

How Belt and Road Initiative Helped Pakistan's Combat against the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: This article aims to discuss the character of Chinese Belt and Road Initiative during Pakistan's combat against the Covid-19 pandemic. When Pakistan is facing the challenge in its healthcare sector and economic sector, the cooperation with BRI project brings assistance against these two dilemmas. This article believes BRI project positively assisted Pakistan's combat against the Covid-19 pandemic, both from health and economic perspectives.

Keywords: Covid-19 Pandemic, Belt and Road Initiative, Pakistan

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 a pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic became an issue necessitating urgent response. Pakistan, with its poor economy and fragile healthcare infrastructure, was not adequately prepared to combat the economic, sociocultural, and health threats that the virus posed [1]. However, compared to other countries, Pakistan possesses a special position in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a series of investment and development projects promoted by the Chinese government and is expected to bring social development and economic growth to its host countries. Nevertheless, the BRI also encountered challenges amid the Covid-19 pandemic, causing problems that come under its umbrella to be either delayed or cancelled completely [2-4]. Using recent literature, this article, therefore, unpacks the challenges that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a project under the BRI, faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, and contends that China's involvement in Pakistan helped both the countries and geared up Pakistan with the tools it needed to fight the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The article is divided into three sections. In the first section, problems encircling Pakistan's response to the pandemic are discussed, and the subsequent sections describe how China's involvement helped address Pakistan's economic and medical needs during the pandemic. This article believes that Pakistan is facing grave challenge in front of the pandemic, because the health system and economic condition are both unprepared for the shock of the pandemic. However, the BRI and HSR projects releases the pressure of Pakistani healthcare system and economy by former assistance and direct medical/financial aid. In the end of the article, the most frequent accusation of debt trap towards BRI is discussed, and this article believes no existence of debt trap within the cooperation between China and Pakistan under the structure of BRI.

2. Pakistan's Response Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic

As China's ally and neighbouring country, Pakistan supported China in its fight against the Covid-19 during the earlier stages of the disease outbreak. In February 2020, Pakistan had its first Covid-19 case, and the state-led response, with its inability to impose a nationwide lockdown due to economic problems, was inadequate [5,6]. In response to the pandemic, Pakistan's government announced a plan titled "National Action Plan for Preparedness & Response to Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)", which included building hospitals, testing, and quarantine centres alongside raising public awareness [6]. The document called for the following measures: travel restrictions, establishment of test points and quarantine facilities, professional health training against Covid-19, ensuring the supply of protection and life-saving equipment [7].

However, compared to China, Pakistan has a lower standard of healthcare and facilities and a government that is less strong [1,8]. According to a study by Naeem, Khan and Saleem and Saad, the government of Pakistan failed to estimate the severity of the pandemic after the first reported case in February [9,10]. Additionally, the provincial government did not coordinate well with the central government, as the distribution of medical resources was in chaos. This section discusses the weaknesses in Pakistan's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as inadequate health infrastructure and shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), arguing that assistance by other countries like China helped Pakistan address those weaknesses.

2.1. Weaknesses in Pakistan's Health Infrastructure

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, Pakistan's state-led authorities released the document known as the "National Action Plan for Preparedness & Response to Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)". However, the regulations mentioned in the document were slowly deployed. For example, the screenings of the significant airports started a month after the document's release. The low efficiency in governance partly counts for this slow deployment, but this article maintains that the weaknesses already embedded in Pakistan's medical sector are the main reason why the country faces severe pressure combating the pandemic.

Pakistan has a population exceeding 212 million people, and its healthcare infrastructure is poorly funded [11,12]. Before the pandemic, only 2% of the GDP in Pakistan was allocated to the public health sector, which was far below the worldwide average of 11.6% [13]. Ebrahim's study points out that the funding of the healthcare sector in Pakistan only accounted for 0.4% of its GDP in 2019 [14]. The inadequately funded healthcare system has led to the lack of availability of medical personnel and facilities that can keep up with the medical needs of the growing population in the country; there are only 9.8 doctors for 1000 patients. Thus, Pakistan's health infrastructure requires foreign support to be able to respond to disease outbreaks and its population's medical needs [9].

