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The Limits of Autocratic Collaboration in Stabilizing Spheres of Influence: Legitimacy in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

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How can powerful autocracies construct stable regional spheres of influence in which subordinate regimes remain politically secure? Existing scholarship focuses on Russia's often unsuccessful military intervention in its "near abroad," paying less attention to China's strategy of economic statecraft. This article theorizes the construction of spheres of influence as politico-spatial ordering that requires not only resource transfers from patrons but also domestic legitimation in client regimes. Examining the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a case of autocratic collaboration, the article argues that CPEC has failed to enhance regime stability in Pakistan. While bringing infrastructure to the host country, CPEC has generated a grave macro-economic crisis in Pakistan that has forced its government to seek bailouts from the International Monetary Fund. In a political context where chronic financial dependence on the IMF carries humiliating stigma of holding a "begging bowl," these bailout-seeking and the implementation of unpopular austerity measures have eroded the Pakistani government's performance-based legitimacy, intensifying political vulnerability. The case suggests that economic statecraft-based autocratic collaboration alone is insufficient for crafting a stable sphere of influence. To succeed, autocratic collaboration must serve to strengthen the legitimacy of subordinate regimes. By connecting autocratic collaboration to autocratic legitimation in the context of theorizing construction of durable spheres of influence by autocratic powers, this study highlights the need for integrated studies of autocratic regime stability and autocratic power projection in the Global South.

¿Cómo pueden las autocracias poderosas construir esferas regionales de influencia estables en las que los regímenes subordinados permanezcan políticamente seguros? La investigación existente se centra en la intervención militar, a menudo infructuosa, por parte de Rusia en su «círculo más próximo», y presta menos atención a la estrategia de gobernanza económica de China. Este artículo teoriza la construcción de esferas de influencia como un ordenamiento político y espacial que requiere, no solo transferencias de recursos por parte de las potencias tutelares, sino también legitimación interna en los regímenes clientes. El artículo analiza el corredor económico chino-pakistaní (CPEC, por sus siglas en inglés) como un caso de colaboración autocrática y argumenta que el CPEC no ha logrado mejorar la estabilidad del régimen en Pakistán. El CPEC atrajo infraestructura al país anfitrión, pero también generó una grave crisis macroeconómica en Pakistán que obligó a su Gobierno a buscar rescates del Fondo Monetario Internacional. En un contexto político donde la dependencia financiera crónica del FMI conlleva el estigma humillante de «tener que mendigar», estas solicitudes de rescate, así como la implementación de medidas de austeridad impopulares, han erosionado la legitimidad del Gobierno paquistaní en base a su desempeño, intensificando, de esta manera, la vulnerabilidad política. Este caso sugiere que la colaboración autocrática basada únicamente en la gobernanza económica resulta insuficiente para crear una esfera de influencia estable. La colaboración autocrática, para poder tener éxito, debe servir para fortalecer la legitimidad de los regímenes subordinados. Este estudio, dado que conecta la colaboración autocrática con la legitimación autocrática en el contexto de la teorización de la construcción de esferas de influencia duraderas por parte de poderes autocráticos, destaca la necesidad de llevar a cabo estudios integrados con relación a la estabilidad de los regímenes autocráticos y la proyección del poder autocrático en el Sur Global.

Comment les autocraties puissantes peuvent-elles construire des sphères d'influence régionales stables dans lesquelles les régimes subordonnés restent politiquement sûrs ? La littérature existante se concentre sur l'intervention militaire souvent infructueuse de la Russie dans son « étranger proche », accordant moins d'attention à la stratégie de diplomatie économique de la Chine. Cet article théorise la construction des sphères d'influence comme un ordre politico-spatial qui nécessite non seulement des transferts de ressources de la part des puissances protectrices, mais aussi une légitimation interne au sein des régimes clients. En examinant le Corridor économique Chine-Pakistan (CPEC) comme un cas de collaboration autocratique, l'article soutient que le CPEC n'a pas réussi à renforcer la stabilité du régime au Pakistan. Tout en apportant des infrastructures au pays hôte, le CPEC a généré une grave crise macroéconomique au Pakistan qui a contraint son gouvernement à solliciter des plans de sauvetage auprès du Fonds monétaire international. Dans un contexte politique où la dépendance financière chronique vis-à-vis du FMI porte le stigmate humiliant de « faire la manche », ces demandes d'aide financière et la mise en œuvre de mesures d'austérité impopulaires ont érodé la légitimité du gouvernement pakistanais fondée sur ses résultats, intensifiant ainsi sa vulnérabilité politique. Ce cas suggère que la collaboration autocratique fondée sur la diplomatie économique ne suffit pas à elle seule à forger une sphère d'influence stable. Pour réussir, la collaboration autocratique doit servir à renforcer la légitimité des régimes subordonnés. En reliant la collaboration autocratique à la légitimation autocratique dans le contexte de la théorisation de la construction de sphères d'influence durables par les puissances autocratiques, cette étude souligne la nécessité d'études intégrées sur la stabilité des régimes autocratiques et la projection du pouvoir autocratique dans les pays du Sud.

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State leaders, diplomats and journalists often make mention of the geopolitical notion of spheres of influence, demonstrating that major powers are intent on establishing their exclusionary spheres of influence in their "near abroad." Examples abound. Beijing-based diplomats told the *Economist* that "China wants a world order built around spheres of influence, with China in control of Asia, Russia wielding a veto over security arrangements in Europe and America pushed back to its own shores" (Economist 2022). Vladimir Putin had complained of NATO's 2004 eastward expansion into the Baltic states as "a serious provocation" (Putin 2007; Shanker and Landler 2007). The Ukraine conflict has been seen as a battle for spheres of influence between Russia and the West (Ferguson and Hast 2018; Chance and Walsh 2025). To exclude Chinese and Russian influence in the American "near abroad," Donald Trump stakes claim to a US sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere, as a "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine (Goddard 2025; White House 2025, 15–19). His intent was further demonstrated by the capture of Venezuelan incumbent President Nicolás Maduro in Caracas in January 2026 and his threat to annex Greenland by force (Ero and Atwood 2026).

However, these accounts only tell that major powers have the shared *desire* to establish their respective spheres of influence in their "near abroad" without exploring further whether they can succeed. We argue that major powers do not only seek to shore up pliant subordinate regimes within their spheres of influence, but more importantly, to stabilize them to consolidate durable spheres of influence. The current literature on spheres of influence primarily focuses on autocratic regimes, and in particular, Russia (Ambrosio 2009; Vanderhill 2012) and there are three major "knowledge gaps." First, given that some pro-Russian authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet space have experienced political instability, the literature does not explain sufficiently why Russia's efforts to bolster subordinate regimes succeeded in some cases but failed in others. Russia's external non-military intervention was only influential in the countries, notably Belarus, which have close cultural ties with it and do not have their own national identity (Way 2016). Way, however, says little about why Russia failed to stabilize the non-democratic governments of Georgia (in the Rose Revolution in 2003), Ukraine (in 2004 and 2014), and Moldova (in 2009) (Way 2016). Indeed, Russia often resorts to military intervention in the post-Soviet space. Russian forces helped Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon end the Tajik civil war in 1997. They have maintained military bases in Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and had joint military facilities in Belarus and Kazakhstan (Klein 2019). In January 2022, Russia led a group of the Collective Security Treaty Organization "peacekeeping forces" to Kazakhstan, albeit symbolically only, to "stabilize" the Tokayev regime against former president Nursultan Nazarbayev (Chausovsky 2022; Libman and Davidzon 2023). However, Russia is unable to consolidate its sphere of influence in post-Soviet Eurasia by military intervention. The Tokayev government has refused to recognize Russian-controlled regions in eastern Ukraine (Libman and Davidzon 2023, 1304–05). Second, power asymmetry between patrons and clients is no guarantee of successful crafting of spheres of influence. Is the normative factor of legitimacy a "missing link" in this process? Third, as an autocratic power with growing economic clout and external economic interests notwithstanding, China has not attracted meticulous attention of the studies of autocratic collaboration or autocracy promotion. Two puzzles arise: Under what conditions could autocratic collaboration, promoting economic connectivity, a policy favored and practiced by China, produce political stability in subordinate states and consolidate regional spheres of influence? Would autocratic collaboration bring about commercial projects but not necessarily legitimacy?

