



China-Pakistan Educational and Cultural Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative has increased the focus on cultural and educational cooperation between Pakistan and China. As the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a key component of the initiative, both countries have sought to diversify their bilateral relationship by promoting cultural and educational exchange. China has sponsored various institutes in Pakistan to teach Chinese Confucianism, language, and culture. Despite Pakistan's openness to interacting with foreign cultures, certain cultural pockets within the country, specifically in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, may present challenges in terms of cultural exchange. The ongoing global pandemic has temporarily hindered the implementation of mutual understanding through cultural and educational exchange, but both nations remain committed to resuming these activities in the future. Higher education and cultural tourism have been identified as areas of potential cooperation that can enhance not only public diplomacy but also foster people-to-people contact. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, provides a valuable opportunity to develop these areas of cooperation further.

Keywords: the Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC, bilateral relationship, education

I. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a significant shift in the global economic and cultural landscape, with the Chinese government's vision of establishing cultural corridors across participating states as a driving force behind the economic collaboration. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) serves as a pioneering model of BRI, providing a testing ground for the examination of educational and cultural cooperation between China and Pakistan. As the flagship project of BRI, CPEC has not only provided a tremendous economic opportunity for Pakistan but has also made a substantial contribution to building education and cultural linkages between China, Pakistan, and beyond.

The BRI offers Pakistan the chance to link itself with the larger community of nations and to build stronger bonds among cultures, fostering a sense of convergence with nations and cultures across the world. Through various initiatives under CPEC, Pakistan and China have collaborated to build stronger education and cultural ties, serving as a blueprint for future engagements with other nations. These initiatives include establishing education linkages at the level of training, universities, think tanks, language institutions, and Confucius institutes' collaboration across Pakistan. The Chinese approach to engaging with foreign governments is characterized by a dynamic and moralistic approach, focusing on being perceived as an equal partner rather than an imperial economic power. This approach is reflected in China's willingness to grant autonomy to the states in which it intends to invest, as well as its reluctance to impose conditions unilaterally. The CPEC, as the flagship project of BRI, serves as a prime example of this approach in practice. The groundwork for CPEC was laid in the 1990s, as both Chinese and Pakistani authorities recognized the potential for a multidimensional economic corridor connecting China with the Arabian sea via the Karakoram Highway. Subsequently, initiatives under BRI were incorporated and implemented on the key component of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, officially launched in April 2015 during President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan. Pakistan's energy deficit served as a catalyst for prioritizing the generation of electricity for households and industries, ultimately increasing the overall cost of the project to a staggering 46 billion USD. To accommodate this, both China and Pakistan mutually agreed to extend the planned timeline for the execution of CPEC to 2030, referred to as the Long-Term Plan, which commenced in 2017.

With the realization of positive dividends from CPEC, China and Pakistan began to explore other broader areas of cooperation under the second phase of CPEC. The importance of culture and education was incorporated in this phase, following multiple agreements of cultural and educational exchange. However, this cooperation was impeded by the Covid-19 pandemic, despite many Pakistani students already enrolled in Chinese institutes, the number could not be increased during the last three years.

This paper aims to shed detailed light on the cultural and educational exchange between China and Pakistan under CPEC. It analyzes the prospects for bilateral exchange between the two partners, where they can enhance public diplomacy and people-to-people contact through higher education and cultural tourism. Furthermore, it examines the challenges and opportunities presented by the cultural and educational cooperation under the BRI, drawing on the experiences of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a case study.

II. Background on China-Pakistan educational and cultural cooperation

The diplomatic relationship between China and Pakistan goes back to the 1950s. Still, the diversification of the bilateral relationship is growing with the passage of time especially since this has gained momentum at the advent of the 21st century. This was also the time when China officially joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as an important member of the grouping and the opening and reform period came to a solid and successful culmination. It was the period when Pakistan was tilting towards the west and joined the global war on terror and faced the aftermath of it in terms of terrorism and a huge influx of Afghan refugees. Pakistan was facing internal and external challenges where China was the main source of comfort and partner that has helped Pakistan and trust with one of the largest foreign direct investments in CPEC. This project was a morale booster and supporter to Pakistan alleviating its global stature.

