

Pakistan's Print Media Presentation of Pakistan China Relation and New Silk Route Corridor Project (A Case Study of Chinese President Xi Jinping Visit Days)

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Abstract

Pakistan China diplomatic relations and initiation of new Silk Road project by China is an initiative of diplomacy, new infrastructure and free trade zones, which has been focus of media from whole world. China Pakistan economic corridor is the center of the two countries' bilateral cooperation. This paper tried to see how Pakistani media see this initiative by examining the editorial and news coverage in Pakistani newspapers. Front-page news, editorials, and opinion pages from 20 April to 26 April were analyzed qualitatively to find out the Pakistani media stance regarding the initiative. Both positive and negative views appeared on the newspapers have been part of study. Mainly, this initiative is seen as positive one, but criticism is also seen on editorial part. Further large-scale research is needed to understand the media treatment of the issue comprehensively.

Keywords: Pakistan China diplomatic relations; New silk road; China-Pakistan economic corridor; Media treatment

Introduction

The rise of China over the last two or three decades continues to make global news headlines. Economic, political and diplomatic domains of this emerging global power has garnered scholarly and media attention. Yet much less has been researched about China's growing ties and initiatives that are spreading across the South Asia [1]. The present initiative of reviving 2000 years old project "Silk Road" in the form of "One Road One Belt" will help many countries in cooperation including Pakistan. China Pakistan Economic Corridor, CPEC, is not only a road, but a commercial, political and strategic investment also by Chinese government that will enhance the importance of Pakistan in regional as well as global politics. Therefore, it is important to study how Pakistani media perceive this initiative.

Relations between states are characterized by commonality of interests and their intensity invariably depends on the range of ingredients forming the basis for common interest [2]. The time-tested, ever-growing and tensile bonds between Pakistan and China derive their depth from geographical proximity, shared geo-political interests, shared perceptions on regional security and issues of global concern over six decades. However, present visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping's to Pakistan from 20 to 22 April was received with much fanfare and excitement. Not only the government but also the opposition parties, civil society, mass media and the public showed their enthusiasm for the visit of their "iron brother" and "all-weather friend". The two-day trip concluded on an optimistic note, with Pakistan and China signing economic and strategic projects worth more than \$ 46 billion. The media presentation is necessary to evaluate as the future cooperation between Pakistan and China is important for whole world.

To increase cooperation, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed that China and Central Asia join hands to build a Silk Road economic belt, while delivering a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2013 [3].

On a broader note, the projects are part of China's 'one belt, one road' strategy aimed at connecting East Asia to Central Asia and Europe, and this proposed "economic belt along the Silk Road" wants to cover almost 3 billion people and is representing the biggest market in the world [4].

According to Chinese vision, Pakistan will act as a corridor linking China to the rest of the world, the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (PCEC). Therefore, the role of Pakistan in the whole initiative is important not only for these two countries, but rest of the world also.

Historical Importance of CPEC

According to the Pew Research Centre, Pakistanis have the most favorable view of the Chinese after China itself. Driving around Lahore and Islamabad, one can witness the 'love' emanating from every standee and billboard, smothering our Chinese brothers with praise.

Founded on a shared enmity with India, China's backing to Pakistan has gone so deep that it was willing to offer the ultimate gift from one state to another: the materials that Pakistan's nuclear scientists needed to build the bomb. Pakistan acted, as China's backdoor during its years of diplomatic isolation, the bridge between Nixon and Mao, and the front-line in Beijing's struggles with the Soviet Union during the late stages of the Cold War. Now, Pakistan is a central part of China's transition from a regional power to a global one. The country lies at the heart of Beijing's plans for a network of ports, pipelines, roads and railways connecting the oil and gas fields of the Middle East to the mega-cities of East Asia [5]. Brewster [6] stated that coastline of Pakistan is becoming a crucial staging post for China's take-off as a

naval power, extending its reach from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea. Penetration by Pakistan's intelligence services into the darkest corners of global jihadi networks are a vital asset to China as it navigates its growing interests in the Islamic world, and seeks to choke off support for the militant activities that pose one of the gravest threats to China's internal stability.

In his book, small [6] stated that for Pakistan, China is the best potential ticket out of instability and economic weakness, the greatest hope that a region contemplating a security vacuum after the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan can instead become an integral part of a new Silk Road. China has been Pakistan's diplomatic protector, its chief arms supplier, and its call of last resort when every other supposed friend has left it in the lurch. Virtually every important moment in Pakistan's recent history has been punctuated with visits by its presidents, prime ministers and army chiefs to Beijing, where the deals and deliberations have so often proved to have a decisive impact on the country's fate. However, not only China favored Pakistan every time; Pakistan has also cooperated with China which history can never forget. For example, Pakistan was the first country, which gave three airplanes to China as gift in the past. Chairman Mao used one of the airplanes personally, which is now kept in the Museum as Mao's personal belonging. PIA was the first airline, which connected China to other parts of the world.