These puzzles lead us to examine China's use of economic statecraft and autocratic collaboration to consolidate and stabilize its sphere of influence in Pakistan. As elaborated below, Pakistan was considered by Chinese leaders China's most strategic "near abroad," as a result of both US President Obama's "strategic rebalance" to Asia policy in the early 2010s (and Japan's eager embrace of it) and US ever-deepening strategic engagement with India as a counterweight to China since 1998. Despite Chinese leaders' political desire, Chinese massive infrastructure projects in Pakistan under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have *not* succeeded in stabilizing Pakistan's elected civilian government as well as China's sphere of influence. Because of the macro-economic distress CPEC has brought about, political instability and fragile legitimacy remain a recurrent feature of Pakistani politics. Post-2018 governments have sought International Monetary Fund (IMF) programs for economic stabilization. In 2025, both civilian and military leaders began to court US President Trump. This drives us to ask: (1) How has Chinese economic autocratic collaboration with Pakistan gone wrong? (2) What normative political factor did CPEC overlook that would have otherwise enabled it to consolidate and stabilize China's sphere of influence in Pakistan? How has CPEC affected Pakistani Prime Minister's right to rule the country?

In the existing literature, Bader argues that China's economic autocratic collaboration with other autocracies has stabilizing effect on regime durability in single-party-based regimes only, which redistribute the benefits to their followers in their patronage networks. But why other regime types, e.g., military junta, personal dictatorship, or monarchy, benefit less or even negatively from economic cooperation with China is less known (Bader 2015a). This, however, tells that inflow of massive economic resources into subordinate countries *alone* does not necessarily help them achieve political stability. Politics, both domestic and international, is constituted by normative and material factors (Coleman 2017, 40). Drawing on Gerschewski's (2013, 2023) observation that legitimation is one of the three pillars that helps autocratic rule remain stable, we argue that the success of an autocratic power's use of economic statecraft to support its client regimes hinges on whether these efforts strengthen the legitimacy of the recipient regimes. Legitimacy is a crucial "missing link" in the previous studies of the efficacy of autocratic collaboration to stabilize subordinate autocratic regimes. However, the meaning of legitimacy, as a social construct, must be understood in the specific context of actors and policies under consideration (Coleman 2017, 20–24), because, according to interpretivism, there is no generalized meaning of social constructs across regions and times

(Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 10–11, 45–53). The empirical study of CPEC assesses the effectiveness of autocratic collaboration by studying how the use of economic statecraft impacts on the legitimacy of the Pakistani government (actor) and CPEC (policy behavior).

This line of argument unfolds in four steps. First, it charts the interrelationships between spheres of influence, autocratic collaboration and autocratic legitimation in second and third sections. The paper argues that autocratic collaboration based on economic statecraft can be a means to constructing spheres of influence, but their durability or fragility depends on whether such economic engagement enhances or erodes the subordinate regimes' legitimacy. With this theoretical background, the fourth section discusses the construction of China's sphere of influence in Pakistan through CPEC. It focuses on the politics of CPEC's germination, legitimacy deficit, and the lack of local agency. The conclusion argues for more comparative research on the connections between autocratic collaboration and legitimation, and local agency in the crafting of spheres of influence.

Spheres of Influence

Recently, there has been a resurgence of academic interest in the notion of spheres of influence (Hast 2014; Etzioni 2015; Allison 2020; Jackson 2020; Ortmann 2020; Lundström 2024). Two features are common to various definitions of a sphere of influence; they are (1) control over a given territory by an external actor and exclusion of other outside actors from exercising the same kind of control over the same space (Jackson 2020, 255); and (2) the level of control is lower than that of imperial colonization and the major means of control are economic and ideational rather than coercive (Etzioni 2015, 117). Because of external control, the sphere of influence is treated as an empty space without "local agency" (Ortmann 2020, 316). Construction of spheres of influence can be understood as a politico-spatial ordering project by major powers to exercise exclusionary control over subordinate states, mostly through economic means.

Liberal internationalists argue that spheres of influence are "pejorative" because of their nineteenth-century colonial connections with the "scramble for Africa" in the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference and with the "Great Game" between Britain and Russia over Central Asia (Ortmann 2020, 314–15). Spheres of influence were supposed to have disappeared with the end of the Cold War, which represented a victory of liberalism over communism; and so, they are "antiquated" (Lundström 2024, 36, 39, 51). Thus, spheres of influence are often associated with non-Western autocratic, revisionist powers, notably Russia, in existing scholarship. The narrative of the "return of spheres of influence" was spurred by Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. This "return" is framed pejoratively because of "Russia's desire to disrupt the post-Cold War peace" (Ferguson and Hast 2018, 278). This narrative portrays a "rational, restrained" West vis-à-vis an inherently expansionist Russia (Ortmann 2020, 317). This paper, however, treats spheres of influence as a normatively neutral geopolitical notion. Great powers, both democratic and autocratic, have incentives to create their respective spheres of influence in their near abroad for strategic buffer reasons (Jackson 2020, 258–59). Adjacent geographical space is also foundational to great-power identity. As soon as a great power's self-identity is perceived to be under threat, it will, in response, seek to assert and construct an adjacent region as its sphere of influence (Lundström 2024, 36–37).

In line with the existing literature, we focus on major autocratic powers. They find it politically feasible to establish their spheres of influence because less powerful autocratic neighbors are more susceptible to their exploitation in the form of policy concessions than democratic countries due to the lack of accountability to their local populations. Propping up fellow authoritarian regimes in their environs also helps the more powerful autocracies secure their survival by warding off negative spillovers from diffusion of liberal–democratic values such as free-market economy, open trade, human rights, political equality, and rule of law (Von Soest 2015, 624; Simmon and Goemans 2021). As all autocratic leaders try to "organize certainty" to minimize threats to their rule and existence (Gerschewski 2023, 3), a regional sphere of influence can mitigate this subjective sense of insecurity (Etzioni 2015, 123). Likewise, authoritarian regionalism, or the creation of regional organizations by powerful authoritarian states in the regions, is claimed to be instrumental in stabilizing smaller and economically weaker autocracies by insulating them from domestic turmoil or external influences from democracies, mutual learning from each other as well as economic cooperation. Smaller authoritarian states view regional organizations as a crucial tool for stabilizing their regimes by providing economic benefits, legitimizing electoral fraud and endorsing military intervention. Authoritarian regionalism can also be seen as a means to create and protect the spheres of influence of the more powerful autocracies (Libman and Obydenkova 2018b).

Despite the desires to create their spheres of influence, Russia and China do not proactively promote anti-democratic regime changes nor topple existing democratic regimes in their neighborhood (Bader et al. 2010; Bader 2015b, 15–27); they merely "seek to secure their immediate perimeter" by forestalling pro-democracy regime change in their neighboring states (Weyland 2017, 1236). They pursue interest-driven autocratic collaboration to stabilize or consolidate regional "like-minded" autocratic regimes. Without a grand strategy to spread autocracy nor to export any mode of autocratic governance, China's goal is limited to making the world "safe for autocracy," particularly for its communist regime (Weiss 2019, 93, 102). All in all, mutual collaboration between autocratic states would ideally be conducive to the solidification of spheres of influence.

