

Translocal Implications of the Green Belt and Road Initiative: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Case

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Abstract

Since its inception in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been surrounded by doubts and fears. Some were confirmed, and some were dismissed, because they were groundless or due to adjustments. One of the most critical adjustments was the environmental dimension in the BRI projects, reflecting China's internal environmental concerns. The enactment of the constitutional rule pursuing ecological civilization can translate to increasing environmental security within the investments in the recipient countries. The hypothesis in the study is that adopting the green BRI incorporates the ecological civilization concept, which refers to a myriad of transnational efforts by China to increase environmental security within its partners. In addition, it includes a constructivist perspective that considers ideational factors that do not happen at the level of the current neoliberal international institutions. Finally, this paper deploys the content analysis technique to seek sufficient empirical evidence to confirm the hypothesis and point out new research directions and limitations.

Keywords

International Law, Development, Green Belt and Road, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Environmental Security

1. Introduction

The impacts on the environment caused by China's economic growth in the last four decades were very high, which led to substantial changes in the policies dealing with protecting the environment.

Some scholars view China as a threat to sustainable development due to its high total CO₂ emissions, the country's stand in multilateral forums, and the lack

of environmental standards on financing projects abroad, especially in developing countries (Kaplinsky, 2008). On the other hand, some see China as a model due to its incremental progress in tackling environmental challenges in terms of the reduction of coal and fossil fuel uses in energy production, reforestation, decreasing air pollution, and projecting leadership to the global arena by assuming bold obligations in international forums (China Dialogue, 2019).¹

A closer examination of the data regarding the economic expansion vis-à-vis the protection of the environment suggests a positive balance that supports China's growing role as a model of sustainable development since the 2010s on regarding local and global environmental protection. This movement started with strict measures in policy to deal with the internal ecological impacts of rapid economic expansion, reinforcing domestic structures to face the mounting challenges and pressures on the environment (Li & Shapiro, 2020; Sun, 2016). The national environmental policies spill over to the international arena thru foreign policy.

The Chinese positioning in the global system as a driving force for dealing with the challenges to the environment gained traction when President Xi Jinping assumed as head of the state in 2013, presenting a more robust green vision for the development process to meet the needs of the people (Wei et al., 2021; Hansen, Li, & Svarverud, 2018). As posed by Maizland (2021), environmental protection [...] became a top priority for the Chinese government; it participated more in global climate talks, eventually becoming a leader on climate change [...].

It is possible to observe an interconnection between the national and international dimensions in how China addresses environmental degradation threats and diffuses greener policies thru the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), the Chinese flagship development, and foreign policy approach (Schwerhoff et al., 2022).² As such, it raises the question of how the greener vision of the development process adopted by China resonates within the BRI and the implications of this vision in the relationship with the partners.

According to the Chinese government, 145 countries have signed the Memorandum of Understanding to join the BRI, reinforcing the Chinese position that the platform got worldwide attention (Belt and Road Portal, 2022). It possesses five significant goals related to cooperation with the participating countries: 1) Policy coordination, 2) Facilities connectivity, 3) Unimpeded trade, 4) Financial integration, and 5) People-to-people bonds. These goals are related to the de-

¹For an overview of the environmental indexes in China made by the United National see: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/environment/envpdf/Country_Snapshots_Dec_2016/China.pdf. Last access: October 05, 2022.

²In September 2021, during the United National General Assembly, the President of China, Xi Jinping, announced the Global Development Initiative (GDI), which would absorb the BRI for some. However, at this point, there is no confirmation of this claim; thus, for this reason, the GDI is left out of the analysis in this paper. In <https://media.un.org/en/asset/k1g/k1g20z98w4>. Last access: Oct 4, 2022. See also: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/dont-sleep-on-chinas-global-development-initiative/>.

velopment of participating countries and poverty alleviation (NDRC, 2022).³

Since its inception, the BRI has been suffering severe critics on two fronts: first, the existence of a lack of transparency in the projects that led to several cases of corruption in the recipient countries of the investments,⁴ and second, the absence of governance structures to oversee environmental and labor standards (China Daily, 2019).⁵

Considering the magnitude of the goals and complexity of the BRI, it was likely that some challenges would emerge as part of building the foundations, trust, and know-how from the beginning (Ascensão et al., 2018). However, the most critical aspect is how China has been working internally and with its partners to strengthen the standards to improve the project's sustainability in all aspects, especially regarding the protection of the environment (Anwar, 2019).⁶

One of the adjustments made by China to address the environmental concerns was the adoption of the Green BRI, which encompasses a vision that has been followed by setting investment standards in BRI projects that ensure environmental sustainability.⁷

By raising the general standards for investments in BRI, primarily the environmental ones, China significantly contributes to increasing the environmental security of the country partners. Considering that most of the recipients of investments are from developing countries, the ecological aspects of economic development are critical, subjecting them to hard choices on how to use natural resources for development (Alam et al., 2015).

³According to the World Bank: e 70 BRI "corridor economies" (excluding China), projects in all sectors that are already executed, in implementation, or planned are estimated to amount to US\$575 billion. If completed, BRI transport projects could reduce travel times along economic corridors by 12%, increase trade between 2.7% and 9.7%, increase income by up to 3.4% and lift 7.6 million people from extreme poverty. In

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative#:~:text=BR%20transport%20projects%20have%20the,improve%20debt%20sustainability%20and%20mitigate>. Last access: January 7, 2023.

⁴This paper will not focus on the analysis regarding the critics of corruption practices. However, we offer some evidence that this is an issue that concerns China as well: "Working together for a clean Silk Road through consultation, contribution, and shared benefits, and safeguarding the development of the Belt and Road Initiative in the spirit of the *United Nations Convention Against Corruption*, under the existing international rules and legal frameworks, based on respecting state sovereignty, cultural differences and national actualities, and in the light of the Silk Road's spirits of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit." Beijing Initiative for the Clean Silk Road uttered by President Xi. In

<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/26/WS5cc301a6a3104842260b8a24.html>. Last access: October 05, 2022.

⁵In addition, there is an unsubstantiated claim that started to be propagated in the Trump administration that with the BRI, China was promoting a debt trap diplomacy. For a quick overview and rebuttal of this claim, see the Bloomberg video The Myth of the Chinese Debt Trap in Africa. In <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QDEWwSkP0>. Last access: January 7, 2023.

⁶Most of the critics are related to the low standards concerning labor rights and lax environmental protection within the investment recipient countries. However, it is worth noting that most critics usually do not consider that Chinese corporations must comply with local regulations, thus, complying with legal standards.

⁷In https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/tz/202203/t20220328_1320629.html?code=&state=123. Last access: October 05, 2022.

