

CPEC: Enhancing Pakistan-China Cultural Exchange

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Introduction

With a massive network of motorways, railways, hydropower, and developmental projects, the \$60 billion worth China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is set to give a new dimension to Pakistan's economy and development in the coming years. Connecting Pakistan's deep-sea Gwadar Port with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China, CPEC is expected to change the face of regional economic integration. In the most recent interaction the matter of economic zones under CPEC was discussed. KPK favors Rashakai as a location instead of Hattar. Baluchistan believes most of its area could be declared an economic zone. There seem to be two views—selected economic zones or new mini cities in selected locations.

It was decided that the Bhasha Dam project would not be part of CPEC and the Karachi Circular Road Project has also not been included. All provinces have to do considerable homework to craft carefully considered and feasible projects. Pakistan needs to safeguard its interests to the maximum and as a model the Chinese-Malaysian agreements may be studied.

Other than India's opposition to the project, the reaction toward Xi's economic corridor has so far been outwardly positive. Majority policymakers in Pakistan see the CPEC as an effective tool in improving Pakistan's economy with enhanced investment, trade and economic cooperation.

From the perspective of the BRI, Southeast Asia has become a place of prominence for China. The China-Pakistan relationship goes back decades. Pakistan and China have always maintained some degree of cultural exchange through art, literature and education. In the past half a decade, however, there has been a significant increase in the number of visits exchanged by cultural delegations from both countries. This is because both countries realize a critical part of furthering CPEC is also promoting dialogue between Pakistan and China. During his address to the Senate of Pakistan in 2013, the Chinese Premier Keqiang Li said, "It is necessary to engage citizens of both Pakistan and China in mutual interaction through cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts."

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Historically, ancient trade routes between the East and the West have led the development and transfer of culture, religion and art. Along with goods, trade routes have also helped in the exchange of ideas and languages. The ancient Silk Road, which connected China and India on the east with the Roman world on the west, is known to have advanced cultural activity substantially between different civilizations and regions. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism spread along the Silk Road as a consequence of these interactions.

The southern route of the Silk Road, which is now being revived as part of CPEC, covers the north-western parts of Pakistan and its revival is predicted to have a significant impact on Pakistan's socio-cultural condition.

This paper will focus on the cultural dimension of CPEC. It will explore the future prospects of Pak-China people-to-people contacts, and the opportunities likely to be created with enhanced multifaceted human interaction between Pakistan and China. It will also consider the risks associated with extensive cultural exchange in an attempt to examine the stakes of the multi-billion dollar project from a cultural angle.

Enhancement of Pakistan-China People-to-People Contact

In opening new channels to increased interaction with China, CPEC has been portrayed by several Pakistani analysts as a one-stop solution for all of Pakistan's ills. Cultural activities have received a substantial boost under CPEC with residents getting better opportunities to showcase their talents to an international audience. The way in which governments of Pakistan and China have attempted to close the gap between the two diverse cultures is important to examine.

Official Visits

Following the 1960s, China and Pakistan signed several border and air agreements opening doors for greater travel between the two countries. Since then the Pakistani and Chinese heads of governments have made frequent visits to each other's countries. President Asif Ali Zardari made a total of nine visits to China during his five years in office. The timing of these visits has also been an important indicator of the way the China-Pakistan relationship has evolved overtime.

In May 2013, following Nawaz Sharif's victory in the national elections, Premier Li Keqiang met with Sharif when he had not yet been sworn in as Prime Minister. China was also the first country Sharif visited on his tour as Prime Minister in July 2013. These visits eventually led to several agreements between the two countries on economic cooperation, enhancement of bilateral trade and promotion of investment.

The Chinese Premier's May 2013 visit to Pakistan led to the two sides signing eleven agreements covering economic and technical cooperation, border management systems, border posts, maritime

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cooperation and the plan for CPEC. Following this, PM Sharif's July 2013 visit to China resulted in the issuance of the "Common Vision for Deepening China-Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Friendship in the New Era". The MoU calling for development on the CPEC was also signed during one of such visits by the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. It proposed the building of road, railway and air links between the Chinese city of Kashgar and the Gwadar port.

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cultural ties between Pakistan and China has also been a significant part of the CPEC project.

