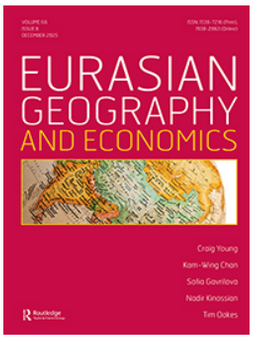
Dissent or desire for more development? : win-win discourse and power dynamics in the narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan

Ashraf, Usman

Taylor and Francis Ltd.
2025-12-11

Ashraf, U 2025, 'Dissent or desire for more development? win-win discourse and power dynamics in the narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan', Eurasian Geography and Economics. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2025.2597825

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/625265
10.1080/15387216.2025.2597825



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Eurasian Geography and Economics

ISSN: 1538-7216 (Print) 1938-2863 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rege20

Dissent or desire for more development? Win-win discourse and power dynamics in the narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan

Usman Ashraf

To cite this article: Usman Ashraf (10 Dec 2025): Dissent or desire for more development? Win-win discourse and power dynamics in the narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan, Eurasian Geography and Economics, DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2025.2597825

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2025.2597825

Published online: 10 Dec 2025.

EURASIAN GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMICS
https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2025.2597825

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Dissent or desire for more development? Win-win discourse and power dynamics in the narratives of the Belt and Road Initiative in Pakistan

Usman Ashraf

Global Development Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

The hegemonic discourse surrounding Chinese investments in Pakistan promotes a win–win situation. In this article, I argue that the hegemonic win–win discourse is crafted through the (re)production and recontextualization of multiple narratives. The narratives encompass such topics as bilateral relations, geopolitics, geoeconomics, and development and growth. The hegemonic discourse is constructed and disseminated by a power elite embedded within a network of institutions. The main finding of the study demonstrates that networks of the power elite and institutions wield discursive power that assimilate dissent within a "desire for more development" framework, thereby rendering dissent invisible and fostering a consensus that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a universally supported win–win scenario. A total of 2,895 articles published between 2013-20 in three English newspapers—*The News*, *Dawn*, and *The Nation*—were analyzed. Initially, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine the framing of CPEC. Subsequently, critical discourse analysis was employed to scrutinize hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses as well as the actors and institutions involved in discourse creation and the processes of co-opting dissent.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 1 April 2024
Accepted 26 November 2025

KEYWORDS
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); discourse analysis; power elite; popular geopolitics

Introduction

"Development, development, development . . . we are quite tired of this word and will not be duped anymore" (Ebrahim 2017). These are the views expressed in a yearlong sit-in by Leela Manjiani, a spokesperson for the Thari community, in southern Pakistan. The views expressed by Manjiani contradict the claims of Pakistani state officials that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a win–win project supported by the majority of Pakistanis (*Dawn* 2017a). This study intends to answer the puzzle of these contradictory claims.

CPEC, termed as a flagship economic corridor, is often seen as the barometer of progress of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC is a framework consisting of US $62 billion investments in energy, transportation, and trade infrastructure. In popular

CONTACT Usman Ashraf usman.ashraf@helsinki.fi 216, Unioninkatu 35, Global Development Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

discourse, strong optimism shrouded the BRI and its implications for the geopolitics and geoeconomics of development, shared prosperity, and a win–win scenario (Huang 2016), while critics pointed out fears of an unsustainable debt burden and political subordination to China (Ali 2020; Miao 2021; M. Zhang 2021; McCartney 2021). This contentious discourse surrounding the "real" impacts of the BRI is the result of the discrepancy between the dominant discourses and empirically grounded realities. In the context of CPEC, Garlick (2021) examined the inconsistency between the discourse of trade/connectivity and geographical realities. He argues that the claims of being, for example, an economic corridor, game changer, or flagship project are uncritically replicated by scholars and practitioners and thus not reflective of on the ground realities. In this regard, an important question arises about how the hegemonic discourse of win-win remains intact despite counternarratives questioning the legitimacy of the dominant discourse.

I intend to answer this by making two arguments through critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Pakistani print media. First, I argue that multiple narratives supported by the power elite are rallied to establish a hegemonic win–win discourse. The analysis shows that the power elite create the win–win discourse on CPEC by historicizing and recontextualizing narratives of bilateral relations, geopolitics, geoeconomics, and development. Second, the power elite co-opt dissenting narratives through multiple ways and transform dissent into a desire for more development. The access of dissent to discourse creation spaces is limited. Therefore, it is easy to co-opt, silence, and marginalize dissenting voices to frame CPEC in a hegemonic "common sense" of win-win.

In the next section, I will introduce the framework of popular geopolitics and review the geopolitical literature on BRI and CPEC, followed by an introduction to the material and methods used in this research. Next, I outline the hegemonic win–win discourse on CPEC and present the first part of the argument by analyzing the establishment of the hegemonic discourse. I trace the four dominant narratives that are reframed and recontextualized to construct the hegemonic win–win discourse. In the power elite section, I map the power elite – major actors and their institutional affiliations involved in the creation of the hegemonic discourse. This analysis shows the actors and their roles and strategies in the construction of the win–win discourse. In the penultimate section, I present my second argument by examining dissenting voices in the print media and the co-option of dissent by the power elite. In the last section, I present concluding remarks and the implications of this research for the politics of the BRI.

Literature review: the geoeconomics and geopolitics of the BRI and CPEC

In this research, I draw theoretical framing from popular geopolitics, a sub-category of critical geopolitics. Critical geopolitical analysis focuses on the "constitutive role of discourse" in establishing a certain reality of a geopolitical phenomenon (Mawdsley 2008, 510). Popular geopolitics is a representation of international politics (Szostek 2017) "occurring every day" (Pickering 2017, 88) that "citizens are immersed in" (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1664). According to Mawdsley (2008), popular geopolitics are concerned with the images and representations of geopolitics presented and circulated in various media (Pickering 2017), including cartoons, film, art, social media, newspapers, and magazines (Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Dodds 2008, 2010; Sidaway 2022). Analysis of different forms of media and textual deconstruction (Dittmer and Gray 2010) provides elite and non-elite

(popular) understanding of how the world works. One theme often used in popular geopolitics literature focuses on the "geopolitical moment" and its representation in a given text (Saunders and Strukov 2018). Thus, analyzing a geopolitical moment is to analyze "a discourse located within a nexus of power and knowledge" (Dodds 2010, 114) "in which powerful actors shape discourse which then descends upon the masses to ensnare them" (Dittmer and Gray 2010, 1664). In conclusion, the popular geopolitics framework is useful in analyzing "the social construction and perpetuation" of understanding a geopolitical moment (Szostek 2017, 196). The geopolitical moment herein under analysis is the BRI and its implementation in Pakistan under the CPEC framework.

The official narratives portray BRI as a geoeconomic project that is an open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial win–win project based on international cooperation (Liu, Schindler, and Liu 2020; Yeh 2016). Scholars, however, have argued about the geopolitical and geoeconomic implications of the BRI (Lin, Sidaway, and Yuan Woon 2019) and its potential to transform the regional order (L.-H. Chan 2020) to push back against the U.S. "pivot to Asia" initiative. However, geoeconomics are not separate from the geopolitics of the BRI. Flint and Zhu (2019) argue that claims of the BRI in terms of geoeconomics or geopolitics as exclusive from each other ignore the connectivity of trade and investment with the territorialization of power. They propose a "single logic" approach (Flint and Zhu 2019) that unifies the interests of firms and states to maximize profit, capture economic activity within the borders of a state, and make global connections that intertwine the economic agenda with geopolitical goals.

Empirical research on CPEC supports the observations made by Flint and Zhu (2019). For example, Garlick (2018) scrutinized the claims of trade and connectivity under CPEC to avoid China's Malacca dilemma. He makes a case for the geopolitical nature of CPEC instead of official claims of geoeconomics. Additionally, McCartney (2021) shows that CPEC is not only of significance to Pakistan's socio-economic uplift, but also it relates to China's Western Development Programme, which aims to revitalize Western parts through rural modernization and tourism development (Aung 2023; McCartney 2021).

The social construction and perpetuation of understanding the BRI and CPEC as discussed in the popular geopolitics literature have been empirically studied by scholars utilizing discourse analysis. In this regard, Dunford and Liu (2019) show that different framings of development and progress play an important role in establishing a win–win discourse around BRI. Using poststructuralist discourse analysis, S. I. N. Chan and Song (2020) show that the two dominant discourses around BRI are development and geopolitics. They argue that the Chinese leadership have resorted to a depoliticized version of development that focuses on economics, thus amplifying geoeconomics. S. I. N. Chan and Song (2020) argue that the label of geopolitics is deliberately disassociated from the Chinese authority's discursive representation of BRI to "tell the China story well." Using a critical geopolitical approach, Xiao (2023) argues that discursive representation of the BRI by the Chinese overseas diplomatic authorities unfolds not only through traditional diplomatic sites but also at both local and domestic media sites. Similarly, many scholars have studied the discursive representation of the BRI in the United States, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, India, and Europe (Miao 2021; Yang and Van Gorp 2021). In a comparative study of discourse on the BRI between ASEAN and Western media, R. Zhang (2024) shows that Western media narratives focus on economic implications and use more negative framing compared to ASEAN media outlets. The main finding was

that the BRI receives positive coverage in "friendly" countries and negative coverage in Western countries.

