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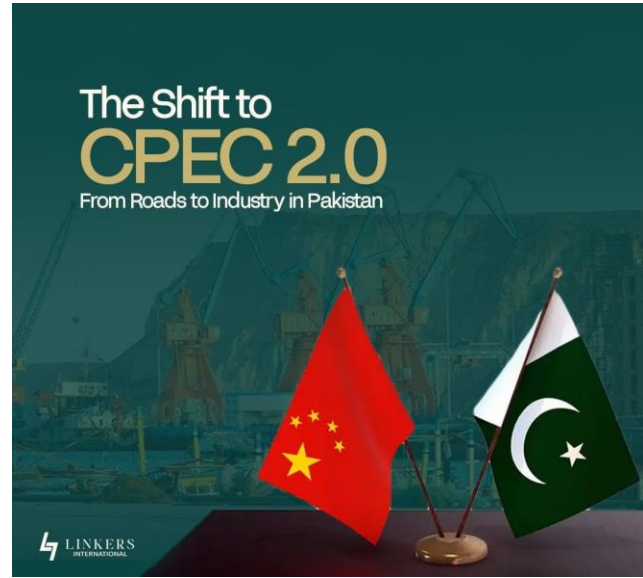
From Iron Brother to Industrial Partner:
Can Chinese Language Skills Become Pakistan's Competitive Edge
in CPEC 2.0?



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China and Pakistan describe each other as “Iron Brothers” since an enduring relationship, which connects the two countries deeply and whose interests are similar in both defense and foreign policies, has developed over several decades. The second phase of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which is following the first phase, which was concerned with roads and power plant construction, requires not only affection but also industrial cooperation.

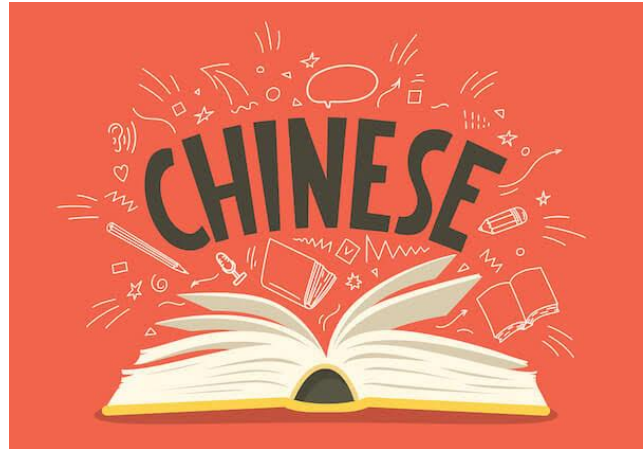


The first phase of CPEC entailed building up roads, energy infrastructure and logistics. Pakistan has gotten much needed impetus through this phase in the areas of connectivity and power generation. Critics of the CPEC argue that this initial phase has made Pakistan excessively dependent on Chinese finance without developing local capabilities at all. Yet this base creates room for opportunities in the next phase, including industrial parks, agricultural development and digital cooperation.

Language as a Game Changer

Language can actually become more than just words. The English language has given India an edge in IT outsourcing in the business community. Similarly, Chinese language would give Pakistanis the ability to negotiate well, understand technicalities without requiring any intermediation, and build relationships with the Chinese individuals. Many things can go wrong with billion dollars ventures, and the absence of expertise would make the situation worse for them. Also, Chinese firms like to have business partners that can speak in Mandarin. This is an indication of dedication to their culture. In a country like Pakistan, where there is very little trust among people regarding “Chinese dominance”, language proficiency could make Pakistani professionals equal participant.

