



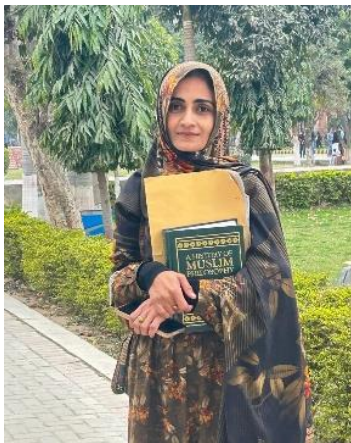
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From Gandhara to Beijing:
Buddhism, Cultural Exchange, and the Historical Evolution of
Sino-Pakistani Relations



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Why Ancient Stones Still Speak to Modern Diplomacy?

In 2023, Pakistani and Chinese officials opened the biggest exhibition of Gandharan art to date in Beijing's Palace Museum with no ambiguity about the symbolism. Standing Buddhas carved nearly two thousand years ago in the valleys of Swat, Taxila and Peshawar was presented as a symbol of a relationship between



two civilizations that predates the modern nation-state. This is the main theme of this article; Beijing and Islamabad today talk of the “iron brotherhood” being a ‘Cold War-era alliance of convenience’, but it is actually the latest iteration in a long history of religious transmission, intellectual exchange and overland connectivity that started in the ancient region of Gandhara. To understand this deep history is important because as a more honest, textured history of the perception of two societies as natural partners, despite their very different political frameworks. If this cultural undercurrent is not taken into account, then Sino-Pakistani relations will remain at a geopolitical level, which both governments often refer to in their opinion pieces.

Gandhara was the crossroads of civilizations

The region of Gandhara was not a united kingdom but a cultural zone centered on the Peshawar Valley and extending towards the Indus and then into parts of eastern Afghanistan, which became the home of a hybrid art form: Gandharan art, a fusion of the naturalism of Greek Hellenistic culture, inherited from Alexander the Great's conquests, with the iconography and symbolism of Indian Buddhism, introduced by the Mauryan dynasty from the Gangetic plains and later incorporated by the Kushan dynasty, which had unified much of Central and South Asian cultures.

It is the role of Gandhara as an “Infrastructure of exchange” that is important for this article. In this way the social and religious were never clearly distinct; indeed the rich trade of the region

helped support the stupa, and the stupa itself provided funds to support the trade itself, with its business interests in Asia lending to the religious art that would spread eastward to China and again oddly, the contemporary characterization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as an economic and “civilizational” project.

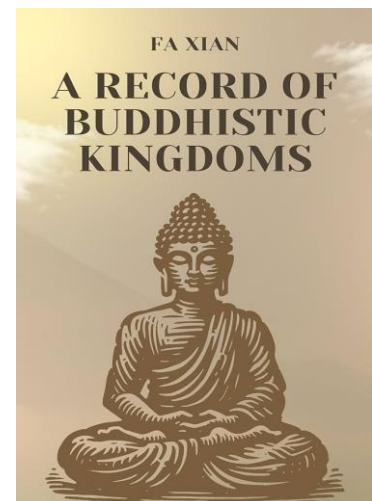
The Kushan Empire and the spread of Buddhism to the East

The eastern Han dynasty (1 - 180 CE) brought the introduction of Buddhist ideas and emissaries into Central Asia and China from the region of Gandhara; Chinese historical sources such as the Book of the Later Han state the transmission took place in this period, with formal transmission around 64 CE which carries a certain air of legend, but the general pattern of transmission along the trade routes from Gandhara and neighboring Central Asian oasis cities to the heartland of China is broadly supported by archaeological evidence and some historical texts.

This transmission can be seen in architecture in China today. It’s an important reminder for anyone who thinks of Chinese Buddhism as a purely Chinese phenomenon, for from its early period it was a creation of exchange across the borders, where the land now Pakistan is situated, was a key part of the process.