The argument that guides this study is that by adopting the Green BRI approach, China refers to a myriad of transnational efforts to increase environmental security within the BRI and in its partners, including incorporating ideational factors such as shared experiences and ideas toward the desired model of development instead of relying exclusively upon the Bretton Woods institutions.

In this sense, the recruitment of the Green BRI approach produces relevant implications for the governance of the environment due to the Hobbesian ontology of the international system in which “[...] most of the actors of the international system operate conservatively, pursuing only sovereign and short-term selfish interests when the logic of the governance of the Anthropocene requires commitments to the universal good and the long term” (Franchini et al., 2017: p. 179). In other words, a constructivist approach to international relations must avoid relying only upon material factors that brought the world to an ecological emergency (Patrick, 2021; Wendt, 1999).

Therefore, this paper aims to connect and track the increase in environmental standards within the BRI development framework, reflecting on the ecological policy diffusion thru Chinese foreign investments, thus, making a significant contribution to sustainable development and the growth of peaceful relations among the participating countries, thus contributing to ecological security (Braithwaite & Jeong, 2017).

2. Methodology

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework mobilizes theories and epistemological stances from International Law and International Relations (Boucher, 2018). They provide the models to test our hypothesis at both local and international levels of analysis. The mobilization is necessary considering the two-level implications and regulatory efficiency of the Green BRI in building behaviors and norms in the regional scenario, which is a result of the interplay with China and Pakistan law and political systems sending and receiving the investments under the BRI banner and international law that recruits the legal instruments to regulate interstate relations (Boyle, 2006).

2.1.1. Third-World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL)

First, we mobilize the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) to deal with the lack of adequate responses to construct an adequate and inclusive world order regarding the right to development (Natarajan & Dehm, 2019; Anghie, 2004).

At the international system level, the rhetoric of States is born that constitutes an ideological struggle promoted to justify European expansion in the period of the great navigations under the argument of the *mission civilisatrice*, which is still used today by the Western powers to impose a model of development that is not working. The rationale for this expansion’s continuity is the idea of universal

values and truths that natural law imposes on everyone. The appeal to universalism takes three primary forms today: 1) the policy followed by Western leaders defends human rights and democracy; 2) there is a civilizational clash; and 3) the market economy is the only alternative for development, leaving only governments to accept (Escobar, 2011; Wallerstein, 2004).⁸

In this sense, we observe that the imposition of the universal ideology becomes fundamental to guarantee the expansion of the state's national interests. At the same time, it consolidates the ideology in international institutions to guarantee that its legitimacy has scientific and rational bases. Therefore, it is an intentional political process to overcome the resistance outside pan-European circles. Unfortunately, the rhetoric has changed little since the fourteenth century.

Mutua and Anghie (2000: p.31) explain the relationship between imperialism and International Law, especially considering the universalization of the development model as present in international norms and institutions:

The regime of international law is illegitimate. It is a predatory system that legitimizes, reproduces and sustains the plunder and subordination of the Third World by the West. Neither universality nor its promise of global order and stability make international law a just, equitable, and legitimate code of global governance for the Third World. The construction and universalization of international law were essential to the imperial expansion that subordinated non-European peoples and societies to European conquest and domination. Historically, the Third World has generally viewed international law as a regime and discourse of domination and subordination, not resistance and liberation.

Therefore, International Law or *ius publicum Europaeum* assumes an instrumental role in Western powers pushing their agendas in Intergovernmental Organizations, which for Mattei and Nader (2018: p. 268):

The rhetorical artifice used in the process of curbing deviant behavior and claiming, as universal and inevitable, the Western modalities of social organization and economic development centered on individualism and social fragmentation is usually an explicitly juridical concept: "international human rights." In the interests of these rights, a doctrine of "limited sovereignty" has threatened the traditional nature of international law as a decentralized system based on territoriality and has advocated the need for

⁸In this regard, Young (2003: p. 3) confirms the argument: "When national sovereignty had finally been achieved, each state moved from colonial to autonomous, postcolonial status. Independence! However, in many ways this represented only a beginning, a relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so much of independence as of being independence. It is striking that despite decolonization, the major world powers did not change substantially during the course of the 20th century. For the most part, the same (ex-)imperial countries continue to dominate those countries that they formerly ruled as colonies. The cases of Afghanistan, Cuba, Iran, and Iraq, make it clear that any country that has the nerve to resist its former imperial masters does so at its peril. All governments of these countries that have positioned themselves politically against western control have suffered military interventions by the west against them."

decentralization in order to make it more like any other West national legal system.

As such, TWAIL provides an analytical tool to compare the development model based on Bretton Wood's institutions vis-à-vis the Chinese model offered by the BRI, which adjusted to a greener approach, provides the alternative for development that goes beyond the materialistic reasoning and justification.

2.1.2. Translocality

The national level of analysis is predicated on the national interest and sovereignty principle, which, although not monolithic, from time to time, the scope and reach change due to the motion of the ideological pendulum in politics, thus, provoking effects on the international order (Liu, 2013; Axelrod & Keohane, 1985).

Therefore, we draw our analysis on the translocality theory, which encompasses the regional space as the locus where social relations happen regardless of the fixed limitations of sovereignty boundaries and multiple actors interact, a space in which culture and history matter (Buzan & Schouenborg, 2018). Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013: p. 35) consider that translocality is able

[...] to capture complex social-spatial interactions in a holistic, actor-oriented and multi-dimensional understanding. The central idea of translocality is aptly synthesised as “situatedness during mobility”. Authors engaging in the development of a translocal perspective seek to integrate notions of fluidity and discontinuity associated with mobilities, movements and flows on the one hand with notions of fixity, groundedness and situatedness in particular settings on the other.

In addition, under the translocality perspective in the regional space, we might observe the variables of interstate dynamics and trans-societal linkages of state and non-state actors, which is analytically important considering the specificities of each project and region of implantation. Testing these two variables in the BRI case is essential in conjunction with the TWAIL approach as it presents a model that has been providing successive international crises with an alternative that is becoming a viable solution for many Global South countries in terms of adopting a sustainable pathway for development.⁹

Furthermore, it is translocal space that the indicators of environmental sensitivity and vulnerability of development projects are felt with more intensity, thus, impacting the perceptions of the local communities (Greiner & Sakdapo-

⁹As pointed out by Galeano and Allende (1997: p. 4) regarding the problems with the Bretton Wood international order: “For its foreign masters and for our commission-agent bourgeoisie, who have sold their souls to the devil at a price that would have shamed Faust, the system is perfectly rational; but for no one else, since the more it develops, the greater its disequilibrium, its tensions, and its contradictions. Even industrialization—coming late and in dependent form, and comfortably coexisting with the latifundia and the structures of inequality—helps to spread unemployment rather than to relieve it; poverty is extended, wealth concentrated in the area where an ever multiplying army of idle hands is available.”

