



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Beyond Infrastructure: Socio-Economic Transformation and Cultural Exchange through CPEC**

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**ABSTRACT**

The objective of this research is to analyze the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor through a social sciences lens, examining how infrastructure investment, regional connectivity, and trade integration intersect with issues of nation-building, cultural exchange, and development equity. This research examines that while CPEC promises significant contributions to Pakistan’s economy—particularly in energy security, foreign direct investment, and regional uplift—it also functions as a site of soft power projection, evident in educational exchanges, language promotion, and cultural diplomacy. This research shows that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has emerged as both an economic opportunity and a socio-political phenomenon in the region and beyond. The study highlights the dual potential of CPEC: to foster socio-economic transformation and cross-cultural understanding. The research is significant as it argues that the Project is not only an economic corridor but also incorporates far-reaching implications for Pakistan’s future. The research recommends that, while the China Pakistan Economic Corridor has immense economic potential, there is a greater need to explore social and cultural aspects of the Corridor to reap its benefits to both countries and the region.

**KEYWORDS** China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Socio-Cultural Exchange, Confucius Institutes, Regional Development, Soft Power

**Introduction**

Economic corridors such as the CPEC play a crucial part in a country’s development as this Project possesses the capacity to immensely improve a country’s standing on the world stage through generating livelihoods and thus improving people’s social standing (Mezzer, 2011; Rahim, et. al., 2018; Shah, et. al., 2020). CPEC is an example of just that. The two neighbors’ friendship has been described as “higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans”. The two nations have been termed as Iron Brothers, and their partnership has endured as well as gotten stronger over time.

Through CPEC, there are expected to be various benefits to Pakistan. The relationship between China and Pakistan is supported by four pillars: mutual internal security concerns, energy security, geostrategic interests, as well as mutual internal interests (Mezzer, 2011). It is important to understand why the realization of CPEC is so crucial. Reasons include the development of impoverished regions as well as the establishment of essential infrastructure, which comprises roads, trade, energy, communication and investment for development (Ramachandran & Linde, 2011). This will be further aided by the fact that the current sea route of Malacca, also called the Malacca Dilemma, will now be bypassed, and a new route will be developed for access to the world (Mengshong, 2015).

China's economic rise presents an opportunity for Pakistan to enhance its economy through China's BRI, of which CPEC is a leading project (Riaz A, et al., 2017). Even though there is a land route between Pakistan and China—specifically from the deep water port of Pakistan's Gwadar to Western China's Kashgar. A significant portion of the Maritime Silk Route, which will run from China to the Mediterranean via the Red Sea and connect via Gwadar to the larger Indian Ocean, East Africa, and the Gulf States, is also a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China will benefit globally from new trade facilities, which will help modernize and extend Pakistan's current infrastructure (Syed, 2017; Muzaffar, et. al., 2018).

The CPEC investment is greater than all the aid that the United States has given Pakistan since 9/11 and surpasses all foreign direct investment that Pakistan has received in recent years (Ali, 2015). Throughout projects like the Karakoram Highway and Karachi-Peshawar Motorway under CPEC, cultural exchanges as well as development are expected to increase between Pakistan and China (Reuters, 2018). Such initiatives will also boost regional connectivity, lead to the formation of formal economic zones, and facilitate economic integration. Through a variety of forms of infrastructure, such as roads, gas and oil pipelines, trains as well as optical fiber linkages, CPEC will connect China to Pakistan and the Gwadar Port (Shoukat, et. al., 2016; Yaseen, et. al., 2017). CPEC is projected to constitute 20 percent of Pakistan's GDP

### **Literature Review**

Economic corridors such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) play a pivotal role in shaping cultural and social dynamics. Beyond its material investments in infrastructure, trade, and energy, CPEC constitutes a framework for deeper cultural linkages and societal transformation. The China–Pakistan partnership, often described as “higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans,” has evolved into a multidimensional engagement underpinned by shared security, energy, and strategic interests as elucidated by Mezzera, 2011.