In the case of the BRI in Pakistan, similar friendly coverage in Pakistani newspapers is noted by many studies (see, e.g. Ekhteyar and Umrani 2021; Garlick 2021; Hameed 2018). Ahmed and Ziaul Haque Sheikh (2021) argue that CPEC can bring regional stability in South Asia because China has engaged multiple actors in the region. CPEC has wider implications for India, Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia (Chaziza 2016; Garlick and Havlová 2021; Husain 2024). China has shown interest in expanding CPEC to Afghanistan because it continues to build power and trust relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan (Basit, Torjesen, and Macfarlane 2019). Regarding the Middle East, E. Hussain (2020) argues that CPEC can become a market for transregional stakeholders. This will have positive effects on transregional trade and connectivity in the Middle East. This is reflected in Pakistan's attempt to woo Saudi Arabia into establishing an oil refinery in Gawadar (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh 2020). However, in the South Asian context, BRI represents a challenging situation for India's regional ambitions. Brewster (2013) argues that India feels threatened because of these developments and China's increasing presence in and relationship with South Asian countries and the Indian Ocean. According to Brewster (2013), India and China are bound to be pitched against each other in South Asia because of their strategic, geoeconomic, and geopolitical goals in the region. This is reflected in India's strong criticism of CPEC on the grounds that the project undermines its territorial sovereignty (Abb 2022; Blah 2018). In conclusion, CPEC in popular discourse is a project of prosperity, regional equality, and rapid economic growth in Pakistan, while critics have pointed out fears of unsustainable debt burdens and economic and political subordination to China (Aslam and Thayer 2020; Ali 2020; McCartney 2021).

Materials and methods: discourses, power dynamics, and social actors

National-level media in Pakistan (newspapers and TV) are mainly controlled by three big media groups: Nawa-i-waqat, Dawn Media, and Jang group. These three groups own most of the circulated Urdu and English newspapers as well as news channels.

For this analysis, three English newspapers, one from each media group, that have the widest circulation in Pakistan were studied. The newspapers are *The News (Jang group)*, *Dawn (Dawn Media)*, and *The Nation (Nawa-i-waqat group)*. The rationale for choosing English newspapers was that generally English newspapers have relatively less censorship compared to Urdu newspapers (Safdar et al. 2019). Urdu newspapers have a wider readership but are highly censored. A similar observation was made by others (Garlick 2021) who have noted that English newspapers have published more critical pieces on CPEC. The three newspapers from the three media groups represent a wide spectrum of political leaning. *The News* and *Dawn* are considered liberal and progressive newspapers. In comparison, *The Nation* is known to take a more conservative position (Akhtar and Pratt 2020; Tabassum, Kazim Shah, and Bilal 2013). The second rationale for my newspaper selection was methodological. Inclusion of Urdu articles in the dataset would have increased the number substantially. Furthermore, it would have increased the complexity of linguistic comparison. The implication of this choice was that English newspapers cater to the upper echelons of Pakistani society. This audience has access to international media that can be affected by editorial choices as well. A Gallup survey on the content analysis of

Urdu and English newspapers shows that English newspapers have a more international orientation compared to Urdu newspapers.

This study focuses on the period 2013–20. Although CPEC was officially announced in 2015, data were collected from 2013 to analyze debates during the planning stages. A search of relevant newspaper archives yielded a collection of news clippings, editorials, and opinion pieces related to CPEC. The articles in which CPEC was framed as a "win–win" or a "game changer" were included in the dataset. In total, 2,895 articles were shortlisted for the study.

A two-tiered approach to the analysis was used. First, a qualitative content analysis approach was used to read through all the articles and analyze the frames used. Content analysis is a widely used text analysis method to analyze framing of a text (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2008). Here, it is used to map positive and negative frames used for CPEC in the newspapers. The analysis revealed that most articles in the database used positive framing for CPEC as a win-win/game changer, while only a few articles documented people's discontent. Based on the findings of the content analysis, the main dataset of 2,895 articles was divided into two categories. The first category uses a positive win-win or game-changer framework. For example, the potential to increase regional trade, develop industry, and increase gross domestic product were categorized as positive framing. Most of the articles (2,806 out of 2,895) belong to this category. The second category frame CPEC more "negatively," focusing on discontent and protests against CPEC. About 90 articles were assigned to this category. An example of negative framing is comparing CPEC to neo-colonization (Qaiser 2019).

At the second stage, a CDA approach was used to conduct an in-depth analysis of the two collections. Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software package, was used to organize the articles, assign descriptive and thematic codes, create networks of codes, and retrieve quotes. According to Hajer and Versteeg (2005, 175), discourse is a "grouping of statements" or "an ensemble of ideas." Codes were assigned to different groupings of statements related to CPEC in the articles. These codes combined different discourses present in Pakistani newspapers. By focusing on the dominant narrative, we can identify hegemonic discourse. CDA is a framework used to situate text in its social context for analyzing "power relations in society" that shape discursive politics (Fairclough 1993). One aspect of power contestations in discourse is manifested through "power over discourse" – the power to frame and "control the ground rules" of discussion (Fairclough 2015; Fairclough and Ruth 2006). By situating the hegemonic discourse, we can discern the discursive position of the powerful, and by identifying the actors, we can discern the power elite/actors who promulgate hegemonic discourse. Therefore, codes were assigned to the speakers found in the database. According to Van Dijk, the actors and institutions that have "privileged access to discourse and communication" (2011, 255) are the power elite that aim to create a hegemonic discourse. Mapping the key actors involved, their institutional affiliation, and interlinkages of discourses they used revealed the power elite's membership.

The CDA approach with a critical geopolitical framework is a useful toolkit to trace the "construction of hegemonic and dissenting discourses within which international debate takes place" (McFarlane and Hay 2003, 212). Texts produced in the mass media provide

a great opportunity to analyze "a context within which elite geopolitical texts are (re) produced" (McFarlane and Hay 2003). It allows the dissection of the workings and constituent elements of hegemony and counter-hegemony. In this regard a geopolitical moment of utmost importance is manifested through the very articles published in the newspaper. Identification of the dominant discourse of the group and disseminating that discourse reveal attempts to construct "hegemonic regimes of representation" (Mawdsley 2008) – the power to construct hegemonic discourse to frame a geopolitical moment in a certain way to maintain and reproduce power relations (Dijk and Teun 2011). The focus of this study is to identify discourse that is silenced and the mechanics of their co-option. As Mawdsley (2008) suggests, absences, as well as presences, play a part in the "production of common sense" or the construction of reality of a geopolitical moment. The approach adopted in this study is to look for "absences" by identifying "presences" (i.e. hegemonic discourse) to analyze the production of "common sense." The voice of different social groups is mediated through their access to information, knowledge, social position, and group membership (Rinne and Nygren 2016; Tannen, Hamilton, and Schiffrin 2015). Although access by activist and dissenting groups to discourse construction is limited, they use different strategies to get their voice heard. For example, less powerful social actors may gain visibility and standing in the media by the spectacle of protest (Isaksen and Stokke 2014). Therefore, focusing on the small number of articles that mention protest is an opportunity to identify "what is being silenced" in discussion about CPEC.

The hegemonic win–win discourse on CPEC

Many discourse studies have noted a win–win framing of CPEC in the Pakistani media (e.g. Afzaal et al. 2019; Ekhteyar and Umrani 2021; Hameed 2018). The content analysis done here shows a similar pattern. Content analysis of newspaper articles revealed that about 97% of the articles describe CPEC as a positive intervention. The highest number of such articles appeared in *The News* (1,198), followed by *Dawn* (1,167), and *The Nation* (441). The two key terms used in multiple contexts, emphasizing the positive framing, are "win-win" and "game changer." These terms appeared 772 times in the three newspapers. The highest number of mentions of these terms was in *Dawn* (315 times), followed by *The News* (293 times), and *The Nation* (164 times). Table 1 shows the distribution of news articles across the three newspapers.

The first appearance of the win-win formula in the context of CPEC occurred in *Dawn* on 5 July 2013. The newspaper reported that "Pakistan and China resolved to

Table 1. Coverage of CPEC in Pakistani newspapers, 2013–2020.