Irak, 2013; Peth, 2018). The indicators also help indicate the degree of environmental security of the development projects, which refers to environmental changes that might pose a common security challenge to all that require collective action or a risk to human security (Buzan, Wver, & Wilde, 1997; Nguyen, Tsang, & Yang, 2021).

Conca and Dabelko (2002: p. 13) reinforce the need to adopt this approach, especially considering the nature and regional impacts of the BRI projects and the imposition by Chinese law of stringent greener standards in foreign policy regarding maintaining or financing projects under the BRI flag:

Relations of ecological interdependence tend to be more tangible, immediate, and apparent at the regional scale than we viewed globally. These characteristics suggest that it should be easier to see or envision the political effects of environmental cooperation in regional relations. Perhaps more importantly, the regional scale often affords a rich, tangible array of offsetting upstream/downstream and shared-commons relationships of ecological interdependence on which to build peace.

Therefore, the relationship between the theoretical framework and the indicators for empirical evidence is summarized as follows (Table 1).

2.2. Case Study and Case Selection

The application of the theoretical framework is made using the case study approach. First, the qualitative nature of the study combined with the research question makes evident the intent of the Author to investigate how the green BRI has the potential to be an alternative to the West development model and standards of sustainable development. Second, the case study method is an investigation pathway that provides a fine-grain analysis of a particular and narrow social phenomenon, looking for an understanding and explanation of micro-causes, relations, and perceptions that quantitative research cannot capture (Yin, 2008; Bennett & Elman, 2007).

The magnitude and diversity of the projects within the BRI flagship impose a smaller-scale case that could accomplish the research goal (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994). Therefore, within the BRI projects, the selected one to be our case study in search of empirical evidence is China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The CPEC case provides the analytical boundaries for this study as it is a typical case for testing our hypothesis as posed in the introduction (Seawright & Gerring, 2008; Gerring, 2006). The typical case is one that [...] exemplifies a stable, cross-case relationship. By definition, the typical case may also be considered a representative case, according to the terms of whatever cross-case model is employed (Seawright & Gerring, 2008: p. 299).

Under the BRI, the CPEC case presents stability and cross-case features based on the green dimension of the investments in BRI projects. First, accounting for

Table 1. Theoretical framework (made by the Authors).

Theoretical Approach	Empirical Indicator
TWAIL	Resistance to status quo international order
	Alternatives to International Law of development
Translocality	Interstate dynamics
	Trans-societal linkages
	Environmental sensitivity and vulnerability
	Increase environmental security

the stability criteria, the BRI projects are essentially infrastructure projects; however, the CPEC has an advantage in the test of the translocality theory since China and Pakistan are bordering countries, which brings the transnational aspect to the case analysis (Brady & Collier, 2010). Second, for the cross-case feature, the CPEC presents themes, similarities, and differences across other BRI cases, and the analysis of the CPEC can create indicators that extrapolate to other cases (Khan & Van Wynsberghe, 2008).

2.3. Research Technique, Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), and Data Selection

It is worth noting that the choice between the various available methods is associated with the research objective. Capturing social reality is something much more complex than something captured by controlled laboratory experiments or by applying mathematical formulas. Social phenomena are associated with the notion of intentionality and conscience, that is, elements of subjective order and experience that transit between the mind, the words, and actions that build society and its institutions (Searle, 1997; Bhaskar, 2010; Foucault, 1994).

To systematize the case study and its analytical boundaries, we adopt content analysis as the research technique proposed by Bardin (2011: p. 37), which is “[...] a set of communication analysis techniques aimed at obtaining, by procedures, systematic and objective description of the message content, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge regarding the conditions of production/reception [...] of these messages.”

In other words, it is the ability to perceive conditions and relationships between the indicators that produce a theoretical sensitivity that enables the application of the theoretical framework to experience through inferences to find minimally sufficient evidence, which begins building increasingly advanced levels of abstraction toward generalizing to other cases (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994).

Regarding the inferences, the analyzed messages and codes are interpretations to determine states, data, and phenomena. As explained by Bardin (2011: p. 47):

[...] what is sought to establish when it is carried out an analysis consciously or not is a correspondence between semantic or linguistic struc-

tures and the psychological or sociological structures (for example, behaviors, ideologies, and attitudes) of the statements. In a very metaphorical way, one will speak of a synchronic plane or horizontal plane to designate the text and its descriptive analysis and a diachronic plane or vertical plane, which refers to the inferred variables. (Translated by the Author)

As for the Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), we resource to the online version of *Voyant Tools* (2022) to systematize the content analysis task. *Voyant Tools* (2022) allows us to perform the content analysis, searching for the hermeneutical units' operationalization (codes), correlation, and context with the correlates in the corpus (Gablasova et al., 2017). Additionally, we resort to bibliographical analysis and network to trace the positioning of scholars towards the BRI as an important measure of civil society's reaction to the model. Thus, as the investigation unfolds, we expect the argument of our research to gain traction in inferences and empirical coverage (Gibbs, 2008).

The content analysis of the corpus will start with an exploratory analysis of the selected documents that constitute the corpus to measure the frequency of the terms (Stebbins, 2001). As there will be no pre-determined code, the high-frequency words will automatically assume the condition of a code, thus, initiating its operationalization and correlation with other codes (Given, 2008; Bardin, 2011). The strategy allows us to perform conceptual and relational analyses, which connect context, messages, and inferences (Kohlbacher, 2006).

The primary documents for the analysis are related to official documents in which the greener dimension of the BRI is present that reflect the adjustments in the Chinese foreign policy of the internal concerns and shift in actions towards sustainable development.

In addition, selected data for the study comprises official documents related to the CPEC from both China and Pakistan governments and reports from international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The included documents have direct implications for increasing environmental security from a transnational perspective in their relationship. Furthermore, we mobilize the resonance of official and non-official documents in the epistemic community and meta-analysis by bringing news reports, papers, and other academic and non-academic sources to perform the conceptual and relational analyses in the codes, which provides insights on concerns and priorities in the study of the CPEC, providing feedback for debates on public policy formation and chances.

3. The CPEC Case

3.1. Background Conditions and Initial Analysis

Since its inception, the BRI has encompassed a broad and alternative understanding of the basis of the development process, which becomes evident by examining the official documents published by the Chinese government (Li, 2015).

As stated by the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road:

The Initiative is harmonious and inclusive. It advocates tolerance among civilizations, respects the paths and modes of development chosen by different countries, and supports dialogues among different civilizations on the principles of seeking common ground while shelving differences and drawing on each other's strengths, so that all countries can coexist in peace for common prosperity (State Council, 2017).

