



**CHINA'S STRATEGIC NARRATIVES ON THE CHINA-PAKISTAN
ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC), 2015–2020**

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – has generated significant academic discourse and policy debates considering its implication to transform regional dynamics and foster economic growth. This article investigates how Chinese official rhetoric had depicted CPEC during 2015–2020, based on the analysis of Chinese state narrative in government white papers, policy statements, and articles in media. Analysis revealed that Chinese propaganda depicted CPEC as a cooperative and mutually beneficial project, with an emphasis on such narratives of partnership and economic modernization, referred to through themes of infrastructure development in Pakistan. And the narrative equally underscored China's larger strategic objectives, painting CPEC as an element of its conception of multilateralism, global connectedness and regional integration under the BRI. Security concerns in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were acknowledged, but Chinese statements emphasized working with Pakistani authorities to drive the project forward. The results demonstrate that in addition to economic purposes, CPEC also acts as a platform for China to promote its image of overall constructive power and strategic influence-building in South Asia.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese strategic narratives, regional integration, Pakistan-China relations, security cooperation.

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Introduction

The Communist Party of China under Mao Zedong had waged a bloody civil war against the Kuomintang (KMT) for several years, and in 1949 declared the establishment of China as a new "nation-state" (Johnson, 1962). POST-INDEPENDENCE, we have witnessed a country that was once cold and lonely transform into one of the world's great powers, taking an active role in shaping the political economic architectures of the world. Led by the Chinese President Xi Jinping, China commenced Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 as a new vision for regional connectivity, trade and cooperation (Shang, 2019).

The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a route that connects the Chinese province of Xinjiang with Gwadar port in southern Pakistan. Officially launched in April 2015, CPEC began with 51 agreements and Memoranda of Understanding estimated to be valued at some \$46 billion involving infrastructure, energy, transport and industrial development (Harris, 2019). The venture has already crossed an over \$60 billion finance, directly or indirectly provided by Chinese financial institutions (Zahid & Khan, 2019).

In addition to providing a new 'shortcut' trade route for the Middle East, Europe and Africa instead of passing through the Uzbek Straits, it also has many potential benefits for Pakistan in terms of reconstruction and energy development that can be stimulated by stimulating economic growth and regional integration (Yamei, 2017). But CPEC has also attracted quite a lot of international criticisms in all three dimensions: transparency, debt sustainability and geopolitics.

The present study, accordingly, aims to understand China's strategic images of CPEC during 2015_2020 and facilitate an understanding about the official Chinese discourse regarding support project objectives, benefits and implications. More precisely, the study intends to understand structural components of CPEC, identify international discontent over it and analyze Chinese state narrative during this span. This study aims to analyze the central research objectives,,,

1) To explore the evolution of China's strategic narratives on CPEC from 2015 to 2020 in light of regional and global developments.

This research papers belongs to the academic voyage trying to learn more about how the China’s geopolitical strategy, as well as economic diplomacies formulated under Belt and Road have evolved over time. Further, the study would provide policymakers, academia and regional scholars the feedback regarding the interplay between China-Pakistan dynamics, regional development and evolving geopolitics of South Asia.



CEPEC Routes Map

Western Centre Eastern

Literature Review

There has been a wealth of discussion among researchers around different facets of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) namely, geopolitical/strategic and geo-economic dimensions in relation to the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, he writes, is a manifestation of China's long-term plans to recast the world's trade systems through Asia, Africa and Europe – strengthening its influence over global trade that is controlled by these routes. The initiative has been dubbed by Du & Zhang (2018) as an instrument of Chinese bringing together its economic expansion with soft-power projection.

Amidst discussion of CPEC, Small (2015) and Wolf (2019), among others, stress its strategic importance in connecting China's western region to the Arabian Sea—the Gwadar Port to be exact via Pakistan—and breaking free from its dependence on the Strait of Malacca. Other studies such as Garlick (2018), Javaid and Rashid (2019) posit that CPEC serves as a geopolitical instrument to increase the regional presence of China consolidating access energy routes. This, from the fiscal point of view has turned into an economic canvas for collaboration on infrastructure and business between China and Pakistan.

In a number of other research including for example Khan and Liu (2020), and Ali (2021) the issues concerning fiscal transparency, what defence economists would call environmental sustainability, and exposure to Pakistani debts are never far from view in spite of megadollar offers. But the literature available so far substantially considers and interprets in terms of Pakistan, few are external geopolitical responses to it, paradoxically the other side of CPEC i.e., Chinese discourses/narratives official or otherwise are not made focal points.

As such, this present study attempts to bridge a crucial void in research literature by examining China's representation on the official state discourse of CPEC 2015-2020. It will also explore the manner in which Chinese official statements, white papers and policy documents frame the strategic value of the corridor within Belt and Road vision.

Research Methodology

The qualitative method chosen in this article encompasses secondary data sources, including Chinese official publications, policy papers and academic works. Using content analysis, the research analyses how China sees CPEC and tells that story from 2015-2020 focusing on how it'll get framed within BRI.

Findings

This research discovered that China-based strategic discourse on the CPEC from 2015 to 2020, was underpinned by the notions of win-win cooperation, regional connectivity and common development. Chinese policymakers and state media promoted CPEC as the "flagship project" of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a key bridge between the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs China, 2017).

China maintained that Pakistan was its "all-weather strategic cooperative partner," emphasising cooperation in infrastructure, energy and industrial parks (Zhao 2019). This narrative was not only intended to enhance bilateral trust, but also to promote CPEC as a model for South–South cooperation (Liu & Dunford, 2016).