History has witnessed the fact that China and Pakistan have stood together with each other on multiple levels Chairman Mao deepened the relationship with Pakistan by instructing his Foreign Minister to develop bilateral relationships.^[1] The meeting between the apex leadership of China and Pakistan at Bandung in 1955 and the border treaty in 1963 gave impetus to mutual understanding. It is worth mentioning here that China was virtually disconnected from the world due to the crisis in Taiwan Strait yet Pakistan became the first non-communist country to begin commercial flight operations in China. China began using Pakistan as a transit corridor for overseas flights, which manifested the first step toward people-to-people contact. When Pakistan recognized Beijing's core tenet of the One China Policy and denounced the Two China policy of the US in 1965, China has been managing Pakistan in high esteem and regard.^[2]

China's unwavering support for Pakistan during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan conflict served as a significant trigger in the strengthening of these ties. After the war, China's reputation grew significantly, which had a good effect on Pakistani psychology. Creating the Friendship or Karakoram Highway in 1966, which connected Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan with the Xinjiang area of China, was another significant stepping stone in developing the ties. Today, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor uses this highway as its major route (CPEC).^[3] Between 1955 and 1965, a decade of gradual efforts that built confidence put the two nations on the verge of cooperation. It was upgraded to "China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative cooperation and establishing a closer Pakistan-China community of shared future in the new era" by the end of 2018. This development demonstrates the relationship's sustained rising trend over the past 70 years.^[4]

Both nations exhibit not just a similarity of interests but also a sincere willingness to deepen this alliance. While China refers to it as its top priority, Pakistan views its relationship with China as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Their unwavering support for one another on important matters of national concern demonstrates how much trust they share.^[5]

China's approach to the BRI does not just emphasize its economic might but also its cultural influence. From the perspective of history, the Empire of the Silk Road had its cultural realm of control and transportation to the farthest frontier territories to obtain commercial benefits. Trade links with South Asia and Central Asia connect China's western region. That demonstrates the region's strong social and cultural interchange.^[6] Through tributaries, several nations in this circle would have established social and commercial ties with China. According to Yu Gong, the ancient Silk Road civilization included Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, among its neighbors. Since ancient times, the countries and cultures along the Silk Road have retained their individuality.^[7]

The Chinese BRI initiative's fifth main objective is people-to-people bonds. This process of interpersonal connection is crucial to the success of any geo-economics endeavor. It will result in connectivity, multilateral collaboration, and infrastructure development along the BRI routes. The benefits of progress in ideas, information, skills, technology, and the economy are certain to result in improved attitudes. In addition, China would give Pakistani students access to various educational options. The new generation will find this stimulation incredibly appealing, but it will instill Chinese values and rapid advancement in their minds.^[8]

People-to-people interactions lasting for so long would have a tremendous sociocultural impact and alter Pakistani society's way of thinking once it saw the advantages of Chinese work culture and Confucian virtues. The CPEC's sociocultural consequences are virtually never mentioned. China and Pakistan both practice very distinct religions, customs, and conventions.^[9] Except for humans, hardly a single feature of religion is the same. The CPEC project would have sociocultural repercussions in the North, East, West, and South areas through which it travels. Chinese people adhere to Confucian ideas fervently and are models of consistency, discipline, and a goal-oriented mindset. Hierarchy, respect for authority, work ethics, and family values are necessary for effective management. Chinese people have won tranquility and complete growth via these values.^[10]

III. Challenges of China-Pakistan educational and cultural cooperation under the BRI

Cultural cooperation and exchange with overseas cultures have faced several challenges. On one side, it offers fluidity and a tendency for assimilation, yielding positive results. In contrast, academics consider it as a cultural influencing factor that might alter the organic outlook. The culture of Pakistan has already been influenced by English in terms of language, administration, and societal norms due to colonial history. Yet, in a sociocultural context, Pakistan was not

on the weaker end and possessed a distinct culture of ethics, norms, values, and traditions that are deeply rooted and cannot be changed by another country or ideology. The pattern of cultural influence is usually studied under the pretext of cultural imperialism, which claims that the stronger culture influences the weaker culture implying underdeveloped economic conditions of a cultural entity are prone to adopt a new way of life, values, and norms of economically developed cultural entities.

The study of post-colonialism suggests that urban centers of Pakistan are largely influenced by English culture, but rural areas remain intact in their cultural roots. The tribal system in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, while the feudal system in Sindh, is a rigid system with little influence on overseas cultures. They do not allow modernization and transformation in their core values and traditions. Similarly, these cultures are likely resistant to Chinese culture due to their inherent rigidity. It presents a massive challenge for cultural exchange between China and Pakistan because both cultures have few areas of convergence.