Premier Li on his May 2013 visit signed several cooperation documents that covered enhancing cultural relations between the two countries. He also made the promise to send 1000 teachers to Pakistan to teach Chinese. Additionally, China extended scholarships to Pakistani students seeking higher education. The Chinese PM further revealed China was planning to build a Cultural Centre in Islamabad. More youth delegations were also promised to be encouraged to exchange visits, and invite Chinese cultural troupes to Pakistan.

The Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Sun Weidong, told a group of journalists in Islamabad, in December 2013, that China intends to keep the tradition of high-level exchanges between the two countries alive and going.

Tourism

Pakistan has some of the highest mountains in the world, it is highly rich in landscape, glaciers, lakes, and valleys, and also boasts another five peaks above 8,000 meters, in addition to the more than 50 other mountains over 7,000 meters. Once CPEC is operational Pakistan is sure to attract mountaineers from all over the world. Just last year, 2.5 million tourists both domestic and international travelled to Pakistan's northern areas.

Moreover, owing to its strategic location Pakistan can also benefit from the increased tourist traffic between Nepal and China, since Chinese tourists from Nepal can enter into the northern areas of Pakistan, especially in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) through Tibet, and Jammu and Kashmir.

The territories of GB have tremendous potential because of their strategic position, beautiful landscape and impressive skylines. GB is considered a highly attractive region for mountaineers, since it is home to five of the 'eight-thousands' (peaks above 8,000 meters), as well as more than 50 mountains over 7,000 meters. It also has the world's second highest peak K2, and the Nanga Parbat.

Additionally, the planned expansion of GB airport and the start of a direct flight between GB and Khatmandu is also likely to attract not only the Chinese but tourists from other countries as well. A bus service is working from the Chinese border to GB. Transportation for other Chinese cities like Kashgar and Urumqi can also be made available under CPEC. Urumqi is typically the first stop for goods coming from Central Asia to China, as majority people from Pakistan, including businessmen, visit Xinjiang daily.

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More recently, the CPEC Cultural Caravan announced its two-week long activities to promote and explore the diversity within Pakistan, and to help map out the cultural diversities especially at the China-Gilgit Baltistan border. With great artistic interaction, the mega

cultural showcasing was meant to help the two populations appreciate the similarities and unique differences between the cultures of both countries. According to reports, anthropologists and writers were also invited on the journey to write about their individual experiences in the Caravan and to document the cultural and creative industries along the silk route. Musical concerts and cultural dance performances were also planned and organized. The main idea of this project was to encourage cultural exchange and discourse not only between but also within the two countries, and to promote the historical Silk Route.

Language Barrier

The chief stumbling block in intensifying Pak-China cultural interactions is the language barrier. Presently both countries are taking joint measures to set up study centers to teach Urdu and Chinese to their respective populations.

Chinese Study Centers have been set up in the Government College University (GCU) in Lahore, COMSATS in Islamabad and the Peshawar University. Even as early as 2012, President Zardari announced that Chinese had been introduced as an optional subject in schools located in Sindh.

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According to Misbah Rasheed, a Chinese language instructor at the Islamabad-based National University of Modern Languages (NUML): "In the past few years – mainly after the announcement of the CPEC project in 2015 – there has been an unprecedented surge in the number of students wanting to learn Chinese".

In April 2005, the Confucius Institute in Islamabad at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) was set up to promote the Chinese language and culture. According to reports, enrolment has nearly doubled in recent years; this year, 460 students were admitted into the program. The institute's department hosts a number of cultural events as well, including a 'Chinese Lantern Festival' and 'Monkey year'. In 2010, the institute launched two Chinese-language radio stations which broadcast in Islamabad (FM 104.6) and Lahore (FM 95).

Governments of both countries have focused on their student populations as a means to advance cultural exchange. Increased demand for learning Chinese has resulted in several Confucius Institutes opening in different parts of the country. Presently, there are four operational institutes located in Islamabad (NUML), Faisalabad (Agriculture University), Lahore (Punjab University) and Karachi (University of Karachi). Another institute is reportedly also under construction in Gilgit.

Moreover, the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) located in Sukkur has also established an Executive Development Centre (EDC) where over 20 students are learning the Chinese language as part of the Institute's first batch. In addition, the Shah Abdul Latif University

(SALU) in Khairpur has also established a Chinese Language learning center.

