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# **CPEC and BRI Nexus**

## **Perspectives on Economy, Politics, Culture and Environment**

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## **Tourism, CPEC, and Security in Pakistan: Threats and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

The chapter highlights issues concerning tourism and security in the context of CPEC. Due to attacks on laborers and Chinese workers at several CPEC sites, the social life of Chinese workers in Pakistan has been disrupted, causing a negative perception of the country among expatriates and tourists. External interferences have also been a matter of concern. Moreover, as a result of security concerns, various CPEC projects have been halted. Besides, what is development if it is rooted in the grievances and deprivation of the local population? The chapter, therefore, is an attempt to understand the nexus of tourism, security, bilateral relations, and CPEC. Data for this small-scale study was collected through questionnaires filled in by 80 Pakistani men and women. The participants had generally positive responses towards tourism in the context of CPEC. They showed confidence that CPEC could improve tourism in the country and would help boost stability and prosperity in Pakistan. However, the participants also pointed out concerns related to the complex nature of the project and its outcomes, local Pakistani people's rights, lack of awareness among local Pakistani people, terrorist attacks on Chinese people, political instability in Pakistan, and a few Chinese groups'

involvement in fraudulent activities in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** Tourism, Safety, CPEC, infrastructural development, Local Pakistanis' rights

## **Introduction**

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the investment of about \$62 billion to develop the infrastructure of Pakistan through Special Economic Zones, energy production, and mass transit. CPEC is one of the best ways for the development of the underprivileged regions to concentrate on the investments in the vital areas like roads, trades, energy, and communications (Riaz, 2024b). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connects China's Xinjiang region to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, spanning several key locations across Pakistan. Gwadar Port in Balochistan serves as the strategic endpoint and a major trade hub, while Karachi, Pakistan's financial center, plays a critical role in trade and infrastructure development. Other important locations include Quetta, due to its proximity to the Afghan border, and Lahore, a major city involved in transport and energy projects. Islamabad, the capital, is central to CPEC-related agreements and policy decisions. Peshawar is important for road infrastructure and economic zones in the northern corridor, while Gilgit-Baltistan is a crucial transit region through which the Karakoram Highway connects Pakistan to China's Xinjiang. In Lahore, the Orange Metro Line has created over 10000 jobs for local people and improved the efficiency of the citizens' commute (Dongxian, 2024). On the Chinese side, Kashgar in Xinjiang marks the starting point of this vast economic corridor. These locations are central to CPEC's network of highways, railways, energy plants, and industrial zones.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), being one of the One Belt One Road projects, will improve the quality of tourism services not only between the two countries but also with the other parts of the world, leaving long-lasting impacts on socio-economic growth. The arrival of Chinese nationals in Pakistan as the launch of CPEC in 2015 shows no signs of slowing down, given that the number of Chinese residents in Pakistan has now tripled to around 30,000 while over 71,000 Chinese tourists visited on short-term visas in 2016 (*International Crisis Group*, 2018). The CPEC was expected to enhance Pakistan's economy, with the GDP projected to grow by more than five percent by 2020, according to an IMF growth forecast. Pakistan's GDP is expected to reach \$4.2 trillion by 2050, up from the current \$988 billion. The 3,200 km-long corridor aims to connect China, the world's second-largest economy, with the Middle East and Central Asia, reducing the distance of the

alternative sea route via the Malacca Strait by 10,000 km (Shah, 2017). CPEC has the potential to boost economic activities, increase trade linkages, enhance technical cooperation, generate financial opportunities, and promote socio-cultural connectivity in the region. This inclusive project could transform the fate of regional states positively and contribute to the seamless integration of South Asia (Manzoor & Wei, 2018). Though Pakistan’s defense diplomacy has been generally successful in improving the security situation and attracting investment (Khalid & Ahmed, 2024), there is a need for Pakistan to consider the crisis perception based on different studies. It is necessary to solve the issues that need security enforcement on a global scale (Shah et al., 2022).

For China, Gwadar port is very important, as they want to expand their trade across the globe. This could only be possible through the sea. CPEC will give China direct access to the Arabian Sea. From the Gwadar port, China will be able to reach the Middle East to take advantage of rich amounts of minerals. Hence, Gwadar port will provide them with the shortest route. With the completion of CPEC, 12000 km distance will reduce for China. If Kashgar is connected to Gwadar, then China has to cover only 2242 km of distance, instead of 9000 km, to reach the Arabian Sea.