Newspaper	Owner	Total number of articles sampled	No. of articles with a positive framing	No. of articles reporting protests	No. of articles using the terms win-win/game changer
The News	Jang Group	1,217	1,198	19	293
Dawn	Dawn Media group	1,186	1,167	19	315
The Nation	Majid Nizami Trust	492	441	51	164
Total		2,895 (100%)	2,806 (97%)	89 (3%)	772 (27.5%)

promote the policies aimed at advancing the cause of peace, co-operation and harmony creating a win–win situation in the region" (*Dawn* 2013). The observation was made during the then-newly-elected Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif's five-day visit to Beijing. On this occasion, multiple memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed between the two countries. A few months prior to Sharif's visit, the Chinese Prime Minister had visited Pakistan. During the Chinese Prime Minister's visit, the newspaper reported that both countries agreed to pursue people-centric policies to "mitigate poverty, promote social and economic development and diminish the roots of conflicts" (Hasnain 2014). According to the newspaper, Pakistan would support the Chinese policy and efforts at combating the "three evils of extremism, terrorism and separatism" (S. Ali 2018).

The early framing of the project set the ground rules for discussion, limiting the possibilities of a more nuanced debate (Fairclough and Ruth 2006). The Pakistani and Chinese Prime Ministers' visit took place in 2013, about two years prior to the official announcement of CPEC. It is important to note that *Dawn* had already declared the project a win–win in 2013, which preceded the announcement of operational and project details including even the inauguration and naming of the project. Therefore, it can be argued that the discursive construction of CPEC as a win–win began before the project was set in motion. The early framing played an important role in setting the rules that were observed in ensuing discussions in the Pakistani print media. As S. I. Haider and Waqar (2019, 62) have noted, little to no transparency and public sharing of information made it impossible to separate "facts from the discourse provided by the media." Hence, the early discussions were, in the absence of facts and project details, "highly ideologically influenced" (A. A. Gill and Kausar 2017) by the government, state officials, political parties, and private businesses and mainly revolved around the feasibility and economic impacts of CPEC.

The early construction of the win–win discourse occurred in a broader historical context of bilateral relations, particularly military relations, between the two countries (Boni 2016). The early framing of CPEC was heavily controlled by China and Pakistan in what Afzal (2020) called controlling the narrative "at all costs." Some later studies identified contestation in the win–win discourse in the Pakistani media as well. For example, S. I. Haider and Waqar (2019) noted a shift in opinions in the editorials and opinion pieces published in *Dawn*. Some other studies have pointed out discrepancies in the discourse and on the ground reality. For instance, a close assessment of CPEC by Garlick (2021, 531) highlighted that "work had not yet begun on more than half of the projects."

My analysis found that the win-win claim was reproduced and recontextualized in many contexts such as bilateral relations, geopolitics, infrastructure, energy, and a shared future. The repetition of the win–win claim in these contexts reinforced the hegemonic discourse that CPEC is a win–win project. The analysis of the news articles revealed that the win–win discourse was produced and recontextualized via four major narratives: 1) bilateral relations, 2) geopolitics, 3) geoeconomics, and 4) progress and development. In the following sections, I explain the key arguments of each narrative and embed them in their historicized socio-political context. Table 2 presents a summary of the key arguments found in the newspapers.

Table 2. Summary of major narratives and key arguments presented in Pakistani newspapers.

Narrative	Key argument
1. Bilateral Relations	CPEC is a result of the historical friendship between China and Pakistan.
2. Geopolitics	CPEC is changing power dynamics at regional and global levels.
3. Geoeconomics	Other countries can join in this win-win opportunity based on trade and investment.
4. Development and Growth	CPEC will bring progress, growth, and development to Pakistan.

Pak-China relations: all-weather friends

> Our friendship is higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the Indian Ocean and sweeter than honey. (Hu Jintao, former President of China)

The above quotation reflects the character of China-Pakistan bilateral relations in popular discourse. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first narrative of the win–win discourse focuses foremost on Sino-Pak bilateral relations. The narrative suggests that the bilateral relations are based on long-term mutual benefits, prosperity, and friendship; hence, CPEC is merely an extension of such preexisting collegial relations.

The act of historicizing the friendship between the two countries legitimizes the call for trust and brotherhood. For example, during his visit to Pakistan at the official launch of CPEC, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, "Islamabad stood by Beijing at a time when it stood isolated on the world stage" (*Dawn* 2015). He was making a reference to the fact that Pakistan was the first Muslim country to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China and Pakistan's key role in Henry Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in 1971, which laid the groundwork for President Nixon's visit to China (Small 2015). Small (2015) explains that the development of Pakistan–China relations is the result of a territorial dispute between China and India that resulted in a war in 1962. It was in this context that the two countries drew closer in a relationship in which China provided diplomatic cover and military assistance as Pakistan became a regional counterforce to India. Small (2015) further argues that, until recently, the nature of the relationship mainly consisted of military assistance in the form of equipment and particularly collaboration between the two countries on nuclear arms. Similarly, Boni (2020) considers CPEC a transformation of the formerly deep, strategic, and military partnership into an economic alliance.

One important feature of this narrative can be found in the language and vocabulary used to substantiate it, which emphasize personal rather than diplomatic relations. One telling statement by the Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing, at the 58th CPEC progress meeting referred to the nature of the relationship. He said: "CPEC is a product of the vision of two brotherly countries that goes beyond traditional business dealings" (Yousafzai 2019). Pakistani officials have made similar remarks, citing, for example, that Pakistan and China are "all-weather strategic co-operative partners … our ties are based on deep mutual trust and understanding" (Ali 2020). These types of statements emphasize that leaders in both countries invoke a personalized vocabulary of trust, friendship, and brotherhood when discussing CPEC. Such a representation of CPEC connotes the idea of a friendship based on trust. Therefore, CPEC is a favor returned by China.

Geopolitics: rivalry unfolded in discourse

Viewing the BRI and CPEC within the context of geopolitics and geopolitical rivalries is perhaps the most used framework of analysis (Abb 2022; D. M. Gill 2019; I. Hussain et al. 2021; McCartney 2021). The geopolitical argument is that the BRI represents a shift in global power dynamics in favor of China vis-à-vis CPEC, which is changing the regional power dynamics in favor of Pakistan. The newspapers present CPEC as instrumental to securing the nation's place in the complex web of regional and global geopolitical dynamics.

The regional and geopolitical rivalry unfolded on an official visit by the then U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian affairs, Alice Wells. Wells presented counter-hegemonic discourse in the following words: "inflated pricing of power and development projects is not good for the Pakistani people" (M. Haider 2019). She repeated the infamous "debt-trap diplomacy" argument (Lai, Lin, and Sidaway 2020) that China has been accused of using to take control of strategic seaports and other assets, such as the infamous case of Hambanthota Harbor in Sri Lanka (Singh 2020). The narrative used by Wells was in part an attempt to establish a counternarrative to the win-win discourse. A quick and fiery rebuttal came from both Pakistani and Chinese authorities. Chinese Ambassador Yao Jing said, "China will not ask Pakistan to pay back its outstanding loans" (Siddiqui 2020). He further advised that the United States should refrain from leveling such allegations without "solid proofs" (Siddiqui 2020). Similarly, on the Pakistani side, the Chairman of the Senate's CPEC Committee dismissed it as "U.S. propaganda" (M. Haider 2019), saying that CPEC has provided 70,000 jobs to Pakistani workers. In response to the debt-trap-diplomacy allegation, the senator responded that "91% of Pakistan's liabilities have nothing to do with CPEC" (M. Haider 2019).

The saga of Wells's visit shows that certain moments become fields of contestation between different actors representing the struggle to establish discursive hegemony. In this struggle, factual accuracy plays a less significant role because the claims are primarily about framing the information in a certain way. The counternarrative in a discursive contestation is built upon two aspects. First, proponents insist on framing the issue according to the preferred discursive position. Second, they question the other party's legitimacy or right "to speak" about the issue. For instance, the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan questioned Wells's legitimacy to speak about CPEC with the following words: "We also want to advise the U.S. that … you should first look back at what you have done to Pakistan. Did Ms. Wells bring any aid, investment, or trade for Pakistan during her visit?" (Syed 2020).

Geoeconomics: the more the merrier

Geoeconomics is another major narrative found in Pakistani newspapers in reference to CPEC. The main argument is that CPEC provides an opportunity for prosperity through regional trade and connectivity between Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. Both China and Pakistan have extended invitations to other states to join CPEC, in particular Saudi Arabia. During his visit to Pakistan, Saudi Prince Muhammad Bin Sulman showed interest in CPEC and signed multiple MOUs (Husain 2024). An extended version of CPEC as the Saudi Arabia-China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (SCPEC) has been proposed (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh 2020; Chaziza 2016). The proposal of Saudi Arabia joining CPEC was very well received and touted as solidification of the win–win claim. These efforts to expand CPEC to the Middle East were

explained by Chaziza (2016) who stated that Pakistan is at the center of Beijing's access and regional influence in the Middle East.

