, 2017, p. 9) – Punjab – reaped the economic benefits of the federation.

Pakistan's history as a federation has thus been characterised by continuing tensions, both between the provinces and the central government, as well as by inter-provincial grievances (Sayeed, 1954; Rakisits, 1988; Adeney, 2007; Bhattacharyya, 2010; Waseem, 2011; Faiz, 2015). Although Balochistan has much higher poverty levels (World Bank, 2013, p. 25) a structural incentive was built into the design of the federation to continue the population-based allocation of resources – Punjab returns most seats in the National Assembly (although the four provinces each have equal representation in the Senate). This has created a strong incentive for all parties, no matter what their 'ethno-linguistic base' to campaign in the Punjab (interview 1, May 2008).

The 18th Amendment and the 2010 award of the National Finance Commission changed the horizontal distribution of resources, allowing criteria other than population to determine the fiscal allocation (including poverty/backwardness, revenue generation and collection, and low population density) (Adeney, 2012, 549). However, while provincial population is now used to allocate only 82 per cent of the award, Punjab's share of the fiscal transfers from the federal government was reduced to just under 52 per cent, it still receives the majority.

Methodology

We have had sustained engagement with the progress of CPEC since 2014, bi-annually compiling an original dataset on the progress of CPEC projects using official data (Adeney & Boni, 2024). Although it is not possible to depend entirely on the veracity of this published material (particularly in terms of predicted completion rates or job creation numbers) as CPEC is a politically sensitive topic, the cataloguing of the information presented on the different projects has enabled us to draw conclusions about the prioritisation of the different projects and the different funding mechanisms. Our dataset has been carefully triangulated through three types of sources. First, we rely on contemporaneous reporting from journalists in the quality English language

Pakistan news media. This reporting gives details of the minutes of meetings of the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) and Joint Working Groups (JWG), even when minutes are not publicly available; reports the inauguration of projects of CPEC (or their lack); and seemingly innocuous details relating to specific projects, for example delays being protested by provincial or national politicians, the acquisition of land or the signing of a construction contract. Second, we rely on Pakistan economic reporting. These include Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) annual reports (Government of Pakistan, 2017-2023), containing a line-by-line annual allocation of funding to different projects and the source(s) of the funding (foreign or domestic); State Bank of Pakistan annual reports, Ministry of Finance reports and its Annual Economic surveys. These economic data provide granular information as to the source of foreign funding and whether the funding is a grant or a loan. They also allow us to track the progress (or lack thereof) of a project, identifying the scale of budgetary allocations in a particular financial year, or whether the project has been removed from the PSDP. Finally, we have conducted multiple rounds of semi-structured elite interviews in Pakistan (presented in the appendix) between 2008 and 2021, spanning the governments of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) (2008-2013), the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) (2013-2018) and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) (2018-2022). We have supplemented our analysis by using the Provincial Autonomy Dataset (1956-2020) collected and coded as part of the Decentralization project (Adeney & Boni, 2022a, 2022b). This has enabled us to present a more nuanced and granular understanding of how the BRI has unfolded on the ground.

CPEC's institutional centralisation

Given CPEC's prominence within Pakistan's political landscape, as well as its development potential, it is not surprising that pre-existing centre-province tensions were mirrored in conflicts over the design and implementation of CPEC. Thus, while the Pakistani government initially hailed CPEC as an 'all-Pakistan' project encompassing three routes (an eastern, central and western alignment) and its original aim was to encourage development in peripheral regions (Guluzian, 2017), it was clear that the focus was on the road networks on the eastern route through Punjab and Sindh. Minutes of the meetings of the JCC – the chief decision-making body co-headed by the Minister of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives of Pakistan and the National Development and Reform Commission of China – corroborate this view (Governments of Pakistan and China, 2014).

Politicians from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa claimed that their provinces were being bypassed and lamented that the decision-making process around CPEC was opaque and it did not take provincial

considerations on board. Imran Khan, leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) who were in power in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – argued against a longer route that would benefit Punjab (Express Tribune, 2015b). Politicians from all provinces pointed to the lack of inclusion in the JCC of chief ministers of provinces (something which was partly mitigated from 2016 onwards). They also decried the absence of discussions around CPEC in meetings of the Council of Common Interests, an important federal institution intended to promote intergovernmental coordination, especially after the 18th Amendment (Boni & Adeney, 2020). The federal government tried to allay some of these concerns by convening an All-Party Conference (APC) in May 2015 to build consensus around the corridor's alignment and to show China a united political front on CPEC (The Express Tribune, 2015a).