According to a senior official of the Pakistani Embassy, about 2,500 new Pakistani students were enrolled in Chinese universities this year, taking the total number of Pakistani students in China to 22,000. With so many students studying in Chinese universities, China is now the largest foreign destination for Pakistani students.

Both countries realize that in order to benefit fully from development under CPEC, people-to-people contacts must also be strengthened. The number of students seeking education in China is likely to only increase with the popularization of the Chinese language.

CPEC: Socio-cultural Impact

The CPEC agreement, in its current form, is shrouded in secrecy. Owing to the lack of transparency around the project, there are suspicions that the agreement may be severely skewed in favor of China. From a cultural perspective there are two major concerns: first, the expansion of the Chinese language may threaten Urdu's dominance in the region; and, second, the influence of Chinese norms and values on Pakistan's societal structure may corrupt the existing system.

Language Concerns

In Islamabad, where Chinese visitors were rarely seen before 2014, their prominence is increasing. They now outnumber other foreigners. Added to that, Pakistan's first-ever Chinese-language newspaper, Huashang, has also been recently launched. Sensing China's growing power, the Chinese language is getting a lot of attention and a large number of students have signed up to learn the language in Pakistani universities and study centers. This is also so they may become eligible for job opportunities in relation to CPEC.

Some observers are worried that after English, Chinese may be an added and an even bigger threat to Urdu's status and prominence in Pakistan.

Pakistan has a multi-cultural and multi-lingual past. It has a rich heritage after having absorbed several foreign influences including Arabic, Turkish, Iranian, Greek and Indian. Some observers are worried that after English, Chinese may be an added and an even bigger threat to Urdu's status and prominence in Pakistan.

Exchange of values

Regarding the incident involving the brutal murder of two Chinese nationals in Baluchistan, a meeting at the interior ministry uncovered that the visitors were actually preachers and not teachers, as had been reported since their abduction in May this year.

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The two slain Chinese nationals had misused their visas and engaged in missionary activities. China's Foreign Ministry later said that they will work with Pakistan on this issue and reiterated that its nationals who visit Pakistan should respect the laws and regulations of the country. Islamabad has also since then revealed its decision to tighten the visa regime for Chinese nationals.

The Silk Road is known to have led to the spread of Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam. With the revival of the ancient Silk Route under CPEC, it is feared that Pakistan's religious society may become influenced by Chinese secular norms and values.

China and Pakistan have starkly different cultural notions and practices. China describes itself as a socialist country with Confucian norms and its cultural life is based on Buddhism and atheism, while Pakistani culture is based on strictly Islamic values. The possible impact of Chinese values and beliefs on Pakistan's social fabric is a matter of concern for many Pakistanis.

Conclusion

Since it was formally launched in 2015, both Pakistan and China are working to eliminate or at least minimize the hurdles that remain to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC is unlikely to come to fruition in either the short or medium terms. In order for it to prosper and reach its potential fully China and Pakistan must, along with offering economic support, invest in strengthening cultural ties and increasing people-to-people interaction overtime.

Running businesses in unfamiliar cultures with different practices and

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ways of communication can result in misunderstandings and costly lags that may even cause important projects to run aground. For Chinese corporations investing in Pakistan, an understanding of the local culture and norms is significant. Consequently, owing to its stakes in the project, Pakistan in particular has a job on its hands. Dealing with the slow and limited nature of China-Pakistan people-to-people interactions is significant in order for Pakistan to truly benefit from CPEC.

The governments of China and Pakistan have initiated several important measures to increase awareness in their respective populations regarding the difference in cultures, social lives and business environments across China and Pakistan. Whether it is with enhancing official visits, investing in the tourism industry or attempting to close the gap by addressing the language barrier, governments of both countries are invested in making cultural cooperation an important part of the project.

Physical, commercial and cultural connectivity between Pakistan and China will also inevitably increase under the CPEC as the project itself aims to build a network of rail and road connections between the two countries.

Even though concerns have been voiced regarding the long-term implications of an increased Chinese influence in Pakistan, CPEC is largely viewed as a potential game changer that could boost economic growth and inject prosperity into Pakistan's frayed socio-economic fabric.