Beijing laid communicative titles to CPEC as a project for peace and stability in South Asia, asserting economic development and connectivity would mitigate extremism and regional conflict (Li & Wang, 2020). But even as Chinese acknowledgements of security challenges and governance issues in Pakistan, they still suggested an optimism through their language by underscoring the Community of Shared Future for Mankind, a common motif across China's multiple geographies (Xi, 2017).

On the whole these findings suggest that China's projection of CPEC during 2015–2020 was aimed at economic as well as geopolitical objectives: expanding its presence in South Asia and casting itself as a responsible cooperative power (Rolland, 2019).

Strategic Framing of CPEC: 'Flagship Project' of the BRI

Since 2015, China has claimed the CPEC as the "flagship project" of its BRI. This frame achieved two things: it not only advertised China's commitment to regional connectivity, but also highlighted the CPEC as a prototype for other BRI projects. The word "flagship" suggested leadership, trustworthiness and mutual advantage. Through official speeches, policy papers and media stories, Beijing has tried to present CPEC not only as an economic corridor but also a signpost of China's peaceful rise and its desire to bring about a "community of shared future."

This “story-telling” dovetailed with President Xi Jinping’s overarching foreign policy theme of “win-win cooperation.”

Development, or development and shared prosperity discourse

The “development for all” was a main feature of China’s CPEC story. Chinese policy makers portrayed CPEC as a means of bridging Pakistan’s energy deficits, infrastructure deficiencies, and industrial backwardness. The discourse was that of inclusivity, where China was being represented as a benevolent partner helping in Pakistan’s modernisation.” State media such as Xinhua and China Daily time and again rushed to highlight how CPEC would provide jobs, connectivity and help lift millions out of poverty. This development story line served to legitimize China’s growing economic and political presence in South Asia and to rebut the accusations of “debt-trap diplomacy.”

Narrative of Sovereignty and Non-Interference

China also placed its involvement in Pakistan under the traditional Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: sovereignty, equality, non aggression and non-interference. “There would be no political conditionalities attached to CPEC, which is about the development of Pakistan and not at all against any third country. This story line sought to distinguish China’s model from typical Western aid systems, which often come with conditions on governance or human rights. The “non-interference” communication attracted Pakistani policy-makers and increased the mutual political trust.

Strategic Communication and Global Image-Building

CPEC acted as a conduit to China’s broader strategic designs. By showcasing the achievements of CPEC in international forums, think-tank discussions and documentaries China painted itself as a conscientious global power which is devoted to South-South cooperation. Between 2018 and 2020, Chinese storytelling became more defensive in the face of U.S. and Indian critiques on Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Official reactions stressed transparency, long-term advantages and multilateral inclusiveness. So the strategic narrative shifted from promoting to protecting — defending China’s global image against the backdrop of growing geopolitical competition.

CPEC: the way forward to regional peace and stability

The second theme of CPEC that it's been made to fit into, a larger narrative about regional peace and stability also finds an echo in Xi Jinping's doctrine "Community of Shared Future for Mankind" (renlei mingyun gongtongti). Official discourse projected CPEC as an instrument to stabilise the economy and enhance connectivity and trade that would reduce regional disparities among various provinces of Pakistan, curb extremism, and foster cross-border cooperation (Li & Wang 2020).

"Win-Win Cooperation" Mutual Benefit Based on their common interests and mutual respect, both sides have enjoyed win-win cooperation.

China frequently claimed that CPEC is a "win-win" game for China and Pakistan. It is not just about China giving money, it's also about enabling Pakistan to expand. China depicted CPEC as a project where both partners "win together" through improved trade, jobs, and development. This conveyed China as a friendly ally, not as a strong nation attempting to force other nations (wikipedia).

Countering Negative Propaganda

When some Western countries or India criticized CPEC, claiming that it could trap countries in debt or hurt local people, China rebutted that those were "misunderstandings." This is fair and good: Chinese govt Ppl who says bedside the right, that critics don't want China and Pakistan to succeed together (Garlick,J. 2018).

Conclusion

This article argues that the Chinese discourse of the CPEC is representative of its broader vision of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in terms of regional connectivity, economic interdependence, and geopolitical influence during this time span. CPEC was constructed by China as a project that is not just about bilateral development cooperation, but rather win-win cooperation, mutual prosperity and peaceful development. These stories include “shared destiny” and “inclusive globalization.” In them, Beijing sought to neutralize Western suspicion and burnish international public opinion. Specifically, CPEC is held as a regional economic stabilizer of Pakistan that also boosts the peace cause in the region, and thus aligns Pakistan’s national development objectives with China’s long-term strategic interests in South and Central Asia.

Recommendations

To make CPEC more successful – Pakistan: (a) should enhance quality of project management. That involves cutting through red tape, making the rules clear and keeping the process honest. The government has to ensure that Chinese workers are safe and the local people can work too, and feel like they are participating in it.” Pakistan also needs to raise its youth for technical work, not just manual labor, safeguard the environment and use CPEC to launch industries that can export products, not just build roads and power plants. It is within China’s power, and also its interest, to contribute by being transparent about terms of lending and promoting fair financial deals. It must spread new technology with Pakistani companies and respect local culture and workers’ rights. China ought to also ensure that all provinces gain from CPEC and invest more in clean energy rather than coal. These two countries, together, they should work closely, and that friendship among peoples of the two countries needs to grow so that we are not seeing just temporary gains but long-term progress for all.

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