The notes of the JCC meeting in November 2015 reflect the government's attempt at recalibrating the narrative around the corridor's alignment. The minutes report the 'one corridor with multiple passages' framing, a clear hint at the need expressed by Balochistan and KP to see their interests protected and included in CPEC. The notes mention that such a decision was agreed at the 3rd meeting of the JWG on Transport Infrastructure, and that the 'one corridor multiple passages formulation' was 'aiming at directly benefitting the socio-economic development of Pakistan, esp. the western and north-western regions, and providing effective connectivity to Gwadar' (Governments of Pakistan and China, 2015, p. 83). Despite these promises, our analysis demonstrates that the development of the eastern route through Sindh and Punjab was prioritised over the western one, at the least in the first phase of CPEC.

The choice of the eastern route confirmed the domination of the Punjab within the political structures of the federation. As the province with a majority of the population and a majority of seats in the National Assembly it is easily defined as a 'core' province of the federation (Hale, 2004). Much of CPEC's eastern route was located within the constituencies of the ruling party – the PML-N – and the motorway to Islamabad zigzags as it goes through the different constituencies of the PML-N (interview 4, February 2020). The grievances expressed by Balochistan and KP regarding the lack of transparency and the exclusion from the decision-making process, especially regarding the JCC and CCI, represented an important reminder of the complexities of implementing BRI projects against the backdrop of Pakistan's distributional politics. However, it is essential to point out that China's interests were not being ignored, as the Chinese were keen to develop existing roads and avoid 'building new ones from scratch' (interview 3, May 2018). Punjab, as the most developed province before the CPEC investments, thus capitalised on its first mover's advantage.

The web of centre-province and inter-provincial tensions just outlined reflects wider dynamics in Pakistan's federation. According to the 'Provincial

Autonomy 1956-2020' dataset (Adeney & Boni, 2022b), Pakistan's federation has been centralised overall. While it should not be surprising that CPEC has followed the same trend, it is nevertheless important to shed light on the internal institutional structures through which CPEC has been implemented, as they reveal the dynamics that characterised CPEC's centralisation and the extent to which an external power can influence domestic political structures.

As noted in Table 1, the most important decision-making structure of CPEC is the JCC, which first met in August 2013. Full provincial representation was *only* included on the JCC in 2016, when several decisions related to the Early Harvest Projects – those that were being prioritised – had *already* been taken (interview 3, May 2018). The provinces now also have input into the JWG, some of which were set up even before CPEC was officially launched (for example, on energy cooperation) (Chinese Embassy Pakistan, 2011). The JWGs are specialist committees, including both Pakistani and Chinese representatives, concentrating on specific areas of CPEC – such as energy, transport, agriculture. There are now eleven JWGs. Although the provinces now have representation on these JWGs, the procedure to determine which of the provincially supported projects are taken forward to the JCC is unclear, (interview 5, February 2020). In some cases, inter-provincial tensions were leveraged within the JCC by provincial governments to get 'their' projects added to the CPEC portfolio. The Quetta Mass Transit project is a case in point. Its inclusion was agreed in principle in December 2016 at the 6th JCC meeting (Governments of Pakistan and China, 2016) and confirmed in November 2017 at the 7th meeting, alongside mass transit projects in Karachi and Peshawar after provincial governments complained about the only scheme being in Punjab (Rana, 2019). However, many provincial projects, despite acceptance at the JCC, did not materialise because of their

Table 1. Decision-making bodies established to deal with CPEC.

Decision-making structure	Year of creation	Chair	Provinces included	Still functioning
Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC)	2013	Minister for Planning Development and Reform (Pakistan) and vice-chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission (China)	Only since 2016	Yes (11 meetings held)
Cabinet Committee on CPEC since June 2022 renamed the Cabinet Committee on Chinese Investment Projects (CCoCIP)	2018	Minister for Planning, Development & Reform	No	Yes (46 meetings between 2017 and 2020)
CPEC Authority	2019	Appointed head	No	Abolished in August 2022
Pak-China Relations Steering Committee	2021	Minister for Planning, Development and Reform	Yes	4 meetings up to Dec 2021

lack of financial viability. This was the case with the Quetta Mass Transit project (Rana, 2019). One interviewee (interview 7, March 2020) argued that many projects were only included on the JCC to allow the centre to argue that they had promoted the project to the Chinese, even if they were subsequently not implemented. This demonstrates the way that CPEC was leveraged for domestic political considerations.

