

Colonising Pakistan to engorge Chinese: CPEC's most pernicious component

China is essentially exploiting poorer Pakistan to feed its own increasingly wealthy and hungry population while putting ever-more water pressure on a country struggling with water scarcity

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How China is putting pressure on Pakistan's resources for its own benefits. Painted by C Christine Fair

Last week, Chinese and Pakistani papers announced the latest accretion of the so-called **Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor**: collaboration in the cultivation of sorghum. By collaboration, they mean the Chinese will generate genetically-modified varieties which will be grown on Pakistani soil for export to China.

According to the *Beijing Review*, sorghum is an “indispensable dry food crop” and is “second only to wheat, corn, rice and barley in China in terms of planting area and output”. Because it is resistant to pests, disease, extreme temperature, and salinity, it is called the “the camel of crops”. The Pakistani paper, *Tribune*, furthered that because there

is little demand for sorghum in Pakistan, there is “no direct competition as wheat essentially is a winter crop and sorghum is a summer crop.”

Sorghum generally underperforms wheat somewhat in terms of micronutrients, dietary fiber, and proteins and has a considerably lower yield than wheat at 1,361 kg/ha compared to 3,009 kg/ha, while having comparable water requirements. So why the excitement over sorghum?

First, sorghum tends to be hardier than wheat, especially in drought conditions. Second, it's grown in the summer and doesn't compete with cultivating wheat. Third, it's ostensibly a way to address Pakistan's balance of payments while purporting to cost Pakistani consumers very little given that in 2019 Pakistan imported some \$12.4 million of sorghum and in 2021 and China imported over 9 million tons.

This copacetic account, however, has one big problem: It further exacerbates Pakistan's water crises while doing little to mitigate Pakistan's undernourished people.

Conking Pakistanis, Englutting Chinese?

China's massive economic growth has translated into massive appetites. China's economic growth has succeeded in lowering the country's undernourished: In 2019, China's per capita GDP was \$10,100 compared to \$1,053 in 2001. In the same period, the percentage of undernourished Chinese fell to 2.5 per cent in 2019 compared to 10.1 per cent in 2001. How does China feed its population clamouring for ever more nutritious — and luxurious — food? Imports. In 2017, China food exports were valued at \$60 billion; however, its food imports totalled \$105 billion. In Pakistan that same period, Pakistan's per capita GDP increased from \$544 in 2001 to \$1,300 in 2019 while Pakistan's undernourishment rate declined from 21.1 percent to 12.9 percent. To put this programme into perspective, China is essentially exploiting poorer Pakistan to feed its own increasingly wealthy *and* hungry population, while putting ever-more water pressure on a country struggling with water scarcity.

China's need for food is likely to explain the most under-studied component of the so-called Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor: Chinese exploitation of Pakistan's agricultural resources. In 2017, *The Dawn* obtained and leaked the CPEC masterplan. Most of the commentary on that plan focused on its dodgy finances whose terms were set by China rather than the market, the road and rail investments as well as power generation. Curiously, no one paid attention to the most striking observation, namely that “main thrust of the plan actually lies in agriculture, contrary to the image of CPEC as a massive industrial and transport undertaking, involving power plants and highways. The plan

acquires its greatest specificity and lays out the largest number of projects and plans for their facilitation, in agriculture”.

The CPEC agricultural plan provides a roadmap that spans the entire supply chain, largely exploiting Pakistan’s own innumerable dysfunctions in its agricultural sector. For example, it observes that 50 per cent of Pakistan’s agricultural products rot during harvesting and transport because Pakistan has no significant cold-chain logistics and processing facilities. Consequently, the plan calls for the provision of seeds and other inputs, like fertilizer, credit, and pesticides while noting that various Chinese enterprises “will also operate their own farms, processing facilities for fruits and vegetables and grain. Logistics companies will operate a large storage and transportation system for agrarian produce.”

As with much of CPEC, the Chinese are motivated by their concerns about Kashgar Prefecture, which is a part of the so-called Xinjiang Autonomous Zone. CPEC links Kashgar province in the north with Pakistan’s port city of Gwadar, where China has built a massive deep-sea port. As is well-known, this is where the Chinese are using every means necessary — including genocide — to rid themselves of the restive Muslim Uyghurs. The Chinese are keen to replicate the strategy they used in Tibet in this province. This plan calls for social re-engineering by diminishing the problem population by all means possible while simultaneously actively resettling Han Chinese into the area. It also calls for better economic and logistical integration with the rest of the country concomitant with these re-engineering efforts. One of the issues that China wants to address is the poverty and under-development in Kashgar. The bulk of the plan dilates upon expanding the opportunities for the Kashgar Prefecture generally and Xinjiang Production Corps, coupled with the opportunities for profitable engagement in the domestic market. This is the primary market for Pakistan, which is hardly a windfall for Pakistan.

An optimist may look at this and see some measure of opportunities in Pakistan. And indeed, the Pakistani press had not raised many alarm bells about this aspect of CPEC. This is odd because, as Huma Yusuf has lucidly explained, within 20 years, Pakistan will be the most water-strained country in the region. While they may sound a long way away, currently, 30 million Pakistani have no access to potable water. Perhaps one of the reasons why few have been concerned about this exploitation of Pakistani resources to advance the culinary and political interests of Beijing is because Pakistan has not had a serious discussion about its water crises, much less considered appropriate policy measures to address them. At best, water scarcity is seen as a potential precipitant of a future conflict with India. Consequently, the full dimensions of Pakistan’s water problems are rarely addressed, much less understood.

Yusuf notes that corruption and mismanagement of water are rife, yet have not concentrated the attention of Pakistanis. She notes how the cartelisation in the sugar industry and Pakistan's obsession with being a sugar exporter, exacerbates these water challenges due to the water intensity of the crop. Equally important is the link between malnourishment and water scarcity. Ironically, malnourishment is highest in Pakistan's most irrigated districts because producers prioritise water resources to grow cash crops for export over domestic food security. Nor have Pakistanis fully grasped the fact that water is required for much of Pakistan's export-oriented sectors like textiles because cotton requires a lot of water. When the water is gone, so is any hope of Pakistan becoming an economic powerhouse.

Boiling the frog

As the adage goes: If you put a frog in cold water and slowly bring it to boil, the frog will die before it realises what is going on. In fact, the frog may have even been grateful for chilly water in the first place. The Chinese Pakistan Economic Corridor was never about helping Pakistan out of Chinese altruism as many Pakistanis believe. The plan has always been instrumental: Render Pakistan in a cog of China's great strategy to enrich itself. In reality, Pakistan is that frog and CPEC are the waters in which it will die long before it catches onto the ruse.

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