The BRI is a form of resistance against the dominant liberal international institutions and economic world order born in the aftermath of the Second World War, which the Bretton Woods institutions are representative and have dominated (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade-GATT, and the World Trade Organization). To that end, the Bretton Woods institutions are charged with "[...] the persistence of extreme poverty in the global South is attributable not to random misfortune, but to a global economic order that systematically benefits the wealthy and disenfranchises the poor." (Alam et al., 2015: p. 9)

As such, cooperation processes within the North-South framework present the discontentment of the developing countries with the *status quo* order, which has yet to be responsive to the challenges, expectations, and values that the developing countries have raised for quite some time. As argued by Alam et al. (2015: p. 553):

The global South is a robust theater for cooperation and competition among developing nations. Regional cooperation is expanding through intergovernmental organizations in each southern area. In addition, similarly situated states in different regions often align policy positions globally. In international negotiations, they rally around the principles of "solidarity" and "common but differentiated responsibilities," largely to enhance negotiations with developed nations—the North.

The BRI emerges as an alternative to the Global North development model within this broad picture. It is a viable option consistent with China's and its partner's interests that consider their experiences with developed countries (Leverett & Wu, 2017; Garlick, 2020). It reflects the real "end of history"¹⁰ as the contradictions of the Western approach, especially the development model, have provoked successive international crises that make the world unequal and unsafe. As stated by Boaventura Santos refers to the necessary changes of the West to survive:

It began as Christianity, colonialism, then capitalism and imperialism, and

¹⁰Refers to the end of the Cold-War and the fall of the Berlin Wall as marking the end of ideological conflict with the unchallenged establishment of Western liberal democracy as the final ideological stage of human evolution. See <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>.

then metamorphosed into democracy, human rights, decolonization, self-determination, “rules-based international relations”—always making it clear that the rules were established by the West and were only followed when they served its interests, and finally, globalization (Santos, 2022).

Among the several BRI projects, the CPEC is considered the flagship, reflecting the relationship traced to 1950, when Pakistan, the largest Muslim country, was recognized by the People’s Republic of China. Additionally, it reflects the economic support from China to the country that has been used by Western powers for decades to establish a foothold in the region (Wolf, 2019; Khwaja et al., 2018).

The CPEC is a connectivity framework that involves energy, road, railroad, and trade infrastructures at the cost of US\$ 47 billion (Dawn, 2017). It connects China’s extreme northern city of Kashgar to the city of Gwadar in Pakistan (Figure 1). According to the Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives of Pakistan, the CPEC is a “[...] journey towards economic regionalization in the globalized world. It founded peace, development, and a win-win model for all of them [...],” spilling over the whole region (CPEC Authority, 2022).¹¹

Due to its grandeur, the projects with the CPEC suffered ups and downs over the years for several reasons, especially of political nature. As stated by Notezai (2021: n.p.), after highs and lows in the execution of the CPEC:

[...] last year geopolitical developments in the region provided vigor to CPEC projects in Pakistan. As a result, two new deals for hydropower projects in Pakistan-administered Kashmir were signed in quick succession, along with an agreement on a special economic zone (SEZ) in Faisalabad. These moves gave cause for CPEC supporters to assert that the projects in the country are, once again, moving in the right direction. With the signing of the new deals, officials from both countries were content that CPEC had returned to its previous pace, leading to a flurry of articles, including in *The Diplomat*, underscoring the steps taken by Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government to revive CPEC projects, which had noticeably slowed down since he assumed office in 2018.

Some pundits and mainstream academics tend to see the BRI as an imperialistic venture formulated by China consisting of co-opting and trapping developing countries thru financing agreements (Rolland, 2022). However, there is no empirical base for such claims. *Au contraire*, as Castro and Denny (2020) sustain, the willingness of China to provide an alternative model of development might be seen as a manifestation of the Bandung Spirit, which reflects the ideational factors to be considered in the relationship among Global South countries to resist the neocolonialist impetus and interventions of international institutions (Anghie, 2004; Koskenniemi, 2004; Eslava et al., 2017).

¹¹For a visual overview of the projects associated with the CPEC, see <https://cpec.gov.pk/maps>. Last access: February 05, 2023.

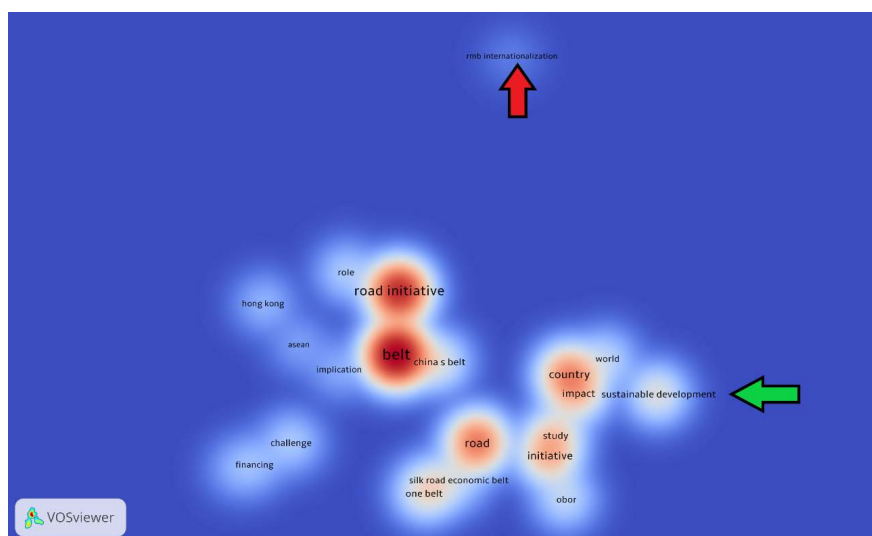


Figure 1. Academic Landscape_BRI (made by the Authors using VOSviewer).

When we look at the general epistemic community's reaction to the BRI, we observe a different scenario that refutes this argument. An exploratory bibliographical search on the term “belt and road initiative” in the title, abstracts, and keywords of academic publications using the application Publish or Perish (Harzing, 2022) returned the following metrics **Table 2**.

The data collected was then inserted into the VOSviewer (2022) application to map the focus of the landscape of the academic investigation related to BRI. The objective is to extract from the title, abstracts, and keywords the most cited terms and their association. Apart from the prominent frequency of terms such as “belt,” “Initiative,” and “China,” the academic landscape showed a significant association between the researched term with the “sustainable development” concept, which is essential to our argument (**Figure 2**, green arrow).

