



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Impact of Chinese Media Initiatives on China's Nation Branding in Pakistan: A Soft Power Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

This research analyzes the effect of Chinese media efforts on China's nation branding in Pakistan from the perspective of soft power theory. It attempts to explore how media efforts influence Pakistani attitudes towards China's economic and cultural policies. China has been actively using its state-owned media, such as China Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua News, and China Daily, to shape Pakistani public opinion. This study delves into the ways these media present China-Pakistan relations, specifically in light of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The research took a mixed-method design with the incorporation of qualitative content analysis on Chinese media representation and a quantitative survey of 500 Pakistani samples. Media stories, reception among the audience, and the performance of soft power campaigns were subjects of study. Findings reveal that Chinese media have had a positive impact on Pakistani attitudes towards China, especially in economic collaboration and cultural diplomacy. However, there is skepticism towards China's political motives and economic power. Survey findings reveal that 75% of the respondents have a positive view of Chinese investment, but 35% are skeptical about media images.

**KEYWORDS** Soft Power, Nation Branding, Chinese Media, Pakistan, CPEC, Public Diplomacy

**Introduction**

Joseph Nye (2004) defines soft power as "the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal instead of coercion." Unlike hard power, which depends on military or economic sanctions, soft power originates from a nation's culture, political values, and foreign policies, which are considered legitimate or morally authoritative. The core of soft power is not about forcing compliance, but rather winning hearts and minds, getting others to want what you want. It has been found to be an important aspect of international relations in a world that is indeed globalized and characterized by ideological competition in an increasingly freer world (Nye, 2011). Countries use soft power not only to promote their foreign policy interests but also to improve their ranking in the international hierarchy and in sustaining partnerships.

In particular, China's foreign policy is central to soft power concerning the diplomatic and economic partnerships of the country with its strategic partners. In the last two decades, China has pressed for outward global soft power projection through initiatives like Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and now Global Development Initiative (GDI). This strategy is, at its core, built around China's relationship with Pakistan, which constitutes an enormous socio-economic as well as geopolitical activity in the context of the latter's strategic location (Ain, Muzaffar & Yaseen, 2024). Pakistan is a significant ally for China's foothold, both economically and politically. This partnership can be considered part of the CPEC, a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Wolf

(2020). Worth an estimated \$62 billion investment, Pakistan's infrastructure will be transformed, offering job opportunities and improving trade routes to the benefit of both countries. CPEC has evolved into a platform for China to exercise soft power, leveraging its economic advantages to craft a narrative of collaborative growth and shared economic success.

The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by China in 2013, is a global development strategy that delivers connectivity and cooperation among more than 130 countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Americas. While its principal goal is to foster economic integration, the BRI is also a critical component of China's soft power strategy. Through programs such as the CPEC, China aims to project itself as a philanthropic player who cares about the betterment and benefits of others. This is accomplished by focusing on narratives of mutual cooperation, reciprocal benefit, and cultural exchange (Thussu, 2018). For Pakistan, which is economically constrained, Chinese investment and the chance for infrastructure development have been particularly beneficial. However, western critics argue that its true motive is to exert strategic influence over Pakistan, making it an economic and political ally in the region (Rahim, Khan, & Muzaffar, 2018; Shah & Abbas, 2021).

China's state media serve as a significant channel for this soft power projection. Channels such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Daily, and Xinhua News Agency have helped create positive stories about China's foreign policy and economic initiatives. By setting the narrative, China aims to shape public opinion in its allied countries, such as Pakistan. The message rests on shared values, historical ties, and common interests, particularly in connection with projects such as CPEC. For example, the Chinese media tends to portray the economic benefits that accrue from Chinese investments in Pakistan as part of a larger effort to promote regional stability and prosperity (Zhao, 2013). These media channels strive to give a good impression and create goodwill among Pakistani viewers, as they mention positively about Pakistani nation and assert that China stands for Pakistan's development.

The two countries have strengthened their economic links, and soft power projection has increased in Pakistan over the past several years, emphasizing the importance of soft power in their bilateral relations.