According to the 2020-21 budget, the funding for Pakistan's health sector was merely \$151 million as compared to \$7.81 billion that the country spends on its military [15]. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was only one isolation hospital with ten beds capacity in Islamabad, 14 isolation centres with 534 beds in Baluchistan, 50 centres with 955 beds in Punjab and four centres with 151 beds in Sindh [16]. According to the study by Waris et al., in a developing country with a mass population, the number of hospitals, tests and quarantine centres is far less than the number required, which is expected to be increased by five to ten folds, but the investment for the health sector is unable to support these constructions [6]. Besides the shortage in the quantity of quarantine centres/hospitals, the quality of these isolation destinations also questionable. Recent research shows that the local hospitals in Pakistan did not reach the Covid-19 treatment guidelines; many quarantine/isolation centres used the equipment previously used for dengue fever patients [1,17].

Since Pakistan only had a few quarantine centres in early 2020, but these facilities soon ran out of capacity, despite the foreign aid. There was also a shortage of masks, PPEs, and medicines that had become extremely costly due to an increase in demand and the creation of black markets [11,17]. According to Latif's report, dozens of patients were contacting hospitals for help, but hospitals had become overburdened and were not able to accommodate the increasing number of patients [18]. Moreover, quarantine centres built across the country lacked standard protection mechanisms and caused the infection of doctors in April 2020, causing the frontline healthcare workers to protest because of being exposed to grave danger due to the lack of masks and PPE kits [11]. However, even though the healthcare workers in Pakistan resumed working under the threat of infection, the public hospitals in Pakistan suffered immensely in the multiple waves of Covid-19 that occurred between 2020 and 2021; there was an average of one doctor per 963 people and one hospital bed per 1608 people [19].

Pakistan was expected to take all measures to limit the virus transmission, but due to a lack of testing facilities, the suspected samples were sent to China during the early stage of the pandemic [16,20]. Saqlain et al. argue that Pakistan lacked any diagnostic measures during the early days of the pandemic; thus, the test kits were received from China and the UK [1]. Khalid and Ali describe the Covid-19 situation succinctly: "Caregivers were stressed, laboratory facilities were strained, and emergency rooms overflowed with infected patients. Likewise, the workforce dwindled, ICUs ran short of space, and the cost of care has increased" [11].

To conclude, Pakistan's weak health infrastructure is faced an unbearable challenge during the pandemic, especially during the onset of Covid-19. The massive cases of infection are a burden too heavy for the developing countries that neglect the investments in public health departments to burden [11,21]. Pakistan faces the challenges stemming from lack of qualified quarantine centres, poor sanitation, shortage of basic protection measurements, test and medical facilities, insufficient medical personnel, and qualified training [7,22,23].

2.2. Weaknesses in Pakistan's Economy

As the former section argued, weaknesses in the healthcare sector are related to insufficient funding — a problem related to Pakistan's instable economy that also faced severe threats in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A locust plague challenged Pakistan's economy in 2019, raising the cost of food (the annual need for wheat is 27.47 million tons, and the total production in 2019 was less than 25 million tons) [15,24]. The Covid-19 pandemic can be regarded as a crisis within a crisis. For example, the pandemic caused a loss of around 15 billion PKR on wheat sale in three months after the Covid-19 outbreak began in Sindh [15,24,25]. The national assembly in Pakistan approved the 2020-21 budget with a fiscal gap of \$20.7 billion [15]. The estimated economic loss in financial year 2021 reached about 1.1 trillion PKR (nearly \$5.9 billion) [13]. The GDP growth rate in Pakistan was 3.3% in 2019 and was predicted to drop regardless of the pandemic as the State Bank of Pakistan had predicted [26], raising the threat of the pandemic towards Pakistan economy [9].

The Covid-19 pandemic adversely impacted Pakistan's economy in different ways: firstly, with the slowdown of the economy, the probability of layoff became high; and secondly, the international trade also declined during the pandemic. The federal minister of planning and development in Pakistan predicted that there would be 18 million job losses in 2020 [9]. As a result, the output of large-scale manufacturing in Pakistan had decreased by 24.8% in Pakistan till May 2020, and the output of this sector took 10% of Pakistan's total national output [19].

