

From Green Narratives to Fragmented Governance: Explaining the Implementation Gap in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Aditya Mani

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is increasingly presented using the language of sustainability. This raises the question of how these environmental ideas are actually put into practice, as, in reality, there is still a persistent gap between stated commitments and what happens on the ground. Even as this large-scale infrastructure initiative is framed through terms such as “Green BRI,” “ecological civilization,” and “Green CPEC,” it continues to generate significant ecological disruption. Coal-based energy production, the encroachment upon environmentally sensitive regions, and a lack of transparency in environmental regulation and enforcement are among the concerns raised. Research looks at this contradiction from multiple perspectives. These include the role sustainability discourse plays in shaping China’s global environmental image, as well as governance challenges in Pakistan, such as policy fragmentation, weak institutional coordination, and a lack of policy coherence across sectors. Such works offer useful insights into the misalignment between environmental commitments and actual outcomes, but they remain mainly evaluative. What can therefore be studied more deeply is how these dimensions interact. Specifically, how environmental narratives are translated into governance mechanisms and why this process often ends in fragmented outcomes.

Rather than simply asking whether policies are aligned or not, this project looks at how such alignment, or misalignment, comes about. It studies how environmental narratives, institutional arrangements, and policy coherence intersect in the context of CPEC. The project draws on environmental humanities, political ecology, and environmental governance. It does not treat sustainability as fixed but as something continuously shaped. In this sense, ideas like “Green CPEC” are more than just rhetorical labels used to legitimize infrastructure development. They structure policy priorities, shape governance arrangements, and influence how environmental responsibility is understood and practiced. Using discourse and policy analysis, the project looks at how these narratives are articulated and evolve and how they are embedded into environmental governance mechanisms *vis-à-vis* CPEC. Moreover, it assesses the extent to which these processes lead to coherence, or, as is often the case, fragmentation, across key CPEC sectors.

What this project does is look closely at how sustainability narratives are translated, constrained, and, at times, fail to operate as intended. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on infrastructure development, environmental governance, and sustainability in the Global South.