As Table 1 shows, a number of decision-making bodies have been created over time to deal with CPEC, including: the Cabinet Committee on CPEC (a policymaking forum); the CPEC Authority; and the Pak-China Relations Steering Committee, in addition to parliamentary bodies whose functions were primarily advisory.

The Pak-China Relations Steering Committee includes senior provincial delegates, but it also has representatives from the 'armed forces and intelligence agencies'. Its purpose is to coordinate and guide the implementation of CPEC projects (Rana, 2021). The military's inclusion mirrors the process adopted in the creation of the CPEC Authority – headed by a retired army general, which institutionalised the military's role in decision-making. The CPEC Authority was created in October 2019 through a presidential ordinance and legislated into existence through the CPEC Authority Act of 2021 (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2021). The creation of the CPEC Authority was an attempt at replacing the civilian leadership at the helm of CPEC-related affairs (and had previously been resisted by Nawaz Sharif for this reason) and to provide a dedicated, one-stop shop to deal with CPEC in an efficient manner. We found that opinion was sharply divided on the necessity for the CPEC Authority, even within the bureaucracy. One provincial economic bureaucrat argued that the Planning Commission had had major capacity issues, with only one project officer, unable to communicate properly with the provinces and that it was a 'complete hodgepodge' (interview 4, February 2020). In contrast, another bureaucrat (interview 6, February 2020) argued that the CPEC Authority could become the focal secretariat for the JCC, but did not have the capacity to manage more than 20–30 projects. What we can be certain of is that although the CPEC Authority never functioned properly and was side-lined following the ouster of the PTI government in April 2022, its establishment represented an important reminder of the centralising tendencies surrounding CPEC, and the difficulty in reconciling Pakistan's fragmented and cumbersome decision-making process with China's. Politicians complained that the provinces were excluded from the CPEC Authority's structures. In February 2022, the then Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Planning and Development, Saleem Mandivala, asked the Special Assistant to the PM: 'Why do you object to the due representation of provinces in the CPEC Authority?' (Hanif, 2022). Similar remarks were echoed by Senator Sherry Rehman, who argued that provincial representation within the CPEC Authority was necessary as the 18th Amendment

devolved powers to the provinces in all spheres, including developmental projects (Hanif, 2022). Despite the abolition of the CPEC Authority in August 2022 (although only after careful consultation with China), the military and intelligence services retained a formal role in CPEC through their membership of the Pak-China Relations Steering Committee.

In addition to the structures that were created specifically to deal with the development of CPEC, the latter has affected the dynamics of centre-province relations. This can be revealed through the working of other federal institutions such as the Executive Committee of the National Economic Coordination Council (ECNEC), the CCI and how the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have been developed (or not). Given that CPEC impacted on many areas of provincial jurisdiction, we would have expected to have seen CPEC high on the agenda in the discussions of the Council for Common Interest, given that the CCI regulates areas that are crucial for CPEC projects (Boni & Adeney, 2020, p. 447). In the first few years of CPEC this did not happen, to the chagrin of the Senate Committee on CPEC. And as late as 2021, the Provincial Minister for Social Welfare and Special Education of Balochistan, Asad Baloch, claimed that CPEC was not benefitting the people of Balochistan (ANI, 2021). These remarks from provincial politicians are not new. Since the inception of CPEC, politicians from other provinces termed it the 'Punjab-China Economic Corridor' (Raza, 2015).

With regards to SEZs, despite attempts to distribute them across all four provinces and with demands of chief ministers playing a large role in the location of the sites for SEZs (see Adeney & Boni, 2021 for a discussion of the (re)location of Rashakai and Allama Iqbal SEZ for political reasons), the cumbersome approval process, partly the result of overlapping competencies between the federal and the provincial governments, resulted in the federal government setting up an automated MIS Approval Module to act 'as a one-window for SEZ's in Pakistan' (The News, 2021). A similar centralising trend could be observed as part of the provision of utilities (for example electricity and gas) to the SEZ. After delays in providing utilities (with provinces not wanting to undertake such a large outlay in advance of the plots in the zones being sold), in 2021 the federal government determined that in 'order to fast-track development of these SEZs, the federal government has ensured provision of utilities to the designated zeropoint of these SEZs and as such allocated Rs4 billion in the Federal PSDP FY2021' (Government of Pakistan, 2021, p. 343). The federal government has effectively usurped provincial responsibilities.