According to Bhattacharyay, 2012, by extending road, rail, energy, and communication networks, CPEC reduces poverty, connects marginalized populations to economic hubs, and narrows regional disparities. These material changes carry direct implications for societal structures, reshaping livelihoods, migration patterns, and community interactions. The educational and cultural domains reflect another layer of cooperation. Various newspapers such as the Daily Times have emphasized on various initiatives such as the Pak–China Friendship Center, the establishment of Pakistan Study Centers in China, and the growing enrollment of Pakistani students in Chinese universities illustrate the scope of people-to-people engagement.

Rehman, 2022 has explored a particularly significant instrument which has been the expansion of Confucius Institutes across Pakistan. Since 2005, five institutes have been established, engaging more than 30,000 students in Chinese language and cultural studies. These institutions, funded by the Chinese International Education Foundation, function as nodes of cultural diplomacy, promoting language learning and cross-cultural interaction. While some Western critiques frame Confucius Institutes as vehicles of ideological influence (Herr, 2019), within Pakistan they represent a tangible avenue for linguistic and educational exchange. Complementary initiatives—such as Chinese-funded university partnerships, vocational training programs, and cultural delegations—further institutionalize cultural connectivity.

The socio-cultural influence of CPEC extends beyond formal institutions. Enhanced infrastructure has facilitated tourism, media exchanges, and religious and cultural encounters. Developments such as the Gwadar Port and transport corridors are expected to foster ecotourism and religious tourism, connecting Pakistani sites of Buddhist heritage

with Chinese visitors. Simultaneously, the growing prevalence of Chinese products, cultural norms, and work practices in Pakistan reflects the everyday dimension of globalization under CPEC (Niazi, 2017). However, these exchanges also raise questions of cultural asymmetry and the reception of Chinese norms within an Islamic society (Sanaullah 2019).

Long-standing cultural cooperation between China and Pakistan, dating back to the 1965 Cultural Cooperation Agreement, has expanded under the BRI framework. Literary translations, joint art performances, and educational scholarships have all contributed to building mutual awareness (Survey on China-Pak Cultural Exchanges & Cooperation, 2020).

## **Material and Methods**

Using qualitative methods, this study analyzes the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as not only an economic initiative but also as a project with significant potential to enhance social and cultural relations through channels such as educational exchanges and institutions like the Confucius Institutes. A wide range of journal articles, newspaper sources, and government reports have been examined to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of CPEC. To ensure balance and depth, works by both Pakistani and Chinese scholars were included, allowing the study to capture perspectives from both national contexts and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the proje

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Socio-Cultural Imperatives**

By tying remote areas and populations to important markets and economic hubs, regional infrastructure also lowers poverty and raises standards of life while closing the development gap within an area (Bhattacharyay, 2012). CPEC is vitally significant for both nations in this regard. China needs CPEC to increase its sphere of influence, fortify its worldwide presence, and secure future energy supply lines, while Pakistan needs it to overcome its obstacles, economic development and energy sources.

These plans, which are currently in the stages of construction, have an estimated budget of 1 billion dollars. They aim to rapidly expand and enhance Pakistan's infrastructure as well as strengthen economic relations between Pakistan and the People's Republic of China (Murad, 2018, pg. 15). The significance of CPEC for China is evident, as it has been incorporated into the People's Republic of China's Five-Year Plan (Rashida and Farooq, 2016).

It is essential to comprehend what "social and culture" actually mean. The term "social" describes the results of interactions among members of a society, cooperation being the most prevalent type. "Culture" refers to ways of living and practices, which include beliefs, knowledge, traditions and technology. Cultural change encompasses all human phenomena that lead to social development and transformation. Through CPEC, it is hoped that a cultural link can be established between Pakistan and China (Ibrar, Ma, and Rafiq, 2016).