The socio-cultural context of Pakistan and China is a relatively new subject, especially under the CPEC. The dynamics of culture are the least debated and need open discussion in academia and policy. Religion is a vital component of Pakistani culture which shares no common aspect and practice with Chinese religious norms. On ideology, China is a Socialist country, whereby the ideology of socialism is a critical mismatch across Pakistan rendering sociocultural implications. However, this does not influence any change in the cooperation over the years and there has been a deep-rooted classical friendship that exists beyond these challenges.

Getting deep into the culture, China is deeply influenced by Confucian norms rooted in Buddhism and Atheism. Being a socialist country, it follows socialism as a political philosophy advocating ownership of the community and the state's role in commercial aspects of life. Confucianism, being a religious ideology, is a code of life that optimizes consistency, discipline, and a result-yielding approach toward life. This code further illustrates harmony, hierarchy, work ethics, and respect for authority which serves as a constitution of management and balance in life. This political and religious hierarchy, which collectively forms Chinese culture, enabled China to achieve social order and political and economic development.^[11]

There is another bright distinction between both cultures. Pakistani culture is made of multiple cultures due to the influx of Muslims into the subcontinent from multiple regions, whereby Chinese culture remains has not been influenced by another foreign culture due to its distinct uniqueness.

The culture where Pakistan is located in geographical location has made it to get influence the multiple races i.e., Turks, Mongols, Arabs, Persians, Turks, and Huns, whereby their cultures were alternatively influenced by the subcontinent's culture. On the contrary, Chinese culture is not dominated by outside cultures. Many scholars attempt to explain Chinese economic growth and its increasing economic relations with other regions as a form of cultural imperialism. Still, it is premature to categorize China as a culturally imperial power as this has not been proved. The criticism of such ideas is based on the fact that Chinese global influence has not been based on culture but based on the fact that it is propagating prosperity and togetherness and not excluding anyone from being rich or prosperous.

As the argument goes, Pakistani culture remains open to outside cultures and maintains room for assimilation while keeping its core values intact; Chinese culture is more distinct due to its internal dynamics and hard to assimilate with Pakistani culture.^[12] Despite all the challenges, there are a few points of convergence between both cultures on humanitarian grounds with certain dissimilarities. Both cultures keep the sanctity of human life, a sense of respect, and dignity in high regard. These teachings have been common in other religions, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.^[13] It creates a common point for realizing human rights in both cultures.

IV. Prospects of China-Pakistan Educational and Cultural Cooperation

As stated in the previous section, one of the major obstacles to a lasting economic partnership between Pakistan and China is not having enough cultural exchange programs between the two nations. Unless people-to-people contact and cultural exchange programs are not made part of policy discourse, the gap between both societies and cultures is likely to remain. That is why both partners are paying stronger attention to the cultural components of international relations and bilateral relationships.^[14]

Cultural interaction can be enhanced by broadening the scope of public diplomacy when Pakistan establishes significant commercial links with China and other countries in the region. The interactions between citizens of neighboring nations can foster a process of cultural integration, which can boost the development of transnational identities based on geo-cultural heritage.^[15] This goal can be achieved through an informed understanding of each other and constructive engagement of both societies at multiple levels, such as education and food.

A comprehensive national Cultural Strategy intertwined with public diplomacy can guide the way the national culture of Pakistan can be capitalized in increasing its soft image amongst Chinese culture. The notion of cultural diplomacy had been missing from the traditional discourse of diplomacy, but it's time to focus on accumulative strengths for Pakistan and China. Scholars of the subject identify the potential of cultural exchange under BRI and CPEC, which further paves the way for educational exchange programs.^[16] CPEC, a critical component of BRI, has kick-started cooperation in multiple areas, including educational, political, economic, and trade cooperation among various countries and regions.

In a manner, people-to-people exchanges continue to be one of the main pillars of China's foreign policy and its partnership with Pakistan. Liaquat Ali Shah, Head of the Policy Division at the Center of Excellence for CPEC at the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives has explained that the second phase of CPEC is focused on people-to-people contact and human-centric development.^[17] In this phase, there are tremendous programs that have been initiated, and these are in the pipeline and few are at the implementation stage as well. Pakistan and China conceived public interaction and human development as the foundation for positive bilateral and international relations. This focused approach to human development has the potential to achieve more inclusive and sustainable development in Pakistan.

The common understanding of any warm relationship lies in the judgment of higher trade and deep diplomatic relations, but human capital is usually overlooked. The research has identified that an increasing degree of public assimilation and mutual understating act as the catalyst of increasing trade and diplomacy.^[18] In a manner, people-to-people contact, cultural exchange, and educational exchange programs are prerequisites of deep cooperation in many other areas, including but not limited to science, technology, agriculture, industry, and energy.