Thus, the hard evidence indicates a severe concern of the academic community for the sustainability of the development under the BRI platform rather than the use of it by China to grant expansionist dividends. The analysis found the term “RMB internationalization” (**Figure 2**, red arrow), which shows how isolated the geopolitical or intentional expansionist arguments within the academic debate are. Two factors might explain this finding.

First, on the side of the investment recipient countries, there are no innocent or naïve people or countries as it was in the European navigations. Nowadays, countries are not willing to give up their natural resources or sovereignty so easily in exchange for “mirrors” or “perfumes” from the civilized world. The developing countries know what to bargain for (Hillman, 2020; Ertan et al., 2016; Ruskola, 2016). For Zaidi (2019: s.d.), the CPEC “[...] will place Pakistan in a much stronger position to get American help as well. A rather win-win situation.”

For instance, as Abid and Ashfaq (2015, p.167) have pointed out, the “CPEC is the crown jewel in the Pakistan economic paradigm because Pakistan has the opportunity to act independently if the western influence especially the US influence as it has proved of late, an irritant factor.” As stated by Hillman (2020: p.

293), the success of BRI would demonstrate “[...] that Beijing can do what Washington could not”, which empirically demonstrates the implications of the so-called Beijing Consensus rather than the Washington Consensus in presenting an alternative model of development to Global South countries (Ramo, 2004; Scott, 2009; Liu, 2006).

In this sense, the national interest plays an essential role as the BRI partners participate in the decision-making process, which allows the recipient’s agency to choose the projects receiving the Chinese investment according to their own political, economic and social agenda (The Diplomat, 2022).

Second, on the Chinese side, the projects have a high involvement of the provinces located at the borders of the country that usually are the precursors of the local integration process that the central government later absorbs or regulates (Hillman, 2020; Zheng, 2019). For instance, the city of Kashgar was instrumental in opening the country to international expansion even before the adoption of the BRI:

Table 2. Bibliographical metrics on the term BRI (made by the Authors).

Reference date: 2022-05-23 06:32:55 +0800
Publication years: 1995-2022
Citation years: 27 (1995-2022)
Papers: 1000
Citations: 623
Citations/year: 23.07 (acc1 = 66, acc2 = 24, acc5 = 4, acc10 = 0, acc20 = 0)
Citations/paper: 0.62
Authors/paper: 1.10/1.0/1 (mean/median/mode) ¹²

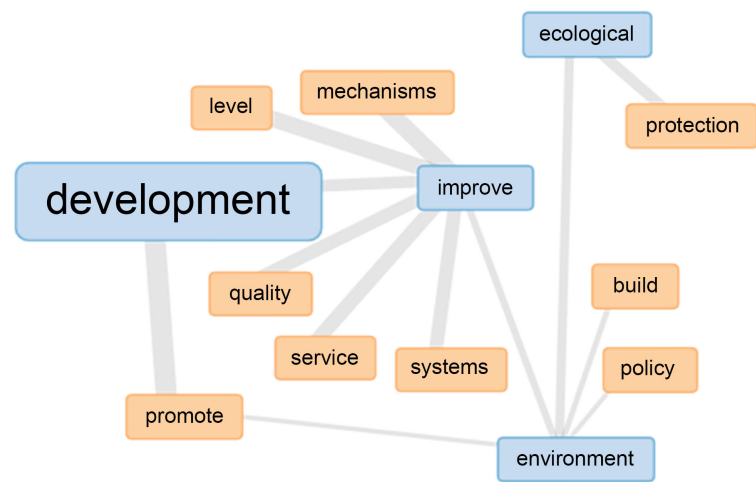


Figure 2. Content analysis—correlates of the terms in the 14th Plan (made by the Authors using Voyant Tools).

¹²Data retrieval: Data source: Crossref; Search date: 2022-05-23 14:31:14 +0800; Cache date: 2022-05-23 06:32:55 +0800; Search result: [0] No error. The complete report can be retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1VcwKbFgsKOFpB75c2Dieho55As8Zx9NA?usp=sharing>.

In the past 10 years, Kashgar has persisted in planning development with an international perspective, adhered to reform and opening up, and innovation-driven, and has promoted the construction and development of the development zone in an orderly, powerful and effective manner (Seetao, 2020).

Therefore, the combination between the provinces' initial involvement and the partners' participation and agency refutes the false perception of the intentional international projection of China as an imperialistic venture by using the BRI as the spearhead. In addition, as exposed in the following sections of the study, the necessary adjustments made in BRI to address environmental concerns reflect the Chinese commitment to comply with the SDGs and help the BRI partners to do the same, thus, providing a significant contribution to the regional and global environmental governance (Maizland, 2021).

Raising the environmental standards of the BRI projects is especially important to Pakistan. The country is especially vulnerable to water stress, natural resource degradation, air pollution, and climate change (Eckstein et al., 2021). Many voices raised this concern to the extent that both countries have enacted regulations to mobilize and adjust environmental protection policies and guidelines (Aslam, 2021).

Due to the complexity and grandiose of the projects, the new experiences of China in handling foreign investments abroad, the inaptitude of the partner's legislation to deal with issues related to the BRI, and the environmental sensitivity of many areas affected by the projects, China reviewed its position as the practical challenges emerged (Ascensão et al., 2018).

In the next part of the paper, we trace how the changes happened and how they influenced the BRI to become greener in its ontology to respond to the growing internal and external demands to protect the environment while promoting a new development model.

3.2. The BRI Becoming Greener

The internal and external demands and challenges were significant for China and its partners to adjust the BRI projects. China and Pakistan commit themselves to international environmental law and principles to deal with existential threats. However, the projects' practical challenges and environmental standards vis-à-vis the international and local regulations caused China to review and update the BRI to consolidate a greener vision (Jiang et al., 2022).

For that matter, China has launched the Green Belt and Road initiative and joined the BRI. International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC) with its partners, which receives the assistance of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and more than twenty UN agencies and funds, demonstrates BRI's multilateral stance and connection to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Environment, 2018). In addition, the BRIGC includes the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that increase civil society's participation and awareness about the BRI's environmental implications (Conservation International, 2022; BRIGC, 2022).

According to the Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road, the internal and external objectives of the Green BRI are to promote the green Belt and Road “[...] is an internal need to share the ecological civilization philosophy and achieve sustainable development...is an essential effort to participate in global environmental governance and promote green development” (Ministry of Ecology and Environment, 2017).

The 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and Long-Range Objectives for 2035 (14th Plan) of China puts development at the center of the policies to be implemented by the country (Adams, 2021). As observed in **Figure 3**, the term “development” appears in the 14th Plan 474 times and has a robust connection with the terms “improve” (593 times) and “promote” (97 times).