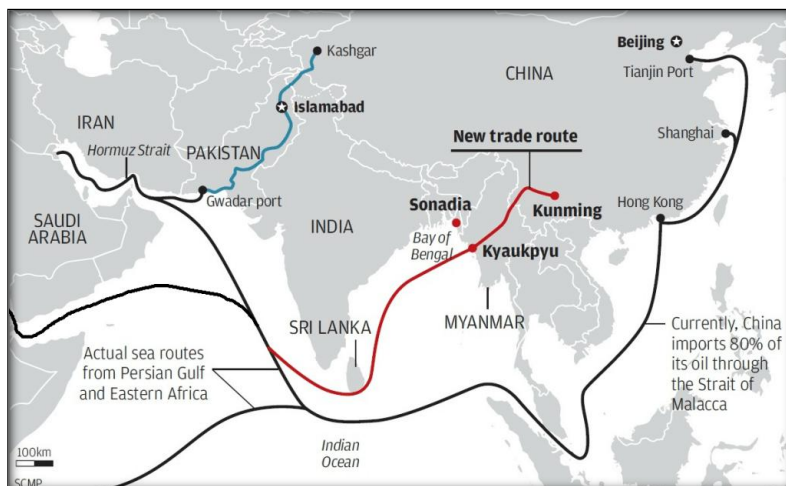


Figure 3: Trade Route of CPEC

### Pakistan, Tourism, and Terrorism

Tourism in Pakistan saw a major downfall after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Post 9/11, Pakistan joined the coalition to fight terrorism and banned all organizations that were suspected of involvement in terrorism. Pakistan has deployed 90,000 troops three times as many as fielded in Afghanistan and hosts 2.6 million Afghan refugees. Pakistan is one of the most affected

countries, particularly in social and human aspects because of terrorism (Daraz et al., 2012). “Until 2001, Pakistan had not experienced a single suicide attack but by the end of 2009, the country had endured over 200 suicide attacks (including 87 in 2009 alone) and close to 500 bomb explosions and IED detonations, largely in the Northwestern Frontier Province (NWFP) and FATA regions, closing the year with a deadly attack on a Muharram procession in Karachi. The casualty figure for the last eight years has reached a staggering 25,000 (2009 alone accounting for approx. 3025” (CRSS, 2014, p. 4). War on terror also caused a loss of approximately USD 50 million annually to the tourism industry in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province alone in Pakistan (CRSS, 2014, p. 17), and overall, a loss of USD 8 billion in addition to a deterioration in Pakistan’s ranking in travel and tourism competitiveness. Post 9/11, many started seeing Pakistan as a terrorist state, but the conditions of the country seem to have improved since 2014 (Nizami et al., 2018). Since 2018, there has been a decline in terrorist activities in Pakistan (Abbas, 2021). Pakistan barely got any tourists during 2007 to 2013 due to war on terrorism which claimed lives of hundreds of Pakistani innocent people as well as caused socio-economic instability.

In 2020, the global outbreak of coronavirus led to a sharp decrease in international arrivals to just 163,000. The tourism economy suffered severe damage, prompting PTDC to swiftly devise a recovery strategy in collaboration with stakeholders. Efforts focused on restoring tourism in Pakistan through the promotion of safe domestic tourism before gradually reopening for inbound tourism. Consequently, there has been a notable improvement, with international arrivals reaching 1.91 million in 2022 (PTDC, 2022).

As the security aspects of the country improved, the tourists have started driving into the country to see the northern areas of Pakistan, including Swat Valley, Hunza, and Gilgit Baltistan, etc. Tourism between China and Pakistan is an opportunity for promoting cultural diplomacy, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and ethical tourism practices (Riaz, 2024b). “With a population of over 1.4 billion, Chinese people have shown an increased desire for local and international travel. China’s outbound tourists spent over 255 billion dollars before the COVID-19 outbreak” (Javed, 2023). In 2019 alone, China reported approximately 169.2 million outbound departures because tourism is a Chinese way of life (Alam et al., 2021). In five years, 39000 Chinese people visited Pakistan (Gishkori, 2018). In 2019, Pakistan's tourism potential was featured on CNN and in Forbes Magazine. The award-winning travel magazine Conde Nast Traveler described Pakistan as one of the "friendliest countries on earth," with mountain scenery that is beyond anyone's wildest

imagination. There is a need to maintain the tourism attraction and preserve the heritage. Some tourist corporations have started working and encouraged the government to attract tourists to Pakistan.

