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Infrastructure as a Tool of Nation-Building: Leadership Choices and National Cohesion under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor

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Abstract

In the contemporary era of globalization, large-scale infrastructure initiatives are increasingly framed not only as instruments of economic growth but also as mechanisms of nation-building and political consolidation. The CPEC is a flagship project of the BRI and offers a significant case for examining whether infrastructure can meaningfully contribute to national integration in a diverse and federal state like Pakistan. This paper investigates the extent to which leadership choices shape the integrative or divisive outcomes of mega-development projects. Adopting a political economy and leadership-oriented framework, the study argues that infrastructure alone does not automatically generate national cohesion; rather, its integrative potential depends on inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and participatory decision-making. The paper analyzes three interconnected dimensions: first, the strategic vision of political leadership in framing CPEC as a national project; second, the role of federal–provincial coordination in managing competing regional interests; and third, the impact of perceived economic inclusion or marginalization on political culture and identity politics. Drawing upon policy documents and secondary literature, the research identifies emerging patterns in which infrastructure-led development can either strengthen national unity or exacerbate regional grievances. While CPEC has contributed to enhanced connectivity and economic optimism, concerns regarding transparency, provincial equity, and local participation remain central to its long-term integrative capacity. The study concludes that infrastructure becomes a genuine tool of nation-building only when leadership prioritizes distributive justice, and political consensus. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on leadership, sustainable democracy, and national integration in South Asia.

Keywords: CPEC, Leadership, National Integration, Globalization, Distributive Equity.

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Background

The year 2013 proved to be a turning point for Pakistan as it put a solid groundwork in place for the official start of CPEC.

CPEC is considered a cornerstone project of the BRI. CPEC holds profound importance for both neighbors (Ritzinger, 2015). It was developed by Chinese think tanks in 2013, and was implemented in 2015 as a result of President Xi Jinping's historic official visit to Pakistan. The Corridor is deemed a premier economic route in South Asia as Gwadar which is a crucial point of connection in CPEC which connects to Xinjiang, was proposed as the largest deep-sea port as well as a main outward trading hub for China (Dent, 2016).

The CPEC is a meticulously designed corridor that runs from Xinjiang to Pakistan and consists of infrastructural networks, energy projects, and free trade zones (Shah, 2015). This Project is a component of the BRI initiative, which also includes the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt. This Project has been championed by President Xi Jinping, who has made it a cornerstone of both his domestic and foreign policy (Kennedy, 2015). The "One plus Four" model of cooperation has been formed by both nations, with CPEC acting as its central tenet and the Gwadar Port, industrial cooperation, and energy and transportation infrastructure serving as its supplementary quadrants (NDRC, 2017). Additionally, a Long-Term Plan for CPEC (2017-2030) has been developed, classifying projects as short-term until 2020, medium-term until 2030, and long-term until 2050.

The "core and radiation zone" is represented in the "One Belt, Three Axes, and Several Passages" that are contained by the dimensional architecture of CPEC.

Along with the main portion of the CPEC, which comprises Tumshuq city, Kashgar, Atushi City, and Akto County in Kizilsu Kirghiz in Xinjiang, One Belt also covers portions of Sindh, Punjab, KPK, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Baluchistan, and Gilgit-Baltistan. It also contains Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. The term "three axes" refers to three axes that connect, respectively, Lahore and Peshawar, Sukkur and Quetta, and Karachi and Gwadar. "Several passages" alludes to the plethora of trains and significant thoroughfares that link Islamabad, Karachi, and Gwadar.

In addition, CPEC is divided into five functional zones: The Xinjiang Foreign Economic Zone, the Northern Border Trade Logistics and Business Corridor & Ecological Reserve, the Eastern and Central Plain Economic Zone, the Western Logistics Corridor Business Zone, and the Southern Coastal Logistics Business Zone (Government of Pakistan, 2017).

CPEC's significance cannot be understated for both nations. It is hailed as a 'game changer' by Pakistani leadership (Giyani, 2016). A pivotal aspect of CPEC is its potential to redefine regional communication, enhancing cooperation and economic ties. This shift could allow Pakistan to pivot its economic and political attention to China instead of the USA and Europe. This transition is expected to fortify the multifaceted collaboration between the two countries, building upon their political rapport (Zhiqin and Yang, 2016).