State-owned channels in China provide wide coverage of CPEC by Pakistani media, underlining the strategic value of soft power in bilateral relations. Normally, Chinese media houses in Pakistan report on matters such as economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and social development, but avoid reporting sensitive political issues. Such selective reporting often portrays China as a benevolent neighbor solely committed to Pakistan's prosperity and progress (Thussu, 2018). To illustrate, documentaries and reports on the CPEC, especially in relation to infrastructural benefits and job creation in Pakistan, are frequently presented by the CGTN, thus reinforcing a good perception of Chinese investments. (Wolf, 2020).

However, despite China's efforts at "soft power projection" through its portrayal in Pakistani media, some uncertainties about the political goals and long-term effects of its investments remain. Western Scholars contend that China's expanding soft power projection in Pakistan, facilitated through initiatives such as CPEC, may result in economic dependence, potentially diminishing Pakistan's strategic autonomy (Ahmed, 2021). These concerns are particularly important in light of China's soft power projection in the region. Despite these criticisms, most in Pakistan see China as a faithful ally that contrasts sharply with Western countries, which are often viewed as less supportive of Pakistan's economic development (Shah & Abbas, 2021).

This paper seeks to answer the following question: What is the role of the Chinese media in shaping public perception in Pakistan towards China's economic and cultural policies? This is of particular relevance because knowing how soft power is exercised in practice, particularly in regions where there is a considerable economic stake for China, will help analyze whether the soft power strategies exhibited by the Chinese media shape perceptions and build influence in Pakistan.

To answer this question, this study uses a mixed-method approach combining qualitative content analysis of Chinese media messages with quantitative data obtained through surveys of Pakistani audiences. This dual approach allows for an understanding of how Chinese media messages are constructed and then received. Qualitative analysis focuses more on finding common themes and narratives of information in the Chinese media coverage of Pakistan on topics involving economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and social development. Meanwhile, data from the quantitative survey provide some insight into how the Pakistani audience views these narratives and whether such representations have any effect on them.

This study's theoretical framework is based on Joseph Nye's soft power theory, which emphasizes attraction and persuasion in international relations (Nye, 2004). Thus, it focuses on how China exercises its media to portray an image that is ideal for and to serve its interests in Pakistan without coercive action. The applicable theory of soft power in China-Pakistan relations is the interlinking of efforts towards economic collaboration in building cultural and social relations. In this light, the theory upon which this study is based is the agenda-setting theory, which contends that media functions by having a strong impact on opinion by setting priority issues in the talk about particular information (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The content selection strategies concluded that Chinese media strives to shape what is important for Pakistani viewers to believe about China's role in the region.

This research explores how China leverages its government media to shape Pakistani public opinion and bolster its soft power through carefully crafted narratives focusing on economic collaboration and cultural connections between the two brotherly neighboring nations. The increasing soft power projection of China on the world in pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative makes such an understanding even more important. Such findings will contribute to a better understanding of how media can be mobilized as a tool in the pursuit of nation branding and soft-power projection for the good in international relations, bearing impacts on policymakers interested in the link between media, soft power, and geopolitical strategy.

## **Literature Review**

### **Soft Power Theory**

Soft power, defined by Joseph Nye in 2004, is one of the basic international relations theories that focuses on attraction rather than coercion. Soft power is built upon having the country shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, rather than force or economic incentives, as stated by Nye. This kind of influence draws on three primary sources: culture, political values, and foreign policies perceived as legitimate or ethically persuasive. Unlike hard power, which is frequently related to military power or economic coercion, soft power attempts to inspire admiration, trust, and pleasant feelings (Nye, 2011).

Nye (2004) contended that in such a free flow information world, where popular opinion can have a say in international outcomes, states need to attract others through culture, values, and policies. Thus, an added national soft power influences foreign populations to take the side of a government's interests and achieve strategic goals

without direct conflict. Soft power relies on subtlety; it depends more on persuasion than on forceful imposition in the long run (Nye, 2011; Shambaugh, 2015). This theory remains relevant in the world today, as it continues to play a significant role in the competition over ideas and information across the world in forming geopolitical landscapes.