Based on different sources, Gilgit Baltistan stands out as the heart of Pakistan's tourism industry, attracting millions of local and international tourists. With the progress of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the tourism industry is poised for significant growth. Pakistan boasts some of the world's highest mountains, including K2, and is blessed with beautiful landscapes, mountains, glaciers, lakes, and valleys. Moreover, it is home to five peaks above 8,000 meters and over 50 other mountains surpassing 7,000 meters. Once CPEC is operational, we can expect a surge in mountaineers visiting Pakistan from around the world (Siddique, 2021). Due to Pakistan's natural scenery and reduced travel time caused by infrastructural development, tourism industry will be boosted in Pakistan (Alam et al., 2021; Gul et al., 2023). Two major infrastructure projects, namely the Sukkur to Multan section and KKH Phase II from Havellian to Thakot, are among the most notable transportation developments, employing around ten thousand local workers. Additionally, the CPEC transit route is projected to generate demand for 800,000 vehicles over the next fifteen years, leading to the creation of secondary and tertiary jobs (Alam, 2020).

CPEC as a result of infrastructural development, including hotels, roads, and mass transit systems could prove to be an opportunity for tourism and business growth in Pakistan (Nazneen et al., 2021). However, related issues, such as trust, security, proper planning, and fair execution of the projects need to be addressed and understood because as a result of such issues, collaboration and execution of projects cannot take place. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connects Kashgar in China to the ports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, making it a significant cross-country initiative for Pakistan. For CPEC activities, Pakistan has created security forces because of emerging threats and political instability (Kugelman, 2023). Though a special security division of Pakistan Army and paramilitary forces is devoted to the security of individuals working on CPEC, yet due to the persisting security concerns, Chinese people have to experience restrictions that hinder their movement and social interaction. The CPEC project faces security threats due to factors like instability in neighboring countries, Pakistan-India Kashmir dispute, and the involvement of various countries in South Asian affairs (Shah et al., 2022).

### **Effects of CPEC on Tourism**

With the investments in Gwadar port and the influx of Chinese investments

through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), tourism within the country is expected to increase in the years ahead making it a very attractive hub for investments in the tourism and hotel business. In September 2023, Karakoram International University in Gilgit, and Fatima Jinnah Women University in Rawalpindi organized an international conference on "CPEC, Sustainable Tourism Development for Women Empowerment in Pakistan" (*International Conference on CPEC, Sustainable Tourism Development for Women Empowerment in Pakistan | Fatima Jinnah Women University, 2023*). The participants of the conference agreed that CPEC holds tremendous potential for tourism, while measures must be taken for safer, environment-friendly, and sustainable tourism in Pakistan. Nazneen et al., (2021) also reinforced that socio-cultural and environmental aspects must be considered for CPEC-driven tourism in Pakistan.

Chinese investors are interested in Pakistan's tourism sector due to the new investment opportunities arising from the CPEC projects. The road and railway connectivity between the two countries will make travel between Kashgar and Pakistan more convenient (Manzoor & Wei, 2018). As the tourism improves, technology and technical education will become more advanced, resulting in the more advanced vocational training programs for young people. In 2015, 30 million tourists visited Xinjiang province, and a delegation from Xinjiang also visited Gilgit-Baltistan to explore joint tourism and business opportunities (Ahmed, 2016).

### **CPEC, China-Pakistan Tourism, and the Threat of Terrorism**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) connects Kashgar in China to the ports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, making it a significant cross-country initiative for Pakistan. CPEC has led to academic tourism, resulting in hundreds of students, professionals, and researchers visiting China and Pakistan (Riaz, 2024a). Although CPEC is one of the major projects for the fate and development of both Pakistan and China, but the safety of this project is a matter of great concern and worry for both countries. The killing of 10 laborers on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May 2017 is one of the horrible examples (Aljazeera, 2017). In recent years, Pakistan has experienced violence and instability in the CPEC regions, and the country's security situation is of particular concern to China (Syed, 2019). Chinese nationals and projects have faced violence from militants who oppose CPEC for various reasons. External involvement in CPEC is also alarming (Khan et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2022).