In this regard, Pakistan and China have enhanced their cooperation in higher education to produce skilled and highly educated human resources to be employed in CPEC. Research and development is the cornerstone to guide cooperation in the education sector because industrialization under CPEC would require human resources for employment.^[19] Pakistan should be able to produce young talent to satisfy the needs of the Chinese industry and corporate companies investing in CPEC and other investments in Pakistan. Foreign investors always remain dependent on highly trained in a domestic environment familiar with local conditions and language. The leadership in both countries is informed in this regard and working on integrating education and culture.

The establishment of China study Centers at various universities throughout Pakistan, followed by joint Research Initiatives, Skill Development, and Language training institutes, reflects the consciousness of leadership. Additionally, cultural exchange through exhibitions and bilateral visits, along with higher education through scholarships and student exchange programs, are vital for increasing people-to-people contact.^[20] To improve the quality of instruction for Pakistani students in Chinese universities, steps are being taken to teach the students Chinese culture and Mandarin language. China employs multiple modes of training and education, such as training modules to cultivate applied and compound talents, assembling a team of teachers with high professional standards, and creating specialized textbooks.

Pakistan and China had drafted six new agreements exclusively focused on Cultural Exchange for three years, 2019-2022.^[21] These agreements would focus on cooperation in culture, tourism, and education through a series of bilateral tours, but their implementation had been negatively affected by lockdowns during Covid-19 in both countries. These agreements were signed in pursuit of the primary agreement on the Pakistan-China Executive Program of Cultural Exchange 2018.^[22]

President Xi was very categorical during the 19th CPC meeting about the importance of cultural cooperation with friendly countries.^[23] The opening of Confucius institutes in Pakistan, especially at the University of Punjab, was among the pioneer efforts guided by the apex leadership of China. These institutes primarily focus on teaching the Chinese language, promoting Chinese culture, cross-cultural interactions, and other receptive activities.^[24]

Chairman Higher Education Commission of Pakistan sees Chinese Confucius Institutes as a positive and timely step towards people-to-people contact through cultural exchange programs. Du Yubo, a Chairperson of the Chinese Higher Education office, applauded the efforts of HEC and its Chairman for improving the higher education landscape in Pakistan and increasing the number of Pakistani students enrolling in Chinese universities.^[25]

Moazzam Ghurki, President of the Pakistan-China Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCJCCI), also called for implementing the Pakistan-China Cultural Exchange Program in both countries, China and Pakistan, to develop a cultural corridor which can later improve bilateral trade corridors.^[26] He links the success of CPEC with the success of the Pak-China cultural corridor because unless there is an adequate degree of bilateral acceptance in both communities, the true potential of business cannot be achieved.

V. Conclusion

Pakistan and China have had strong cultural and educational cooperation for the past 70 years, creating a shared future for the communities in the region. This cooperation has been rooted in their shared history and the deep-rooted cultural ties between the two nations. The relationship has been further strengthened by the Belt and Road Initiative, specifically, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has served as a catalyst for diversifying the bilateral relationship between the two countries. Along with the several key areas of cooperation, education has of cooperation between Pakistan and China has been promoting Chinese culture and language in Pakistan. China has sponsored several educational and cultural institutes in Pakistan to teach Chinese Confucianism, language, and culture. This has provided Pakistanis with an opportunity to learn about Chinese culture and language, further strengthening the cultural ties between the two countries. Higher education is another area of cooperation that has great potential for the future. Pakistan and China have a long history of collaboration in the field of higher education, with Chinese universities offering scholarships to Pakistani students and many Pakistani universities offering Chinese language programs. In the future, there is potential for increased collaboration between universities and research institutions, which could lead to the exchange of knowledge and expertise in various fields. Cultural tourism is another area of

cooperation that has great potential for the future. Both countries have a rich cultural heritage and many tourist attractions that are of great interest to visitors. In the future, there is a potential for increased collaboration in this area, which could lead to more people-to-people contact and an enhanced understanding of each other's culture. Overall, the cultural and educational cooperation between Pakistan and China has a bright future, with many opportunities for further development in the areas of culture, language, higher education, and cultural tourism. The deep-rooted cultural ties and the shared history between the two countries provide a solid foundation for this cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative provides a valuable opportunity to develop these areas of cooperation further.

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