### **Nation Branding and Media Influence**

Nation branding refers to the strategic communication of a country's image, which makes the country more appealing globally (Anholt 2010). It is a collective effort to influence the perceptions of a nation by foreign communities, while promoting tourism, investment, and smooth diplomatic relations. Countries such as China have increasingly relied on national branding to promote a positive impression, particularly in regions where the country has significant economic interests (Fan, 2010). Nation branding transcends mere advertising campaigns; rather, it also involves utilizing media, cultural exchange, and public diplomacy to build a consistent and captivating national story.

Media is fundamental to nation branding by means of narratives that influence public perception. As Nye (2011) suggests, the strategic manipulation of the media will empower the concept of soft power in configuring how the values and policies of a country are perceived abroad. So far, China has been very efficient at using its state media to project positive stories and counter negative portrayals by Western media (Thussu, 2018). Most media narratives in South Asia, where China has been investing in infrastructure and development projects, are about mutual benefits and how local economies are likely to benefit from the investments of Chinese entities (Ahmed & Mustafa, 2022). Using a discourse of shared development, China aimed to be seen as a benevolent partner in the pursuit of soft power.

### **Chinese Media Strategy in Pakistan**

China's policy of creating soft power in Pakistan forms an integral part of its stronger socio-economic pursuit in South Asia. China and Pakistan have initiated to go deeper into the region by collaborating with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which is a main flagship aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As of 2020, the value of CPEC is more than \$62 billion, and it is intended to be used for developing infrastructure, the energy sector, and trade routes within Pakistan. Thus, it brings the two nations more closer economically. Beyond its economic value, however, the CPEC serves as an instrument for China to project soft power projection through a narrative of shared prosperity and growth.

In this regard, the Chinese government utilizes state-controlled media outlets such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), China Daily, and Xinhua News Agency as vehicles for promising stories on its investments in Pakistan. All of these media channels highlight friendship, cooperation, and development, while projecting China as a reliable partner in Pakistan's economic progress (Zhao, 2013). As an example, CGTN periodically features 'success stories' regarding CPEC projects, demonstrating how the investments are generating employment opportunities and up-gradation of infrastructure in Pakistan (Thussu, 2018). By adopting these investments into a mutually beneficial one, Chinese media is aiming at cultivating goodwill among Pakistani audiences to spread harmony and brotherhood.

Studies have observed that Chinese media initiatives in Pakistan are crafted in such a manner that cultural diplomacy and the historical links between the two countries are highlighted. For instance, the media of the PRC communicates a lot with the nation about exchange programs for culture, joint academic work, and scholarships for Pakistani students to garner feelings of fraternity between the people of Pakistan and China (Ahmed and Mustafa 2022). This policy is part of an overall BRI strategy that seeks to establish

long-term relations in strategic areas by incorporating not only economic but also cultural and social interests.

Despite these socio-economic efforts, critics are concerned about the potential implications of China's growing soft power projection. While many appreciate the economic benefits of Chinese investments, critics argue that these projects may lead to economic dependency, compromise Pakistan's sovereignty, and give China significant leverage over Pakistan's internal affairs (Shah & Abbas, 2021). Such apprehensions demand more scrutiny of the manner in which China wields its soft power in Pakistan by discussing its media initiatives during its successes and times of limitations.

### **Public Diplomacy and Media Influence**

Communication studies have established that the media plays a role in public diplomacy. Public diplomacy refers to the process of shaping foreign public and international relations through information dissemination and cultural exchanges. Therefore, the agenda-setting theory developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) is crucial. According to this theory, the media does not tell people what to think about but what to think about, thus influencing the public agenda. Media can shape public perception and influence policy preferences not by telling them what to think of but by selectively highlighting certain issues and downplaying others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The agenda-setting approach of China in its media outreach to Pakistan can be highlighted by the fact that it has centered its narrative on the bright sides of the CPEC and plays down any form of controversy surrounding the project (Zhao, 2013). As such, through projecting CPEC's socio-economic dividends, Chinese media presents the endeavors to Pakistani viewers, who view China as a helpful ally committed to Pakistan's progress. For instance, documentary films and news reports that Chinese media telecasts related to CPEC initiatives highlight the infrastructural benefits and employment produced (Wolf, 2020). This type of soft power projection shapes Pakistani public opinion and tends to keep the Pakistani masses inclined towards China's socio-economic initiatives.