However, two issues remain unresolved. How do China (and other autocracies) employ the practices of exclusionary control and how successful are the practices? The mechanisms used by autocratic powers and their utility are the subject of the following section. Second, some have taken it for granted that authoritarian regionalism increases the *legitimacy* of authoritarian regimes (Libman and Obydenkova 2018a; 2018b); however, the concept of legitimacy, especially in the context of autocracy, has yet to come under close scrutiny. This study focuses on legitimacy, as powerful autocracies aiming to establish a stable sphere of influence need to demonstrate some form of rightfulness. China's economic cooperation with military juntas does not contribute to extending the durability of military regimes, as pointed out by Bader (2015b), partly because military juntas "not only lack a clear vision of their rule, but also lack a *justification to rule* permanently" (Kailitz 2013, 44) (emphasis added).

Autocratic Collaboration and Legitimation

As a major mechanism of autocratic collaboration, economic statecraft is said to be used when political leaders intentionally use economic resources—or the resources that have a price tag (Baldwin 1985, 30)—at their disposal to exert external influence in pursuit of foreign policy ends, which may be purely political (Norris 2016, 15). Examples are economic sanctions, export controls, foreign investment and official development assistance, and preferential trade agreements.

One may argue that Russia's autocratic collaboration with regimes within its sphere of influence fails because Russia lacks economic prowess to promote regional economic connectivity and growth. Its tool of economic statecraft is largely restricted to cutoffs of natural gas supplied by Gazprom. However, gas disruptions, which run counter to promoting regional economic connectivity, cannot be used to support or stabilize pro-Russian regimes such as the Moldovan communist Voronin government in 2009. A prima facie case can be made that China stands a better chance of success with autocratic collaboration than Russia. However, autocratic collaboration alone, even if propped up by vast material resources, gives no guarantee of success. We argue that whether a powerful autocracy's use of economic statecraft to bolster its client regimes succeeds is contingent on whether the efforts themselves enhance the legitimacy of the recipient regimes and their policies. The impact is wide open, as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has generated divergent impacts on the legitimacy of Southeast Asian ruling governments (Kuik 2021). Constrained by the need to seek nationalist and Islamic legitimation, the Indonesian Joko Widodo government (2014–2024) restrained from engaging with the BRI fully (Yeremia 2021). Theories of legitimacy and autocratic legitimation will be given more discussion before we examine the BRI's implementation in Pakistan.

Rightfulness and audience are pivotal in understanding the social concepts of legitimacy and legitimation. Focusing on the rightfulness of both political actors and their conduct in international society, Clark discusses legitimacy in this way: "[t]he core principles of legitimacy express rudimentary social agreement about *who* is entitled to participate in international relations, and also about appropriate forms in their *conduct*" (Clark 2005, 2) (emphasis added). While this view ignores the role of the audiences, it is addressed by Franck, who defines legitimacy as "a property of a rule or rule-making institution which itself exerts a pull towards compliance on those addressed normatively" (Franck 1990, 16). "Those addressed" are the target audience, and what exerts a pull towards compliance on the audience is the quality of the rightfulness of the rulers and their behavior. Similarly, Goddard and Krebs refer legitimacy to as "the boundary of the acceptable within a given social community," setting out "the limits of sustainable social practice" (Goddard and Krebs 2018, 78). They concur that legitimacy, as a social construct, is the consequence of an intersubjective political process between rulers and ruled, which comprises both the bottom-up attribution of legitimacy by audiences and the top-down cultivation of belief in legitimacy by rulers. Conversely, illegitimacy posits that rulers or their actions are socially offensive to the relevant audience (Coleman 2017, 20).

Legitimacy must be discussed together with legitimation to understand how legitimacy or the "boundary of the acceptable" is created, used and challenged or lost (Hurd 2007, 15). Jackson conceptualizes legitimation as "the process of drawing and (re)drawing boundaries, ruling some courses of action acceptable and others unacceptable" (Jackson 2002, 453–54) while Gerschewski defines it as "the dynamic process of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the ruled" (Gerschewski 2023, 66). It is crucial to discuss the role of audience in deciding which courses of action are (un)acceptable. The politics of legitimation is understood in terms of the question of "how political actors publicly justify policy stances before concrete *audiences*, seeking to secure *audiences'* assent that their positions are indeed legitimate and thus potentially to garner *audiences*' approval and support" (Goddard and Krebs 2018, 67–68, 78) (emphasis added). In short, "the powerful must explain themselves in terms that [audiences] comprehend and find acceptable" (Goddard and Krebs 2018, 70).

Taken together, by demarcating the boundary between permissible and impermissible actors and action, legitimation strategies are therefore a group of goal-oriented activities to justify political actors' access to political power and their policy and behavior (Goddard 2015, 107; Gronau and Schmidtke 2016, 541). They are crucial for political leaders to "sell" rather than imposing forcibly their projects to the main audiences. Successful legitimation claims are the articulations which resonate with the intended audiences (Jackson 2002).

When does legitimation matter the most? It is necessary whenever the policy concerned is highly visible and thus bound to come under public scrutiny, and publics, domestic and/or international, must be mobilized (Goddard and Krebs 2018, 73–78). China's BRI meets these two requirements, as it involves large-scale highly visible construction projects across recipient countries and often entails population resettlement and redistribution of economic wealth or gains, the success of which depends on public's contribution and cooperation. If BRI projects widen existing economic inequality, they will become a major site of contention for opposition parties and civil society, the most politically relevant audiences, to challenge the ruling governments which must engage in regular legitimation.

Why and *how* do autocratic leaders or regimes legitimize their rule? Autocrats seek legitimacy because they feel insecure while organizing certainty. Although autocratic leaders might not be chosen through a genuine democratic process, they still attempt to justify their rule and authority to reduce opposition and tell the masses why they are entitled to rule (Gerschewski 2023, 59–60). For the second question, an autocratic legitimation strategy rests on six dimensions: foundational myth, ideology, personalism, procedures, performance, and international engagement. The first three define who are rightful actors. Rulers or the ruling party may refer to their prominent historic role in the founding of a polity or to a dominant ideology they articulate or to their personal charisma in which the leaders frame themselves discursively to be "chosen 'from above' to fulfil a certain mission" (Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 290). The fourth dimension relies on an exercise of power based on rules-based mechanisms, a form of rightful behavior. This is more crucial in "electoral" or "competitive" authoritarianism (Levitsky 2010, 5), the most widespread form of contemporary non-democratic rule (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2017, 257). Output legitimacy, the fifth dimension, is essential; ruling elites often invoke performance-linked claim to legitimacy by stressing their success in meeting their people's material needs, especially economic well-being, and salvaging national pride (Gerschewski 2023, 66). The last dimension does not only refer to defense from external invasion or intervention but also to acting as a good global citizen or as an ideological "model exporter" (Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 291). Common to all authoritarian regimes is the invocation of performance-based claims to legitimacy (Gerschewski 2013, 19; Von Soest and Grauvogel 2017, 273).

To summarize, this paper understands legitimacy in terms of the "boundary" that demarcates political actors and behavior into the rightful and the unrightful. Rulers undertake legitimation to seek compliance from their main audiences. In competitive authoritarian states, performance-based claims to legitimacy are of immense importance.