The estimated economic loss caused by the pandemic reached \$1.3 trillion till the end of 2020, especially when the global trade and economy were negatively impacted by the pandemic. The spread of Covid-19 forced most of the countries to implement a lockdown and cancel massive export orders.

The import of Pakistan also declined due to the disruption of global supply chains, both resulted in the halted production and economic decline in Pakistan [26]. According to Meo et al.'s research, the exports of Pakistan were reduced to 54% (from \$2.1 billion in 2019 to \$957 million in 2020) and imports to 35% (from \$4.7 billion to \$3.1 billion) [19]. Pakistan's primary export partners take 40% of its foreign revenue. From August 2019 to June 2020, only the import and export with China continued to grow (from \$1300 million to \$1500 million in imports and \$100 million to \$200 million in exports). Pakistan's trade with the USA, UK, and Germany witnessed a rapid decline [13].

The decline in Pakistan's trade and GDP depicts the country's dwindling economic conditions. Thus, the measures countering the outbreak were hard to be followed thoroughly, rendering its economy more vulnerable to a healthcare crisis amid the pandemic. IMF reports that the Pakistan budget deficit for the financial year 2020 might reach 9.2% of the GDP. Therefore, many relief packages from the government are funded by external debt, leading to a heavy debt burden for Pakistan [26]. Considering this, Pakistan needs financial aid, international business orders, and relief in debt issues to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic.

3. China's Health Silk Road (HSR) and its Role in Pakistan's Covid-19 Response

The Covid-19 pandemic is an international threat necessitating international cooperation. Low-income economies are often unable to respond adequately due to inefficient state-led responses and weak health infrastructures, leading to solutions like strict border controls and pause of economic action, which have repercussions on the society as well as the economy [27,28]. For the same reason, many projects that come under the BRI were paused or shut down due to the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and travel restrictions that were implemented worldwide [29]. However, the BRI represents a potential method to fight against the pandemic and a possible opportunity for economic recovery for both China and the host countries [3]. The Covid-19 pandemic has given China the opportunity to expand the BRI's scope beyond infrastructural projects to develop the Health Silk Road (HSR) and provide healthcare services, strengthen hospitals, offer loans, and give vaccines particularly to BRI host countries [30]. HSR is a series of medical/health cooperation plans deployed among BRI host countries, which starts from a document named "A Three-Year Implementation Plan for Advancing BRI Health Cooperation (2015-2017)" released by Chinese government in 2015 [31].

Promoting healthcare was already a prominent part of China's relationship with the ASEAN countries before the BRI was announced [30]. China received an excellent reputation due to its medical assistance towards Asian and African countries (e.g., China's medical assistance during the Ebola cases from 2012-2014) [32]. The reputation that China has attracted due to healthcare projects in BRI host countries may help defend itself from criticisms and misleading apprehensions related to how it promotes debt-traps in the host countries [4]. However, China's medical assistance in BRI host countries has been chiefly overlooked since 2017 [31]. Earlier in 2015, Chinese health authorities had promoted proposals suggesting international health cooperation under the BRI. However, until the outbreak of Covid-19, the notion of HSR has remained marginalised [33]. The pandemic twisted the focus of global politics and diplomacy. The negative impact on economies made it hard for BRI to continue its costly infrastructure building in the host countries. The Covid-19 crisis shifted people's attention from economic growth to minimising the negative health impacts of the virus. Thus, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, China began focusing on HSR in the BRI host countries [31, 34].

This article argues that the HSR is not China's new venture, but it builds on enhancing cooperation with countries based on BRI partnerships. The HSR, much like BRI, is highly adaptive, as China and the host countries can adjust projects according to their needs [31]. Tillman, Ye and Jian's report argues that a geographical boundary does not explicitly define HSR [34]. Instead, it covers a series of projects, including bilateral and multilateral health policy meetings and networks; capacity building and talent training; mechanisms to control and prevent cross-border infectious diseases;