For China, the CPEC is a conduit to stimulate development in its relatively underdeveloped Western Provinces, especially the Xinjiang province, while concurrently countering terrorism. China also hopes to strengthen Pakistan's internal stability through economic growth by implementing a number of projects, such as building gas and oil pipelines (Zhiqin and Yang, 2016). Additionally, by adopting the Strait of Hormuz route, China can sidestep the Malacca Dilemma, yielding savings in time, distance, and energy costs (Shaikh, Ji & Fan, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

An eclectic approach to theories has been used regarding the China Pakistan Economic Corridor which include soft power, complex interdependence and liberal institutionalism.

The concept of power constitutes a fundamental and central element in the study of international relations. and surviving without power is an inconceivable notion. Soft power is the capacity of a state or actor to change another's preference without using coercion, as opposed to hard power, which uses coercion (Tahir, 2022).

In his book "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power" American political scientist Joseph Nye proposed that "if a country wants other countries to do what the former wants [and] if they do it voluntarily without feeling any humiliation or without the use of force, it is called soft power." (Nye, 1990). He argues that soft power, unlike hard power, relies on the willingness to do rather than being forced to through coercion leading the way for mutual understanding and cooperation. Hard power is likened to the concept of a 'stick' and soft power to that of a magnet. (Barrech & Khan, 2023).

There are three sources of soft power according to Joseph Nye: its culture which is positively shown to the world, its political values (and its foreign policies (Nye, 2008).

1. Political Values: According to Joseph Nye (2008), political values are a key component that combine value and attraction
2. Culture: The political ideals of any state are supported by culture, both attracting and contributing significantly to the nation's impact.
3. Foreign Policies: The goal of foreign policy is to increase a nation's soft power. In the domestic and foreign contexts, foreign policy is a component of soft power.

The Birth of the Concept of Soft Power

Soft power, as a conceptual framework, can be traced back to early Chinese intellectual traditions. Sun Tzu, in his seminal work *The Art of War*, advanced the principle that the highest form of strategy lies in achieving victory without the use of force. He emphasized that effective leadership requires prudent decision-making and moral integrity to ensure the prosperity and security of the state (Dost Barrech, 2020). Contemporary scholars argue that the modern Chinese state has drawn upon this tradition, prioritizing peaceful development and mutually beneficial cooperation, particularly through initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Barrech & Khan, 2023).

The concept of soft power is also deeply intertwined with Confucianism. The teachings of Confucius emphasize values such as benevolence, harmony, and social order. Central to this philosophy is the idea that governance rooted in moral authority, rather than coercive force, is more effective in securing public allegiance and ensuring long-term stability (Barrech & Khan, 2023).

In the contemporary era, these philosophical underpinnings are reflected in China's global strategy, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, introduced by Xi Jinping in 2013. This initiative embodies elements of soft power by promoting economic connectivity, regional integration, and cooperative development across participating states.

By forming alliances with 150 member states, the BRI aims to expand connectivity throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe (World Bank, 2018). Through regional connectivity, win-win collaboration, and the adoption of a non-interference policy in the internal affairs of other states, China has been using its economic power to project its soft power (Yadira, 2023).

It can be argued that China is using soft power as a means to project itself through the BRI and through its cornerstone project of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor through which connectivity is being promoted through development with a 'win-win' mindset on both sides. China has also supported Pakistan in being a counterweight to India with which Pakistan has a conflict over Kashmir. China has been an 'all weather' friend to Pakistan and is also investing in Pakistan's infrastructure through CPEC (Nye, 1990) (Itteffaq, 2017).

Literature Review

For theories to understand these two countries relations as well as CPEC. Joseph S. Nye (1977) very succinctly differentiates between soft and hard power, with hard power comprising of coercion by a state to do its bidding whereas soft power relies on the willingness to do instead of coercion. With regards to the CPEC, China has used foreign policy as well as culture to promote CPEC through various initiatives. Hussain and Mehmood (2018) agree that the China has successfully used soft power to advance CPEC through various steps that included foreign investment and aid, cultural initiatives as well as opportunities for higher education in China and diplomatic support. Barrach and Khan (2023) in their article 'US-China Growing Competition in Soft Power', elaborate that Nye (1977) based the idea of his theory of soft power from Sun Tzu, a famous Chinese strategist whose concept of winning wars without resorting to a war itself points heavily towards the concept of soft power. Sun Tzu also pointed towards the importance of leadership adopting wise decisions and displaying moral excellence with Barrech and Khan (2023) further reiterating that through CPEC the Chinese government is doing promoting peaceful development, especially through the soft power approach. These authors go further in saying that Confucianism is also rooted in soft power with Confucianism with the ideology promoting harmony and benevolence.