Our primary focus is not only on the establishment of spheres of influence by the means of autocratic collaboration, but more importantly, on how to use such collaboration to bring political stability to subordinate recipient regimes. Legitimacy judgements made by the relevant audiences are crucial to the sustainability of the subordinate regimes. To determine whether China can employ its asymmetric economic prowess to shape its strategic environment to sustain a stable authoritarian regime along its periphery, this paper studies whether its BRI helps the rulers of an acquiescent recipient state, Pakistan, legitimize their rule. Does the influx of Chinese investment bolster the domestic authority of the Pakistani government? Alternatively, do the CPEC infrastructure projects incite domestic opposition to the regime? The connections between legitimacy and sphere of influence in the context of Pakistan are established by the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 2010. It repealed various infringements on the 1973 Constitution by previous military rulers, especially the 17th Amendment made by Pervez Musharraf in 2003. The 17th Amendment allowed Musharraf, in the capacity of President, to dissolve Parliament unilaterally and to create a semi-presidential political system. The 18th Amendment removed the presidential power to dissolve Parliament and restored power to both Parliament and the Prime Minister, strengthening the institution of parliamentary democracy (Hussain and Kokab 2012). It also tried to reconcile tensions in center-province relations, which was characterized by the domination of Punjab in national politics, by expanding the powers of the provinces (Adeney 2012). This has enhanced the voices of less populous provinces, as audiences, in Pakistani politics of legitimation. These point to the significance of political legitimacy and stability of *elected civilian* Pakistani *federal* government to China in its management of a sphere of influence in its western environs. While the military is widely regarded as the *de facto* ruler of the country due to the enormous resources it commands (Siddiqa 2016), this article is inspired by an alternative normative perspective, emphasizing the military's belief in its role as the state's preeminent guardian and in its legitimate or entitled right to intervene in governance (Fair 2009). This is especially evident when civilian leaders are seen as incapable of governing effectively, facing serious crises of legitimacy.

As alluded to above, we apply the epistemology of interpretivism, including Geertz's "thick description" to study observed action within its cultural context (Geertz 1973), to examine how Pakistanis interpret their experiences with loan-financed infrastructure construction and external debts in the context of their "web of beliefs" (Bevir and Rhodes 2016). These context-specific interpretations affect the legitimacy of the Pakistani government and CPEC. While more than 90 developing countries have had outstanding debts to the IMF, Pakistan is distinctive because its officials often discursively describe asking for IMF financial assistance as holding out a "begging bowl."

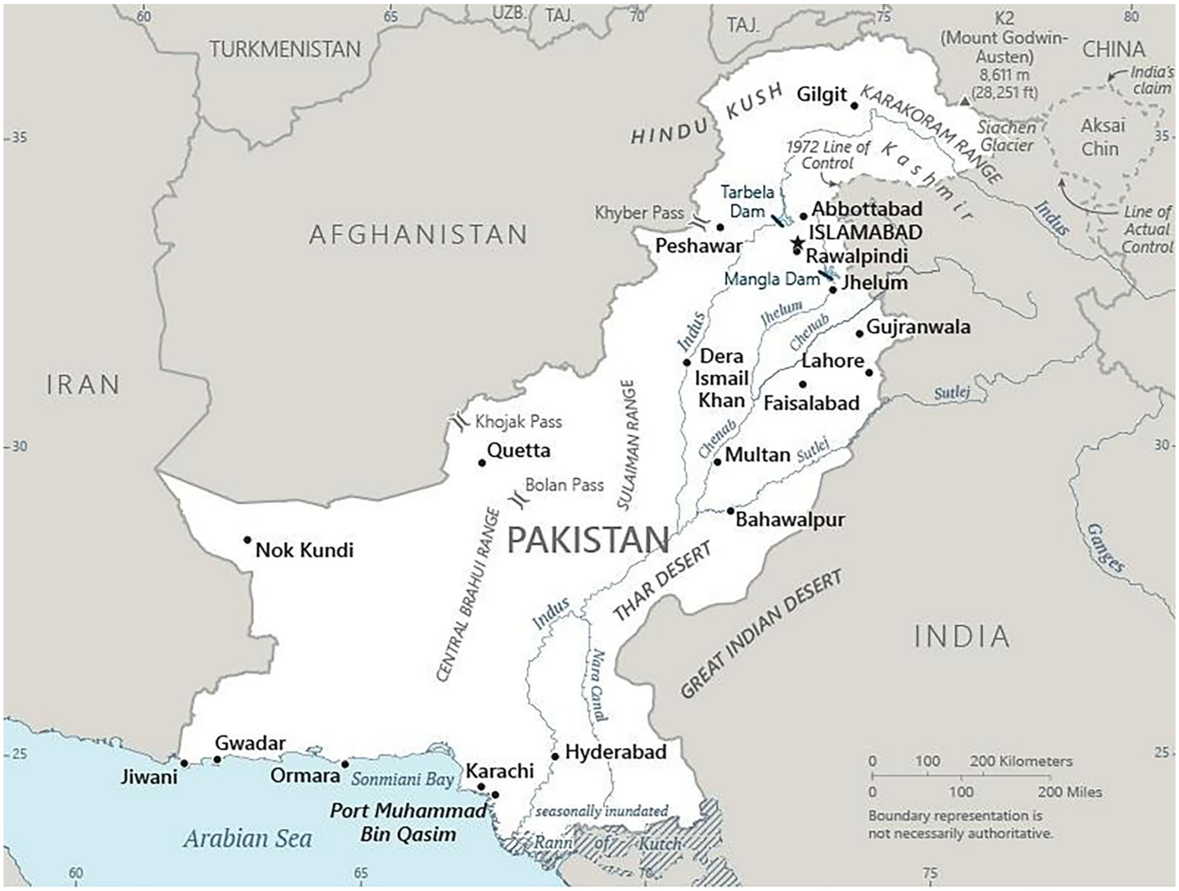
CPEC and China's Sphere of Influence in Pakistan

This paper argues that China organizes Pakistan as its sphere of influence with CPEC as the main mechanism of autocratic collaboration. A motivation behind the BRI was a call for a "rebalance of China's geostrategy" by Wang Jisi of Peking University in October 2012 (Wang 2012, 2014). Wang describes this rebalance as China's "Westward March" (*xi jin*), a counter-strategy to the US strategic rebalance to Asia, formally announced during President Obama's visit to Australia in November 2011. Wang argues that China's geostrategy should not only focus on its coastal areas but also on the areas to the west of China. Unlike East Asia, the areas to China's west have yet to be (and cannot be) dominated by US-led military alliances. They are where major powers' spheres of influence overlap. In addition, China does not have long-standing bitter conflicts with the countries to the west of it (except India); this favorable geopolitical condition facilitates China's building of a "New Silk Road." Thus, consolidation of a sphere of influence in the region west to China has been central to China's "soft balancing" against US (and Japanese) strategic challenges from the east and its reaffirmation of its self-identity as *the* major power in Asia (Chan 2017). Pakistan was a natural choice for Chinese leaders who wanted to have a capable—not only militarily—Pakistan to counter India (Small 2020, 15; Garlick 2022, 4–5). Treating India as a counterweight to China has undergirded US rapprochement and engagement with India since late 1998 (during the Clinton administration). Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was enthusiastic with the US strategic rebalance policy and envisaged India's potential to counterbalance China (Blackwill and Fontaine 2024, 162–63). In December 2012, he articulated an "Asia's democratic security diamond" strategy, whereby Australia, India, Japan, and the United States would form the "security diamond." It set the stage for his vision for building a "free and open Indo–Pacific" (Chan and Lee 2023).