There is a clear connection between the development with the improvement of several societal aspects in the 14th Plan, among them the environment/ecological protection. **Figure 4** shows that the internal ecological dimension of the development in the 14th Plan presents the international ecological dimension within the BRI framework; in other words, the stance adopted by China in dealing with internal environmental problems due to the economic expansion is “exported” to BRI partners via regulation of the criteria for investments (Hillman, 2020).

The language presented in the 14th Plan reflects the political and legal implications of the Chinese understanding of the construction of an ecological civilization, which for Zhou (2020: p. 2):

[...] is not only a discourse but also a practical strategy. At the same time, it is also a Marxist response put forward by China in the process of promoting its own economic and social practice. Especially since the 19th Congress of the CPC this response has been concentrated on “harmonious symbiosis between man and nature.”

The Chinese Constitution incorporated the ecological civilization postulate via constitutional amendment in 2018 that spilled over the extraconstitutional legislation (Wei & Hu, 2018).

The Guideline of Environment Protection for Overseas Investment and Cooperation (The Notice) issued in 2021 addresses the concerns regarding how the country and its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) handle the projects from an environmental standpoint.

Figure 5 shows that the most cited term is “environmental” (40 times) at the center, which is normal due to the objective of The Notice. However, the collocates “companies,” “assessment,” “accidents,” and “regulations” present analytical importance. The association of the collocates with the term “environmental” indicates the need to incorporate the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is considered the most one of the most critical techniques in applying the principles of prevention and precaution in dealing with environmental resources (Wathern, 1998; Kiss & Shelton, 2007).

tively. Henceforth, increasing media concern with environmental issues, new environmental and CSR laws and regulations, and the harmonious society concepts, became domestic drivers for CSR in China.

Also, as a representative instance of the adjustments in the BRI structure, the Supreme People's Court's Opinions on the People's Courts' Providing of Judicial Services and Guarantee for the Construction of the Belt and Road establishes that:

Correctly grasp the working principles of the people's courts to further provide judicial services and guarantees for the construction of the "Belt and Road". Adhere to serving the overall situation, enhance consciousness and Initiative, and provide targeted and effective legal guarantees for reform and opening up. Adhere to demand orientation, improve litigation procedures, strengthen the construction of litigation service centers, vigorously support the development of international arbitration and mediation, improve the new type of international commercial dispute resolution mechanism, and continuously meet the dispute resolution needs of the subjects of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Adhere to the promotion of the rule of law, strengthen procedural justice, equally protect the legal rights of Chinese and foreign parties in accordance with the law, accurately apply international rules, actively participate in the formulation of international rules, and strive to be a participant and leader in improving the relevant legal rules of the "Belt and Road" (Supreme People's Court, 2019).

The content analysis of the primary legislation in China that makes the BRI greener presents significant implications for our argument. However, some might say it is a pure exercise of rhetoric, which is not the case for two reasons: first, China's latest results show significant improvements in internal environment conditions; and two, independent reporting shows the transfer of ecological policies to the BRI projects.

For instance, The China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2021 presents findings of the following data that is relevant for the argument in this study:

- No coal projects received financing or investments in 2021;
- Green energy finance and investments in the BRI slightly increased to a new high in 2021 at US\$6.3 billion (compared to US\$ 6.2 billion in 2020);
- For the 2022, we expect an acceleration of green projects, also due to the "Guidelines for Greening Overseas Investment and Cooperation" issued in July 2020, and the "Guidelines for Ecological Environmental Protection of Foreign Investment Cooperation and Construction Projects" issued in January 2022, both issued by the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) and the Ministry of Ecology and Environment (MEE). Both Guidelines call for application of stricter and if necessary international environmental standards (Wang, 2021).

Note that the report points out three findings that resonate empirically with

our argument in the sense that there is a course of action corrections made through new policy guidelines, the potential increase of investments in green energy, and a halt in the investments in coal projects. The stop in coal projects reflects China's internal commitment to ecological civilization and international commitments assumed in the Paris Agreement (China Dialogue, 2022).

The findings of Wang (2021) are consistent with the Advancing the Green Development of the Belt and Road Initiative: Harnessing Finance and Technology to Scale Up Low-Carbon Infrastructure report. As observed in Figure 5, the frequency of terms along the report indicates a correlation that distances the carbon emissions that China and its BRI partners, especially Pakistan, are due to coal burning and the green production of energy (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Let us now focus on the environmental dimension within the CPEC under the lens of environmental security. First, we need to shift our focus from the efforts of China to promote a greener BRI to the recipient side.

3.3. Environmental Security in the CPEC

As global environmental issues become increasingly complex, local and regional settings emerge as better alternatives to deal with such challenges. As stated by Buzan and Schouenborg (2018: p. 30):

As the period of intense Western hegemony begins to draw to a close, one might reasonably expect the regional level to become more prominent and more differentiated, perhaps making connections to some of the international societies that were submerged and transformed, but by no means completely destroyed, by the Western expansion and overlay.

The emergence of BRI as a new alternative for development and its incorporation of the protection of the environment implies the existence of the translocal dimension in which the increase of Chinese environmental security spills over to BRI partners, thus increasing their environmental security as well. Furthermore, this is not a fortuitous action but an intentional one ignited by the experience and practices accumulated by China since 2013 when the BRI was unveiled.

As a developing country, Pakistan faces challenges in several dimensions of the development process. For example, in the last ten years, the country has improved many economic and social indicators, including the indicators related to environmental protection (World Bank, 2022). A vital contribution to the continuous improvement of the indicators is the CPEC, which is expected to "[...] improve the country's macro-economic and human development indicators by bridging gaps in infrastructure and energy, boosting modernization in core economic sectors, keeping low inflation, contributing to an optimal international balance of payments, and reducing the national trade deficit (especially with China)." (Wolf, 2019: p. 74)

One of Pakistan's direct challenges is energy production and distribution

across the country. To that end, the initial investments made in the CPEC were directed to resolve the country's severe power shortage yearly, which corroborates our argument of the agency of the recipients of the investments to address the local development needs.

As we look, for instance, at the Sahiwal Power Station, even though it is a coal operation energy plant, the socio-environmental dimensions stand out along with the energy security it provides. On the energy side alone, it provides nine billion kWh, which is enough to benefit more than 20 million people and reduce power shortage in the country in two hours. On the social and economic side, during its construction, the plant employed more than 3,000 people. With its initial operations, 500 direct employees and more than 1,000 trainees per year, thus, making a positive impact on the local community as well (Yi, 2021).