Keohane and Nye introduced the theory of complex interdependence in the 1970s which espoused the idea that relations between states are becoming increasingly deep and complex. According to Joseph and Keohane there are three main characteristics of the theory of complex interdependence which include: avoidance of using military force, several channels of communications as well as the absence of hierarchy among issues. Ali (2020) add liberal institutionalism to these theories, adding that absolute gains can be achieved through using soft power and cooperation among countries.

To understand China Pakistan Economic Corridor at its present, it is crucial to look at China and Pakistan relations. Hunt (1984) writes that through the Silk Route, China established trading ties with modern-day Kashmir during the Han Dynasty. Butt (2007) adds to this and reiterates that as early as 1C.E saw interactions between Pakistan and China with Chinese relics discovered in the Indus Valley regions of Hyderabad and Bhambore.). Furthermore, Chaudri (1970) adds that Mughal and Afghan rulers in the subcontinent furthered the commercial ties between China and present- day Pakistan. Zaidi (2004) writes that the China filled the vacuum as a tactical partner that was left by Pakistan's long-standing ally. Zahid Hussain in his book 'No Win War' (2021) reiterates this fact that the changed dynamics in Pakistan-United States relations was especially apparent after Osama bin Laden was killed Abbottabad without the knowledge of Pakistan by US Special Marine Forces in 2011, after which Pakistan was accused by the United States of harboring

terrorists. Siddique (2014) mentions in his article that the relations between Pakistan and China are described quite eloquently with phrases such as “deeper than the oceans” and “sweeter than honey” used to describe both countries’ relations with each other. What is interesting to note is the Siddique (2014) goes further, in which he lists the reasons for such cordial relations between Pakistan and China. These include being untied in the fight against terrorism countering of Indian threat, achieving self-reliance for Pakistan through transferring of military technology and fourth is that Pakistan considers China “an all-weather friend”. Ghulam Ali (2016) brilliantly covers in depth China Pakistan relations from 1950-2015 including Chinese premier Xi Jinping’ landmark visit to Pakistan which resulted in the signing of 51 MOUs establishing the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. The writer can be regarded as one of the few Pakistani authors who has produced a book specifically on China-Pakistan relations. Sattar (2005) writes in his book “Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: A Concise History:1947-2005” that Pakistan was one of the first countries globally to recognize China in 1950 and relations remained amicable and on an even level, even though Pakistan criticized communism (Sattar &Shahi, 2007). M. Zaki (2015) in his chapter in the ‘Handbook of Pakistan- China Relations’ published by Pakistan- China Institute, says that Pakistan and China enjoy a unique partnership even though we have different cultures, social systems and language barriers. Zhang Ghengli who was the ambassador of China to Pakistan in 1996 in his address at the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs reiterated that the Sino-Pakistan relationship has endured as well as both countries having supported each other against hegemonies and power politics as well as having mutually beneficial and reciprocal cooperation. Rizvi (2015) says that by fostering a more structured, upgraded, and need-based contact for socioeconomic, industrial, energy, and trade development, CPEC acknowledges the new realities of international and regional affairs. Rumi Aoyama’s article “One Belt-One Road: China’s New Global Strategy” (2016) in the Journal of Contemporary Asia Studies stresses on the fact that China wants to concentrate its investment in 15 harbor cities through the Belt and Road Initiative’s 21st Maritime Silk Road. Arafat (2017) in the working paper “Challenges and Solutions in building CPEC- a flagship of BRI” says the BRI consists of six major economic corridors including CPEC and spans 66 countries in Africa, Asia and America. Johnson (2016) of the Centre for Strategic and Regional Studies furthers this by contending that the BRI consists of 3 billion individuals and 33% of the world’s GDP.

In his book "The China- Pakistan Axis- Asia's New Geopolitics," Andrew Small argues that relations between China and Pakistan have been "remarkably resilient" since their inception, serving as Beijing's backdoor channel during its diplomatic exile and the front line in its conflicts with the Soviet Union during the latter stages of the Cold War. Pakistan also played a crucial role in China's transformation from a regional to a global power (Small, 2015).

In the article “One Belt, One Road; Does China Pakistan Economic Corridor benefit for Pakistan’s Economy?” the authors say that China has consistently in terms of imports and exports with mutual links being established (Sahib, Irshad, Xin & Arshad, 2015) Since both countries' first bilateral long-term trade agreement was signed in January 1963, there has been reciprocal trade and economic ties between the two countries.2014 (Ministry of Finance) According to Muhammad and Qi, Pakistan and China inked a free trade agreement in 2006; it went into force in 2007 and increased total trade between the two nations from US\$ 3.5 billion in 2006 to US\$ 14.3 billion in 2013). (Muhammad and Qi, 2015). Malik (2019) emphasizes that the results of CPEC are promising and are contributing to a vibrant and sustainable economy. According to Ali et al. (2017), CPEC will raise the economic standing and level of living of the Pakistani population.