The institutional centralisation outlined in this section is therefore the result of both external stimuli coming from China and domestic political pressures, particularly as part of the tense civil-military relations characterising the country's political dynamics (Boni, 2019). On the one hand, the establishment of decision-making structures at federal level and of the JCC is in response to China's desire to have a single point of contact to agree the

projects coming under the aegis of CPEC (Boni & Adeney, 2020). On the other hand, the increased centralisation observed under the PML-N government was the result of the civilian government's desire to control CPEC without military interference. In a similar fashion, the decision to establish the CPEC Authority reflects the military's increased sway over CPEC, under the civilian government of Imran Khan.

Evaluating CPEC's distribution across Pakistan

As more than 10 years have now passed since the first MoUs on CPEC were signed, this section focuses on analysing how and why CPEC projects were distributed across Pakistan's provinces. The analysis focuses on energy, infrastructure and Gwadar, both for comparative purposes with earlier studies (for example, Boni & Adeney, 2020) but also because these are the official classifications that China and Pakistan have used to organise the bulk of CPEC. The ensuing sections reveal only a partial re-calibration of the earlier trends observed regarding the inequitable distribution of projects across the country.

Energy projects

Energy generation was high on the agenda of the first phase of CPEC, primarily because the governing PML-N promised to solve the 'energy crisis' in its election manifesto. The minutes of the 1st JCC meeting in August 2013 record Pakistan's position that reviving the energy sector was essential for economic revival (Governments of Pakistan and China, 2013). China's representative in the meeting agreed to follow the priorities assigned to projects by Pakistan's officials (Governments of Pakistan and China, 2013). Before any initiatives could be taken, resolving the plans for energy was the prerequisite (interview 4, February 2020). However, the Chinese side added the caveat that efficient implementation was also needed (Adeney & Boni, 2021).

China's desire to work on areas which would ensure high efficiency (and high profits for the Chinese companies running them (Rana 2022)) chimed

Table 2. Status of CPEC energy projects.

Province	Total	Completed	Under construction	Percent completed in the province
Punjab	4 (22.2%)	4 (25%)	0	100
Sindh	10 (55.6%)	10 (62.5%)	0	100
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	1 (5.6%)	0	1 (50%)	0
Balochistan	2 (11.1%)	1 (6.3%)	1 (50%)	50
Gilgit-Baltistan	0	0	0	N/A
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	1 (5.6%)	1 (6.3%)	0	100
Totals	18	16	2	88.9

Source: Government of Pakistan (2024) n.b. Some projects across two provinces are double counted. All data correct as of 13 March 2024.

with the federal government's priorities on energy. This resulted in the picture presented in [Table 2](#). Sindh and Punjab were allocated 78 per cent of the CPEC energy projects, all of which have been completed. On the contrary, and evidence of the inequitable distribution of projects, Balochistan and KP were assigned only 17 per cent, of which only 6 per cent (one project) have been completed. This was despite a PML-N Senator asserting in 2017 that Sindh and Balochistan would get the majority of the power projects (Khan, 2017) and the Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Reform, Ahsan Iqbal, heavily associated with the CPEC projects stating (during a visit to Balochistan) that '[o]ut of the \$35bn (allocated to energy projects under CPEC), \$11bn would be spent in Sindh while \$9bn would be allocated to Balochistan' (Dawn, 2016). In contrast, Balochistan was only allocated US \$2.5 billion for energy projects, compared to the allocation of US\$ 7.3 billion for Punjab (Boni & Adeney, 2020, p. 460).

The delay in constructing the project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa can partially be attributed to the fact that the project is a hydroelectric power station, which has a much longer lead time. More revealing is the delay over constructing the coal-fired power station in Gwadar, which has not even started. Decisions concerning its fate have been made, and re-made by different prime ministers, in consultation with, or under direction of, China (Isaad, 2023). There has been a striking lack of provincial input into the construction of an important part of the local economy even though the '[d]evelopment of industries, where development under Federal control is declared by Federal law to be expedient in the public interest' is allocated to Part II of the Federal Legislative List (Item 3; National Assembly of Pakistan, 2012). Items listed on Part II come under the purview of the CCI, demonstrating the centralisation of decision-making.