There are various types of cultural and people to people cooperation that have been a positive precursor for the CPEC. Various forms of collaboration between the two countries are evident. For example, during the visit of former Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Islamabad in December 2010, the Pak-China Friendship Center was opened. Furthermore, more than 8,000 Pakistani students are presently enrolled at Chinese universities through four Pakistan Study Centers (Khan, 2014). An interview that was conducted with Dr Liaqat Ali Shah that was done by the research for the purpose of this thesis derbies it very succinctly, "CPEC is a development project. China has industrial power and there will spill over benefit from these. Spill overs not only in the economic aspect but also c cultural,

connectivity with China, people to people exchange with the rest of world There will be cultural impact in some aspects of the BRI and through exchanges with China. Time will tell”.

In 2012, the Sindh government's Education Department allotted Rest. 625 million for Chinese lan

guage instruction. In August 2008, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was also signed by Pakistan and China to create the Pakistan-China University of Engineering, Science, and Technology's permanent campus. The Pak-China Institute, an independent Pakistani think-tank devoted to studying China, was founded on October 1, 2009, despite the university's untimely opening (Board of Investment, 2020).

### **Confucius Institutes as a tool for promoting Chinese culture and language**

Since 2005, there are five Confucius Institutes that have been established, the first one being in the University of Modern Languages in Islamabad. The rest of the Institutes are in: University of Sargodha, University of the Punjab, University of Karachi and the University of Agriculture. Currently, there are more than 30,000 students benefitting from Confucius Institutes in Pakistan (Rehman, 2022).

The Chinese International Education Foundation, which is a division of the People's Republic of China's Ministry of Education, provides funding for cultural development initiatives through Confucius Institutes.

The Confucius Institutes' declared goals are to support local Chinese instruction abroad, encourage cross-cultural exchange, and advance Chinese language and culture. Pakistani students are also benefiting from cultural exchanges; in 2018, the Confucius Institute at NUML launched the "BS Area Study China" undergraduate program, which gives students the chance to study Chinese language, culture, and the arts while providing faculty members with an up-close look at Chinese culture (Mattes, 2012).

China is using the Confucius Institutes to promote its culture and to spread its ideology through the Confucius Institutes. Even though this has been portrayed in a negative light by the United States and other actors who are apprehensive about the rise of China, it is best not to forget that these same countries have used different 'centers' to promote their culture as well (Herr, 2019).

Transport infrastructure is expected to become more robust and expansive, thereby stimulating faster economic growth through increased trade and investment. After CPEC's launch in 2013, Pakistan's growth rate increased from 4% to 5.5% in 2015 (Mehmood, 2019).

China and Pakistan developed a long-term strategy in 2013 that would run from 2014 to 2030. The establishment of a transport link between Gwadar and Xinjiang which also includes Gwadar Port are the two key elements of this plan (Haq and Farooq, 2017).

Pakistan and China inked a 43-year lease for the Gwadar port in addition to leasing 2,300 acres of land to China for the construction of the first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) Gwadar. If China employs the proposed CPEC route for its trade, shipping prices are expected to drop dramatically and transit time for trade is expected to drop by more than 10 days (Aqeel, 2016).

CPEC also holds promise from a sustainability perspective. This Project is expected to foster infrastructural as well as social development. Given China's rising status as a global power, CPEC aims to advance socio-economic growth, alleviate poverty, and contribute to sustainable development in Pakistan. It is expected that greater collaboration and better

governance in Pakistan will improve linkages between the two nations, leading to the growth of power and energy production infrastructure.

Opportunities for business and employment are also expected to improve, thereby elevating Pakistan's socio-economic status through the implementation of various projects. These include infrastructure development, energy production, and the founding of new industries.

These initiatives are likely to create new job opportunities and contribute to poverty alleviation. Technical and vocational training will also enhance the societal conditions in Pakistan by providing state-of-the-art technological training (Mahmood, Hussain, Safdar, and Tanchangya, 2019).