The youth bulge is a problem that is at the same time an opportunity for Pakistan. Millions of people enter the labor market each year, most of them have little chances in finding a good job. If some among them learn to speak in Mandarin alongside their technical knowledge, Pakistan will be in position to build a bridge workforce for its CPEC-related industries. The trilingual workforce consisting of Pakistani engineers, managers and entrepreneurs who can speak in Urdu, English and Mandarin language would be able to work in joint ventures and logistics without an interpreter. This advantage is real and not abstract. Such countries as Singapore and Malaysia used their bilingualism as an opportunity to access the world capital markets. This can benefit Pakistan also, but with a little emphasis on China.



But there are some people who do not agree with this view. The naysayers say that language alone will not be able to fix the structural problem – the weak institutions and policies as well as the energy constraints. They say we should not view Mandarin as a silver bullet; otherwise, learning of the language will fail to produce success because of lack of reform on taxation policies, good governance, and industrial policies. Some are also afraid of losing balance in terms of their culture. There will be a huge investment for Mandarin, which will entail a huge price – that of Pakistan's linguistic plurality and dependence on Chinese language.

Communication as Strategy

It is erroneous to believe that language can be secondary because it is communication which acts as lubricant for industrial collaboration. The biggest drawback of even the best planned policy is mistrust and misunderstanding which creeps in. In the case of a Pakistani negotiator being conversant with Mandarin, he will be better equipped to understand the nuances, avoid missteps and serve as foundation for building relations with the Chinese negotiators. When it comes to building relations, it is a very important prerequisite in most

countries which becomes a strategy rather than a style. Pakistan will be in a position to reach a stage where they are working side-by-side with other partners in their industrial projects.

Collaborations towards the formulation of policy have been taking place. To formulate policies, it is essential for Pakistan to integrate the teaching of Mandarin language in the curricula of engineering, information technology, and business management studies. The exchange programs and scholarships will certainly be needed in order to ensure inclusiveness in elite as well as vocational institutes. The private-public partnership of Chinese firms could also help in establishing language training centers in the industrial areas where trilingual employees are encouraged by their employers. Most importantly, it is essential to respect Urdu and other regional languages.

Such activities may imply something bigger than CPEC. Learning Mandarin is going to be beneficial for the workforce, creating good industrial relations and also enhancing the chances to travel, seek higher education, and serve abroad. The Pakistani student is going to have an opportunity to directly access the Chinese educational institutions. The local companies are going to be able to market their products competitively in China. The diplomats from Pakistan are going to work effectively with their Chinese colleagues in Beijing. With China becoming more influential in the global arena, Pakistan is going to benefit from this tendency globally. The need for linguistic abilities appears in the contemporary world in connection with the growing role of Chinese influence. It is a signal for readiness; not only for investments.



Confidence and Identity

Psychological aspects must not be overlooked. For a long time, Pakistan's participation in the development of CPEC has amounted only to that of a passive recipient of investments,



loans, and projects together with foreign expertise. Through language capabilities, the paradigm of behavior becomes entirely different. Initiative, critical thinking, negotiations and innovations become part of Pakistani behavior. Confidence is built up. Confidence, once it is repeated for a whole generation, can change the perception of Pakistan concerning this cooperation. In the end, Pakistan can become the co-designer and not the junior partner.

A parallel example is also shown. Outsourcing of information technologies from the rest of the world into India was mostly because of the capability of Indians to speak English in addition to having technical skills. Linguistic capabilities helped them become competitive on a global scale. Pakistan has been lamenting that it had failed to repeat the same success. Mandarin provides another chance, not to repeat the Indian experience but to carve a niche for Pakistan in Chinese industrial ecosystem. The strategy is so critical that the benefits for Pakistan will be revolutionary if they implement it effectively.

This is not only about CPEC 2.0 of factories and fiber optics but for the people too. If there is any significant investment made in the learning of language and culture, then a new world of competition would unfold for Pakistan. Although speaking Mandarin may not be a solution to all its troubles, yet it is the key that lies in tipping the scales in favor of a partnership-based relationship rather than a dependent one. This is no longer a question of whether or not Chinese should be taught but whether or not Pakistan can afford not to learn Mandarin.