The inequitable distribution observed in energy projects can be explained by several factors. First, China's desire to develop projects across those areas that were more populous and had a stronger industrial base (and hence economic potential) was coupled with the PML-N's desire to make sure that its constituencies across the core region of Punjab would see the benefits of Chinese investments. Second, from a technical perspective, locating power plants in remote areas without accompanying this decision with investments in the transmission lines would have made their impact on Pakistan's electricity shortages negligible. As such, Punjab's stronger and more advanced industrial base was a clear favourite, ensuring that projects built under CPEC could come on the grid more quickly. Third, the nature of the projects themselves is a key aspect to be considered, especially as far as the completion rates are concerned. A hydroelectric power plant requires more time to be completed than a coal-fired one, hence the delay that we see in some of the project completion rates.

Infrastructure projects

In addition to energy generation, another key area of CPEC was investment in infrastructure. Here we see more involvement of the ECNEC.² The ECNEC's role is to 'consider and decide accordingly, Public Sector Development Program Schemes (Federal/Provincial)' (Government of Pakistan, 2022a). It is a constitutionally mandated body (Article 156) chaired by the Prime Minister and including the chief ministers of the provinces (plus one other member nominated by each chief minister). As Mukhtar notes, its reconstituted membership after the 18th Amendment, including two members from each province 'made the National Economic Council more responsive to provincial interests' (2013, p. 6). Between 2013 and 2021, it met between five and 11 times per year (Cabinet Division, 2014–2021; Government of Pakistan, 2022b). Many of its decisions have been in reference to CPEC transport projects, for example the Zhob to Kuclak Road CPEC Western Corridor, sanctioned on the 28th March 2019.

The National Economic Council is constitutionally mandated to 'ensure balanced development and regional equity' (Article 156). As Table 3 demonstrates, there has been a marked increase in the number of completed projects over the last three years (two in 2020 compared to 16 in 2023) (Boni & Adeney, 2020, p. 435). The provincial distribution of completed projects is also more equitable. Back in 2020 Punjab and Sindh were the only provinces with completed projects. In 2023, all provinces had seen at least one project's completion.³ However, the disparity has not disappeared. While progress has been made in KP with four out of five projects being completed, in Balochistan, only one out of five has been completed.

There are several explanations for the different completion rates. In contrast to two out of three completed road projects under CPEC⁴ which were financed by a Chinese concessional loan, the badging of the five

Table 3. Progress of CPEC transport and infrastructure projects.

Province	Total	Completed	Under construction	Percent completed in the province
Punjab	5 (23.8%)	5 (31.3%)	0	100
Sindh	3 (14.3%)	3 (18.8%)	0	100
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	5 (23.8%)	4 (25%)	1 (20%)	80
Balochistan	5 (23.8%)	1 (6%)	4 (80%)	20
Gilgit-Baltistan	2 (9.5%)	2 (12.5%)	0	100
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	1 (4.8%)	1 (6%)	0	100
Total	21	16	5	76

Source: Government of Pakistan (2024). All data correct as of 13 March 2024. Some of the percentage column totals do not equal 100 due to rounding. Projects are allocated to the provinces in which they are located, so some are double counted. These data also include the pilot project of the digital media terrestrial broadcast (assigned to all provinces). This was recently listed under the 'Infrastructure' section, having previously been allocated to 'Other' projects (Adeney & Boni, 2024).