The affiliation between both these countries spans several decades which includes various forms of cultural exchanges related to literature, art, and education. Premier Li Keqiang stressed the value of promoting "mutual interaction through cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts" in his speech during his visit to Pakistan, one example of how cultural delegations from the two nations have interacted (Pakistan and China Diplomatic Relations – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

China and Pakistan have a requirement that both countries need to have an understanding of each other's traditions. There is a need for China and Pakistan require an understanding of both countries' traditions as well as language and culture which have close ties to development.

Intellectuals from both nations will be encouraged to distribute and translate high-caliber publications as well as take part in each other's book fairs. Additionally, China seeks to train 1,000 Chinese language teachers in Pakistan and offer 2,000 teaching posts to Pakistanis living in China. Additionally, research on different facets of CPEC will be encouraged.

The establishment of the "FM98 Pakistan-China Friendship Radio" Studio by China Radio International, the launch of the CCTV English News Channel and the International Documentary Channel as well as the Pakistan-China Small-sized Hydro Power Technology National Joint Research Center in Pakistan are all noteworthy projects (Wolf, 2016, p. 2).

Additional avenues through which CPEC will affect Pakistan socio-culturally include an increase in globalization, a rise in the prevalence of the Chinese language, and the expansion of Chinese products in the Pakistani market (Niazi, 2017).

Energy projects constitute a significant portion of CPEC investments in Pakistan. Interstate relations will also be impacted, with several countries expressing interest in joining the CPEC initiative. The visa-free access granted to Chinese citizens could also influence the religious landscape in Pakistan (Ghani et al, 2020). Another cultural avenue is media. China's master plan includes broadcasting Chinese programs on Pakistani television channels via Digital Television Terrestrial Multimedia Broadcasting.

Living standards for the population are expected to rise through increased employment opportunities. Basic amenities, such as banking, transportation, health, and education, will also be provided. People-to-people contact will be promoted, as will culture and tradition (Ghani et al, 2020).

Infrastructure was first popularized by Singer in 1951, demonstrating the importance of investment in infrastructure for national development. Infrastructure affects society from two perspectives: economic and social. Research indicates that a road network reduces poverty by promoting employment, facilitating trade and migration across

communities, and enhancing both human and physical output. The installation of industrial units in small towns—and the emergence of numerous new towns—represents a substantial structural transformation linked to the development of road connectivity (Zia et al., 2018).

Pakistan and China have long had cultural exchanges that go back to the Silk Road or even before. However, the modern cultural relationship was especially established when the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949.

The agreement on cultural cooperation between China and Pakistan, which was signed on March 24, 1965, was a significant turning point in the field. Notably, in May 1983, a cultural delegation from the Chinese government led by Mr. Zhu Muzhi, a former Chinese minister for culture, traveled to Pakistan. In November 1991, a different team traveled to Pakistan under the direction of Mr. Xu Wenbo, a former Chinese Minister for Culture (Survey on China-Pak Cultural Exchanges & Cooperation, 2020).

Pakistan's Board of Investment reports that foreign direct investment (FDI) fell from US\$3.7 billion in 2008–2009 to US\$0.82 billion in 2011–2012. Doors have been opened by CPEC for a consistent flow of FDI. According to a study from the State Bank of Pakistan, FDI inflows rose by 5% to US\$2.41 billion in 2016–2017 from US\$2.3 billion in 2015–2016. Chinese investment is mostly responsible for this surge.

Nation-building is seen as one a positive outcome of CPEC with this Project being seen as a step in the right direction for alleviating socio-economic marginalization, especially in Baluchistan, by creating employment opportunities.

Another aspect related to the socio-cultural impact on Pakistan is ecotourism under CPEC. The number of tourists to scenic spots has increased due to the development of CPEC. Transparency is also crucial for the success of CPEC (Ali, 2018).