However, skeptics argue that despite such media discourses, critics still, to a certain extent, appear skeptical about China's long-term intention with regard to soft power projection. While the Chinese and Pakistani media celebrates cooperation over the economy as well as the cultural sphere, some Pakistani scholars and policymakers along with western scholars have apprehensions that economic dependence on China may actually undermine Pakistan's strategic position in long-run (Ahmed, 2021). Additionally, there are concerns about the borrowing and return of loans, which holds that taking on too much debt from China could result in both political and financial instability (Shah & Abbas, 2021).

### **Theoretical Framework: Soft Power Theory**

A study of China's media strategy in Pakistan fits the theory of soft power propounded by Joseph Nye. While based on non-coercive means, Nye's theory explains how China uses media in attempting to create a favorable image and enhance its soft power. According to Nye (2004), the best form of soft power will be one that relates to a country's strategic interests, in addition to resonating with the values and aspirations of the intended target audience. In Pakistan, China used media as a soft tool projecting an image of friendship and mutual development, which resonates with the aspirations of Pakistan regarding economic growth and stability (Thussu, 2018).

In addition, agenda-setting theory can further elucidate the role of the Chinese media in shaping public opinion in Pakistan. According to some western critics, China broadcasts news items - like the benefits of CPEC and the historical connections between

China and Pakistan - while playing down potential negative news related to it, Chinese media have successfully determined what Pakistani audiences consider important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This enhances China's soft power through its socioeconomic initiatives across the region, particularly in South Asia.

In sum, the literature reveals that China's soft power strategy in Pakistan is multifaceted and utilizes economic dividends, cultural diplomacy, and media influence to shape public perceptions. China expects to project a kind of narrative of itself as committed to being a good partner to Pakistan if it focuses on mutually beneficial narratives and derives suitable media content. Regardless of the success of this policy, there are many concerns by western critics regarding the implications of the increase in China's soft power in Pakistan, especially economic dependence and strategic autonomy.

The application of soft power theory along with agenda-setting theory provides a formidable framework through which one may understand the impact by Chinese media on shaping Pakistani public opinion. Both the positive consequences and possible fallouts of China's media influence over Pakistan are discussed in this paper, while analyzing the success of these soft power initiatives.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Nature of Study**

A mixed-methods descriptive and analytical study was conducted.

### **Population and Sample Size**

The sample consisted of 500 Pakistani respondents from varied backgrounds.

### **Data Collection**

**Content Analysis:** Analyzed Chinese media reports between 2019 and 2024.

**Survey:** Participants answered Likert-scale questions evaluating perceptions of Chinese media.

**Interviews:** Interviews with media professionals and policymakers.

### **Data Analysis**

**Qualitative:** Thematic content analysis.

**Quantitative:** Statistical analysis with the use of chi-square tests and correlation analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants gave informed consent, which included confidentiality and voluntary participation.

A mixed-methods approach was used to investigate how the Chinese media, particularly through CPEC and BRI is impacting public perception in Pakistan regarding China's socio-economic and cultural programs. Qualitative and quantitative research techniques were used to analyze the content and impact of Chinese media using both primary and secondary data sources. This study was anchored in the soft power theory of Joseph Nye, which would guide the understanding of how China is using its media for non-coercive influence, creating harmony among people of both nations.

## **Research Design**

The nature of the research design is descriptive and analytical-empirical, focused on understanding the mechanisms through which Chinese media initiatives positively shape perception in Pakistan regarding China. It finds answers to the central research question: How does the Chinese media influence public perception in Pakistan about China's economic and cultural initiatives?

### **There are two key components of this study**

- Content Analysis of Chinese media, but with a special focus on CGTN, China Daily, and other Chinese state news platforms.
- A public opinion survey to assess the perceptions of Pakistani viewers regarding China and its policies, particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its role in facilitating socio-economic development in Pakistan.