Since the mid-1960s Sino–Pakistani relations have been described as "entente cordiale" (Garver 2001, 187–215), and "all-weather friendship" (Small 2015, 19, 31, 53). Prior to CPEC, however, the bilateral relations had had *few* economic pillars (Boni 2016, 500). We therefore contend that CPEC should be seen as an economic means for China to consolidate a sphere of influence in Pakistan. "Forged by war," the pre-CPEC relationship centered on defense: arms supplies and nuclear weapons, after the Pakistani capitulation to India in the Indo–Pakistani War of 1971 and India's first nuclear weapon test in May 1974, respectively. This nuclear cooperation has forged an imbalanced bilateral relationship because Pakistan's "autonomy and even survival as a state have been preserved by its nuclear capacity" (Small 2015, 44). Pakistan has embraced China further after US killing of Osama bin Laden at his compound in Abbottabad, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), in May 2011 (see the map of Pakistan in figure 1) and US suspension of more than one-third of security aid in the following July (Ali 2017, 174; Landler and Harris 2018). The first Trump administration (2017–2021) suspended security aid to Pakistan in 2018 after accusing Pakistan of offering sanctuary to Afghan terrorists (Landler and Harris 2018). Military aid was not restored by the Biden administration (2021–2025).

China's Xinjiang represents another key geopolitical factor in China–Pakistan relations. It borders Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) in northern Pakistan, which lies adjacent to the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (now part of KP) and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor (see figure 1). Beijing has accused East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) militants of lying behind alleged terrorist attacks on Chinese in Xinjiang and Pakistan. ETIM has allegedly allied with the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in the tribal areas of North and South Waziristan, and the TTP has reportedly been active in GB (Small 2015; Trédaniel and Lee 2018, 67–91). Fearful that ETIM militants are infiltrated into Xinjiang via GB, Beijing wants to promote economic collaboration with Islamabad to "stabilize and de-radicalize" the Islamic country (Small 2018) and to make GB a gateway to CPEC.

Nationally speaking, Pakistan's political stability is the exception rather than the rule. Since independence in 1947,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ISLAMABAD
Rawalpindi
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AFGHANISTAN
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Sutlej
Bolan Pass
Bahawalpur
Ganges
Nok Kundi
PAKISTAN
CENTRAL BRAHUI RANGE
THAR DESERT
GREAT INDIAN DESERT
INDIA
Indus
Nara Canal
Gwadar
Jiwani
Ormara
Sonmiani Bay
Karachi
Hyderabad
Port Muhammad Bin Qasim
seasonally inundated
Arabian Sea
Rann of Kutch
0 100 200 Kilometers
0 100 200 Miles
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.
60
65
70
75
80
35
30
25

Figure 1. Map of Pakistan. *Source:* Central Intelligence Agency, US, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/pakistan/map/ (copyright free) (accessed June 12, 2025).

Pakistan has had thirty-two Prime Ministers, including caretaker ones.[1] No Prime Minister, appointed or elected, has ever managed to complete a full 5-year term (Hassan 2022). The Army has exerted enormous influence over the formation of the civilian government and security and foreign policies. It had staged four coups (in 1958, 1969, 1978, and 1999) and its role in politics and economy had grown notably under the juntas of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1978–1988) and Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008) (Shah 2014). Amid political fragility, how do Pakistani elected civilian leaders use or manage economic collaboration with China to legitimize and stabilize their rule? An external power's use of economic statecraft to consolidate a sphere of influence is intertwined with domestic legitimation.

The Politics of the Germination of CPEC

The idea of a CPEC originated in the reign of Musharraf who offered Pakistan as an energy alternative to the Strait of Malacca in his visits to China in 2006. But China's response was muted (Ali 2017, 168, 203; Garlick 2022, 1). The prevailing thought was that Pakistan, a country torn apart by civil strife, was never a safe bet for Chinese commercial investment (Mishali-Ram 2015). Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to Pakistan in May 2013 laid the foundation of CPEC (Small 2015, 170–71), indicating the geopolitical impact of the Obama administration's strategic rebalance policy on Beijing's decision to leverage strained Pakistan–US relations to solidify its sphere of influence in Pakistan by autocratic collaboration. This echoes Abb's study of CPEC through the lens of "Chinese strategic visions of transforming and securing its *near abroad* by means of infrastructure." These strategic visions are "'recentr[ing]' China on the world stage by *linking sympathetic countries even more closely to it*" (Abb 2023, 79, 82) (emphasis added).

The two countries decided to speed up the CPEC development during Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit to China in July 2013 (Small 2015, 173). Chinese leaders were delighted to find a "*civilian* partner" in the Sharif government that was committed to undertaking large-scale infrastructure investment expeditiously (Adeney and Boni 2021, 10) (emphasis in original). In April 2015, when Xi Jinping paid his first state visit to Pakistan, China and Pakistan signed a $46-billion CPEC agreement (raised to $62 billion in 2017) (Garlick 2022, 1). In addressing his party's parliamentary meeting in August 2016, Nawaz Sharif claimed that Xi referred CPEC to as a "gift" to Pakistan and that China was waiting for his party to be in power before making CPEC commitments (Dawn 2016). As this claim cannot be verified from Chinese official sources or independent sources that quoted Xi or senior Chinese officials, it should be treated with caution. One may interpret it as Nawaz Sharif's calculated attempt to take the credit for pulling off a major coup to attract China's massive investment. In the same address, he accused Musharraf, who ousted him in the October 1999 coup, of depriving the Pakistani people of electricity for 9 years (Express Tribune 2016).

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[1] Pakistani Prime Minister's Office, https://pmo.gov.pk/pm_profile.php (accessed February 26, 2026).

By contrasting him with Musharraf, he implied that he was the rightful leader of the country.

CPEC would be built in three phases. The first stage contained "early harvest" projects and other short-term ones to be finished by 2020. The "early harvest" projects were timed to be completed by the Pakistani general election in 2018. The first-phase projects were mainly in the energy (accounting for about 70 percent of the funding) and infrastructure sectors (including the construction of the Gwadar port—see figure 1—and an upgrade of the old Karakoram Highway in GB; accounting for about 30 percent). The second phase, focusing on setting up of special economic zones and industrialization, would run up to 2025. However, this phase had experienced long delays (Shoaib 2024) and was formally launched in September 2025 (Dawn 2025). The third phase would encompass a wide array of cooperation ranging from agriculture to tourism and be completed by 2030 (International Crisis Group 2018, 10–12; Small 2020, 21–23). CPEC aims to promote economic development in poverty-ridden regions such as Balochistan in southwestern Pakistan, where Gwadar is located, to make the country more cohesive (Khan and Liu 2019). Baloch nationalists and insurgents have been strongly opposed to CPEC's infrastructural projects and resource extraction (Ahmed 2024).

Energy was given priority in Phase 1 because it has been a prominent issue in Pakistan's domestic politics. Since 2007, energy crisis has dealt a crippling blow to Pakistan's economic growth. A major cause of the energy crisis is "circular debt," a chain of unpaid bills among fuel suppliers, private power producers, the national transmission agency, distribution companies, energy consumers, and the government, resulting in a dearth of regular power supply in the country. The "circle" may start from consumers who would pay to power distributors while receiving fuel subsidies from the government. The Pakistani government funds the Tariff Differential Subsidy (TDS) to protect consumers from increasing electricity cost (Naqvi 2022, 33); TDS is, however, an "enormous fiscal burden" for the state (Naqvi 2022, 35). The IMF has repeatedly asked for elimination of the subsidies (Naqvi 2022, 36). Despite being offered state subsidies, consumers often do not pay their bills in full. Power theft and the government's delayed payment or non-payment of subsidies contribute to the vicious circle (Tauhidi and Chohan 2020). With financial shortfalls, power distributors delay payments to the national grid, operated by the National Transmission and Despatch Company (NTDC). It, in turn, struggles to pay power producers, who experience the same problem with fuel suppliers. Because of fuel shortages, the NTDC implements electricity load-shedding, a deliberate shutdown of electricity supply to zones of areas periodically, causing rotating power outages and stifling industrial growth (Naqvi 2022, 2).