‘under-construction’ road projects as part of CPEC conceals that they receive no Chinese (or any other foreign) funding (Government of Pakistan, 2023). As interview 7 (March 2020) revealed, why would the Chinese fund roads in Balochistan when they already had the eastern route? Even though transport and infrastructure projects are a provincial responsibility (Adeney & Boni, 2022a, 2022b) (and therefore some would lay the blame at the door of the provincial administrations) in reality, these projects are dependent on financial transfers from the federal and provincial government, through the PSDP. As such the Balochistan government argued that the federal government should fund these roads as the federal government had received Chinese assistance for the roads that had been built in Sindh and Punjab (interview 7, March 2020). However, for the five projects that are outstanding, two in Balochistan have been allocated only 41 per cent and 57 per cent of their predicted cost. Another two projects have only being allocated 9 per cent and 16 per cent, with the final project in KP allocated only 15 per cent. Even with the allocations in the 2023–2024 PSDP, none of the five will have been allocated more than 75 per cent of their predicted cost by the federal government (Government of Pakistan, 2023). Therefore, the unwillingness of the federal government to allocate the resources necessary for the projects in Balochistan (as throughout so much of Pakistan’s history) has hampered the equity of delivery. The federal government has recently been seeking funding from China for the building of these roads, but as Rana argues, the Chinese are not interested (2023a). This demonstrates the importance of taking into account Pakistan’s domestic priorities. Notably, the one completed road project that was not funded by a Chinese concessional loan – the D I Khan motorway – was funded through the PSDP (Government of Pakistan, 2016–2021) spanning the tenure of both the PML-N and the PTI governments. Indicative of Pakistan’s domestic political imperatives in managing ‘CPEC’ this road starts at Islamabad/Rawalpindi in the Punjab (where support for the PML-N is concentrated), running almost 300 km to KP (the heartland of the PTI).

10 Years of Gwadar under CPEC: a missed opportunity?

Even before CPEC was developed, the port of Gwadar was being dubbed ‘the next Dubai’, ‘the next Shenzhen’, a ‘game changer’ both for Balochistan and for the local inhabitants of the fishing town. The hype and aspirations surrounding the port have conveyed an image of grandeur and development that is at odds with the reality on the ground. In both the Pakistan and Chinese narratives, the port will be the jewel in the crown of Sino-Pakistani relations. The planned development of Gwadar as a luxury resort, complete with golf courses, is supposed to appeal to the affluent urban upper-middle class, as well as international investors. However, there is a clear disconnect between this image and the actual development of the port.

Table 4. Gwadar projects.

Total	Completed	Under construction	Percent of projects completed
10	6	4	60%

Source: Government of Pakistan (2024) n.b. Energy projects excluded. All data correct as of 13 March 2024.

Since CPEC was officially launched in 2015, six projects have been completed in Gwadar, including a ‘Smart Port City Masterplan’, and the first phase of the ‘Development of Port and Free Zone’ (Table 4). More tangible progress has been achieved in the completion of the ‘Pak-China Technical and Vocational Institute’ and the ‘Gwadar Eastbay Expressway’. At the end of December 2023, the ‘Pak-China Friendship Hospital’ and one of the planned desalination plants were also completed. However, other projects that will benefit *local* communities have been delayed, such as the ‘Fresh Water Treatment, Water Supply and Distribution’ project, the 300MW coal-fired power station, and the larger de-salination plants. Electricity continues to be imported (often intermittently) from Iran and the power shortage represents a major stumbling block for development in the area (Aamir, 2022). At the 11th JCC meeting in 2022, Pakistan suggested either shelving the 300MW project or moving it to Sindh’s Thar coal fields to use the local coal, but China refused to agree to these requests. The final minutes showed that the existing commitment for the Gwadar power project would be honoured (Rana, 2023b).⁵ This is almost certainly related to China’s security designs for the port.

The lack of progress on projects benefitting the local communities has led to several protests over the years. The most recent, year-long one was led by Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman, chief of the Haq Do Tehreek (Gwadar Rights Movement). The protesters lamented the lack of access to basic facilities, including clean drinking water. They also opposed the trawling by Chinese fishing boats, a practice that is significantly affecting local fishermen. While the neglect by the federal government of the Gwadar population has been longstanding, local politicians also point to the poor governance standards of the provincial government as another cause of the difficult living conditions. When asked about who should provide water and electricity in Gwadar, Senator Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar of the Balochistan Awami Party (later caretaker prime minister between 2023 and 2024) responded that it was the chief minister of Balochistan (The Express Tribune, 2023). However, as discussed above, the provision of these facilities is dependent upon financial allocations in the PSDP, particularly so in the province of Balochistan, the poorest province of the federation. Despite Imran Khan’s PTI government promising to prioritise socio-economic development, in 2018 many of the PSDP allocations for Balochistan were removed, including four CPEC projects and other schemes for Gwadar (Rana, 2018). This stands in contrast with the continued funding of the D I Khan motorway through the PSDP, noted above.

Table 5. Status of projects overall (energy, infrastructure and Gwadar).