China and Pakistan have carried out extensive exchanges and cooperation in political, military, diplomatic and cultural fields as well as science and technology since the two countries formally established diplomatic relations in 1951 and have made remarkable achievements, however, the bilateral economic and trade cooperation between the two countries was still in a relatively low level [7]. In 2012, Sino-Pakistan bilateral economic and trade cooperation was impacted by multiple factors both in Pakistan and the world. During premier Li Keqiang's visit to Pakistan in May 2013, he quoted a Pakistani welcome slogan of "good neighbors are a blessing" many times, emphasizing Pakistan is always a trustworthy "iron" friend of China in the hearts of the Chinese people, and "Ba Tie (Our Iron Brother Pakistan)"[8]. The relationship is not limited just to this, it is further stated by [9] that since the turn of 21st century, with the continuous deepening of friendly relations between China and Pakistan, the two countries have carried out a series of economic and trade cooperation to achieve mutual benefit and win-win development goals. Thereafter, bilateral economic and trade development between the countries has entered the speedway. At present, Pakistan has become the China's second biggest trading partner in South Asia, and China has become the second largest trade partner, second source of imports and second largest export market of Pakistan [10].

In recent years, bilateral economic and trade relations has made great progress with a steady growth in bilateral trade volume between the two countries. Economic and trade cooperation between China and Pakistan has expanded to extensive fields regarding mutual investment, project contracting and technical cooperation from simple commodity trade. The idea of developing a China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which was visualized by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang during his visit to Pakistan on May 2013 [8], found a proper shape in the present visit of Chinese president Xi. The visit was planned to be in August 2012, but postponed because of Political situation in Pakistan, protest of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) [6].

The proposed economic corridor will connect the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang with the Pakistani port of Gwadar

through a network of roads measuring around 3000 kms (1,800 miles), providing Pakistan its much-needed economic infrastructure, especially power-generation plants [11]. The importance of Gwadar port for CPEC and bilateral relations between two countries so interwoven that the diplomatic maxim "friends of today can be enemies of tomorrow" may prove to be false. This article analyzed how media in Pakistan portrayed these Chinese initiatives as well as the visit of Chinese president Xi to Pakistan.

Methodology

This study focused on the treatment of Pakistani print media to Chinese president visit to Pakistan, initiative of CPEC, Pakistan China relations and its influence on foreign policy of Pakistan. Front-page news, editorials, and opinion pages from 20 April to 26 April were analyzed qualitatively to find out the Pakistani media image regarding above-mentioned issues. English newspapers were considered including Dawn, The News International, The Nation, Express Tribune, and Daily Times Pakistan. The reason behind selection of English newspapers was their role and readership among policymaking officials in Pakistan.

Findings

This part qualitatively analyzed the news articles on the front page of five major English dailies of Pakistan, their editorial and opinion pages. Period for the study was 20th to 26th of April 2015. This period is chosen because Chinese president and his initiatives were got more coverage during this period. Headlines of all five selected dailies were about welcoming Xi Jinping on 20th April with positive notes by the reporters. For example, Kiani [12] used the term "fate-changing visit" for Pakistan, and discussed the importance of visit regarding infrastructure development, energy projects and investment opportunities by Chinese government. No editorial and column related to Xi Jinping and his visit were written in "Dawn" on 20th of April 2015. In the editorial of "Dawn" on 21th of April, the visit was described as "A breath of fresh air for Pakistan". The speech of president Xi Jinping was taken as agenda point. His points about peace and security in Pakistan and South Asia were discussed, as it was considered more important in China's view. The CPEC concept was seem optimistically, and it was said that if properly executed, it could prove a transformative vision that can be driver of Pakistan's growth rates for decades to come. The 35 minutes speech in Chinese by Xi Jinping, simultaneously interpreted in English and Urdu, were the focus of headlines on 21th of April 2015. The Chinese President rightly characterized the relations as 'strategic partnership' between China and Pakistan. Addressing the parliament, he recounted the friendly acts of Pakistan towards China and the moments when the former stood by the latter in times of need. He called Pakistan the 'Iron brother' of China and acknowledged that Pakistani economy had the capability to transform into an "Asian Tiger". The Economic Corridor, he said, will benefit not only the region but also every citizen of Pakistan. The journalists pointed out that the deep-rooted defense relations of China and Pakistan are now converting into economic and commercial relations. Through the Pakistani port "Gwadar", China can get the most suitable and short route to reach Central Asia and Middle Eastern countries.