Many other countries have also been invited to join the project, including Afghanistan (I. A. Khan 2023), Iran (*The News* 2016), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkmenistan, Tajikistan (*The News* 2017), and Russia (*The News* 2018). The Chinese ambassador to Pakistan, Weidong, commented on the idea of expanding CPEC to include Iran: "CPEC is a win-win cooperation, so we are looking forward to exploring the possibilities for cooperation among all regional countries" (*The News* 2016). The Pakistani ambassador to UAE echoed a similar sentiment: "Pakistan will be pleased if the UAE can benefit from the project (CPEC), as this is a win-win situation for all countries in the region" (M. Aamir 2017). Despite the narrative of inclusion and regional expansion of CPEC, the on the ground situation is not very encouraging. For example, Garlick and Havlová (2021) argue that the advent of the BRI and CPEC has not increased Chinese investments or engagement in the region.

The possibility of other countries joining the initiative helps cement the win–win claim based on the geoeconomics of cooperation rather than geopolitics. With the geopolitical narrative, the win-win discourse becomes a defense of the BRI/CPEC against the criticisms leveled by other states such as the United States. With the geoeconomic narrative, the win–win discourse becomes a justification to expand CPEC to include other countries, thus serving the dual purpose of countering critical narratives and legitimizing the win-win claim.

Development, progress, and a shared future

Development, progress, and the desire for a shared future is another major narrative pushed in Pakistani newspapers. According to this narrative, CPEC is "a new model of development," one based on "win–win cooperation" (*The Nation* 2019b) and a "shared future for humanity" (*Dawn* 2017b; M. Haider 2020; Z. Hussain 2018). An article in *Dawn* announced, "[CPEC] has become the hope for development and strengthening the economy" (*Dawn* 2013). Another article referred to CPEC as "the key to Pakistan's socio-economic development" (*Dawn* 2018b). Supporters see CPEC as "helping Pakistan to improve its socio-economic indicators through development and prosperity" (Butt 2018). Furthermore, the project will only continue its "mutually beneficial march towards" development, prosperity, and win-win cooperation (*The News* 2020).

Prime Ministers, state officials, and diplomats from both countries have issued statements in which the win-win narrative is embedded in discussions of prosperity, development, a shared future, and peaceful coexistence. This narrative is uncritically replicated in agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and other economic sectors (Butt 2018; Suleri and Qaiyum 2018). Development as a solution for every problem in the country will bring improvements in agriculture, power generation, employment, economic growth, industrialization, progress, regional integration, social benefits, trade, and business.

A small number of the news articles debate about CPEC in comparative terms where negatives and positives are weighed against each other. Not a single article, though, reaches the conclusion that CPEC has more negative impacts than positive. The idea is that the negatives are mainly of a procedural nature and would only impede the rapid execution and delivery of the projects. For example, the negatives might include a missing regulatory framework that could have sped up the CPEC projects or bureaucratic procedures that could alternatively slow them down (M. Haider 2017). Few of the articles approach the questions of

inclusion or who is impacted. The newspapers barely discuss the communities and people that should be included in the decision-making process. A problem with these analyses is that many of them are not based on actual groundwork. In the past few decades, the newspapers have lost the majority of their clientele to online news sources. Many of them face financial difficulties and thus do not maintain a large cohort of journalists, especially in distant areas. These dynamics contribute to erasing the voices of locals. Interestingly, this is in contrast to the space that is available to the power elite for discourse creation, as discussed in the following section.

Power elite: actors, institutions, and discursive coalitions

The previous section discussed the construction of the win–win discourse about CPEC in Pakistani newspapers. In this section, I analyze the question, "Who makes the win-win claim?" A mapping of standing and "actors in voice" (Rinne and Nygren 2016) help us discern the actors, institutions, and discursive coalitions that enact the win–win discourse. The statements reported in the newspapers were coded to identify speakers and their institutional affiliations (e.g. state, non-state, politicians, diplomatic staff, civil society), the events where the statements were made, and the organizer of the event. During the mapping process, a total of 348 statements were identified in which a speaker is quoted. The statements are direct quotations from speakers and do not include the statement or opinions of the journalist doing the reporting.

The analysis revealed a wide range of actors involved in making discursive statements, including heads of states, diplomats, businessmen, political parties, academics, journalists, research institutions, and think tanks. The analysis revealed that the highest number of reported statements pertain to Pakistani state actors, with 133 statements (39% of all statements) made by representatives of Pakistani state institutions. A further evaluation of the actors revealed that the narrators of the win–win discourse are spread across different institutions. The data showed that the Foreign Office of Pakistan, including the ambassadors of the country, have been the most active in constructing the win–win discourse. The greatest number of statements (38) were made by the Foreign Office of Pakistan, followed by Prime Ministers, who made 25 statements. The Ministry of Planning, Development, and Reforms; parliamentarians; and special assistants to the Prime Minister also often spoke in favor of CPEC as a win–win solution. Other actors that claimed CPEC to be a win–win solution included governors, senators, and the Chief of the armed forces. The main groups of social actors found in the newspapers are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. The main groups of social actors with a voice in Pakistani newspapers.

Social actors		Frequency as a speaker	Total
Representatives of state institutions	Chinese	98	248
	Pakistani	133	
	Joint Statements	17	
Representatives of academic/research institutions	Chinese	7	29
	Pakistani	17	
Private-sector representatives	Chinese	6	21
	Pakistani	15	
Media	Chinese	6	18
	Pakistani	12	
Other states (India, UK, Russia, U.S.)			15
Misc. (political parties, international organizations, etc.)			17
Total			348

The role of the Pakistani armed forces in discourse creation is a feature of Pakistan's political economy, in which the armed forces play an important economic role (Saddiqa 2016). Hameed (2018) argues that the Pakistani military wanted a more formal role in CPEC because of its economic prospects. According to some analysts, the military advocated for the creation of a CPEC Authority in 2019 for precisely this reason. The military was pushing the government to create such an authority on the grounds that it would help ensure the smooth execution of CPEC projects. The suspicions expressed by the analysts were further confirmed when, in 2019, one of the ex-generals became Chairman of the Authority (Haq 2020).

The second major group identified in the analysis of published statements is that of Chinese state officials. Ninety-eight statements (28% of all statements) quoted in Pakistani newspapers were made by representatives of the Chinese state. The Chinese ambassadors to Pakistan have been most active in creating and disseminating the win–win discourse with 37 statements reported in newspapers. The two Chinese ambassadors appointed during the period under analysis, Yao Jing and Sun Weidong, made 21 and 16 statements, respectively. Along with the ambassadors, other Chinese diplomats in Pakistan have also been quite active in constructing a positive discourse about CPEC. Newspapers reported a total of 35 statements issued as press releases by the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan. In addition, newspapers quoted the President of China, Xi Jinping, 15 times, followed by the Foreign Minister, governors, members of the Chinese Communist Party, the Prime Minister, and the Vice President. Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of Chinese and Pakistani speakers in the data.

The third major group identified in the analysis consists of academics and researchers from both Pakistan and China. Twenty-nine statements (8% of total statements) quoted in the newspapers were made by academics and researchers. Pakistani academics and researchers issued 17 statements, whereas their Chinese counterparts made seven statements. Five academics outside the two countries also commented on CPEC. In Pakistan, research institutions, particularly the Pakistan-China Institute and the Planning Commission's CPEC Center of Excellence, have been the most active in constructing a positive discourse. The founding member and Chairperson of the Pakistan-China

Figure 1. Institutional affiliations of speakers in the data (Source: author's calculation).

Institute is a Pakistani senator who also heads the Senate Committee on CPEC. He has been quoted as part of the process of constructing a win–win discourse. Similarly, other academics and institutions have played a role in constructing the discourse.

The fourth largest group quoted in the newspapers includes the representatives of various businesses and private companies, with a total of 21 statements. The business interest representatives were from the Chamber of Commerce, chairpersons of private companies, and representatives of electronic and print media, including journalists, analysts, and TV news show hosts, who issued a total of 18 statements. Diplomats from the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Russia, Turkmenistan, Iran, and India have also participated in constructing the discourse. The last group of social actors quoted in the newspapers consists of representatives of Pakistani political parties as well as international organizations, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank (ADB).