The Pilgrim-Scholars: Faxian, Xuanzang and the Human Bridge

Knowledge exchange was made possible by trade routes but it was the person of the scholar-monks who gave the exchange its lasting intellectual substance. His journey later known as a Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms was overland through Central Asia, through the land of Gandhara and into northern India, where he sought out the true Buddhist scriptures and monastic discipline books. His travelogue “A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms” was one of the earliest detailed Chinese accounts of the territory that is now Pakistan and Afghanistan.



Xuanzang’s journey (629–645 CE) to the site of Kanishka’s stupa, to the capital of Purushapura (modern Peshawar) and to the Indian monastic university of Nalanda, is known to Chinese

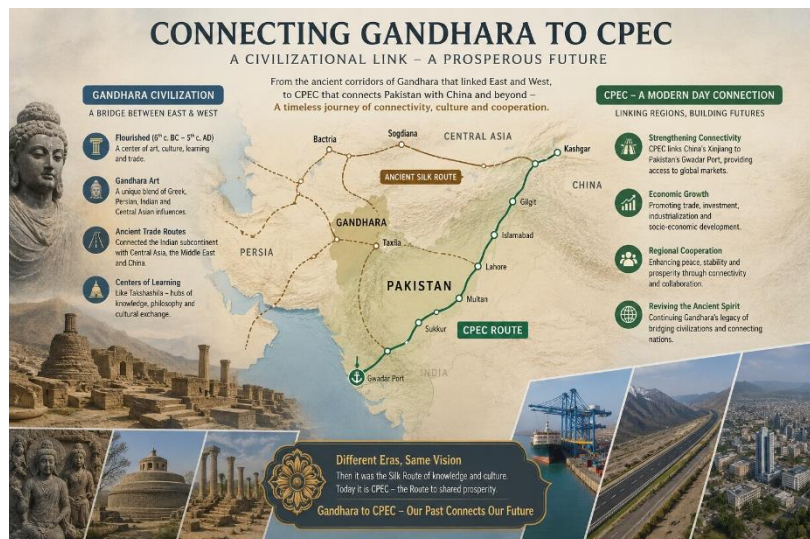
history and served as inspiration for the later folk novel *Journey to the West*, which even introduced the geography of Gandhara into Chinese popular culture for centuries.

These trips only prove that long before a modern treaty, people were prepared to risk their lives in crossing deserts and mountain passes.

Ancient Routes to Modern Diplomacy

In early period, however, the relationship was characterized by restraint; for the first decade or so, both governments refrained from any actions that could directly impact each other's core interests.

The character of the relationship has evolved in the officially defined steps: described as "friendly relations" until the 1950s–70s, a "traditional friendship" in the 1980s, an "all-weather friendship" in the 1990s, and after 2003, an "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership" after CPEC's launch from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which both governments state is a flagship



of the Belt and Road Initiative, has sparked genuine domestic debate on debt sustainability, regional equity and transparency, the latter a theme that an honest opinion piece should not gloss over even as it recognizes its symbolic and infrastructural value.

From the perspective of this opinion article, what is remarkable is how often in both cases, both governments employ the language of culture and civilizations to articulate a relationship that is in hard terms, one of strategic balancing against a common set of regional concerns. All these points indicate that the Gandhara heritage is being used in a manner quite similar to that of a usable past, shared through a narrative that both states are tapping into in order to give their partnership a sense of historical depth and legitimacy when, in reality, its historical roots are far more recent and far more pragmatic namely, CPEC's own origins.



Conclusion

In op-eds about China and Pakistan, there is a danger of relying on one of two frames: either a purely transactional “all-weather alliance” based on competitive relations with India, or a simplifying “ancient friendship” that glosses over policy differences. As outlined in this history, there is a third position that many might see as more defensible. For centuries, the Gandhara region was not a passive area as would be suggested, but an active agent in the transmission of ideas and arts to China and thus a key to the formation of Chinese Buddhist civilization. Such a history does not bind either government to any specific policy now, or address current issues of the terms of CPEC or the security situation in the region. It does, however imply that when the Pakistani and Chinese establishments talk of "centuries of friendship" they are not talking out of thin air. A challenge for both societies and for outsiders is to allow that deep history to inform a relationship without at the same time blinding them to the very real, very contemporary interests that drive the relationship.



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