## **Data Collection**

### **Content Analysis**

Content analysis was used to systematically analyze the messages of Chinese state media. This research examines how Chinese media frame discourses about CPEC and China-Pakistan ties and China's strategy of soft power. Contents to be analyzed include the following:

- Channel Programs of Television Channels, such as CGTN, and other Chinese media houses with extensive viewership in Pakistan.
- Article in Print media and Online articles of China Daily, Xinhua News Agency, and other Chinese media agencies, which regularly print content about the CPEC, China's foreign policies, and initiatives that promote cross-cultural dialogue.

The time frame for content analysis was the last five years, that is between 2019-2024. In this period, CPEC and China's soft power initiatives became significantly important in both China and Pakistan. The themes on which the content will be analyzed are as follows:

- Characterization of China as a benevolent partner.
- Framing of CPEC as mutually beneficial to both China and Pakistan.
- Importance given to the common cultural relationships between China and Pakistan.
- History of China's initiatives in Pakistan's economic development: All media messages were coded based on the themes mentioned above. Content analysis also considered content tone, either positive or negative, or neutral towards the action of Chinese motives.

### **Survey Research**

A survey with Pakistani audiences were conducted to gather quantifiable statistics regarding their perceptions of China and the media's role in forming these perceptions. The primary goals to be surveyed include.

- Public attitudes towards Chinese economic initiatives (such as the CPEC).
- Perceptions of Chinese culture and cultural exchange.
- Views on China's and the country's role in Pakistan's progress.

The web-based online survey was applied to a balanced sample of 500 from across Pakistan, thereby taking diverse samples of different age groups, gender, educational levels, and geographical spread. The questions for the survey would be closed and open-ended, such as Likert items designed to measure the level of agreement with statements such as the following:

- "China's participation in Pakistan's economy through CPEC is good."
- "Chinese media gives an accurate portrayal of the relationship between China and Pakistan."
- Chinese soft power increases in Pakistan on the economic investment account.

### **Interviews**

A survey complements in-depth interviews with experts in the areas of international relations, media studies, and China-Pakistan relations. The interviews provide qualitative insights into how experts view the role of Chinese media in shaping public opinion and soft power. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions that allowed further exploration of themes related to the influence of China's media.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Qualitative Analysis**

Thematic analysis was conducted on the qualitative data collected from the content analysis and interviews. This entails:

- Identifying recurring themes and narratives within the media.
- Categorizing the data based on themes generated by China's soft power approach, CPEC, and cultural diplomacy.
- Tone analysis of media content to identify the extent to which it influences perceptions of China.

The interviews were transcribed and coded for common views and expert opinions on the role of the Chinese media in formulating public opinion regarding China within Pakistan. Thematic coding was used to identify the most important areas of concern or appreciation, such as dependency on Chinese investment and perception regarding long-term intentions.

#### **Quantitative Analysis**

Quantitative data for the survey were analyzed through statistical techniques regarding testing exposure to media by Chinese and respondents' perceptions of China. The distribution of responses would be presented by descriptive statistics, but inferential statistics would explore the significance of the relationship between demographic variables and media exposure through chi-square tests and correlation analysis. This



analysis will allow us to determine whether there is a statistical correlation between media consumption and positive or negative perceptions of China.

### **Qualitative and Quantitative Integration**

Integration of the qualitative findings with quantitative insights into the research will enable an all-embracing understanding of the effects of Chinese media on Pakistani audiences. Through content analysis, one would find out the messages Chinese media have been spreading, while data from a survey provided an understanding of how these messages are received by the public in Pakistan. Interviews would add more depth to the analysis through expert views on the effectiveness and challenges of China's soft power strategy in Pakistan.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Data validity was ensured by employing triangular research tools, including media content, questionnaires, and interviews. With that, it was possible to achieve a complete perspective on the research question. The reliability of the survey instrument will be assessed by conducting a pilot survey with a small sample size for adjustments of clarity and accuracy in questions.