In a discursive coalition – a complex web of relations involving different actors, institutions, narratives, and practices – it is not only the actors who exercise agency in constructing the discourse but also the hegemonic nature of the discourse that encourages actors to reproduce the discourse, a process called structuration of discourse (Isaksen and Stokke 2014). In the process, "when a discourse starts to dominate the way a given social unit conceptualizes the world" (Isaksen and Stokke 2014, 112), individuals start to reproduce the dominant discourse. Even if the actor is replaced, the nature of the discursive statements does not change. For instance, two different political parties have been in power in Pakistan during the period under analysis. In 2015, CPEC received the support of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), and three years later it was replaced by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) Party. While in opposition, the PTI raised many questions about the transparency and viability of CPEC. The head of the party, Imran Khan, announced that the party would review CPEC projects. The Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM), Razaq Dawood, publicly expressed his concerns with CPEC projects in an interview with the *Financial Times* (Bokhari, Anderlini, and Sender 2018). However, the SAPM's call to review CPEC resulted in a turbulent response from top officials in both China and Pakistan. The day after the publication of the *Financial Times* interview, the SAPM clarified his position in favor of CPEC and reiterated that his statements were taken out of context. In its rebuttal, the Commerce Ministry that Razak Dawood was heading said, "both Pakistan and China reiterate their 'all-weather strategic partnership' and reaffirm their commitment to CPEC" (*The Express Tribune* 2018). Similarly, the incumbent Prime Minister, Imran Khan, called CPEC a "project of national significance" (Wasim 2019a), in contrast to his earlier accusations of massive corruption and possible rollback of CPEC. The structure effect of the dominant discourse is shown by the fact that between 2015 and 2020, four different individuals served as the Minister of Planning, Development, and Reforms. They belong to two different political parties, yet they all reproduced the same win-win narrative.

Co-opting dissent as a "desire for more development"

A very small number of articles reported dissenting voices on CPEC. A meager 89 out of 2,895 articles analyzed in this study reported dissenting narratives. Different actors' voices in these articles were: 1) political parties and 2) local community groups (activists and civil

society organizations). In the following section, I will explain the different actors and their reasons for dissent.

The first group, political parties, primarily focused on two major issues. First, the so-called route controversy was the first major test of CPEC in Pakistan. According to the advertised plans, CPEC would consist of two routes: eastern and western routes (Iqbal, Arduino, and Gong 2018). The eastern route would connect Punjab and Sindh, and the western route would connect Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan (see Figure 2).

In 2015, *Dawn* newspaper first leaked the masterplan for CPEC. According to the leaks, the western route connecting KP and Balochistan was not part of the CPEC framework. The exclusion of KP and Balochistan is a sensitive issue because of historical reasons. Historically, an unequal development pattern exists between the provinces. KP and Balochistan have lower infrastructure development and socio-economic indicators compared to Sindh and Punjab. This unequal development gave rise to strong resentment against the political and military elite, which mainly belong to Punjab. Thus, Punjab has become a symbol of the appropriation of resources and curbing the rights of other provinces. The historical resentment exploded into widespread protests in KP and Balochistan where people felt that the historical inequality was being replicated again. Many political leaders from KP and Balochistan started calling CPEC the China–Punjab Economic Corridor instead of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (A. Aamir 2015). Boni and Adeney's (2020) analysis shows the fears of KP and Balochistan were not unfounded

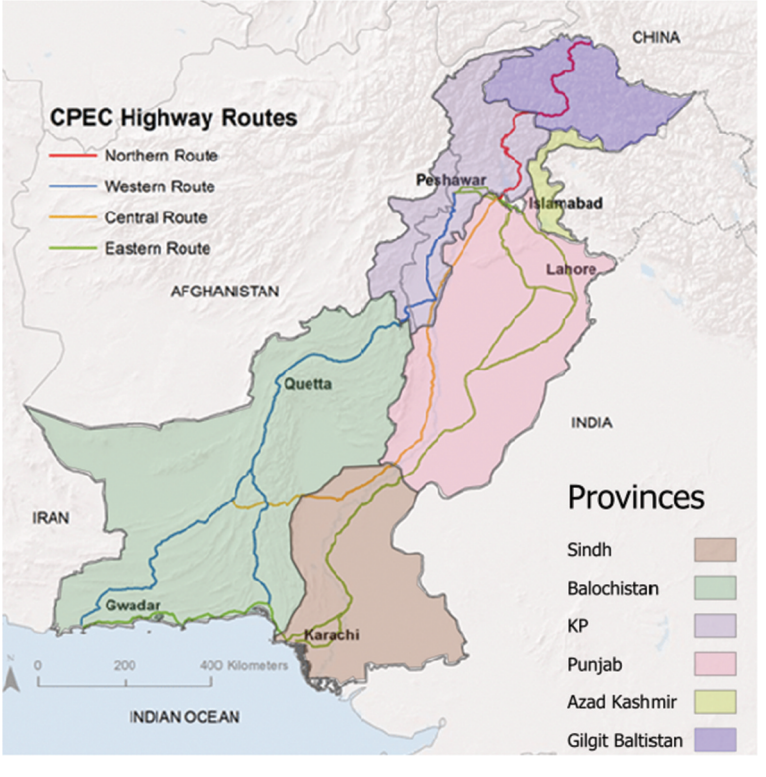


Figure 2. CPEC routes and provinces of Pakistan (Source: adapted from Reconnecting Asia, reconasia.csis.org).

because they learned that the early distribution of development projects under CPEC was unequally distributed in favor of Sindh and Punjab. Many commentators feared that the route controversy could "unmask some very troubling historical political wounds" (Javed 2016).

For instance, although home to Gwadar port, an important CPEC project, Balochistan has witnessed fierce resistance to CPEC. According to Kakar et al. (2024), CPEC represents different things for different groups in Balochistan. The Baloch separatists rejected CPEC outright as an imperialist agenda of neo-colonialization (Khan and Ahmed 2024). Moderate Baloch nationalists viewed it with suspicion as another project to exploit their resources, while the pro-federalist were optimistic with some caution (Baloch 2015; Kakar 2018; Kakar et al. 2024). The reporting of protests about the route controversy tried to frame it as politicking by Baloch and KP "nationalist" leaders. The protests were partly an effort by the political parties to establish their political legitimacy by the Baloch and KP nationalists. The protests were nothing but a political strategy; protesting over regional developmental issues is at the heart of party politics (Yousaf 2015). Some of these political leaders were even framed as "anti-Pakistan."

Instead of accommodating the concerns of the Baloch, the Pakistani state took a militarized approach to development by threatening violence against locals and leaders and doubling down on militarization (Kakar et al. 2024). In Balochistan, these issues are more sensitive given the history of insurgency and militarization of the region since the 1950s. As a result, violent attacks on Chinese workers and engineers increased markedly from the start of CPEC (Ahmed et al. 2024). Ahmed et al. (2024) calculated about 15 violent attacks carried out by the Balochistan Liberation Army and other groups against CPEC projects between 2016 and 2022.

The second major point of protest by political actors had to do with the establishment of a CPEC Authority. According to the official narrative, the CPEC Authority would be a "one window operation" for all CPEC projects, expediting coordination between investors and various government departments for speedy project execution (*The Express Tribune* 2021). The counternarrative, which mainly came from political parties in opposition, called the establishment of the CPEC Authority "a takeover of CPEC by the military" (Wasim 2019b). Despite the protests, the Authority was established in 2019, and an ex-military general served as its first chairperson. However, the Authority's legal status remained in limbo since the Authority operated on a presidential ordinance. After two years, the presidential ordinance lapsed, and the Authority legally ceased to exist. Around the same time, the Authority Chairperson came under immense scrutiny after reports of corruption (K. K. Shahid 2020) that resulted in his resignation and the collapse of the CPEC Authority (Raza 2021).

The second group of dissenters reported in the news articles are communities and their protest narratives. Their narratives diverge strongly from the political parties in two ways. First, communities' protests focus on issues related to land, livelihoods, and the environment, including land compensation, jobs, health, and education services (*Dawn* 2019; Akbar 2019). The actors articulate citizen-based narratives based on demands stemming from on-the-ground encounters with development projects, encounters that pitch local livelihoods against the overarching win-win discourse of CPEC. In addition, their tactics differ from rallies and processions organized by political parties. For example, two cases reported in the news article were the Suki Kinari Hydropower Project and the Thar Coal

Mining Project (Ebrahim 2017). The affected community of the Suki Kinari Hydropower Project stormed the construction site to stop work due to a delay in land compensation (*Dawn* 2019). The newspapers quoted one resident on the matter: "We want the government to pay those affected the market value of the land [and provide] jobs for locals (the Suki Kinari Hydropower Project), schools, health and residential settlements, and free electricity for those affected" (Ibid). In the other case, the protests by Thari indigenous people over the Thar Coal Mining Project focused on the environmental and livelihood implications of mining. Similarly, the Thari indigenous community resorted to a blockade, a month-long march to the provincial capital, and litigation against the mining company to stop mining operations and protect their water reservoir (Ebrahim 2017). The dissenting narratives on the day of action (protest day) were covered in the newspapers, though only minimally. It is through protests that counter-hegemony is not only manifested but also creates a discursive space in newspapers that otherwise is not accessible to communities.

