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Fake news and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Social Information Processing of University Students of Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

The multibillion-dollar CPEC project will be crucial for Pakistan's economy in the next few years. CPEC includes different types of projects, i.e., energy, infrastructure, tourism, recreation, agriculture, industry, and many others. Private consortia will build energy infrastructure worth more than \$33 billion to help Pakistan's chronic energy shortages. In this research paper, a quantitative method approach is adopted, as a survey is carried out through a standardized questionnaire with a total of 400 university students as a sample size. The nonprobability method of convenience sampling is used to pick the sample from the population. The results expose that Adversaries are continuously engaging to spread fake news about CPEC via social media, like CPEC is the East India Company, Pakistan's food security and dairy industry are in danger, and China will capture Pakistani agriculture lands and Gwadar port in the future. CPEC is a threat to Pakistan's sovereignty, and via CPEC, China wants to invade Pakistan and its neighboring countries. The results reveal that local people have many concerns about their lands, farms, and other sources. CPEC adversaries took advantage of these weak points and hostile, the local area people through fake news, and the purpose of wrong information is to harm CPEC activities. The finding also revealed that social media is a big source of fake news, and our youth heavily use social media. Fake news is affecting youth perception because significant respondents don't countercheck the accuracy of news. This is strategic fifth-generation warfare, but our youth are not much aware of it.

Keywords: *China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Fake News, Adversaries Propaganda, Youth perception, Information Warfare, Social media.*

Introduction

As far as international projects go, CPEC is one of the most important. It is the centerpiece of the Chinese government's OBOR initiative, which calls for the construction of an international road and belt to boost global economic activity.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a significant investment, amounting to \$62 billion, aimed at enhancing Pakistan's infrastructure and energy sectors. CPEC encompasses various projects, such as tourism, agriculture, the development of Gwadar Port, energy initiatives, and economic zones. Since its official launch in 2015, CPEC has now entered its seventh year, with the completion of the first phase and the commencement of the second phase. This initiative has further strengthened the already exceptional strategic and diplomatic ties between China and Pakistan, transforming their relationship into a predominantly economic partnership. Notably, the CPEC project will connect Gwadar in Baluchistan, Pakistan, to Kashgar in China, providing China with an alternative route for oil and energy procurement.

The project holds particular importance as it bypasses the Strait of Malacca, where there are disputes involving China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia and where US fleets often operate. By bypassing both Gwadar and the Strait of Hormuz, CPEC enables China to avoid any potential disruptions that could impact its economy, as seen with the possibility of the Strait of Malacca being blocked. The route from Gwadar to Kashgar spans only 1500 kilometres, effectively shortening energy supply transportation by 12000 km (Ullah and Hussain, 2022). A significant youth population characterizes Pakistan's demographic landscape, accounting for over 60% (Chachar et al., 2022). Former US President Barack Obama emphasized that "The future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create" (Atkins, 2020), viewing this young generation as the driving force behind the country's future. Media industries are perception-making industries. Only the media has the ability to shape people's perceptions on a mass scale. The perception and direction of youth matter, a lot in this digital era (Hund, 2023).

Review of Literature

CPEC: A Multifunctional Dollar Part of China OBOR initiative- Baloch National Movement President Khalil Baloch's Perspective

According to Baloch National Movement (BNM) president Khalil Baloch, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a multifunctional dollar part of China One Belt, One Road initiative for the achievement of China's strategic objectives in Baluchistan. As an economic initiative, Pakistan's parliaments, including the National Party, actively

promoted the CPEC, and they achieved financial incentives by backing both Pakistan and China. When Pakistan's federal government was in talks with Nawaz Sharif's government about selling Baluchistan to China, the National Party backed them wholeheartedly. Previous reports indicate that Pakistan, including Gwadar, has entered into significant financial arrangements with China, leading to increased Chinese influence over most of Baluchistan. These arrangements aim to solidify Pakistan's authority and suppress the Baloch rebellion (Ismail & Husnain, 2022).

Chinese Companies in CPEC: Tax Benefits and Strategic Implications

Incentives such as tax benefits have been granted to Chinese companies involved in the various projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), particularly in challenging regions. Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government shared this information with Pakistan's National Assembly in March. Skilled Chinese workers staff Chinese industrial parks and exclusive economic zones in the area, offering excellent infrastructure for investment. By accomplishing this, China secures a strategic position by gaining control over a nation heavily reliant on its support and obtaining access to a valuable deep-water port in the Arabian Sea. Moreover, it enhances China's potential to surpass its South Asian rivals in terms of economic power. Concerns have been raised that CPEC might lead to a situation akin to the historical impact of the East India Company on Pakistan (Khan et al., 2023).

The Impact of CPEC on Pakistani Culture: Perspectives from Anti-CPEC Scholars

Many Anti-CPEC scholars present their thoughts on the subject in various international forums. They said that the culture of the CPEC in Pakistan changes a lot in terms of soft dressing and drama. Films (the entertainment industry) and food in particular Chinese language centres are opening in many Pakistani universities; it is the first step towards neo-colonialism (Jiao, 2023).