### **Ethical Issues**

This research will observe ethical standards by safeguarding confidentiality concerning the population who answered the questionnaires and interviewees. The participants will be notified of the purpose of the research and will volunteer on their own. Informed consent will be obtained, and participants will be granted the right to withdraw at any moment. In addition, the data in any media content analyzed will be attributed to its original sources with proper citations.

### **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of Chinese media in shaping perceptions in Pakistan, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- This study focused primarily on Chinese media, which do not represent the variety of influences from the media that shape public opinion in Pakistan.
- The sample surveyed may not reveal in-depth views from all Pakistani demographics due to its representation.
- This study does not fully discuss how and to what extent fast-evolving social media platforms influence public opinion more dynamically than traditional media, and this is open to future investigation.

The methodology adopted in this research is well designed and provides an in-depth examination of how Chinese media mold public perception in Pakistan concerning China's economic and cultural initiatives. This study will address this issue by drawing upon a combination of content analysis, survey research, and expert interviews to present an effectually nuanced perspective on the strategy of China's soft power and the eventual potential for long-term influence in Pakistan. This will contribute to a much wider discourse on media diplomacy and the use of soft power around the world.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Demographics of Respondents**

- **Gender:** 58% male, 42% female.
- **Age Groups:** 18-25 (35%), 26-40 (40%), 41+ (25%).
- **Education Level:** Undergraduate (50%), Graduate (30%), Postgraduate (20%).

**Table 1**  
**Survey Responses on Perceptions of Chinese Media Content in Pakistan**

| Question  | Positive Response (%) | Negative Response (%) |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Do you perceive Chinese investments positively due to media coverage? | 75%                   | 25%                   |
| Do you trust the information presented by Chinese state media?        | 65%                   | 35%                   |
| Has Chinese media content improved your opinion of China?             | 70%                   | 30%                   |
| Do you believe China's media influences public opinion in Pakistan?   | 80%                   | 20%                   |

**Interpretation:** Most of the respondents perceive Chinese investments positively, in relation to their projection in Chinese media, but, at the same time, there is a considerable segment that questions its validity.

**Table 2**  
**Content Analysis of Chinese Media Coverage in Pakistan**

| Theme                | Frequency of Coverage (%) | Key Quotes  |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Economic Cooperation | 50%                       | "CPEC will transform Pakistan's economic landscape" (CGTN, 2023).             |
| Cultural Diplomacy   | 30%                       | "China and Pakistan share a rich cultural heritage" (China Daily, 2022).      |
| Political Alignment  | 10%                       | "China respects Pakistan's sovereignty and partnership" (Global Times, 2023). |
| Social Development   | 10%                       | "Chinese aid supports Pakistan's social sector growth" (Xinhua News, 2023).   |

The thrust of Chinese media focuses more on economic cooperation. Cultural diplomacy is another significant thrust. Political narratives are minimal, showing strategic efforts in non-controversial themes to build soft power.

The results of the survey show that the Chinese media influence Pakistani public opinion almost perfectly in advancing economic cooperation. However, this presentation, after discourse analysis, shows that although Chinese media content is appreciated, queries regarding China's political intentions prevail. Indeed, this indicates that soft power derives its influence through culture and economy, but lacks political capabilities (Shambaugh, 2015).

## Conclusion

China's soft power strategy in Pakistan is largely executed through Chinese media, with a focus on projecting a positive image through high-lighting cooperation, mainly socio-economic cooperation, and cultural diplomacy. The key element of this strategy was the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a massive infrastructure initiative aimed at strengthening bilateral ties. Positioning China as a development partner that is not just investing in the future of Pakistan but also contributing to its long-term growth, the Chinese media has been using various mediums, such as the China Global Television Network (CGTN), Xinhua, and China Daily, to report the benefits of CPEC. These media representations have been successful in shaping the perceptions of CPEC as a mutually beneficial project, bringing much-needed critical infrastructure and employment opportunities to Pakistan, thereby fostering Pakistani citizens' positive sentiments towards China (Thussu, 2018; Zhao, 2013).