Chinese media has highlighted that the security risks associated with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are mainly focused on the China-Pakistan Economic

Corridor (CPEC). Meeting Chinese security requirements calls for a comprehensive approach that goes beyond just deploying armed personnel. This entails integrated services, including security, insurance, and other components, all with associated costs. The Chinese insurance sector is recognizing the significance of this niche business. Security concerns, such as traditional security, counterterrorism, and kidnapping for ransom require insurance for Chinese businesses operating in Pakistan. Although often overlooked, specialized insurance could become a thriving sector due to the growing Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region. China's active participation in security management is also needed (Khan et al., 2024).

This chapter explores the interrelation between CPEC, tourism, and safety concerns. The primary purpose of this chapter is to highlight issues concerning tourism and security in the context of CPEC in Pakistan. The purpose of the chapter is to identify key challenges in promoting tourism in the context of CPEC and security in Pakistan. The chapter aims to pinpoint areas for improvement for the promotion of CPEC-driven tourism as well as highlight safety concerns which have impacted the locals as well as Chinese individuals living in Pakistan. It addresses the following research question:

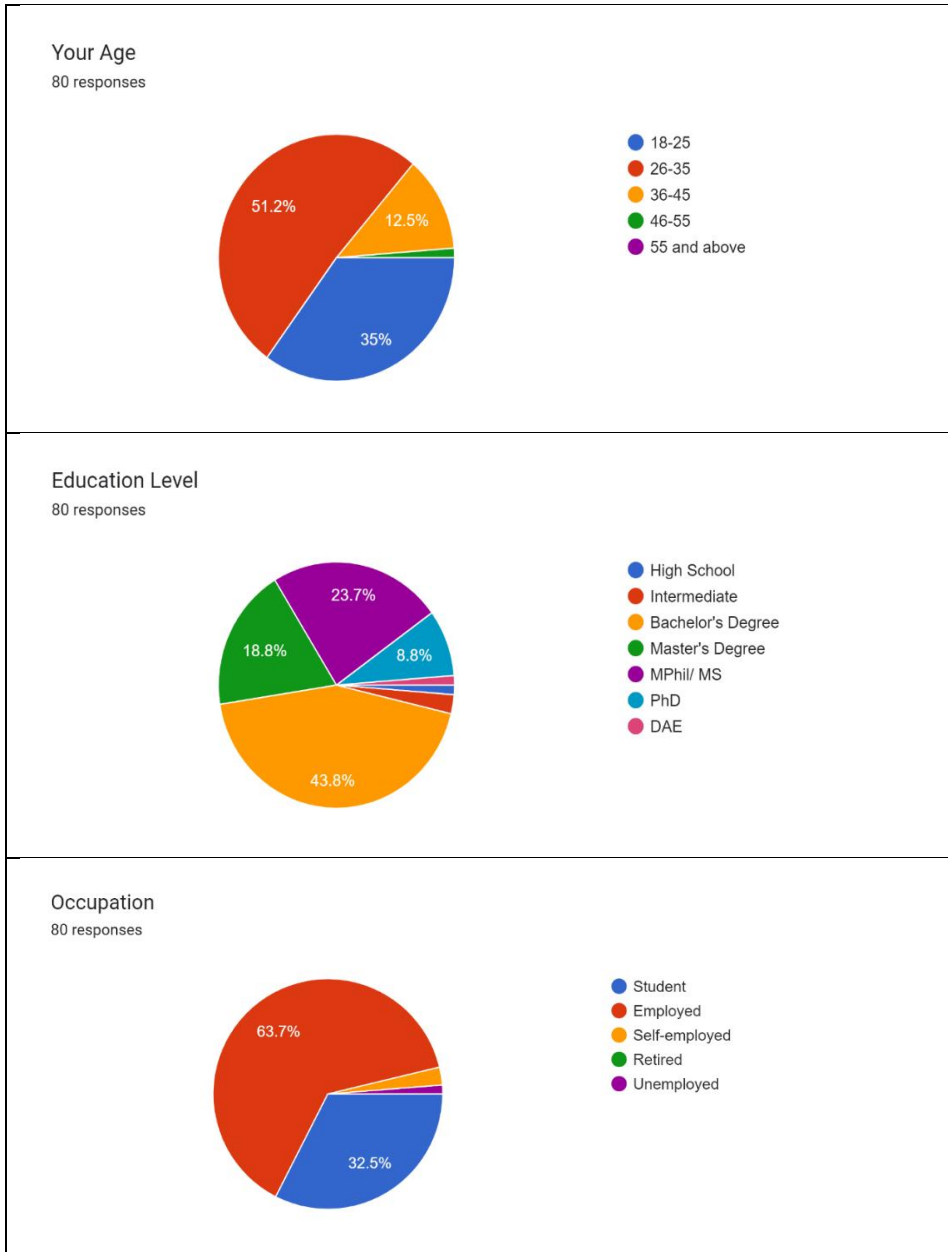
What are the key challenges and areas for improvement in promoting tourism in the context of CPEC and security in Pakistan?