The *modus operandi* of silencing and co-option of dissenting narratives consist of four strategies used by newspapers. First, dissenting narratives are rendered silent by far less reporting in comparison to the win–win claims. An analysis of the news articles revealed that, despite action days, only a small number of news articles reported on issues from the perspective of local communities. Among the articles that provided reports of dissent, only 15 articles quoted a person from one of the protesting communities. Other articles either quoted political parties or used the umbrella term "civil society" to lump together all those not affiliated with a political party into a single category (*Dawn* 2019). A further examination of articles that included voices of the community revealed that, out of 15, a majority of 13 articles were published by *Dawn*. *The News* published only two articles and *The Nation* none in which community activists had a voice. The conclusion that can be drawn from the "absence" of community voices in the newspapers is that the newspaper readers end up listening much less to the community voice, thus rendering dissent "silent."

Second, in dissenting narratives, political parties are given more space compared to communities. The evidence of silencing community voices was also corroborated from the analysis of speakers in the dataset. The analysis revealed a total of 78 instances when one of the newspapers specifically quoted a protester. The newspapers identified the speakers as either political workers or as activists or members of community groups (formally not associated with any political party). The data show a total of 60 instances in which the speaker was related to a political party – often a national or local leader. In comparison, voices not connected with any political party received a chance to raise their concerns in only 13 instances. The claims of political parties can be easily dismissed as "politicking," while communities and people can garner solidarity and sympathies if they are seen as losing, for example, their livelihood or home. In addition, political parties as part of the power elite are not the real threat to the win–win discourse, as discussed below.

Third, the political leaders use a language of speaking on behalf of the people. For example, many articles quoted political leaders' statements in the following ways: "the people of Gwadar are becoming agitated" (Akbar 2019), or CPEC is but "a step in keeping the region backward" (*Dawn* 2020b). In another instance, the KP provincial assembly passed a resolution during the route controversy that stated: "any change in

the original plan of the project will be sheer injustice to the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who have already been affected due to terrorism" (*Dawn* 2015a). The Chief Minister of Balochistan, Nawab Sanaullah Zehri, noted that the "people will not compromise on the development process initiated by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif" (S. Shahid 2017). These statements by the Balochistan political elite are in complete contrast to the on the ground reality. For instance, Haq Do Tehreek (Gwadar Rights Movement), which started in Gwadar in 2021 (Hafeez 2023), emerged out of the grievance of fisherfolks who lost access to the sea because of the Gwadar port. The protests turned into an enormous mobilization against CPEC over a broader range of issues concerning securitization, healthcare, education, and other issues (ibid), while political leaders remained concerned with development projects in their constituencies that could secure a win in the next elections.

Fourth, the power elite who have access to discursive spaces change the focus from dissent to other issues. For example, the statements mentioned above are telling because the issues identified by communities were not under discussion by the political parties. In contrast, the newspapers portrayed the issues identified by the political parties as the people's concerns. Thus, by speaking on behalf of the people, political parties and other actors co-opt dissent and make it part of their own narratives, which advances their party's politics while silencing local people's concerns. The protests staged by local people were not related to the route controversy or the CPEC Authority but to the destruction of houses and loss of land and livelihoods. However, the dominant voice of the political parties speaking on behalf of the people shifted the focus from criticism of the development project to being excluded from the development process.

This discussion has shown that newspapers are far less likely to report dissenting narratives compared to a positive framing of CPEC. Dissenting narratives are denied access to the construction of counter-hegemonic discourse through marginal coverage in news articles; unequal access to discursive spaces; co-option of dissent by the power elite, particularly the political elite; and favoring political discourses over people's discourses.

Conclusion

In this article, I intended to answer why the hegemonic win-win discourse of the BRI persists despite contrasting on the ground realities. The main argument presented here is that the power elite – the set of actors and institutions who have privileged access to discourse construction – co-opt dissent expressed by people into a desire for more development. The co-option happens through four processes: 1) silencing dissent by less reporting in media, 2) unequal access to discourse by the power elite, 3) speaking on behalf of the "people," and 4) changing the framing of dissent. Through these methods, the power elite co-opt and transform dissent against BRI projects into a desire for more development. As a result, dissenting narratives are discursively silenced, keeping the hegemonic win–win narrative in place. Concurrently, an array of multiple narratives of bilateral relations, geoeconomics, geopolitics, and development are mobilized to establish and legitimize the win-win discourse. I further show that the power elite use these multiple narratives to establish the hegemonic discourse. They are able to do so because of their privileged access to discursive spaces.

This study, using the empirical case of CPEC, contributes to the geopolitical literature on the BRI by analyzing the embeddedness of discourse into a nexus of power (Dodds 2010). It shows the roles that actors and institutions play in constructing a social reality of a geopolitical moment (Saunders and Strukov 2018). By building on Garlick (2018, 2021) and others' work on the deconstruction of the hegemonic discourse of the BRI, I contribute by showing that the legitimization of a win–win discourse is maintained through co-option by the power elite. Methodologically, my research contributes by showing that a focus on "what is silenced" can reveal the nature of geopolitics that is absent in newspaper texts. Therefore, it brings nuance to understanding why and how the BRI in the media of a recipient country is presented the way it is. Therefore, it is a contribution to the wider geopolitics literature that explores Global China's encounters with local dynamics.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Anja Nygren and Dr. Eija Ranta for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank the editors of *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, and two anonymous reviewers, for their kind and detailed comments that have helped to improve this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article was written with the generous support of the Kone Foundation (Koneen Säätiö), Finland, [grant no. 201904082].

References

Aamir, Adnan. 2015. "Calling CPEC, China-Punjab Economic Corridor Is Not a Mistake." *The Nation*. Accessed May 1, 2015.

Aamir, Muhammad. 2017. "*Pakistani Ambassador Promotes CPEC*." *The Nation*. Accessed February 19, 2017. https://nation.com.pk/19-Feb-2017/pakistani-ambassador-promotes-cpec.

Abb, Pascal. 2022. "All Geopolitics Is Local: The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor Amidst Overlapping Centre–Periphery Relations." *Third World Quarterly* 44 (1): 1–20.

Afzal, Madiha. 2020. *"At All Costs": How Pakistan and China Control the Narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*. Washington, US: The Brookings Institute.

Ahmed, Zahid S., and Shahram Akbarzadeh. 2020. "Pakistan Caught Between Iran and Saudi Arabia." *Contemporary South Asia* 28 (3): 336–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1779181

Ahmed, Zahid S., and Md Ziaul Haque Sheikh. 2021. "Impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative on Regional Stability in South Asia." *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 17 (3): 271–288. https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2021.2001985

Ahmed, Zahir Shahab. Pascal Abb, Filippo Boni and Hasan Karrar, edited by. 2024. *"The Securitization of CPEC" In* China, Pakistan and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Experience of an Early Adopter State, 93–114. London, UK: Tylor and Francis.

Akbar, Malik Siraj. 2019. "*Eight Months in, How Is Balochistan Faring?*" *Dawn*. Accessed April 4, 2019. https://www.dawn.com/news/1473862.

Akhtar, Nadeem, and Cornelius Pratt. 2020. "Pakistani Government–News Media Relationships: How Relevant Are Western Journalistic Values? " In *What Journalists Are Owed: How Structures, Systems and Audience Enable News Work Today*, edited by Fred Vultee and Lee Wilkins, 64–84. London, UK: Routledge.

Ali, Murad. 2020. "China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Prospects and Challenges." *Contemporary South Asia* 28 (1): 100–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2019.1667302

Ali, Shafqat. 2018. "Pakistan, China Remove CPEC Irritants." *The Nation*. Accessed November 5, 2018. https://www.nation.com.pk/05-Nov-2018/pakistan-china-remove-cpec-irritants.

Aslam, Wali, and Bradley A. Thayer. 2020. "Pakistan's Grand Strategy: The Poverty of Imagination." *Contemporary South Asia* 28 (3): 351–358. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1723493

Aung, Geoffrey. 2023. "Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development, and Control in Western China." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 64 (1): 134–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2021.1913207

Baloch, Shah Meer. 2015. "CPEC: A Bad Deal for the Baloch People?" *The Diplomat*. Accessed December 30, 2015. https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/gwadars-trials-and-tribulations/ .

Basit, Saira, Stina Torjesen, and S. Neil Macfarlane. 2019. "China in Pakistan and the Wider Region: A Cautious but Effective Leader?" *Contemporary South Asia* 27 (1): 15–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1557109

2019a. "Battagram Landowners Protest Govt Apthy." *Dawn*. Accessed November 19, 2019.

Blah, Montgomery. 2018. "China's Belt and Road Initiative and India's Concerns." *Strategic Analysis* 42 (4): 313–332. https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2018.1482631

Bokhari, Farhan, Jamil Anderlini, and Henny Sender. 2018. "Pakistan Rethinks Its Role in Xi's Belt and Road Plan." *Financial Times*. Accessed September 9, 2018. https://www.ft.com/content/d4a3e7f8-b282-11e8-99ca-68cf89602132 .