Although such cases are seen despite this, the analysis concluded that Chinese media efforts have positively shaped public opinion to a great extent, especially with regard to economic benefits from CPEC. However, some reservations about China's broader regional goals persist. Most Pakistani citizens appreciate the economic growth generated from Chinese investments, but a few have expressed cautious curiosity about the long-term dynamics, particularly in terms of sovereignty, partnership, and mutual influence. Others criticize the fact that although China's economic assistance is well accepted, it is making Pakistan increasingly dependent on Chinese goods and, therefore, results in a mildly disproportionate relationship. In this scenario, there are some perceptions that China's economic engagement could subtly influence Pakistan's internal and external decision-making. (Shah & Abbas, 2021).

This scepticism underscores the importance of China refining its soft power approach to build trust and better communicate its narratives. Bringing Nye's (2004) soft power theory into application helps illustrate both the potentiality and limitation of non-coercive influence in international relations. Although the use of media by China to create good stories has become a good tool for soft power, the theory postulates that for soft power to be most effective, it must align with the values and concerns of the target population. In this scenario, although Pakistanis acknowledge the benefits of Chinese economic initiatives, there remains a cautious outlook regarding the possibility of political influence.

However, China could consider enhancing its media presence to further solidify its soft power projection in Pakistan and alleviate the political concerns that contribute to some uncertainties about its initiatives. Such clear and open communication about strategic objectives could help ease concerns that China's investments in Pakistan are part of a broader geopolitical initiatives to influence mildly or in some way the neighboring country's resources. This would also help counter the negative perceptions fostered by political adversaries of both China and Pakistan in the region.

In addition, the consumption of more localized content that appeals to Pakistani culture and value systems can enhance the comparative rapport and attraction attached to Chinese media. For example, it would be apt to focus on local progress in the education and healthcare sectors and environmental quality improvement resulting from CPEC projects.

Furthermore, educational, cultural exchange and technology transfer programs will also provide opportunities for interpersonal relations between the citizens of both countries. Some of these exchanges could include scholarships to students for study in either country, collaborative research projects, and cultural events all aimed at increasing mutual understanding and respect. This would add a human face to the relationship, making the Pakistanis familiar with China not just as a political and economic counterpart but as a friendly neighbor.

In the era of digital media, the role of social media platforms in amplifying or counteracting these narratives is gaining greater importance. The soft power projection of social media on public opinion concerning CPEC and China's role in Pakistan could be explored as an area of future research. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become powerful instruments for disseminating information and opinions to a large audience, often countering the narratives presented by mainstream media. China may reach a younger audience more effectively and even counterbalance the negative perceptions created online through the incorporation of social media into its soft power strategy.

## **Recommendations**

### **More Transparency in Media Accounts**

Chinese media must take greater care in presenting stories of China-Pakistan relations. Equally representing both the achievements and failures of CPEC would reinforce credibility and trust among Pakistani viewers.

### **Local Production of Content**

Chinese media must consider the production of more localized content that appeals to Pakistani viewers. This includes representing Pakistan's cultural values, traditions, and local success stories due to Chinese initiatives.

### **Increased Engagement through Social Media**

Chinese media needs to expand its presence on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to interact with younger populations in Pakistan and combat misinformation or skepticism.

### **Development of Educational and Cultural Exchange Programs**

More scholarships for Pakistani students, collaborative research initiatives, and cultural exchange programs will further improve people-to-people connections and boost China's soft power.

### **Diversification of Media Coverage**

Whereas economic cooperation is still a prominent theme in Chinese media, attention should be devoted to other areas like technology collaborations, sustainable environment, and health programs.

### **Independent Media Monitoring and Evaluation**

Setting up independent think tanks or research centers to assess Chinese media's impact and effectiveness in Pakistan would yield desirable insights and enhance strategy formulation.

### **Bilingual Media Content**

In order to maximize reach, Chinese media need to produce more Urdu and other local Pakistani language content to raise accessibility and relevance to a broader audience.

### **Building Soft Power through People-Focused Storytelling**

Rather than emphasizing only infrastructure developments, Chinese media need to feature how such projects affect ordinary Pakistanis and present stories of economic empowerment, employment generation, and social progress.

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