China allegedly wanted to use the CPEC energy projects to help Nawaz Sharif and his party, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), to get re-elected in the 2018 general election. The PML-N also saw CPEC as "a ticket to re-election" (Boni and Adeney 2020, 454; Downs 2019, 7; Small 2020, 19, 36). Nawaz Sharif framed CPEC as a "game-changer" that "[would] change the fate of Pakistan" (Small 2015, 171; Garlick 2022, 3, 22). In August 2016, he vowed to supply cheap electricity and end all scheduled blackouts by using coal-fired plants (Dawn 2016), which, Pakistani officials hoped, would generate cheaper electricity (Adeney and Boni 2021, 8; Bhandary and Gallagher 2022). The PML-N's official 2018 election campaign focused on its performance in redressing the country's chronic power shortages and claiming the credit for the "gift" of CPEC (Shah 2019, 102). A downside was that as CPEC was closely tied to the political agenda of Nawaz Sharif and the PML-N, they neither engaged other political parties in the inception and launch of CPEC nor sought any social buy-in for the large-scale projects (International Crisis Group 2018, 27; Small 2020, 4, 28).

Legitimacy Deficit of CPEC

CPEC was initially welcomed not only by Pakistan's politicians across the political spectrum but also by business leaders (International Crisis Group 2018, 9) because both foreign direct investment in, and economic growth of, the country had declined as a result of deteriorating political violence and terrorism after 2001 (Mehmood 2014; Shahzad et al. 2016). While the CPEC coal-fired energy projects have increased Pakistan's power generation capacity, it cannot alleviate circular debt and load-shedding. This is because the problems are not due to inadequate power capacity, and by late 2020, Pakistan had excess capacity (Naqvi 2022, 25, 56, 75). But this paper does not aim to address the structural causes of circular debt and load-shedding[2] but to discuss the repercussions of the CPEC energy projects for Pakistan's macro-economy as well as the Pakistani government's legitimacy.

As soon as the fiscal and debt burden of CPEC on the state became evident and mounting, the megaproject has been discursively connected to the shameful, non-rightful conduct of approaching the IMF with a "begging bowl" and the regime's legitimacy has been at stake.

Fiscal Burden and Over-Indebtedness

The IMF had warned that the generous terms Pakistan offered to energy investors would become unaffordable if the increased power generation did not spur economic growth (International Crisis Group 2018, 11). Nawaz Sharif's "gamble" was later deemed to be fiscally unsustainable (Rafiq 2020).

Both Port Qasim and Sahiwal coal-fired power plants import coal from Indonesia and South Africa. The fuel has become increasingly costly, partly due to rupee depreciation (see below for details) and the cost of transporting imported coal by rail for more than 1,000 km to Sahiwal (in central Punjab, about 180 km from Lahore) from Karachi (see figure 1) (Naqvi 2022, 54–55, 168n42). The tariff for the electricity generated by coal-fired power plants, determined by the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA), was accordingly raised (Safdar 2025, 5) and TDS has correspondingly grown. These power projects cause extra burden on state coffers because of the "sovereign guarantees" the Pakistani government offers to independent power producers (IPPs) (Dohadwala et al. 2020). Sovereign guarantees on payments to IPPs by its state-owned power purchaser have been in place since 1994, when then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto implemented reforms to encourage the growth of IPPs (Safdar 2025; Yadav 2025). Sovereign guarantees cover US dollar-denominated returns on equity (ROE) and capacity payments indirectly. The ROE, according to the 1994 Power Policy, was 15–18 percent[3] and was lowered to 12 percent in 2002 (Yadav 2025). However, some Chinese IPPs under CPEC were offered higher ROEs of 27–34 percent. The 1.3-gigawatt (GW) Thar Coal Block 1 Power Generation Company in Sindh, of which the majority shareholding company is Shanghai Electric, was granted a ROE of 34.49 percent (Nazar 2018), partly because at that time China was one of the few countries that still offered financing to overseas coal-fired power projects (Bhandary and Gallagher 2022, 2,

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[2] See Naqvi (2022, 25–56) for an account.

[3] Another source says, it was 17–20 percent (Safdar 2025, 5).

3; Safdar 2025, 6).[4] Ahsan Iqbal Chaudhary, Pakistan's Minister of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives for several times, explained to the *Financial Times* that "We wanted power investment, but nobody came in. The Chinese spotted an opportunity" (Stacey and Sender 2017).

The Pakistani government does not directly guarantee capacity payments to CPEC power plants; instead, it guarantees that if the government-owned Central Power Purchasing Authority-Guaranteed Ltd (CPPA-G), the power buyer, fails to pay the plants under the power purchase agreements, it will pay. CPPA-G is obligated to pay capacity charges even if the plants run below its maximum capacity due to insufficient demand (Downs 2019, 35). Capacity payments to CPEC power plants are also US dollar-denominated. The rapid expansion of generation capacity within a short period of time has indirectly exacerbated Pakistan's fiscal burden. The fourteen completed power generation projects under CPEC have increased Pakistan's generation capacity by 9.5 GW (Malik 2025, 43), and capacity payments have accordingly ballooned from 384 billion rupees a year in 2015 (before the operation of CPEC power plants) to 2,100 billion rupees in 2024 (Isaad 2024; Zaidi and Sami 2025). Shanghai Electric, the majority shareholder of Thar Coal Block 1 Power Generation Company, had reportedly complained to Pakistan's Prime Minister of CPPA-G not making payments on time (Ghumman 2024). China had pressed Pakistan to establish a "revolving fund" through which Pakistan would pay Chinese companies any shortfall in revenue (Rafiq 2019, 238; Small 2020, 24). In October 2022, the Ministry of Finance managed to establish the Pakistan Energy Revolving Account (PERA) at the State Bank of Pakistan (Rana 2022). Not addressing the root causes of the circular debt (e.g., electricity theft, poor collection of pay dues, and rising costs of imported fuels), PERA serves to increase fiscal deficit. Shortly before Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to China in June 2024, his government made a "bullet payment" of 70 billion rupees (about $248 million) to Chinese power plants to reduce their outstanding dues to secure Chinese financing for infrastructure projects and a $600-million commercial loan (Rana 2024a).

Another source of fiscal burden caused by CPEC is the special security forces established by the Pakistani Army and police to protect Chinese nationals working on CPEC projects in Balochistan from terrorist attacks. The most notable component of the special security forces is the Special Security Division, established in 2017 and comprised of about 15,600 army personnel (International Crisis Group 2018, 7–8; Khan 2022).

CPEC has also worsened Pakistan's indebtedness, as many energy projects were financed by Chinese bank loans rather than equity investment. Within Pakistan, there have been mounting concerns over the crippling debt incurred by borrowing from China and, coupled with currency devaluation, the high cost of repaying the debt (Afzal 2020, 2; Shah 2024). According to the World Bank's *International Debt Report 2024*, Pakistan's total external debt in 2023 amounted to $130.847 billion, of which 22 percent ($28.786 billion) owed to China (World Bank 2024). Its external debt servicing accounted for 43 percent of its total exports (Kiani 2024). Most of the loans extended by Chinese financial institutions to power producers are in US dollars. A depreciation of Pakistani rupee against the US dollar, shortly after late 2017 (Shah 2024), has made the domestic cost of debt servicing inviably high (Downs 2019, 37). Despite not being the direct borrower from the lenders, the Pakistani government could not afford to adopt a hands-off approach not only because of the sovereign guarantees or contingent liabilities. Debt repayment by CPEC IPPs required foreign exchange, most of which was at the hands of the federal government, and debt servicing would lead to a fall in the country's depleting foreign exchange reserves. If the IPPs defaulted, it would worsen the crisis of load-shedding. To prevent the power sector from a financial collapse, the Pakistani government had tried to seek debt relief from China, in addition to "support" from the IMF (Khaliq 2023). But Pakistan–China negotiations were stalled by terrorist attacks on Chinese personnel in Balochistan (Shah 2024). With the outstanding debt accumulating, Pakistan in July 2024 formally requested China to reschedule the debt by paying interest payments in Chinese currency rather than US dollar and reducing the interest rates for Chinese-funded projects (Rana 2024b).