Boni, Filippo. 2016. "Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: A Case Study of Sino-Pakistani Relations and the Port of Gwadar." *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 54 (4): 498–517. https://doi.org/10.1080/14662043.2016.1231665

Boni, Filippo. 2020. *Sino-Pakistani Relations: Politics, Military and Regional Dynamics*. London, UK: Routledge.

Boni, Filippo, and Katharine Adeney. 2020. "The Impact of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Pakistan's Federal System: The Politics of CPEC." *Asian Survey* 60 (3): 441–465. https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2020.60.3.441

Brewster, David. 2013. "China and India: Great Power Rivals." *Contemporary South Asia* 21 (2): 181–182. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2013.805939

Butt, Hassan Daud. 2018. "*Great Expectations*." *The News*. Accessed March 11, 2018. https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/290801-great-expectations.

Chan, Lai-Ha. 2020. "Can China Remake Regional Order? Contestation with India Over the Belt and Road Initiative." *Global Change, Peace & Security* 32 (2): 199–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/14781158.2020.1772215

Chan, Seng In, and Weiqing Song. 2020. "Telling the China Story Well: A Discursive Approach to the Analysis of Chinese Foreign Policy in the 'Belt and Road' Initiative." *Chinese Political Science Review* 5 (3): 417–437. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-020-00146-1

Chaziza, Mordechai. 2016. "China–Pakistan Relationship: A Game-Changer for the Middle East?" *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3 (2): 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798916638209

DAWN. 2013. "*Pakistan China Vow to Promote Regional Peace and Cooperation*.". AccessedJuly 5, 2013. https://www.dawn.com/news/1022999.

DAWN. 2015. "Pakistan Was with Us When China Stood Isolated: Xi Jinping." Accessed April 21, 2015. https://www.dawn.com/news/1177304.

DAWN. 2015a. "KP Assembly Opposes Changes in Economic Corridor Route." Accessed February 7, 2015. http://www.dawn.com/news/1162011.

DAWN. 2017a. "PM, Chief Ministers Travel to China to Attend Belt and Road Forum." Accessed May 12, 2017. https://www.dawn.com/news/1332660.

DAWN. 2017b. "CPEC Must Not Be Politicised, Says Sharif." Accessed May 15, 2017. https://www.dawn.com/news/1333247.

DAWN. 2020b. "Opposition, Civil Society Decry Plan to Drop Key Road from CPEC Route." *Dawn*. August 16, 2020. https://www.dawn.com/news/1574601.
Dijk, Van, and A. Teun. 2011. *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
Dittmer, Jason, and Klaus Dodds. 2008. "Popular Geopolitics Past and Future: Fandom, Identities and Audiences." *Geopolitics* 13 (3): 437–457. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040802203687
Dittmer, Jason, and Nicholas Gray. 2010. "Popular Geopolitics 2.0: Towards New Methodologies of the Everyday." *Geography Compass* 4 (11): 1664–1677. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00399.x
Dodds, Klaus. 2008. "Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror." *Third World Quarterly* 29 (8): 1621–1637. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590802528762
Dodds, Klaus. 2010. "Popular Geopolitics and Cartoons: Representing Power Relations, Repetition and Resistance." *Critical African Studies* 2 (4): 113–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/20407211.2010.10530760
Dunford, Michael, and Weidong Liu. 2019. "Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative." *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 12 (1): 145–167. https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/rsy032
Ebrahim, Zofeen T. 2017. "Economy Vs Environment: Thar Coal and a Test of Pakistan's Priorities." *Dawn*. Accessed February 21, 2017. http://www.dawn.com/news/1314947.
Ekhteyar, Afsheen, and Tariq Umrani. 2021. "CPEC in Pakistani Print Media: Transitivity Analysis of English Newspapers' Articles." *Progressive Research Journal of Arts & Humanities (PRJAH)* 3 (1): 157–170. https://doi.org/10.51872/prjah.vol3.Iss1.93
The Express Tribune. 2018. No Rollback of CPEC, Pakistan Assures China. September 10, 2018. https://tribune.com.pk/story/1799826/pakistan-china-react-angrily-financial-times-report-cpec.
The Express Tribune. 2021. "Asim Bajwa Wins Kudos for Advancing CPEC." Accessed August 6, 2021. https://tribune.com.pk/story/2314086/asim-bajwa-wins-kudos-for-advancing-cpec .
Fairclough, Norman. 1993. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
Fairclough, Norman. 2015. *Language and Power*. London, UK: Routledge.
Fairclough, Norman, and Wodak. Ruth. 2006. "Critical Discourse Analysis." In *Discourse as Social Interaction*, edited by Teun A. Van Dijk, 258–284. London, UK: Sage.
Flint, Colin, and Cuiping Zhu. 2019. "The Geopolitics of Connectivity, Cooperation, and Hegemonic Competition: The Belt and Road Initiative." *Geoforum* 99:95–101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.12.008
Garlick, Jeremy. 2018. "Deconstructing the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Pipe Dreams Versus Geopolitical Realities." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27 (112): 519–533. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1433483
Garlick, Jeremy. 2021. *Reconfiguring the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Geo-Economic Pipe Dreams Versus Geopolitical Realities*. London, UK: Routledge.
Garlick, Jeremy, and Radka Havlová. 2021. "The Dragon Dithers: Assessing the Cautious Implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative in Iran." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62 (4): 454–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1822197
Gill, Ayesha Asghar, and Ghazala Kausar. 2017. "Game of Hope and Doubt: Critical Discourse Analysis of Pak-China Economic Corridor." *New Horizons* 11 (2): 1–16.
Gill, Don McLain. 2019. "The Geopolitics of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Its Security Implications for India." *The Korean Journal of International Studies* 17 (3): 337–353. https://doi.org/10.14731/kjis.2019.12.17.3.337
Hafeez, Somaiyah. 2023. "Gwadar's Trials and Tribulations." *The Diplomat*. Accessed January 12, 2023. https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/gwadars-trials-and-tribulations/.
Haider, Mehtab. 2017. "Winners or Losers!" *The News*, November 6, 2017. https://www.thenews.com.pk/magazine/money-matters/242110-Winners-or-losers.
Haider, Mehtab. 2019. "China, US Spar Over CPEC." *The News*. Accessed November 23, 2019. https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/573039-china-us-spar-over-cpec.

Haider, Mehtab. 2020. "China, Pakistan Agree to Preserve, Protect, Promote CPEC." *The News*. Accessed August 21, 2020. https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/703766-china-pakistan-agree-to-preserve-protect-promote-cpec.

Haider, Syed Imran, and Azhar Waqar. 2019. "Projection of CPEC in Print Media of Pakistan from 2014-2019." *Global Strategic and Security Studies Review* 1 (1): 45–64.

Hai Xiao, A. 2023. "The Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese Overseas Diplomatic Authorities: Discursive Representations and the Geopolitical Outreach in Africa." *The Professional Geographer* 75 (3): 512–520.

Hajer, M., and W. Versteeg. 2005. "A Decade of Discourse Analysis of Environmental Politics: Achievements, Challenges, Perspectives." *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning* 7 (3): 175–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/15239080500339646

Hameed, Maham. 2018. "The Politics of the China—Pakistan Economic Corridor." *Palgrave Communications* 4 (1): 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0115-7

Haq, Mifrah. 2020. "Pakistan Army Set to Gain Sweeping Belt and Road Authority." *Nikkei Asia*. Accessed November 30, 2020. https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-Army-set-to-gain-sweeping-Belt-and-Road-authority.

Hasnain, Khalid. 2014. "$1.6bn Chinese Soft Loan for Elevated Metro Train." *Dawn*. Accessed March 4, 2014. https://www.dawn.com/news/1090941/16bn-chinese-soft-loan-for-elevated-metro-train .

Huang, Yiping. 2016. "Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework and Assessment." *China Economic Review* 40:314–321. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2016.07.007

Husain, Syed Rashid. 2024. "Riyadh's Change in Strategy." *Dawn*. Accessed February 5, 2024. https://www.dawn.com/news/1811295 .

Hussain, Ejaz. 2020. "CPEC and the Belt and Road Initiative: Economic Implications for the Greater Middle East." *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 14 (1): 35–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2020.1728970

Hussain, Iqtidar, Israr Hussain, Guo Ke, and Muhammadi Muhammadi. 2021. "The Effects of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on Regional Geopolitics." *Geopolitics Quarterly* 17 (64): 206–230.

Hussain, Zafar. 2018. "Belt and Road Demonstration Project Award Held in Beijing." *The News*. Accessed January 22, 2018. https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/271644-belt-and-road-demonstration-project-award-held-in-beijing .