Province	Total	Completed	Under construction	Percent of projects completed
Punjab	9 (18%)	9 (23%)	0	100
Sindh	13 (26%)	13 (33%)	0	100
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	6 (12%)	4 (10%)	2 (18%)	66
Balochistan	17 (34%)	8 (20%)	9 (82%)	47
Gilgit-Baltistan	3 (6%)	3 (8%)	0	100
Azad Jammu and Kashmir	2 (4%)	2 (5%)	0	100
Totals	50	39	11	

Source: Government of Pakistan (2024). All data correct as of 13 March 2024. Some of the percentage column totals do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Overall, Table 5 reveals that by considering the total number of projects, including energy, infrastructure and the ones in Gwadar, only 47 per cent of the projects have been completed in Balochistan and 66 per cent in KP, whereas all CPEC projects have been completed in Sindh, Punjab, GB and Azad Kashmir. While under the PTI government (2018–2022) there was a recalibration of CPEC towards KP and Balochistan, Balochistan has been deliberately deprioritized.

Conclusion

The article has sought to foreground the importance of understanding the BRI through the lens of local dynamics. As our analysis has showed, domestic contexts shape the way in which the BRI unfolds on the ground in important ways. From discussions related to the CPEC route through to the latest wave of protests in Gwadar, this article demonstrated how Chinese investments have become entangled in the complex web of domestic political and economic relations, enhanced by Pakistan's federal set up, that have a significant impact on how China-backed projects are developed. This is in line with what other studies, for example Barton (2022), have found regarding the implementation of the BRI in other geographical contexts.

The analysis presented in this article revealed two interlinked trends related to CPEC and federalism: first, the overall centralisation of the decision-making process, as epitomised by the lack of provincial representation in the decision-making bodies created ad hoc to deal with the CPEC projects. This centralisation occurred under the PML-N as it was reluctant to cede control over CPEC to the military during its 2013–2018 term in office. After the election of Imran Khan's PTI, the Pakistani military increased its role through the establishment of the CPEC Authority in 2019, headed by a retired Pakistani Army general. This outcome, supported by China, further undermined provincial input. The return of a PML-N-led government in Pakistan following the February 2024 elections is unlikely to reverse the

centralisation trend. The return of the PML-N was welcomed in Beijing. The latter had a very functional working relationship with leaders in Islamabad during the PML-N's last stint in power (2013-2018), which kickstarted most of the CPEC projects that have now come to fruition. The issue will be whether a coalition government will be able to deliver the stability that Beijing has sought from Pakistan since 2013.

Second, and directly related to the first point, is the overall inequitable distribution of the CPEC projects, with Sindh and Punjab hosting more projects (both energy and infrastructure ones) than the other provinces. While some of these decisions can be explained by the location of resources in particular provinces rather than others (such as the Thar coal fields, located in Sindh), many others are obviously political (such as the removal of PSDP allocations for the province of Balochistan, the prioritisation of the Rashakai SEZ over Hattar and the concentration of projects in Punjab) (Adeney & Boni, 2021, 14, 16).

Beyond the specificities of the Pakistani case, the analysis presented in this article has broader ramifications for students and scholars of global China. Through a detailed empirical examination of the politics of the projects' development (or the lack of development) and by foregrounding the role that domestic politics play in the BRI implementation, our work has contributed to bringing nuance and granularity into understanding how the so called 'flagship' project of the BRI was implemented in Pakistan. In doing so, we were able to highlight the relational nature of power dynamics by showing how CPEC projects were resisted, bargained, negotiated and adapted, demonstrating how these considerations should take centre stage when making sense of global China at a time of increasing international confrontation.

Notes

1. This research received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham ethics committee in 2015 and 2020.
2. Thanks to Zafarullah Khan for reminding us of this.
3. Although if we remove the digital media terrestrial broadcast pilot which is assigned to 'all Pakistan', then Balochistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir have yet to see a completed infrastructure project.
4. The KKH Phase II (Havelian-Thakot Section) and the Peshawar-Karachi Motorway (Multan-Sukkur Section).
5. For an analysis of the approval process over the years of the Gwadar Coal power plant see: Ghumman (2024).

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Appendix. Table of interviews cited

Number of interview	Description	Date
1	Senior PPP politician	May 2008
2	Senior bureaucrat, Islamabad	February 2015
3	Senior journalist	May 2018
4	Senior economic bureaucrat in Punjab	February 2020
5	Senior PTI appointee in Punjab	February 2020
6	Economic bureaucrat in Punjab	February 2020
7	Bureaucrat with responsibility for Balochistan	March 2020