health aid; traditional medicine; and healthcare industry. It is a project that China founded in 2015 under the BRI, but now, it has become increasingly relevant to highlight it and assess how China is assisting the BRI host countries in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The medical assistance to host countries under the BRI includes a training programme for medical personals, public healthcare mechanism-building, emergency help, and free treatment abroad by Chinese doctors [30]. These principles are systematically listed in a document titled "A Three-Year Implementation Plan for Advancing BRI Health Cooperation (2015-2017)", which was released by the Chinese government in 2015 as a guiding tool highlighting the basic principles of the HSR [31]. The document emphasises the necessity to build an infection tracing mechanism to control and coordinate epidemics among the BRI host countries [31]. According to Chow-Bing, the document serves the following functions: 1) suggesting different medical training programmes as well as an alliance among medical institutions among the BRI countries; 2) constructing a cooperative framework for health crisis among the BRI countries; 3) proposing the institutionalisation of medical aid (i.e., medical aid teams, infrastructure, equipment, and donation) in the BRI countries; and 4) providing broad and extensive guidelines and principles for the health cooperation [31]. Thus, the document lays out how China wants HSR to operate in the BRI countries, but it is not a fixed blueprint, and the HSR can be expanded upon, depending on the need of host countries.

Therefore, the HSR is to be seen as an extension of the BRI to help the host countries strengthen their health infrastructures, especially during epidemics and pandemics. Moreover, the HSR may also become an opportunity for countries worldwide to coordinate and cooperate amid health crises, which will continue to plague societies in the future. The following sections introduce China's health aid and its principles, Chinese vaccine diplomacy and the health market accelerated by Chinese BRI, highlighting how may the BRI and HSR assist the battle against the pandemic.

3.1. China's Medical Aid and Health Diplomacy

Chinese health diplomacy shaped a tradition of medical aid by sending medical experts to host countries, building health infrastructure, sharing medical knowledge, and cooperating with other international health organisations [34]. The infrastructural focus of the BRI projects includes building hospitals and can help host countries in their fight against the pandemic and future disease outbreaks [35]. According to the report released on Health, China showed its medical preparedness and cooperation by hospital construction, malaria control, education and training of health workers, drug donation, and cross-border infectious disease control in West Africa and Nigeria. Chinese medical aid teams also benefited from their domestic experience of combating SARS in 2003 and were able to help other countries with growing SARS cases in Africa. According to Tillman et al.'s study, Chinese health aid and medical infrastructure accounts for 57% of the total infrastructural building in Africa since 2000 [34]. Likewise, before the Covid-19 crisis, the Chinese government built a medical service centre in the BRI core region, Xinjiang, to provide medical services to Mid-Asian BRI countries [30].

Expanding the HSR further will ensure that the BRI proceeds with its projects under a safety environment. For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, China sent out more than 1000 medical personnel, provided free care and built a bio-safety level e-laboratory for the local government in West Africa, which had already experienced the Ebola epidemic in 2012 [31]. Similarly, the medical team from China to Pakistan quickly reacted under the framework of CPEC by arriving in Islamabad from China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in March 2020. The team included eight experts along with the provision of 10,000 test kits, 10,000 N-95 masks, 100,000 disposable medical masks, 5,000 medical protective clothes, 5 ventilators, 11 defibrillator monitors and 62,000 sets of drugs for treating COVID-19 [36]. Based on the experiences of building medical centres, China's Kunming University of Science and Technology worked with Pakistani medical experts to convert a university

campus into a 1,000-bed field hospital in Lahore, Punjab, during the Covid-19 pandemic [36]. Overall, 75 countries — mainly the BRI host countries — received Chinese medical teams' assistance in the second quarter of 2020 [34].

Rudolf argues that when traditional aid donors like the United States are not able to provide medical aid, Chinese action in the form of HSR fortifies China as a reliable partner [30]. For Chow-Bing, HSR can be regarded as a Chinese promise to continue participating in global health governance since the Trump administration decided to withdraw from its commitments amid the pandemic [31]. For example, in the case of Covid-19 vaccines, China assisted BRI countries when the U.S. monopolised them for their own use.

Additionally, China is becoming a new source of funding for the WHO since the funding for medical provision keeps decreasing. China has turned from a beneficiary into a donor [34]. Within the framework of AIIB, China has set aside \$13 billion to aid its BRI members' recovery from the pandemic [34]. Loans were extended to Sri Lanka, and a makeshift hospital was built in Pakistan [33]. Besides direct economic aid, China also showed its efforts to alleviate its partner countries' debt burden due to the pandemic. The Chinese government signed a \$500 million loan agreement with the Sri Lankan government, aiming to lower its debt payment pressures and to increase the official foreign reserves in Sri Lanka to enable it to manage the pandemic's economic consequences [34]. Lauding the Chinese action amid the pandemic, as well as the BRI, Vinokurov aptly writes, "We applaud the 2019 decision, announced at the Second BRI Forum in Beijing, to improve debt sustainability analysis in cooperation with the multilateral financial organisations [28]. In the extreme case, should the Covid-19 crisis prove to be longer and tougher than currently expected, some restructuring might be necessary for some recipient countries".