On the environmental side, the Sahiwal Power Station is considered a model, as uttered by Yi (2021, s.d.):

During the construction of the power station, we always adhere to the concepts of “green environmental protection” and “sponge power station”, and integrate “green Sahiwal” and “ecological Sahiwal” into every link of feasibility study design, engineering construction, and commissioning. The unit is equipped with advanced environmental protection facilities such as dust removal and desulfurization...Adhere to cleaning and diversion, classified treatment, and multi-use of one water, and the entire production process has achieved “zero emission”; noise reduction, noise reduction, sound insulation, dustproof, vibration reduction and other noise control in the factory area; ash yard has anti-leakage control [...]

According to the new guidelines regarding BRI investments, no coal-related projects, such as the Sahiwal Power Station, receives money; however, it does not mean that environmental sustainability is not part of the game. As part of the initiatives to recalibrate the investments in BRI projects, addressing the lack of transparency and environmental standards, the 2109 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation called for the Clean Silk Road. The Clean Silk Road is a platform that provides guidelines to mitigate the effects of operating or stopping projects that need decommissioning actions (Ali et al., 2022).

As we look into the case from the perspective of non-state actors, such as the All-Pakistan Chinese Enterprises' Association (APCEA) Sustainable Development Report, the data confirms the presence of concerns and actions toward the protection of the environment as central for the Chinese and Pakistani companies engaged in business in Pakistan (APCEA, 2021).

Figure 6 shows the strong connection between “protection” and “environment” and “environmental”, which is our first level of analysis. However, considering that the mentioned terms carry a high level of abstraction, at this point, we focus on the correlates of these terms, which present more empirical groundedness; moreover, the terms “advanced” and “standards” (APCEA, 2021).

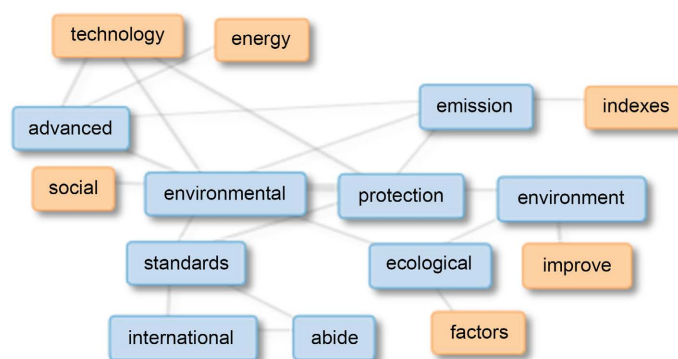


Figure 6. Content analysis—correlates of the terms in APCEA Report (2021) (made by the Authors using Voyant Tools).

Beyond the high degree of association between the first-level terms with the correlates, as **Figure 7** shows, the analysis of the context in which the correlates “advanced” and “standards” emerge presents the evidentiary paradigm that supports the argument in the paper.

The concept of the environmental security is connected to the degree to which the adverse effects of human activities produce instability in a given society, which might be one of the leading causes of violent conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

As such, the conceptualization of environmental security requires two indicators, which refer to environmental changes that pose 1) a common security challenge that requires collective action or 2) a risk to human security (Buzan, Wver, & Wilde, 1997; Barnett, 2009).

The development process has important implications for environmental security as it moves the needle from urgent issues related to social and economic development to environmental conditions that sustain life (Nguyen, Tsang, & Yang, 2021). However, dealing with the adverse effects of the development process, it is not to say that the securitization of the environment is occurring. The securitization of the environment as the referential object due to an existential threat is an intentional process that dislocates the narratives from the political sphere to the security or military one. This manipulation promotes the urgency of dealing with the issue, thus justifying the urgent measures based on a fear that society generally would not accept (Buzan et al., 1997; Hough, 2021).

Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that in the CPEC case, the increase in environmental security happens as part of the developing process rather than an intentional political shift in narratives to justify extreme measures to protect the environment.

The “Contexts” 3 and 4 in **Table 1** confirm this understanding as protecting the environment according to international and Pakistani standards promotes safety and protection while improving the lives of the local community. Other contexts of the APCEA (2021) in **Table 3** point to social responsibility and development as critical local factors to international standards, including the re-

cent regulations and guidelines for a greener BRI.

As we look into **Table 4** with regards to the term “advanced” and its contexts in the **APCEA (2021)**, we confirm two trends: 1) the new model of sustainable development based on technological advances does not stop investment in infrastructure projects but make them more efficient in consuming natural resources, and, 2) the stress on environmental prevention in building and maintaining the projects, which is aligned with the principles of precaution and prevention of harm to the environment as outlined in the Stockholm Declaration (1972) and Rio Declaration (1992) and other international legal instruments (Wu et al., 2021).



Figure 7. Content analysis—associations of terms in **APCEA Report (2021)** (made by the Authors using Voyant Tools).

Table 3. Term “standard” and contexts **APCEA (2021)**.

Context #	Left	Term	Right
1	abide by international and Pakistani	standards	on safety and environmental protection
2	environmental protection, and its emission	standards	reach the world advanced level
3	abide by international and Pakistani	standards	on safety and environmental protection
4	commitment to improving the living	standards	of the local community and
5	the development goals of high	standards	sustainable and benefiting people’s livelihood
6	is in line with international	standards	adapt to the investment attraction
7	selection adhere to ISO26000, GRI.	standards	and other international social responsibility
8	and other international social responsibility	standards	national policy requirements, public opinion

Table 4. Term “advanced” and contexts **APCEA (2021)**.

Context #	Left	Term	Right
1	implemented. We will actively use	Advanced	technology to strengthen environmental prevention
2	low power generation heat consumption	Advanced	technology, energy conservation and environmental
3	emission standards reach the world	Advanced	level, so it will be
4	project adopts the world’s most	Advanced	s660kV DC transmission technology, and
5	currently one of the most	Advanced	urban rail transit projects in
6	implemented. We will actively use	Advanced	technology to strengthen environmental prevention
7	and publicity of foreign employees’	Advanced	models. Enterprises such as China
8	the energy sector by utilizing	Advanced	technologies such as Advance Metering

As the challenge in the availability of energy is mitigated, other projects related to infrastructure received priority from the Pakistani government, such as energy distribution, hydropower energy production, economic zones, and ports. These projects depend highly on technology with considerable environmental risk (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015; Khwaja et al., 2018).

Both trends connect with the terms “standards” and “advanced” to provide empirical coverage of societal and ecological aspects of the CPEC that increases the environmental security of the country. Mardell (2020: n.p.) states, “Chinese wisdom holds that state-driven investment in infrastructure creates economic growth, social stability, and an improved security environment.”

The increment in environmental security is connected directly with the projects being executed in Pakistan and indirectly to China under the CPEC umbrella. As stated, Pakistan is highly dependent on coal energy production, an essential source of emissions. As observed in Figure 8, China is the most affected by Pakistani emissions; therefore, the increase in environmental security in Pakistan contributes to China’s growing concerns and actions toward the green BRI and ecological civilization obligations under Chinese and International Law. Therefore, it reinforces the argument that since its inception, the BRI has been evolving to reflect the concerns over sustainable development as part of the global commitments made by China (Kouser et al., 2020).