The present qualitative study using voluntary response sampling technique employs a questionnaire, which was administered online, as a data collection tool. Eighty participants responded to the questionnaire which included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Although participants from all four provinces contributed, a limitation of the study is that a more diverse group, particularly with greater representation from Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, would have provided more comprehensive insights, especially given the unique security dynamics in regions like Balochistan, which are central to CPEC. However, existing studies on CPEC-driven tourism predominantly focus on Gilgit-Baltistan or the northern areas, making this study valuable for understanding perspectives from Sindh and Punjab. In addition, this study draws on the first author's interactions with a few Chinese nationals, currently employed in Pakistan, whose opinions about the security measures and their current security related challenges were sought.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Eighty Pakistani nationals, 88.8% male and 11.3% female, participated in the survey. The pie charts given in Table 1 illustrate their age, qualification, profession, and region of residence:

Table 1: Demographic Information



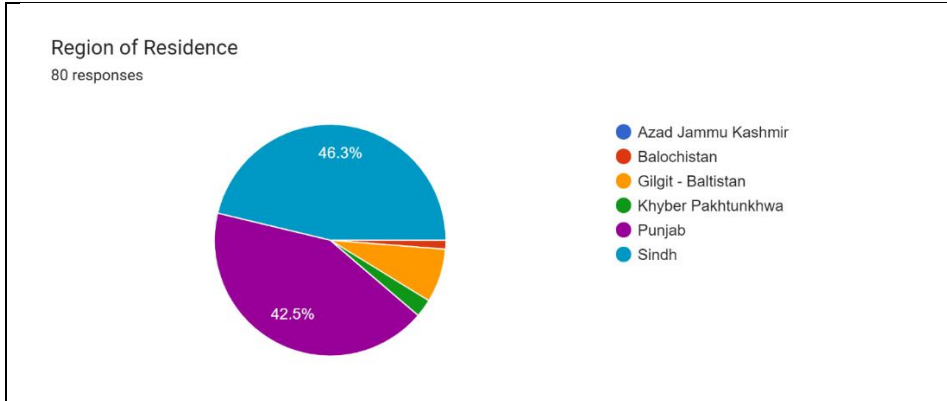


Figure 1 given in the following illustrates that 50% of them endorsed that they did observe a CPEC-related development in their region. Thirty percent of them did not see any change, while 20% were not sure.

Have you personally experienced any changes in tourism in your region since the inception of CPEC?  
80 responses

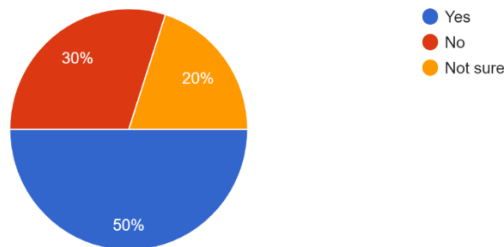


Figure 1: Pie Chart on CPEC Driven Changes in Pakistan

Most of them suggested that roads improved in their region as a result of CPEC, which could be beneficial for tourism. In addition, they suggested that hotels, new construction projects, and buses purchases from China, and mass transit system, such as Orange Line Metro were a few changes resulting from CPEC. They also noted that Pakistanis' perceptions of Chinese people in their respective regions also improved.

