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Fostering Educational and Cultural Partnerships:
China-Pakistan Collaboration in the Belt and Road
Initiative



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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which emphasises cultural corridors alongside economic cooperation, has changed the economic and cultural landscapes of the world.

A centrepiece of the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides a forum for cooperation between



China and Pakistan in the fields of education and culture. This partnership expands Pakistan's international linkages by providing economic opportunities and fostering cross-border relationships in the fields of education and culture. This study examines how higher education and cultural tourism might be used in bilateral exchanges to strengthen people-to-people ties and public diplomacy. As the BRI project enters its tenth year, it also looks at the opportunities and challenges given by cooperative cultural and educational efforts.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which emphasises the creation of cultural corridors alongside economic cooperation, represents a dramatic shift in global economy and culture. A pioneering example of the BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) provides as a platform for China and Pakistan to collaborate on educational and



cultural initiatives. As the main BRI project, CPEC not only provides Pakistan with tremendous economic prospects but also makes a considerable contribution to establishing cross-border relationships in the fields of education and culture. It gives Pakistan a chance to become a part of the world society and strengthen cultural ties with other countries. By collaborating to improve their educational and cultural relations as part of CPEC, Pakistan and China have established a model for future interactions with other nations. These programmes involve partnerships with educational institutions at different levels, including colleges, universities, think tanks, language schools, and Confucius Institutes all over Pakistan. In contrast to more conventional imperialistic nations, China emphasises equality and autonomy in its foreign policy. As a premier BRI undertaking, CPEC serves as an example of this strategy. The foundation for CPEC was established in the 1990s, and President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in 2015 marked the official inauguration of the project. Due to Pakistan's energy deficit and a project cost increase to \$46 billion as a result, both China and Pakistan extended the CPEC timeframe to 2030, known as the Long-Term Plan, starting in 2017. After CPEC's benefits were realised, China and Pakistan looked at expanding their collaboration in its second phase, putting a particular emphasis on culture and education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented difficulties, which hindered the rise in Pakistani students studying in Chinese colleges in recent years. This study examines the possibilities for bilateral exchanges that might strengthen public diplomacy and people-to-people ties through higher education and cultural tourism by examining the cultural and educational exchanges between China and Pakistan under CPEC. Utilising lessons learned from the

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, it also investigates the difficulties and potential associated with cooperation in the cultural and educational sectors under the BRI.

China and Pakistan: A Diplomatic Evolution and Cultural Impact Since the 1950s

Since the 1950s, China and Pakistan have had a diplomatic relationship that has grown more complex over time, especially in the twenty-first century (Faisal, M., 2020). China's strong economic reforms and WTO membership during this time period strengthened its position on the world stage. This occurred at the same time as Pakistan sided with the West in the global war on terror, creating serious problems like terrorism and a huge flood of Afghan refugees. Through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a

project with significant foreign direct investment that improved Pakistan's reputation in the world, China has become Pakistan's main ally and source of trust (Chai, W., 2015). Historical turning points like Pakistan's first commercial flight operations in China,



the construction of the Friendship or Karakoram Highway in 1966, and the acceptance of the One China Policy are symbols of the two countries' ongoing friendship (Small, A., 2015).. Their connections were further solidified by China's unflinching assistance throughout the 1965 Indo-Pakistani conflict (Khalid, M., 2021). Both countries have established a strong relationship over time, characterised by common goals and mutual



respect. This alliance harkens back to the historic Silk Road culture, which promoted cultural and commercial relations among nearby countries, and goes beyond economic might to include cultural impact (Zakaria, 2019). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promotes connectivity, cooperation, and infrastructure development along BRI routes with the goal of building people-to-people ties, a crucial element of geo-economic endeavours (Small, A., 2015). As people experience the advantages of Chinese values and quick development, China's effect on Pakistani society, its workplace culture, and its Confucian qualities will transform the sociocultural landscape (Hussain, Z., 2017). The CPEC project will have a significant sociological impact as it passes through numerous regions, imparting Chinese work ethics, discipline, family values, and hierarchical structures to Pakistani society, despite the fact that China and Pakistan have different religious, customs, and norms.