Trust, solidarity and a growing political alliance between China and Pakistan are based on a variety of factors, such as proximity to India, security concerns, Pakistan's support for China's UN seat, Islamabad's role in easing China's isolation in the 1960s, and China's role as a bridge to the Muslim world. Regarding matters like Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and human rights abuses, Pakistan likewise supports China (Ali, 2017).

Regional development is also expected to improve due to CPEC. Factors like regional connectivity, diverse investment opportunities, tourism, people-to-people contact, industrial cooperation, and livelihood improvement will likely increase (Zhang .

Another significant impact of CPEC on infrastructure relates to agriculture. There are multiple opportunities within CPEC to increase exports to China, and for the full utilization of these opportunities, the government will need to play an instrumental role. Tourism is also another aspect, where the culture and norms of Pakistani people have the potential to attract Chinese tourists, and vice versa (e.g., the Great Wall of China, and the scenic beauty of Azad Kashmir).

Religious tourism, although less common due to Buddhism being relatively unfamiliar in Pakistan, still has potential, especially in locations like Taxila, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

There are over 22,000 Pakistani students enrolled in Chinese universities, and by some estimates, 60,000 Chinese students are studying in Pakistan. Notable institutions include Fudan University in China and the National University of Science and Technology in Pakistan (Best universities in China, 2021).

Chinese work ethics, dedication, and focus on career development are key indicators of the country's rapid growth and could influence Pakistan in a similar manner (Niazi, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

Chinese cultural norms, such as women in business and bike riding, could also influence Pakistani society. The influx of Chinese workers for CPEC projects is likely to affect Pakistani culture (Pakistan Academy of Competitive Exam, 2017). Given the religious differences between predominantly Islamic Pakistan and largely atheist China, some may view Chinese culture as having an adverse impact on Pakistani society (Sanaullah, 2019).

There has been a lack of attention given to cultural cooperation as compared to other aspects under CPEC. After the establishment of People's Republic of China, the trade and consumption of cultural products between the two countries have been relatively limited. For example, in 2016, the scale of bilateral cultural trade negligible (Jiqiong and Keyo, 2017).

Numerous bilateral cultural exchanges involving literature, education, information sharing, sports, youth issues, cultural relics, archives, publications, health, and women's issues have taken place between Beijing and Islamabad. Chinese art troupes have visited numerous Pakistani localities, where they have performed traditional instruments, dance, music, and acrobatics.

Trades have also taken place in the areas of handicrafts, art, and puppetry. Many literary works from both sides have been translated into each other's languages over the years. The two governments came to a special agreement to promote collaboration in the TV and film industries, and by the mid-1980s, both countries' TV networks were co-producing a number of TV series. In the realm of education, many hundreds of scholarships have been offered by China for Pakistani scholars and this can be vouched by the fact that currently more than 19000 students are studying in China (CPEC, 2021).

The development impetus provided by CPEC is aimed at improving impoverished regions of Pakistan through the establishment of essential infrastructure, including roads, trade conduits, and energy links. Through CPEC, it is expected that enhanced cultural exchanges will lead to a deeper understanding and appreciation between the people of Pakistan and China.

## **Recommendations**

### **Enhance Cultural and Educational Exchanges**

Given the imbalance between economic projects and cultural initiatives under CPEC, it is essential to institutionalize people-to-people cooperation. Expanding language programs, academic partnerships, and cultural forums can foster deeper mutual understanding and reduce cultural misperceptions between Pakistan and China.

### **Promote Inclusive and Context-Sensitive Development**

To ensure that socio-cultural impacts are broadly positive, CPEC-related projects should prioritize inclusivity and local participation. Particular attention is needed for marginalized regions such as Baluchistan and Gilgit-Baltistan, where development must align with community needs and cultural sensitivities.

### **Strengthen Governance, Transparency, and Sustainability**

Sustainable socio-cultural benefits depend on transparent governance and policies that balance modernization with cultural preservation. Integrating eco-tourism, media collaboration, and heritage protection within CPEC initiatives will help safeguard Pakistan's cultural identity while advancing regional connectivity.



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