The Chinese government responded to the international need for help quickly after the outbreak; even non-BRI European countries like Serbia turned to China for help [4]. Till now, China has aided 150 countries and seven international organisations and exported over 179 billion masks, 1.73 billion protective suits, and 543 million testing kits [34]. Furthermore, among these Chinese material aids, the Chinese vaccines, comprising SinoPharm, CanSino, and SinoVac were particularly important as China presented them as public goods for the world. The following section zooms into China's health diplomacy via vaccines.

3.2. Chinese Vaccine Policy

The pandemic may result in greater inequality, especially in the world's access towards the Covid-19 vaccines. Thus, significant economies ought to take more responsibility to help countries in need of vaccines. According to Tillman et al.'s report, there is a vacuum in the global supply of Covid-19 vaccines that Chinese makers have filled [34].

With the world's increasing desire to control the outbreak through vaccines, the Chinese vaccine gained more trust in developing countries since President Xi announced that the Chinese vaccines would be accessible as public goods [34]. China provided the world with cheap vaccines, conducted pilot studies in the BRI host countries, and joined the international platform COVAX to ensure a fair distribution of vaccines [30]. Although China did not rely on foreign vaccine in its domestic fight against the virus, it still decided to join COVAX to deliver its vaccines as global public goods, and the Chinese government provided vaccine doses for 15 million people as its first COVAX purchase (which is equivalent to 1% of its population) [34]. Chinese vaccines were more suitable and accessible for countries like Pakistan that come under the BRI. For example, Pakistan decided to buy 1.2 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine from the Chinese company Sinopharm [34]. Throughout the pandemic, China provided massive anti-pandemic products to Pakistan. Nearly 90% of Pakistan's vaccines are from China [37]. According to a report by The Daily Mail, China continued to provide medical aid to Pakistan in 2021 with another 0.5 million doses of Sinopharm and 60,000 doses of CanSino

vaccines [38]. This stable source of vaccines allowed Pakistan to proceed with the national immunisation programme against Covid-19 across the country.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the weaknesses of many countries' public healthcare systems. Many of them were overwhelmed with a sudden surge of cases. Lack of essential protective equipment like masks and ventilators was also significant. However, China, as a manufacturing country, provided more than 50% of these products to the rest of the world before the pandemic. Thus, the continued ability to provide these goods was crucial for other countries during the pandemic [31]. On 19 June 2019, the Chinese government issued the document "Joint Statement of the High-level Video Conference on Belt and Road International Cooperation: Combating Covid-19 with Solidarity" to promote the sharing of information and knowledge, strengthening public healthcare system, investment in health infrastructure, and equitable access to health products [31]. China soon became the relief supplier after the control of the pandemic in late February. Considering that most of the world's mask factories are in China, the country soon occupied a monopolistic position to provide most countries with medical supplies [30]. For example, China raised its exportation to Pakistan in the mid 2020, the export of drugs raised to 23.6%, products related to coronavirus raised to 45.4%, PPE raised to 32.4% [39]. This sector discussed how HSR assisted Pakistan's medical struggle during the pandemic, the familiar assistance in economic sector from BRI to Pakistan will be explained in the next sector.