Small (2015) says that Pakistan needs to overcome its economic development energy and social problems while China seeks to expand its periphery of influence, secure future supply of energy and trade and consolidate its global presence. According to the Center of Excellence's research, CPEC is increasing the local human resource's capacity in addition to giving the local community meaningful employment. This working paper has found that the six CPEC-related road infrastructure projects have generated 52,000 direct jobs, with an average employment ratio of Chinese to Pakistan of 1:18. These six road projects include the Peshawar-Karachi Motorway and the Upgrading of DI Khan Phase 1-V. (Ministry of Planning Development and Reform, 2018). The Sustainable Development Policy Institute estimates that CPEC will boost GDP growth by 1.5% over the following three years (Ramay, 2018). Khan et al (2023) emphasize that Gwadar has the potential to boost both Pakistan and China's economies.

Abid and Ashfaq (2015) reiterate that Chinese investment will benefit Pakistan by increasing Pakistan's Gross Domestic Product by \$274 billion GDP over 15 years as well as alleviate the energy crisis which will increase Pakistan's GDP growth rate by 2 percent. At the 32nd Annual General Meeting and Conference in 2016, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics stated that investments in transportation and infrastructure would also result in low-cost access to both domestic and international markets, boosting trade as well as investment and productivity (Ali, Rasheed, Muhammad & Yousaf, 2017).

Muhammad et al (2016) and Marc (2020) emphasize in their writings that the uniqueness of the Pakistan and China's friendship is that there is a lack of cost-benefit analysis in the traditional sense which can especially be seen from the language used to describe both countries' strategic relationship. Shi Zhiqin of Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre for Global Policy, writes that for China, the areas of security and economics are closely interlinked with one improving the other. China is aiming to stabilize its western part through economic development and investment in Pakistan, therefore strengthening Pakistan's economy through investments in infrastructure projects and construction of gas and oil pipelines. China anticipates that this will lead to a certain level of stability in Pakistan and a decrease in extremism in Xinjiang (Zhiqin and Yang, 2016). According to the Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, a Norwegian think tank in its policy brief outlines that there are four main pillars which are: economic cooperation, geo strategic concerns, energy security concerns and internal security concerns.

One of the major challenges faced by the China and Pakistan in their 70-year friendship is the lack of security and current militancy in the South Asian region. Due to its "One China Policy," China sees domestic terrorism and separatist movements as dangers to its national security. These include threats from the militant Uighurs of the Turkic-speaking ethnic majority in China's Xinjiang province, known as ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement). Xu, Fletcher & Bajoria, (2014). There is concern that the ETIM, which is linked to both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban and poses a security danger to both China and Pakistan, is wreaking havoc on the restive and underdeveloped Xinjiang province from safe havens in North Waziristan, Pakistan. With Uighur militancy showing an increase over the past seven years, China has increasing fears that the ETIM is a major threat targeting Chinese interests within Pakistan especially CPEC. (Elahi, 2015). Therefore, China has sought to increase its security presence as well as economic development in Xinjiang (Markey and West, 2017).

CPEC also passes across the volatile province of Baluchistan as well as Gilgit-Baltistan. Baluchistan has witnessed a recurring conflict in this province which has hindered development and stability in Baluchistan -it is the least developed of all Pakistan's four provinces (Alam, 2015).

Abid and Ashfaq (2015) write that many political parties have opposed CPEC, for example Baluch nationalists as well as ANP, even though there have been assurances by the government that all provinces will benefit. The Baluch militants, according to The Economist, do not want to see Baluchistan prosper unless it wins independence because they believe that if Gwadar grows, outsiders may move in and further isolate Baluchistan by tipping the demographic scales against the Baluchs.

According to Sial (2014), another factor is that the Eastern Alignment will not pass through the majority of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. This is because the political parties in KP are worried that the benefits of CPEC will primarily benefit Punjab and that the new alignment will deprive the respective provinces of opportunities for employment and development.

There is an opinion that while China will culturally impact Pakistan through CPEC there is also an opinion that the government is not protecting the interests and rights of the people and that there is utilization of local financing for CPEC projects, rather than Chinese or foreign investment and funding (Raza, 2016). However, as The Diplomat writes that is not the case/ first off, friendship between Pakistan and China is based on mutual trust. Second, Pakistan is more dependent on China than the other way around according to The Diplomat. The third reason is that Pakistan has a political system and institutional framework that is mostly independent (Shah, 2018).