Table 1: Pakistan's current-account balance

Year	*Amount ($ billion)*	*As % of GDP*
2015	-2.80	-0.9
2016	-7.19	-2.3
2017	-16.18	-4.8
2018	-18.86	-5.3
2019	-8.56	-2.7
2020	-0.65	-0.2
2021	-12.28	-3.5
2022	-12.22	-3.3
2023	-0.83	-0.2

Source: The World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BN.CAB.XOKA.GD.ZS?locations=PK&view=chart (accessed January 10, 2025).

CPEC also increases Pakistan's trade deficit, a major component of the deficit in current-account balance (table 1). Coal-fired power stations were given priority because they could be speedily completed to deliver tangible results to woo the population in the run-up to the 2018 election (Adeney and Boni 2021, 6–8). The first unit of Port Qasim coal-fired power plant near Karachi (figure 1) was completed in November 2017, 42 months after construction.[5] But coal-fired power stations are heavily import-reliant (Downs 2019; Small 2020, 23). Of 6.6 GW generated from coal-fired power plants, 3.96 GW (60 percent) use imported coal (Malik 2025, 43). The trade-deficit woes have plunged the country's foreign exchange reserves below acceptable levels (Rafiq 2019, 239) and increased external debt, as Pakistan has relied on Chinese lending to finance its imports of goods for energy and infrastructure projects.

IMF Bailout Stigma

As indicated in table 1, the year 2018 marked a major turning point in the fortune of CPEC. By early 2018, CPEC "had effectively gone into hiatus" because Pakistan ran into a mounting macro-economic crisis (Small 2020, 40). It did not yield tangible returns to the national economy to showcase the performance of the Nawaz Sharif government. Voters outside Punjab, an audience whom he ignored, voted the opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), to power in the parliamentary election in July 2018. The perception that Punjab was disproportionately—and illegitimately—benefitted by CPEC had been prevalent. Earlier in November 2015 Daud

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[4] Following South Korea and Japan, China pledged to phase out overseas coal finance in September 2021 (Davidson et al. 2023, 1187).

[5] https://www.power-technology.com/projects/port-qasim-coal-fired-power-plant-karachi/

Kahn Achakzai, then a senator from Balochistan, termed CPEC as "China–Punjab Economic Corridor" (Raza 2015).

Before the 2018 election, it was already anticipated that the new government would need to seek a bailout from the IMF (Page and Shah 2018). But there is a political stigma about the IMF in the country. Since 1950 when it was admitted to the IMF, Pakistan has sought financial bailouts from the institution 25 times (with the latest one of $7 billion being approved in September 2024). Having received more IMF lending than any other country, Pakistan has had a politically sensitive "begging bowl" syndrome. Civilian leaders have expressed shame at asking for financial help from the IMF whereas the Musharraf regime had boasted of its credentials for having "broken the begging bowl" (Shah 2008). Although the latter claim must be qualified by the fact that Pakistan's military regimes had received "geopolitical rents," including external military aid in the Cold War and in the post-9/11 Afghanistan War (Mian 2024, 13–14), and that in the early years of the Musharraf regime (in 2000 and 2001), the IMF had provided financial support of $1,757 million, the scale of IMF programs to Pakistan has substantially increased after the end of his rule in August 2008 (EFSAS 2024). Thus, post-2008 civilian political leaders cannot afford to eschew addressing and countering this pro-military narrative. Acknowledging popular and military apprehension over national humiliation, senior Pakistani officials have frequently reiterated their aspiration to end the country's dependence on IMF bailouts. In the aforementioned August 2016 PML-N address, Nawaz Sharif said that his government had concluded an agreement with the IMF whereby the latter would pay a final $102 million tranche in a 3-year program worth $6.4 billion. He added, "It is our desire . . . that after this we will say goodbye to the IMF" (Dawn 2016). In January 2025, Pakistan's Finance Minister, Muhammad Aurangzeb, said, "We are now in the 25th IMF program, and we want to, you know, ensure that this is the last program" (Kawase 2025). In addressing senior military officers in Quetta, Balochistan in June 2025, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said that Pakistan's key allies, such as China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), "no longer expect us to go there with a begging bowl" (Times of India 2025). The humiliating "begging bowl" metaphor was not only a matter between Pakistan and its creditors, but more humiliatingly also an object of ridicule of its arch-rival, India. During his visit to the UAE in May 2024, Shehbaz Sharif said, "Gone are the days that I will go to our brotherly countries with begging bowls. I have broken that bowl" (PTI 2024). In the same month Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, made a jibe at Pakistan for its economic crisis. He said, "Pakistan, which troubled India for 70 years, kept bombs in its hand. Today, it has a *begging bowl* in its hand" (Singh and Singh 2024) (emphasis added). India has persistently disapproved of the IMF's financial support because of Pakistan's failure to crack down on terrorism (Deshpande and Siddhartha 2019; Inamdar and Shukla 2025). Seeking bailouts from the IMF (and other countries) crosses the "boundary" of rightful conduct in Pakistan, as it constitutes a national humiliation for Pakistanis.

Upon assuming power in August 2018, Imran Khan of the PTI tried to legitimize his rule by scaling down CPEC while managing both tough negotiations with the IMF and the cautious implementation of the austerity measures demanded by the IMF. He accused the Nawaz Sharif government of granting China too favorable terms on CPEC projects (Small 2020, 42) and of catering to the interests of Punjab only.[6] The new Minister of Commerce, Abdul Razak Dawood, even vowed to suspend the projects until after a thorough review (Putz 2020). In the face of the debt repayment crisis, which stood at $12 billion in November 2018, the Khan government reached out to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to keep the economy afloat (Chan 2020, 208) and to meet the political goal of relying less on the IMF. Initially Khan wished to have a $6-billion grant from China but disappointingly found that Beijing was only willing to offer $2.5 billion in *loans* (Chan 2020, 208). Accordingly, there was a 77 percent reduction in Chinese investment in Pakistan in the 2018–2019 fiscal year (Lalwani 2020, 180).

In July 2019, the Khan government accepted a structural adjustment package with the IMF in exchange for a 39-month loan of $6 billion (Lalwani 2020, 184). The IMF, however, required Pakistan to increase its taxation income and have market-determined exchange and interest rates and electricity tariffs (Chan 2020, 208). As an aftermath of pursuing the IMF's stabilization policies, both raging inflation and devaluation of rupee continued (Lalwani 2020, 184), and the masses bore the brunt of economic hardship brought about by IMF structural adjustment programs. This further exacerbated the legitimacy crisis of the civilian government. Even with the IMF loan, Pakistan's fiscal crisis did not lessen, as the national economy was "in free fall" in 2020 (Shafqat 2022, 178). The implementation of the IMF package and the release of the loan were stalled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Khan government was fearful of the political ramifications of introducing belt-tightening policy measures amid the pandemic (Bokhari and Findlay 2020). Only in February 2021, could the impasse be resolved (Bokhari 2021). Pakistan then implemented the NEPRA Amendment Act to levy a 10 percent surcharge on electricity base tariffs (Naqvi 2022, 75).