4. CPEC and Pakistan's Economic Recovery

Pakistan's economy was not stable even before the pandemic; thus, the government promoted cooperation with a neighbour with sound investment plans to stabilise the domestic economy [40]. Host countries welcome BRI involvement because it fulfils the need for infrastructure, energy and agriculture sectors and creates much-needed job opportunities, which boosts the local economic growth [40]. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the primary set of projects within the BRI that directly aids Pakistan, promoting infrastructure building, industry, and agricultural development, energy sectors, job opportunities, and easy access to markets [41]. Explicitly speaking, according to the study of Irshad, the first stage of CPEC investment is around \$46 billion — most of these investments were delivered through FDI, which includes 17000 megawatts of power generation worth \$34 billion [42]. By 2021, the investment towards CPEC had increased from \$42 billion to \$62 billion, within which China provided 80% of the 62 billion US dollars' investment to CPEC [43,44]. Although the speed of BRI construction is unavoidably slowed down because its member countries must transfer their resources to responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, CPEC is welcomed by most politicians in Pakistan and was believed to bring economic development and prosperity to the country directly [45]. This is also evident from various news reports, where statements made by the chief of Pakistan's army are unequivocally supportive of the CPEC project [44]. The following parts of the essay will introduce how CPEC as a part of BRI can assist the Pakistani economic recovery under the pandemic and defend against fears of debt trap.

4.1. CPEC's Contribution to Pakistan's Economic Growth

China and Pakistan are allying countries that share bilateral ties and similar stances about economic and political issues [43]. According to the study by Belova et al., the economic cooperation between China and Pakistan started decades before the pandemic [45]. For instance, China's imports to Pakistan increased from 7.34% to 24.78%, and the exports from Pakistan to China increased from 2.18% to 8.58% from 2003 to 2019. Even under the pandemic, Chinese investment in Pakistan rose to \$332.1 billion from July to October 2021. Meanwhile, the export of zero-tariff items, including leather, yarn, and some other agricultural goods, from Pakistan to China widened to 75% [45]. Khan

et al argue that Pakistan's exports to China in the first quarter of 2021 increased by 70% (\$888 million) compared to the first quarter of 2020, and the total export amount in 2020 reached more than \$15 billion when projects under CPEC came into action [43].

Out of all the CPEC projects (e.g., oil pipelines, special economic zones, roads, railways, and energy plants), infrastructure building is suspected to be the costliest. However, Li et al and Khan et al argue that infrastructure building is essential for the recovery of Pakistan's economy [40,43]. For instance, products could be effectively delivered to the market with available roads and stimulate the economic growth, which would raise job opportunities; all these elements are essential for the economic recovery after the outbreak. The construction of CPEC is estimated to attract \$150 billion worth of FDI for Pakistan, creating a more attractive environment for investment [43]. For example, over \$11.83 billion were spent on communication infrastructure under CPEC. Moreover, the terrorist index decreased from 9.07 to 8.61 in 2021. Besides infrastructure building, CPEC also aided the development of energy and technology sectors in Pakistan (e.g., Sahiwal Coal-fired Power Plant in Punjab, Hydro China Dawood Wind Farm in Gharo, UEP Wind Farm in Jhimpir, and Karot Hydropower station in Rawalpindi) [45]. These projects are estimated to release Pakistan from energy shortage while creating 2.3 million jobs till 2030.

The Covid-19 pandemic influenced the development of the CPEC projects, yet this negative impact is still within a controllable range [46]. Project supervisors provided the CPEC sites with masks, regulated daily disinfection and sent medical teams to workers. Therefore, till the end of 2020, there were no Covid-19 cases reported from CPEC project sites [39,47]. Furthermore, there were no Pakistani employees laid off from their jobs, and pay cuts were not administered during the pandemic crisis [48]. Even though a few projects were delayed, no cancellations were reported amid the pandemic. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan confirmed that the CPEC would not be disrupted because of the pandemic [49]. For example, the Gwadar port, one of the most important CPEC projects, remained operational during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to Pakistan's economy [49]. Chairman of the CPEC Authority, Asim Saleem Bajwa, contended that after the successful completion of the first phase, CPEC was expanding into its second phase as per schedule despite the severe setback of Covid-19 around the world, ensuring economic stability and well-being of the people of Pakistan [45,50]. According to the data released by the Embassy of China, 46 CPEC projects have made significant progress, generating \$24 billion for Pakistan's economy, and creating 75,000 jobs for the locals during the pandemic. Despite all the economic and medical benefits that can be attributed to HSR and CPEC, China's involvement in Pakistan has attracted immense criticism due to the debt trap issue, this article believes that worrying about debt issues is overly concerned and should not be criticized as a deliberate trap.