Materials and Methods

Digital databases such as JSTOR ProQuest, Emerald and Science Direct as well as Taylor and Francis have been consulted in the preparation of this thesis. Various books, journal and think tank articles have also been referred for this synopsis.

Results and Discussion

Internal Politics of Pakistan and CPEC

CPEC has been portrayed as a major boost for Pakistan that will increase employment while alleviating the energy crisis through development of infrastructure and in turn make it an economic hub in South Asia. (Akhter 2018).

The success of CPEC is reliant upon internal stability as well as unity among the provinces of Pakistan. Even though the Pakistani government has stressed that this is a federal project that seeks to benefit the entire nation, the country's outer provinces have raised concerns about the unfair distribution of resources. Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have voiced their concerns that Punjab province is benefitting from with the greatest share of the infrastructure project and Punjab dominance regarding CPEC. Official statistics show that the majority of the CPEC projects, out of the total of 330 projects, 176 are in Punjab with only eight projects being allocated to Baluchistan (Tribune, 2016), (Mengal 2016).

Furthermore, Pakistani provinces such as KPK and Baluchistan and political parties alike have voiced serious reservations about the Eastern and Western route alignment and have stressed that the current routes of CPEC will most cater to Punjab. The political parties are supporting the Western route with the view that it will benefit the less developed and backward Western route (Kasi 2015).

A major role of China is to increase the level of economic development in Baluchistan. The People's Republic of China's aim is that the promotion of CPEC will lead to increased economic development and less prone to insurgency infiltration. China also hopes, that through leveraging

the region of Xianjing, to increase the stability of the borders between Pakistan, China and Afghanistan (Shi and Lu 2016).

There is a prominent perception in Baluchistan especially from the separatists that they are excluded in their province's development with a strong perception that concurs that Chinese are the most who benefit from CPEC Projects in Baluchistan. Secondly, the movement of laborers from Punjab and Sindh has increased the Baluchis' fear that demographic shifts may tip the scales of political and economic power against them.

There have been close to 60 Chinese personnel being killed in four years from 2021 to 2025 that have targeted workers and infrastructure with Baluchi separatist groups especially the Baluchistan Liberation Army BLA targeting Chinese workers (GIS, 2026).

To ensure the success of CPEC, Chinese are reliant on the Pakistani military. The reliance extends to the Pakistan Army for fighting insurgency in the restive regions in and around Pakistan around the border region of Ulghar province. The Chinese reliance also extends to the Pakistani military that the protection of the Chinese personnel and investments. The division size special force has also been allocated by the Pakistan Army to safeguard the CPEC Project with 15,000 military personnel being deployed as under the umbrella of Maritime Security Force (MSF) and Special Security Division (SSD)), to safeguard projects (Boon & Ong 2020) (Raza, 2017).

The Strategic Importance of Gwadar and its Situation in Present Day

Gwadar holds strategic importance, being situated around 635 kilometers west of Pakistan's main seaport, as well as being situated on the Makran coast of the Arabian Sea in the province of Baluchistan. Its strategic importance has increased manifold due to being a main focus of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor since it served as the primary route connecting Central Asia and Europe.

If strategic importance is especially relevant as China would benefit from energy security as it will be able to bypass the Strait of Malacca and save money and time when using shipping lanes. (ul Amin, 2021) (Bhutta 2015)

Conclusions and Recommendations

CPEC's significance, not just as an economic corridor but as a key player in the larger game of international diplomacy and politics.

The conception of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) can be traced to the longstanding and cordial relations between the two neighboring states. This partnership, shaped by converging strategic interests and shared developmental aspirations, has culminated in an ambitious initiative with the potential to transform the regional geopolitical landscape.

China's emergence as a major global economic power in the late twentieth century further reinforced its inclination to expand infrastructure connectivity with surrounding regions, driven in part by broader geostrategic considerations. Within this context, CPEC represents a significant extension of China's outward economic and strategic engagement.

However, the trajectory of CPEC is characterized by multiple complexities. While the corridor promises substantial economic benefits, it also serves as a strategic instrument aimed at addressing regional instability, particularly in light of unrest in areas such as Xinjiang. Consequently, the security dimension of CPEC remains central to understanding its broader significance.

At the domestic level, concerns persist among Pakistan's provinces regarding the equitable distribution of CPEC-related benefits, with apprehensions that the initiative may disproportionately favor Punjab. These internal dynamics, combined with shifting regional geopolitics, highlight CPEC's importance not merely as an economic project but as a critical component of contemporary international diplomacy and strategic politics.

Conflict of Interest

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