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From CPEC to KnowledgePEC: Why Pakistan–China Relations Need an Education Corridor



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As Pakistan and China celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations, the real question is not how warmly the two countries can remember the past. That part is settled. The more important question is whether they can design a future equal to the scale of global change now underway.

The first major phase of Pakistan–China cooperation was built around diplomatic trust and strategic alignment. The second phase found its most visible expression in the China–



Pakistan Economic Corridor, with its emphasis on energy, transport, industrial zones and connectivity. That phase was necessary. Pakistan needed roads, power, ports and infrastructure. But the next stage of national development will not be decided by infrastructure alone. It will be decided by the capacity to produce knowledge, train people, absorb technology, build institutions and compete in a world where ideas move faster than goods. This is why Pakistan and China now need a new framework, KnowledgePEC — a Pakistan–China Education and Knowledge Corridor.

The argument is that CPEC remains incomplete without a human-capital architecture strong enough to convert connectivity into capability. A port is not a development strategy unless a country has maritime experts, logistics managers, customs professionals, data analysts and export-oriented firms. A special economic zone is not transformative unless it is connected to skilled workers, applied research, technical training and industrial innovation. A highway can move containers, it cannot, by itself, create competitiveness.

Pakistan’s central development challenge is no longer only a shortage of infrastructure. It is a shortage of capability. The country has one of the world’s largest youth populations, but far too many young people pass through an education system weakly connected to productivity, research, industry and public problem-solving. Universities produce graduates, but not always innovation. Technical institutes exist, but not always excellence. Research is conducted, but too rarely converted into policy, patents, prototypes or industrial upgrading.



China's own development experience offers an important lesson. Its rise was not built only on factories, roads and exports. It was built on disciplined investment in education, technical skills, research capacity, industrial learning and state-guided long-term planning. Pakistan does not need to copy China mechanically. No serious country imports another country's model wholesale. But Pakistan can learn from the deeper principle behind China's progress that infrastructure becomes transformative only when it is matched by human capability.

KnowledgePEC should therefore be designed as the second-generation architecture of Pakistan–China cooperation. It should move education from the margins of diplomacy to its center. Instead of scattered scholarships, ceremonial university agreements and occasional exchange visits, both countries need an integrated framework with clear institutions, financing, measurable targets and regional priorities.

There are global precedents for this. Europe's Erasmus+ program has made education, training, youth and mobility central to regional cooperation. Germany's DAAD has used academic exchange not merely as charity, but as a long-term instrument of scientific influence and international partnership. The World Bank-supported Africa Higher Education Centers of Excellence initiative shows how regional collaboration in higher education can strengthen specialized skills and research capacity in priority sectors such as STEM, agriculture, health, environment and education. These examples matter because they show that knowledge corridors are not symbolic luxuries. They are development infrastructure. ([Erasmus+](#))

For Pakistan and China, KnowledgePEC could rest on five serious pillars. The first pillar should be joint higher education production. Pakistan and China should establish dual-degree programs, split-site PhDs, joint laboratories and faculty fellowships in areas that matter for the future economy like artificial intelligence, renewable energy, biotechnology, climate adaptation, agriculture technology, public health, logistics, maritime studies, engineering, data science, educational leadership and digital governance. A Pakistani doctoral student working on climate-resilient agriculture should be able to conduct laboratory work in China and field research in Pakistan. A Chinese scholar studying regional connectivity should be able to work

with Pakistani universities, local governments and communities. The goal should be knowledge co-production, not one-way training.

The second pillar should be technical and vocational transformation. Pakistan often speaks of its youth as a demographic dividend. But demography is not destiny. A young population becomes an asset only when it is skilled, disciplined, employable and productive. CPEC-related sectors require technicians, machine operators, solar and wind energy specialists, logistics workers, construction supervisors, IT professionals, translators, safety inspectors and mid-level managers. Pakistan and China should establish Pakistan–China Technical Excellence Centers in regions linked to CPEC.



These centers must not become another layer of poorly funded institutes with outdated curricula. They should be co-designed with industry, linked to employment outcomes and built around internationally recognized certification.

The third pillar should be regional inclusion. If CPEC passes through a region, KnowledgePEC must enter its classrooms. Gwadar, Khuzdar, Gilgit, Peshawar, Multan, interior Sindh and other less-developed areas should not be treated merely as project locations or transit routes. Their young people must become engineers, entrepreneurs, researchers, technicians and managers in the economy being built around them. This requires targeted scholarships, language training, digital learning hubs, women-focused skills programs and local entrepreneurship support. The test of KnowledgePEC will be simple that can a young person living near a corridor of development access the skills required to benefit from that corridor?

The fourth pillar should be applied research for national problems. Pakistan and China should create a joint research fund focused on climate resilience, water security, food systems, urbanization, public health, educational reform, industrial productivity and digital governance. The success of this fund should not be measured by conferences held or memoranda signed. It should be measured by publications,



At 75 years, Pakistan and China have something rare in international relations that is continuity. But continuity alone is not enough. The world is entering an era shaped by artificial intelligence, climate stress, technological competition and knowledge-intensive economies. In such a world, the most strategic corridor will not only be the one through which goods travel. It will be the one through which skills, ideas, researchers, technologies and young people move.

CPEC gave Pakistan and China a physical map of cooperation. KnowledgePEC can give them an intellectual map. The first 75 years built trust between two states. The next 75 must build capability among two societies. That is the real promise of an education corridor that infrastructure may connect territory, but knowledge creates the power to transform it.