Other vital agents to measure and echo the perceptions and concerns of civil society are the local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A large number of NGOs in Pakistan reflect civil society’s environmental concerns. According to Aftab (1994: p. 2), [...] it has been observed that even in a country like Pakistan where long term planning is still in vogue, and is very much the prerogative of the government, the government is happy to hand over a substantial share of the responsibility for preventing environmental degradation to the private sector.

Two trends might be observed in energy, climate change, and biodiversity reports produced by NGOs: 1) that local communities embrace new projects as a venue for the development of the region, and 2) concerns about how the projects impact the local environment (Khan, 2021).

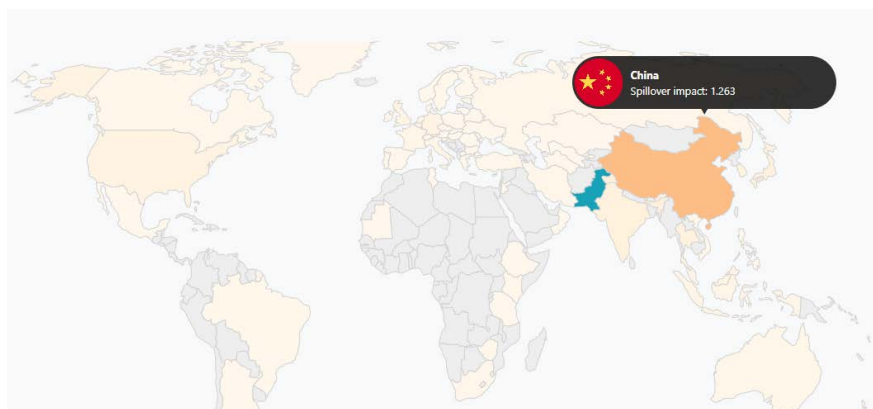


Figure 8. CO₂ emissions—Pakistan bilateral spillover (BMZ, 2022).

Regarding the CPEC, the NGOs recognize the importance of the project for local development, as one of the main issues for Pakistan is connecting the regions to extend development while protecting the environment. As pointed out by the United Nations Development Programme: “The greatest progress in promoting connectivity has been made under the umbrella of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with the construction of the road connection [...]” (UNDP, 2021: p. 7).

Therefore, it is indisputable that from the development perspective, the CPEC is an important venue for the development of the country; however, an analysis of the reports issued by the NGOs acting as consultants for local communities to build supervising and accountability mechanisms point out to the need of targeting local government authorities and companies to increase transparency, information, and participation in the decision-making process of the projects (WWF, 2021).

As per the International Union for Conservation of Nature, the CPEC “[...] encompasses environment and biodiversity conservation along the route. To match this effort and become a collaborative partner on this front, IUCN is scaling up its work with governments, industry and civil society to ensure that biodiversity conservation and environmental issues are fast tracked into the mainstream initiative.” (IUCN, 2019)

There is a significant convergence among stakeholders towards ensuring a fair distribution of the benefits of the CPEC and generating political consensus to balance the challenges and opportunities along the corridor under a sustainable development perspective.

The international and local dimensions are being considered in all the projects under the CPEC as stated by Ichii et al. (2021: p. 29): “Regional integrity and access to global trade are imperative features of the EC and thus become crucially important for achieving sustainable development. The CPEC offers real potential for regional development and access to global trade.” Therefore, sustainability and security are achieved in the environment and economic domains of the relationship between China and Pakistan, producing spillovers and positive feedback for both countries.

4. Conclusion

The study found sufficient empirical evidence to confirm the inferences. The boundaries of the case study were able to confine the fine-grain analysis of the narratives of state and non-state actors towards the sustainability of the CPEC, although it is not possible to exclude the potential risks to the environment that the projects possess.

It is possible to conclude with high confidence that the spillover of the green BRI approach instituted by China to the international/regional dimensions is positive. The national legal changes and practical gains in protecting the Chinese natural environment are consistent with the international legal commitments

assumed by the country in several multilateral forums.

The spillover to BRI projects is a logical pathway considering that it is the most important Chinese development platform, which resonates directly with Global South countries that face similar challenges in identifying a clear path for sustainable development. The recipient's reactions to the Chinese investments have oscillated since the launch of the BRI in 2012; however, it is possible to identify a more mature positioning as they view it as an alternative to the Bretton Woods institutions at the same time that it is leverage in dealing with the Global North interests. There are no naive countries in this game; thus, the arguments of debt-trap or diplomacy trap do not sustain vis-à-vis the empirical evidence presented by the case.

We found sufficient evidence of the environmental security in the relationship between the countries at the national and international level, as the interstate dynamics and trans-societal linkages of state and non-state actors show. This is the significant contribution of the CPEC case study in this paper.

The interstate dynamics within the CPEC case indicates that although it is a work-progress platform, there are in place sophisticated mechanisms and regulation created by the Chinese and Pakistani governments to deal with the projects, which provides and increases levels of security in socio-environmental dimensions.

As for the trans-societal linkages, the initiatives of bordering provinces were essential to provide a robust exchange to the point of taking it to the national level. In addition, the high involvement of local decision-makers and stakeholders supports sustainability from economic, social, and environmental perspectives.

We summarize our findings vis-à-vis the theoretical framework as follows:

Theoretical Approach	Empirical Indicator	Findings
TWAIL	Resistance to status quo international order	BRI as a new model of development—alternative to Bretton Woods international institutions
	Alternatives to International Law of development	South-South engagement on more equality basis
Translocality	Interstate dynamics	Increase support to Pakistan and spillover of domestic regulation
	Trans-societal linkages	High involvement with border and local communities in the projects
	Environmental sensitivity and vulnerability	Infrastructure projects as sources of concern for communities;
	Increase environmental security	Green adjustments in legal systems

Despite the contributions made by the study, there are significant limitations that need to be considered. First, although the chosen research design was a case study, which by definition is suitable to identify micro-causes or phenomena that escape from other types of analysis, the CPEC case has to pick some of the projects to conduct the analysis and generalize the findings. The generalization is necessary with the boundaries of the case but leaves it open to escape other phenomena or micro-causes within the projects.

Second, related to the last paragraph's limitation, the content analysis considered the broader scope of data related to the CPEC available online. This limitation implicates a less robust finding regarding the local perceptions and impacts of the projects in local communities, which only interviews would have captured.

Future research agendas should consider the exposed limitations and lapidate the findings and indicators in the study, extrapolating to the projects as case studies to fine-grain the analysis by identifying additional implications.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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