4.2. Unpacking Debt Trap

Pakistan is troubled by a debt burden, which is closely related to the U.S.-led War on Terror. Pakistan suffered a heavy economic loss during that war; the estimated cost of terrorism in Pakistan reached \$252 billion in 2018. However, Pakistan only received \$33 billion worth of aid from the U.S. [44]. Currently, Pakistan must borrow more loans to pay back its previous loans, and developing countries prefer Chinese economic aid because, at least through the Chinese official statement, China would not interfere with other countries' domestic affairs [44].

In his study, Ahmad argues that "Economies of BRI participating countries have been hit by Covid-19, which will affect their ability to repay the debt. If China cannot handle the debt relief problem promptly and effectively, then these projects can anticipate further delay" [39]. Pakistan contacted the IMF for emergency financial aid in mid-2020. However, Pakistan was under a heavy debt burden even before the pandemic due to IMF loans. Additionally, Pakistan's economy has severely been influenced by the pandemic [39,51]. However, though people are worried about the debt burden

caused by CPEC, this is not likely to become a trapping issue. Both China and Pakistan are supporting the CPEC projects, owing to the essential geo-strategic position of Pakistan and the long-term economic cooperation between the two countries. Though Pakistan may easily fall into a debt trap, it is not in China's interest to see its investments become a trap for Pakistan [44].

Pakistan's trust towards China started from the war between China and India in 1962 and the war between Pakistan and India in 1965; the stable relationship in political view is stabilised by the China – Pakistan Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations in 2005, and its economic cooperation, which was enhanced by the Common Vision for Deepening China – Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era in 2013 [44]. Meanwhile, Pakistan does not share a friendly diplomatic environment as the relationship with India, Afghanistan, and Iran is hard to predict. A stable relationship with China turns out to be more critical for Pakistan's safety [43]. Pakistan has signed a currency swap with China in 2014, meanwhile China had already become the biggest investor of Pakistan's infrastructure, telecommunications, ports, and energy sectors before the sign of CPEC [42].

The accusation of debt trap was frequently mentioned when the government Sri Lanka ceded its control of Hambantota port. However, the case of Hambantota port is closely related to the imprudent lending of Sri Lanka government instead of a deliberate debt trap. The Sri Lankan government optimistically thought that the debt could be paid back soon by incoming and foreign exchange through the port, but finally proved unavailable, which means there is no existence of deliberate debt lending [52]. Pakistan is still a pivotal ally for China due to its particular geo-strategic position. It is too early and irresponsible to sentence the debt trap accusation. On the other hand, if the Chinese government deliberately turns its lending into a debt trap, then it will mean an economic loss of billions of dollars for both countries and may shock the highly leveraged domestic financial system [52]. Besides, in June 2020, the Chinese government announced to suspend the debt repayments for several countries as a part of its "debt service suspension initiative", which again proves that Pakistan is not falling into the debt trap [52]. Meanwhile, the asymmetry of creditor-debtor power relations does not always favour the creditor. For example, China is the US' major creditor with its debt to China totalling US\$1.08 trillion in May 2020, but this doesn't mean the US is controlled by China through its massive debt [52].

5. Conclusion

The BRI has been unavoidably affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, but evidence have shown that the host countries and BRI project, particularly Pakistan and CPEC, are still contributing to each other's development against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought severe challenges towards Pakistan's medical sector and economy, both of which were unstable before the disease outbreak, but due to the contribution of HSR and CPEC, the virus' negative impacts on Pakistan's economy and health infrastructure have been significantly reduced. The HSR offers medical teams, drugs, and other medical equipment to Pakistan, which reduces the pressure from Pakistan's already burdened health infrastructure. A massive vaccine rollout as well as the localisation of vaccine production in Pakistan have also been facilitated by the HSR within the BRI. The projects that come under the CPEC were not entirely terminated during the pandemic. On the contrary, the BRI and CPEC kept contributing to the economic recovery and growth of Pakistan. The economic recovery is closely related to the Chinese economic aid, infrastructural building, and trade via the CPEC. Besides these contributions, BRI is not likely to become a debt trap for Pakistan. Instead, it will reduce the debt pressure off Pakistan during the pandemic. Thus, this article believes that the BRI project positively assisted Pakistan's combat against the Covid-19 pandemic, both from health and economic perspectives.

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