Education and Cultural Exchange in Strengthening Pakistan-China Ties

As Pakistan develops considerable trade ties with China and its neighbours, increasing public diplomacy initiatives may be necessary to improve cultural engagement (Hussain, R., 2017). The establishment of transnational identities anchored in shared geo-cultural heritage can be facilitated by increasing interactions between inhabitants of neighbouring countries (Faisal, M., 2020). Previously absent from traditional diplomatic discourse, the idea of cultural diplomacy is now becoming more significant, especially in light of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). A key tenet of China's foreign policy and its engagement with Pakistan is now people-to-



people exchanges. With numerous programmes already started and in operation, the second phase of CPEC focuses on strengthening people-to-people engagement and human-centric development (Pakistan Today, 2022). This method of promoting human development could encourage Pakistan to develop more inclusively and sustainably. Human capital is usually neglected, even though trade and diplomacy are frequently viewed as essential components of healthy relationships. According to research, improved trade and diplomacy are catalysed by greater public assimilation and comprehension. Deep collaboration in a variety of fields, including as science, technology, agriculture, industry, and energy, requires people-to-people exchanges, cultural exchanges, and educational exchange programmes.

In order to satisfy the objectives of CPEC, cooperation in higher education intends to generate highly educated and talented human resources. Improving people-to-people contact requires the establishment of China study centres at Pakistani universities, collaborative research projects, skill development, language training facilities, and cultural exchange via exhibitions and bilateral visits. The instruction of Pakistani students in Chinese universities is being improved by introducing them to Chinese culture and the Mandarin language. The COVID-19 pandemic has hampered the implementation of agreements on cultural interaction that both countries have prepared (Xinhua, 2022). Cultural exchange initiatives greatly benefit from the work of Confucius Institutes, which were founded in Pakistan with the goals of teaching Chinese, promoting Chinese culture, and fostering intercultural dialogue. The Chinese government has directed the opening of

these institutes, displaying their dedication to intercultural exchange. Prominent figures from Pakistan, including the President of the Pakistan-China Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Chairman of the Higher Education Commission, stress the importance of cultural exchange programmes and cultural corridors for enhancing bilateral trade corridors and the overall success of CPEC. By promoting mutual respect in both communities, these initiatives hope to maximise corporate collaboration.

Pakistani Students Opt for Affordable Chinese Universities

Pakistani students favour studying in Chinese institutions over those in the West. This is due to the fact that Chinese institutions are more accessible and provide more government grants than Western universities, which have expensive tuition and onerous visa procedures. However, Pakistani students who opt to study in China represent a wider cross-section of Pakistani society,



both economically and geographically, despite the fact that many Pakistani elites still send their kids to Western colleges. Pakistanis with lower incomes now have the chance to study in China on scholarships and get highly sought-after degrees (Zakaullah, 2022). Around 7,034 of the 25,000 students registered in Chinese universities are Pakistanis (Defence, 2023), which is more than the combined numbers of Pakistanis studying in Australia, the UK, and the US. Local students are primarily attracted to local universities



in Pakistan through Confucius Institutes and China Study Centres. Many faculty members who have themselves attended Chinese institutions lead the China study centres at Pakistani universities, actively enticing Pakistani students to pursue studies there. Local think tanks and educational consultancies are a second source of student recruitment. Chinese policymakers, particularly those at the Chinese Embassy, maintain close ties to regional think tanks like the Pakistan-China Institute in Islamabad (Times, 2023). For Pakistani students interested in studying in China, a number of private companies also offer educational consulting services. Some Pakistani students may be eligible for scholarships from the Chinese government, which are administered by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (Safdar, 2021). It's likely that a large number of Pakistani families are investing their own funds in degrees from Chinese colleges. Some possible causes of this trend are the rise in interactions between Chinese and Pakistani actors following the start of the CPEC, the increased awareness of opportunities for higher education in China, the lower cost of earning a Chinese degree, and the expansion of Confucius Institutes and China study centres at many Pakistani universities.



Conclusion

Pakistan and China have fostered a strong cultural and educational connection over the past decade that is firmly founded in their shared history and cultural ties. The Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has been instrumental in developing and bolstering their bilateral ties. Education has become a key component of cooperation among its many components, encouraging cultural exchange and interdependence. Pakistan's cultural environment has been improved by China's assistance for educational and cultural organisations that focus on teaching Chinese Confucianism, language, and culture. Through this programme, cross-cultural learning has been made easier and the cultural ties between the two countries have grown stronger. Additionally, there has been a lot of cooperation in the realm of higher education, with Pakistani institutions launching Chinese language programmes and Chinese colleges granting scholarships to students from Pakistan. The potential for future collaboration in the sharing of knowledge and skills across numerous fields is encouraging. Given the rich cultural legacy and tourist sites in both nations, cultural tourism offers another opportunity with untapped potential. Future cooperation in this area can promote more in-person interactions and a deeper understanding of one another's cultures.



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