The participants selected the major challenges to tourism in Pakistan in the context of CPEC in the following order (Figure 2): political instability (62.5%), attacks on Chinese workers (51.2%), lack of awareness about CPEC (46.3%), lack of CPEC related benefits to local Pakistani people (43.6%), violation of locals' rights (45%), poor facilities for tourism in Pakistan (45%),

terrorist attacks in the CPEC regions (41.3%), negative international media coverage (37.5%), resistance from local liberation groups (30%), and hazards to environment and natural resources, including landscape and wildlife (25%).

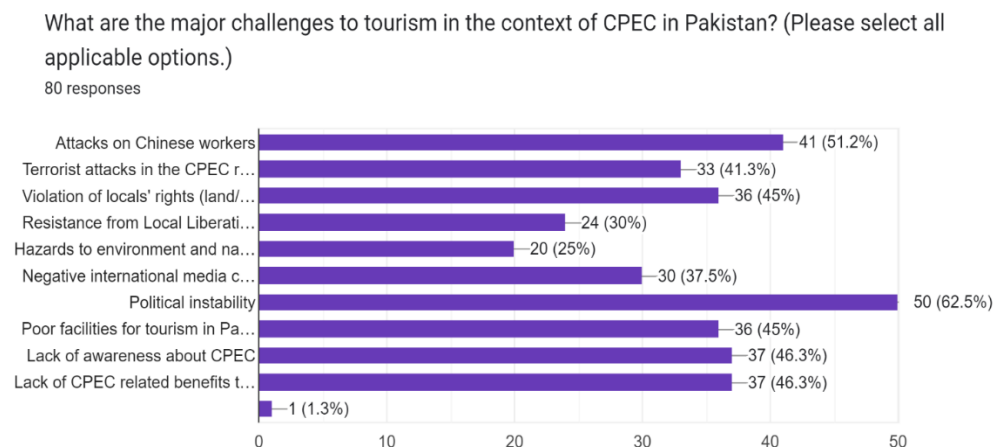


Figure 2: Major Challenges to Tourism in the Context of CPEC in Pakistan

Forty-six percent of the participants considered the possibility of external (non-Pakistani and non-Chinese) involvement in the terrorist activities related to CPEC, 38.7% remained neutral, while 15% rejected the option of external involvement in terrorist activities.

Do you think third-party (non-Pakistani, non-Chinese) groups are involved in terrorist activities related to CPEC in Pakistan?

80 responses

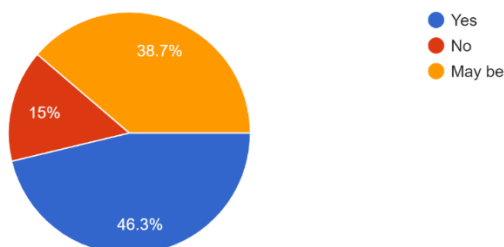


Figure 3: Participants' Perception of External Involvement in Terrorist Activities in the CPEC Regions

In the context of CPEC, 35% of the participants remained neutral about the possibility of a negative impact of Chinese individuals or organizations on

Pakistani businesses and tourism, while 28.7% agreed and 13.8% strongly agreed that certain Chinese individuals' and organizations' involvement in fraudulent activities could affect business and tourism. On the other hand, 20% disagreed. It was pertinent to ask this question because tourism, business, safety, and trust are interconnected. If Chinese people do not feel safe, they would not come to Pakistan, and if they are not considered trustworthy, they will not be welcomed. In either case, business, tourism and bilateral relations are affected.