Iqbal, Khuram. Alessandro Arduino and Xue Gong, edited by. 2018. *"Securing CPEC: Challenges, Responses and Outcomes" In* Securing the Belt and Road Initiative, 197–214. Singapore, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Isaksen, Kari-Anne, and Kristian Stokke. 2014. "Changing Climate Discourse and Politics in India. Climate Change as Challenge and Opportunity for Diplomacy and Development." *Geoforum* 57 (November): 110–119. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.08.019.

Javed, Umair. 2016. "CPEC and the Provinces." *Dawn*. Accessed October 24, 2016. https://www.dawn.com/news/1291834.

Kakar, Rafiullah. 2018. "No Progress Made on Balochistan Component of CPEC's Western Route." *Dawn*. Accessed December 15, 2018. https://www.dawn.com/news/1451519 .

Kakar, Rafiullah. Pascal Abb, Filippo Boni and Hasan Karrar, edited by. 2024. "BRI and Ethno-Regional Conflicts: A Case of CPEC in Balochistan" In *China, Pakistan and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Experience of an Early Adopter State*, 93–114. London, UK: Tylor and Francis.

Khan, Iftikhar A. 2023. "*CPEC Will Be Extended to Afghanistan as Trilateral Cooperation Set to Deepen*." *Dawn*. Accessed May 9, 2023. https://www.dawn.com/news/1751728.

Khan, Seema, and Zahir Shahab Ahmed. 2024. "Impacts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Nation-Building in Pakistan: A Case Study of Balochistan." *Journal of Contemporary China* 33 (150): 1006–1020. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2023.2299770

Lai, Karen P. Y., Shaun Lin, and James D. Sidaway. 2020. "Financing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Research Agendas Beyond the 'Debt-Trap' Discourse." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61 (2): 109–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1726787

Lin, Shaun, James D. Sidaway, and Chih Yuan Woon. 2019. "Reordering China, Respacing the World: Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路) as an Emergent Geopolitical Culture." *The Professional Geographer* 71 (3): 507–522. https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2018.1547979

Liu, Zhigao, Seth Schindler, and Weidong Liu. 2020. "Demystifying Chinese Overseas Investment in Infrastructure: Port Development, the Belt and Road Initiative and Regional Development." *Journal of Transport Geography* 87:102812. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2020.102812

Mawdsley, Emma. 2008. "Fu Manchu Versus Dr Livingstone in the Dark Continent? Representing China, Africa and the West in British Broadsheet Newspapers." *Political Geography* 27 (5): 509–529. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2008.03.006

McCartney, Matthew. 2021. "The Prospects of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): The Importance of Understanding Western China." *Contemporary South Asia* 29 (3): 358–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1855112

McFarlane, Thomas, and Iain Hay. 2003. "The Battle for Seattle: Protest and Popular Geopolitics in the Australian Newspaper." *Political Geography* 22 (2): 211–232. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(02)00090-2

Miao, Julie Tian. 2021. "Understanding the Soft Power of China's Belt and Road Initiative Through a Discourse Analysis in Europe." *Regional Studies, Regional Science* 8 (1): 162–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/21681376.2021.1921612

The News. 2016. "China to Welcome Iran's Inclusion in CPEC, Says Ambassador." Accessed October 17, 2016. https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/157858-China-to-welcome-Irans-inclusion-in-CPEC-says-ambassador .

The News. 2017. "*Pakistan Invites Tajikistan to Benefit from CPEC*." *The News*. Accessed September 17, 2017. https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/230604-Gwadar-port-lucrative-for-Tajikistans-import-export-Pakistan.

The News. 2018. "Pak-China-Russia Cooperation Opens New Vistas of Prosperity in Eurasia: Salman Bashir." *The News. February*...

The News.2019b. "*Pakistan Blooms at China's Commodity Expo*." *The Nation*. Accessed June 17, 2019.

The News. 2020a. "CPEC to March Forward as Scheduled Despite Epidemic: Ambassador Hashmi." Accessed March 6, 2020. https://www.app.com.pk/global/cpec-to-march-forward-as-scheduled-despite-epidemic-ambassador-hashmi/.

Pickering, Steve. 2017. "Popular Geopolitics." In *Understanding Geography and War*, edited by By Steve Pickering, 87–113. New York, US: Palgrave Macmillan US.

Qaiser, Adnan. 2019. "CPEC: Pakistan's 'Chinanization' or Colonization?" *South Asia Journal*: 28.

Raza, Syed Irfan. 2021. "*Asim Bajwa Quits as PM Picks CPEC Aide*." *Dawn*. Accessed August 4, 2021. https://www.dawn.com/news/1638684.

Rinne, Pia, and Anja Nygren. 2016. "From Resistance to Resilience: Media Discourses on Urban Flood Governance in Mexico." *Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning* 18 (1): 4–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2015.1021414

Saddiqa, Ayesha 2016. *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*. London, UK: Pluto press.

Safdar, Ghulam, Ghulam Shabir, Abdul Wajid Khan, and Asad Mumtaz Seyal. 2019. "Pakistan's Print Media Industry Challenges and Prospects." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 39 (1): 49–59.

Saunders, Robert A., and Vlad Strukov. 2018. *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline*. London, UK: Routledge.

Shahid, Kunwar Khuldune. 2020. "*Asim Bajwa Expose Underlines the Corruption Linking the Pakistan Army and CPEC*." Accessed September 4, 2020. https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/asim-bajwa-expose-underlines-the-corruption-linking-the-pakistan-army-and-cpec/.

Shahid, Saleem. 2017. "*Zehri, AJK President Emphasise Balochistan's CPEC Potential*." *Dawn*. Accessed January 19, 2017. http://www.dawn.com/news/1309392.

Sidaway, James D. 2022. "Popular Geopolitics 3.0? Deconstructing the Boundaries of Popular Geopolitics." *Geopolitics* 27 (5): 1622–1628. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.2022909

Siddiqui, Naveed. 2020. "Alice Wells' Remarks Another Doomed Attempt to Defame Sino-Pak Relations: Chinese Embassy." *Dawn*. May 21, 2020. https://www.dawn.com/news/1558763 .

Singh, Ajit. 2020. "The Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' and Realities of Chinese Development Finance." *Third World Quarterly* 42 (2): 239–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1807318

Small, Andrew. 2015. *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Suleri, Dr., and Abid Qaiyum. 2018. "*A Shared Future Under CPEC*." *The News*. Accessed January 28, 2018. https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/564850-shared-future-cpec.

Syed, Baqir Sajjad. 2020. "*Beijing Warns Washington Against Efforts to Spoil Pak-China Ties*." *Dawn*. Accessed January 23, 2020. https://www.dawn.com/news/1529992.

Szostek, Joanna. 2017. "Popular Geopolitics in Russia and Post-Soviet Eastern Europe." *Europe-Asia Studies* 69 (2): 195–201. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1288861

Tabassum, Mehnaz., Sayed Kazim Shah, and Muhammad Bilal. 2013. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Left and Right Wing Ideologies in Pakistani English Newspaper Editorials." *Journal of Education and Practice* 4 (13): 72–78.

Tannen, Deborah, Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, eds. 2015. *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. New York, US: Wiley Blackwell.

Wasim, Amir. 2019a. "*PM Imran Assures China of CPEC Projects' Speedy Execution*." *Dawn*. Accessed September 9, 2019. https://www.dawn.com/news/1504379.

Wasim, Amir. 2019b. "*Opposition Rejects CPEC Body Formation Through Ordinance*." *Dawn*. Accessed October 9, 2019. https://www.dawn.com/news/1509863.

Wodak, Ruth, and Michał Krzyżanowski, eds. 2008. *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Yang, Hai, and Baldwin Van Gorp. 2021. "A Frame Analysis of Political-Media Discourse on the Belt and Road Initiative: Evidence from China, Australia, India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 36 (5): 1–27.

Yeh, Emily T. 2016. "Introduction: The Geoeconomics and Geopolitics of Chinese Development and Investment in Asia." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57 (3): 275–285. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1237881

Yousaf, Salman. 2015. "Political Marketing in Pakistan: Exaggerated Promises, Delusive Claims, Marketable Development Projects and Change Advocacy." *Journal of Public Affairs* 16 (2): 140–155. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.1562

Yousafzai, Fawad. 2019. "*CPEC Projects: China Complains About Red-Tapism, Delays*." *The Nation*. Accessed September 14, 2019. https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Sep-2019/cpec-projects-china-complains-about-red-tapism-delays.

Zhang, Min. 2021. "The Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for China's Foreign Aid." *China: An International Journal* 19 (4): 75–99.

Zhang, Rui. 2024. "How ASEAN and Western Media Covers China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Case Study of Representation of the Laos-China Railway Under International News Flows Framework." *Media Asia* 51 (3): 398–419. https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2023.2290785