In facing skyrocketing surge in food and energy prices in 2020 and 2021, Khan announced relief measures to reduce petrol prices, electricity tariffs and taxes in late February 2022 at the cost of piling considerable pressure on the country's fiscal and balance-of-payment deficits. The IMF was therefore gravely concerned about the Khan government's "one step forward, two steps back" approach to reforms. Release of two tranches of the loan worth $1.9 billion was put on hold (Kiani 2022). As a result of economic mismanagement, Khan was ousted after losing a non-confidence in Parliament in April 2022 (Ellis-Petersen and Baloch 2022). His government was replaced by the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a 13-party coalition led by the PML-N's Shehbaz Sharif (Hasanain 2022). But with inflation standing at 27 percent, the "debt-driven and import-based" economy was teetering on the edge of collapse in 2022 (Mufti 2023, 214). Although it managed to obtain $6.3 billion-loans from China and Saudi Arabia in 2023 to avoid insolvency (Sarfraz 2023), the PDM government had no alternative but to ask for a Stand-By Arrangement from the IMF ($3 billion). However, because of concerns for domestic legitimacy, it obstinately refused to adhere to the IMF conditions to achieve fiscal revenue targets and implement market-driven measures to restore the ailing economy after crisis (Mufti 2023, 215). The PDM government was short-lived and came to an end in August 2023 after the dissolution of the Parliament. It was succeeded by a caretaker government until after the general election in February 2024. During this transition, violent protests against soaring electricity bills took place across major cities in the country in late August 2023 (Ebrahim 2023). In July 2023, the PDM government raised the national average tariff by 20 percent to satisfy an IMF condition (Bhutta 2023).

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[6] Since 2013, KP, home to less than 17 percent of the total population, has become the PTI's stronghold to date.

With no single party securing a majority in the new parliament, Shehbaz Sharif was re-elected the Prime Minister in early March 2024 after receiving support of seven other parties (Ellis-Petersen 2024). Amid domestic vulnerability, he attempts to stabilize his country by navigating carefully the complex China–US/West relations. On the one hand, he has demonstrated commitment to CPEC which proceeds, albeit slowly, towards Phase 2; on the other, he has continued negotiations with the IMF, which eventually approved a $7-billion loan in September 2024, and more notably, with the Army Chief Asim Munir, he has actively courted US President Trump with offers of commercial deals on cryptocurrency, critical minerals and a port in Pasni in Balochistan—only 112 km from the Chinese-operated Gwadar port. This renewed extraction of geopolitical rents from the United States might weaken China's influence over Pakistan (Singh 2026).

Back to Basics: Spheres of Influence

CPEC's energy projects have brought Pakistan a macroeconomic crisis, forcing the civilian government to take the unrightful steps to hold a "begging bowl" to approach the IMF and implement unpopular austerity measures on the population. Since 2018, Pakistan has entered three major arrangements with the IMF, totaling $16 billion, reflecting a growing financial reliance on it. Political instability and fragile legitimacy are recurrent features of Pakistani domestic politics.

Why is China oblivious to the context-specific normative meaning of Pakistan seeking IMF bailouts in terms of the humiliating proverbial "begging bowl" and to its concomitant negative impact on the legitimacy of both Pakistani leaders and CPEC? We may explain by looking at a defining feature of spheres of influence. The powerful patron is tempted to adopt a top-down approach to consolidating its sphere of influence, especially as a geopolitical response to looming external threats (from both the United States and Japan in our case study). This leaves reduced space for "local agency" of its client states.[7] Before CPEC, China–Pakistan relations had already been asymmetrical. By CPEC, China wanted to create substantial economic collaboration with Pakistan virtually from scratch in a short time span. This top-down, non-gradualist approach determined not only that priority energy projects had to be completed quickly, though in alignment with Nawaz Sharif's political agenda, but also that Chinese entities predominated in contract-making process in which competitive bidding was absent and non-transparency was the "normal" practice (International Crisis Group 2018; Chan 2020, 10). Pakistani leaders' courting of Trump can be interpreted as their tacit attempt to increase their agency by playing the United States off against China.

The lack of Chinese–Pakistani commercial ties in the past 50 years before the arrival of CPEC indicated a deep-seated grave concern among Chinese firms over the dearth of "suitable business environment" in Pakistan (Adeney and Boni 2021, 18). Considering the additional human toll of terrorist violence against Chinese personnel (especially in Balochistan), Chinese commercial entities constructed the projects on non-preferential terms (Small 2020, 29; Janjua 2024).

Conclusion

Autocratic powers are tempted to stabilize and tighten their grips on subordinate states in their spheres of influence when they face external geostrategic threats or when subordinate states are embroiled in domestic political turmoil. As the Russian approach of military intervention in the post-Soviet space has been futile, we asked whether the Chinese approach that relies on economic statecraft to forge autocratic collaboration would fare better, using CPEC, the flagship project of the BRI, as the case study.

The paper first attributed CPEC to China's Westward March policy, Beijing's counter-strategy to the Obama administration's strategic rebalance to Asia and the Abe government's embrace of it. Chinese leaders found it imperative to consolidate a sphere of influence in their country's western periphery. With an eye on India, China aimed to stabilize and bolster Pakistan's elected civilian regime and de-radicalize the restive country through economic collaboration. However, this Westward March has contributed little to stabilizing an ally in its western environs. CPEC has brought infrastructure to Pakistan but not legitimacy to its civilian leaders. Nawaz Sherif constructed the narratives of "gift" and "game-changer" to claim the credit for soliciting CPEC and transforming the economy, expecting that CPEC's energy projects would enhance the legitimacy of his governance and contribute positively to his 2018 re-election campaign. However, CPEC aggravated the age-old problems of fiscal vulnerability, over-indebtedness and trade deficit. Although Imran Khan's attempts to scale down CPEC and seek bailouts from the IMF seemed inevitable, they undermined the legitimacy and stability of his government because of the stigma attached to holding out a "begging bowl" to the IMF and the rising cost of living. His regime was succeeded by coalition governments between multiple rival political parties. Amid political instability, Shehbaz Sharif tries to legitimize his rule through a multi-dimensional approach: continuing his brother's policy of embracing CPEC; continuing seeking IMF programs while managing the socio-economic aftermath of implementing the unpopular austerity measures; and, unlike the previous two governments, trying to mend fences with the United States under Trump's second presidency after a brief military conflict with India in May 2025. Consequently, despite autocratic collaboration, China's politico-spatial project to consolidate an exclusionary sphere of influence in Pakistan is less successful than it had been anticipated.

This case study of Pakistan demonstrated that autocratic collaboration based on economic statecraft *alone* does not go a long way towards creating a Chinese sphere of influence "safe for autocracy" because of the pushback from the audiences of the projects in recipient states. Pakistan is not a unique isolated instance. Elsewhere in Asia, popular backlash against debt-financed BRI projects was instrumental in the fall of the Abdulla Yameen regime (2013–2018) in the Maldives, the Mahinda Rajapaksa government (2005–2015) in Sri Lanka, and the Najib Razak government (2009–2018) in Malaysia (Chan 2020, 208–12; Small 2020, 10). In Sri Lanka, despite the "return of the Rajapaksas" in 2019 (Klem 2019), the Gotabaya Rajapaksa regime collapsed in July 2022 amid economic and political turmoil (Ducci and Lee 2022). The succeeding governments have sought assistance from the IMF and undertaken debt restructuring (Gunawardena 2025). Further comparative research is warranted to study how legitimacy and local agency matter in autocratic collaboration between a major autocratic power and its regional illiberal states.

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[7] This is also indicated in Trump's treatment of Venezuela in 2026.

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