Do you think fraudulent activities by Chinese individuals or companies are a threat to local people, businesses and tourism in Pakistan?  
80 responses

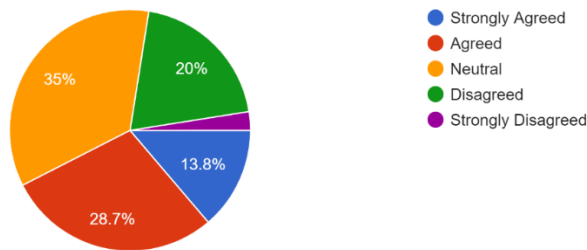


Figure 4: Perceptions Regarding Chinese Organizations

In addition to closed-ended questions, participants were asked an open-ended question to explore more about the relationship between CPEC, tourism, mutual trust, opportunities and threats in the Pakistani context. The following section highlights the perceptions, concerns, opportunities and threats shared by various participants.

1. Many participants pinpointed the value of CPEC for tourism in Pakistan. One of them noted, “CPEC is a beneficial opening for the tourism industry of Pakistan. CPEC is expected to be lucrative for tourism and travel in Pakistan. Improved roads, power infrastructure, and pipelines will make pristine tourist spots accessible. A lack of energy in Pakistan has had a negative impact on several facets of the country's economic strategy.” Another claimed the CPEC to be a “positive change for Balochistan and Pakistan's economy, tourism, organizations, and digital business, etc.” Another participant stated, “It's purely beneficial for Pakistan in improving tourism capital”.
2. Many of them highlighted the multitudinous nature of CPEC as well as the complexities surrounding it. One of the participants stated,

“CPEC's impact on Pakistan is complex, with potential benefits like economic growth and job creation, but also concerns about terrorism, mistrust, environmental degradation, and displacement of local communities”. Another supported, “Pakistan's development trajectory is influenced by various factors, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), tourism, terrorism, and mistrust. CPEC promises economic growth, job creation, and infrastructure development, but also raises concerns about debt, environmental impact, and unequal benefits distribution. Tourism has the potential to promote cultural exchange and generate revenue but faces challenges like security concerns and infrastructure limitations. Terrorism has severely impacted Pakistan's security, economy, and global reputation, while mistrust among citizens and towards institutions hinders national progress. To maximize benefits and minimize losses, Pakistan must ensure transparent decision-making, develop effective policies, invest in human capital, and promote national unity and trust-building initiatives. By addressing these challenges and leveraging opportunities, Pakistan can unlock its potential for sustainable development and prosperity”.

3. While many of them highlighted CPEC and its importance for tourism, stability, and infrastructural development as well as its role in “creating hope for the marginalized classes in Pakistani society”, most of them emphasized local Pakistanis’ rights and the need to protect them. They also stressed upon the need for creating awareness among local Pakistani people regarding the benefits of CPEC. One of them stated, “CPEC associated benefits should be reached at the grassroots level. The rights of local community should be acknowledged, and other land related disputes should be resolved. CPEC is one of the best infrastructures for Pakistan, which will reduce the lengthy route, and facilitated many people”.
4. Various participants raised various concerns regarding CPEC, tourism and related security issues. One of them asserted, “The CPEC projects have improved tourism in Gilgit Baltistan. However, terrorist attacks on Chinese engineers are negatively affecting the China and Pakistan relations”. While many of them claimed the CPEC to be a “game changer” and “life-changer”, one of them stated, “I think CEPEC is not game changer but game over and Chinese investment of 65 dollars will bring the most expensive success in the distant future”. One of them drew attention to the Chinese expatriates’ activities in Pakistan stating, “Overall, the cooperation through CPEC is beneficial and in favor of locals and Pakistan. However, as it has been asked, I would like to mention that I've seen some Chinese groups that engage

in activities in rural or underdeveloped areas of Pakistan and cause significant damage to the image of Pakistan and so to the image of China in return, affecting tourism”.