China offer \$46 billion investment in energy and infrastructure to Pakistan was major topic of concern in news and editorials of Pakistani newspapers. The print media described it as a plan is to build an epic trade super-highway, the likes of which has never been seen in South

Asia. These Chinese funded networks of roads, railways and pipelines, expand Chinese trade and transport links across Central and South Asia. Regarding investment, the news reports also mentioned that \$15.5 billion worth of coal, wind, solar and hydroelectric projects would come online with Chinese help by 2017.

Undoubtedly, Pak-China relations are very old but this visit makes the two countries strategic relations to its peak. In some news articles, the investment is taken as a positive act of Chinese government, which never deserted or betrayed Pakistan. It was said in an article that these 51 contracts worth of 45 billion dollars are unconditional, whereas America aid to Pakistan has always have some conditions or demands.

Some news reports also discussed the issue that the 3,000 km network will cut several thousand kilometers off the transport route for oil from the Middle East to China, bypassing rival India. Overall the network of 3,000 km from the Pakistani port of Gwadar to the western Chinese city of Kashgar, was seen an opportunity for Pakistan in majority of the news articles. As in one column of daily Nation, the writer described, "The mega project will ties us to China much tighter than we are tied to even Saudi Arabia".

However, it is not that Pakistani newspapers just praised the visit; there were point to ponder also. For example, in one editorial in Dawn, the editor stated that the progress in CPEC on Pakistan's part depended on the proper understanding of the opportunity and performing the deeds required on our side. Because, there are 60 countries in "One Belt, One Road", and Pakistan is not the only country that can serve as bridge. The journalists show reservations concerning Pakistan cooperation with India or vice versa, as there is history of tensed relation between two countries in the past.

Focus on promotion of stability and creation of right economic environment for the promised environment to operate in were seen as requirements on Pakistan end. Print media was also concerned about the nature of this investment and the attached terms and conditions. In express tribune, the editor was interested to know who would be the prime beneficiary of the Silk Road project and said that China would get more advantage so China should construct the road on its own expenses.

The concerns about environmental pollution, and displacement of people were also discussed in some news stories. Both Daily Times and The News highlighted the issues regarding lack of common linguistic, religious or cultural ties between Pakistan and China, and said that linguistic, religious or cultural exchange were also required to solidify the 'iron-brother-friends-forever' fluff bubble. Almost all newspapers also discussed the transparency in project costs as a key issue, and forwarded their suggestions for the government.

Conclusions

The road to China is indeed a fortuitous opportunity for Pakistan and the need of the hour is for the leadership to get maximum mileage out it. Pakistani print media also supported CPEC initiative optimistically, but they also showed the concerns regarding what Pakistan should do to make this initiative a success. However, there is a

consensus in media reporting that a positive image of Pakistan is emerged after the visit of Chinese president. After 9/11, Pakistan is considered as a heaven for terrorist, but this visit and investment changed Pakistan to be a shelter for Chinese investment of billions of dollars. Now, other countries also feel a trust and confidence to invest in Pakistan. This investment means a lot for Pakistan, but it does bring a colossal responsibility concerning issues related to infrastructure, political crisis, instability, and security situations.

The journalists advised in the articles that in addition to manufacturing, Pakistan can request assistance and learn a couple of critical soft skills from China. The current Chinese president is building a reputation for going after big-ticket corruption in a serious way. Contrarily, Pakistan's each experiment in curtailing corruption to date has been an abject failure. It would be extremely beneficial for Pakistan to request expertise from China to eradicate corruption in Pakistan. Secondly, China has been successful in operating its state-owned enterprises profitably for many decades. Once again, it would be useful to request China to provide guidance and policy dictates for the management of Pakistan's loss making public sector. On the part of China, lack of cultural, religious and linguistic understanding should be met with proper measures.

The success of the Chinese vision of revival of the old silk route and CPEC undoubtedly depends on peace and stability in Pakistan and related areas, and greater focus is required to make this happen. Peace in Pakistan and Afghanistan would facilitate and open up new avenues of trade and economic cooperation with the Central Asian states and the realization of the trans-regional projects like TAPI gas pipeline and CASA-1000. Media of both Pakistan and China should work together eliminate the instability to make the dream of CPEC come true.

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