5. Suggestions: Participants made the following suggestions for tourism, safety measures, and bilateral relations in the context of CPEC:
  - a) “Addressing terrorism, mistrust, and ensuring equitable benefits are crucial for maximizing positive impacts and minimizing losses”.
  - b) “Sincere leadership that works only for the welfare of individuals who are deprived, especially in areas where major CPEC projects are being staged is needed. Locals must get maximum opportunities and build trust and acceptance for Chinese individuals. Proper media coverage should be given to all projects, especially Pakistani staff taking advantage from these projects can create a positive image of this great Pakistan-China collaborative step”.
  - c) “Political stability is the solution to all these problems”.
  - d) “Regarding tourism in the northern Pakistan, there is still a lot of room for improvement through CPEC projects. Most of the northern areas are still not equipped with the basic tourism facilities which may be improved through the CPEC projects and infrastructure”.
  - e) “CPEC projects should provide more employment opportunities to local people. Social media platforms should be used to remove mistrust between Pakistani and Chinese communities. Pakistan and China should organize more cultural exchange programs to improve relation and tourism between both countries. In my opinion, CPEC has potential to give rise to Pakistani economy and all the other industries”.
  - f) “More CPEC Economic Zones should be established in Gilgit Baltistan”.
  - g) “When considering CPEC's impact on Pakistan, it's essential to prioritize agricultural land to avoid adverse effects on this vital sector. Public awareness through ads and media is crucial to ensure that the population understands the implications and opportunities of CPEC. Additionally, a robust system of checks and balances must be established to monitor progress and address any emerging issues. Involving local engineers and labor is critical to ensure that the benefits of CPEC, including employment and skill development, benefit Pakistan. Addressing concerns like tourism, terrorism, and mistrust will require transparent communication and collaboration to maximize the benefits and minimize any potential losses.
  - h) Local people must be involved in decision making process and public participation should be increased.
  - i) Pakistani government should know the cost and benefits of this project and make timely decisions to increase the benefits.

Overall, the participants appreciated and highlighted the importance of the CPEC project as well as raised concerns related to security. On the whole, they pointed out the need for local participation and lack of awareness as major challenges. They also pointed out political instability and attacks on Chinese workers as major threats to building trust, infrastructure, and tourism opportunities. Khan et al., (2024) also highlighted the risks associated with locals' lack of awareness, illiteracy, oppression, political marginalization, and poverty as major risks in Baluchistan. In addition, the risks to and from Chinese expatriates in Pakistan should be addressed, and appropriate security measures should be implemented.

Existing studies not only highlight Pakistan's tourism potential resulting from CPEC but also emphasize the need for a concentrated effort to promote tourism, public and private sector collaboration, use of technology, safety, skilled personnel in tourism industry, electricity production, and infrastructural development as solutions to tourism development and cultural heritage protection in Pakistan (Alam, 2021; Gul et al., 2023). The present study also endorses that Pakistan has massive potential for tourism which can thrive as a result of CPEC, provided that steps are taken to address political instability, insecurity, violations of local Pakistanis' rights, media image of Pakistan, and the lack of facilities for sustainable tourism.

This chapter highlights that for tourism to flourish, it is essential that local Pakistani people not only become aware of the opportunities for business and development but also foster positive sentiments toward these developments. They should not perceive development as exploitation. What is the point of development if it is built on the suffering of local residents? They should, instead, be able to make the best use of their land and other resources peacefully. Insurgency in different parts is one of the causes of chaos. "In Balochistan, CPEC is exacerbating existing grievances among a population whose perceptions of exploitation and neglect by the center, together with authorities' suppression of dissent, have long fueled an insurgency. Similarly, displacement is another major cause of grievance among locals (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. ii).

This chapter reinforces the need for protecting the rights of local people in Pakistan and creating awareness among them for maximizing the benefits of CPEC for tourism, employment, and business. Political instability has been identified as a major threat to tourism in Pakistan. Negative media portrayals and third-party interventions, which create an unsafe environment and deter tourists from visiting Pakistan, have also been identified as major issues.

Pakistani and Chinese organizations are taking all the necessary measures to provide security to Chinese people who are currently working in Pakistan, however, security concerns have affected their social lives badly. Chinese officials are increasingly worried about security risks in Pakistan (Kugelman, 2023). This section draws on the first author's interaction with Chinese officials in Pakistan. One of them stated, "It is difficult to stay away from families, especially feeling isolated due to security restrictions". It is a matter of grave concern because it affects their well-being and ease in a hospitable country that Pakistan is.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter, exploring the nexus of tourism, safety and CPEC and highlighting the key challenges, concludes that political stability, protection and social ease of Chinese expatriates as well as local Pakistani people's rights, improved media portrayals as well as facilities for tourism, and accountability can help boost the tourism industry in the context of CPEC in Pakistan. In the future, it should be investigated how and to what extent CPEC related terrorism is rooted in locals' deprivation.

## **Suggested Citation**

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