Geopolitical Implications of CPEC: American Experts and Pakistani Perspectives

American experts and a few Pakistani academics who tilt more to the west have promoted this anti-CPEC viewpoint. According to the United States, the world order will move quickly, with power shifting from the West to the East, and America will lose its status as the world's eminent superpower to China's rise. When old allies, like Pakistan, shift to China as a result of CPEC, their perspective strengthens. To maintain its hegemony, Pakistan can't reject the Chinese CPEC project proposal, despite its concerns. Pakistani rulers are under intense pressure and are using a variety of measures to regain their country's power. Pakistan will hang on to China's debt policy in the future, and China will take over Gwadar port just like Sri Lankan ports (Abb, 2023).

China's Population and Agricultural Economy: CPEC and Its Impact on Pakistan

In terms of population, China has 1.38 billion people and is a major agricultural economy. Although appropriate agricultural land is scarce, international media and analysts give analysis day and night that China, via CPEC, will capture Pakistani land for farming purposes and fulfil his country's needs, but Pakistan has no benefit from this project. So, they've planned a number of road and rail projects to link their landlocked Xinjiang province to the Arabian Sea via the Port of Gwadar (Ali et al., 2022).

Challenges in Provincial Relations and CPEC Execution

Provinces are at odds with one another." The GB WTrile project is supposed to benefit only Punjab, leaving Baluchistan behind. This excellent opportunity should be used to its fullest potential in the years to come; therefore, negative feedback from specific CPEC quarters should be avoided and solidarity should be demonstrated. Certain regional and international forces are concerned about the CPEC's execution, and they are determined to disrupt or cause issues. According to Pakistani media reports, the CPEC project would have a similar outcome. Politicians who have something to gain or lose by doing so form the basis for the majority of reporting. How is it possible for the general public to form an opinion when there is so little information available? If the general populace knew about the advantages of this massive project and how it would affect their lives and Pakistan's progress, it would serve as a channel for information.

The Pakistani government and the military are conducting social media campaigns separately. Both institutions focus primarily on countering propaganda and misinformation. In Pakistan and elsewhere, there are many opportunists and cynics who actively disseminate negative information about the CPEC and Pakistan-China ties, whereas those who support this big project do not speak out about their opinions.

Unraveling India's Narrative on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Officials, especially legislators, should focus on developing a national perspective rather than letting biased emotions influence them (Hassan et al., 2023).

Recently, India has redirected its efforts at disinformation and propaganda towards China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It appears that India has aligned itself with Western propaganda against China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), possibly due to historical conflicts with the emerging power. India has labelled the multi-billion-dollar CPEC project a 'debt trap for South Asian countries' to undermine its positive impact on developing nations. Another narrative propagated by India suggests that CPEC passes through disputed territories, potentially challenging Indian sovereignty. This narrative

may aim to question the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the CPEC project and justify India's hardened position on the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan. Indian newspapers often emphasize the risk of a debt trap crisis for Pakistan and the slowdown or delays in funding from China for specific CPEC projects. These highlights seemingly aim to create a negative perception of Pakistan's strategic partnership with China (Jaffer et al., 2021).

Challenges Faced by Local Baloch Residents: Influx of Workers and Resource Exploitation Concerns

Several local Baloch residents are concerned that the influx of workers from other regions may lead them to become a minority in their own province. They draw a parallel to a historical incident when the arrival of Pathans during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 resulted in their minority status in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan. Additionally, they express apprehension that their natural resources might be exploited by China without receiving an equitable share (Abbas & Fani, 2021).

James Mattis Supports India's Claim on CPEC and Allegations of Anti-CPEC Propaganda in Western Media

James Mattis, former U.S. Secretary of Defence, supported India's claim that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passes through a disputed area, leading to an increase in anti-CPEC propaganda in Western media. This stance aligns with India's position, even though Pakistan and China have not given weight to American concerns. Some reports from the European Union Disinformation Lab suggest that Indian fake media outlets and NGOs are generating similar statements on behalf of European Union parliament members to support Indian viewpoints. These statements aim to question and undermine the legitimacy of the CPEC megaproject. Consequently, countries like the Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Central Asia have expressed interest in joining the project.

It is believed that India exploited the Baloch insurgency as a proxy to destabilize the CPEC province and undermine it (Mujahid, 2022).

Methodology

Survey Research is the method used in this study. This research is descriptive and deductive in nature; a quantitative approach is used in this study. The subjects of the study are University students in Punjab, Pakistan. All the University students who are present in Punjab, Pakistan, are included in the population. In this research, university students who are heterogeneous and have the ability to understand the critical issues in Pakistan related to CPEC are taken as units of analysis. Non-probability method Convenience sampling is used to pick the sample from the population. The sample size is

400 respondents, all university students. In this research, the independent variable is Fake news, and the dependent variables are Youth Perception, CPEC activities, Baluchistan insurgency, and Pakistan Sovereignty. Data was collected from the respondents through the use of a well-established questionnaire. Maximum questionnaires are closed-ended. A total of Sixty-one (61) questions are asked in one questionnaire. Four universities are selected for data collection. The names of the universities are Sargodha University, Punjab University, the University of Okara, and National University of Science and Technology. The researcher personally visited all four universities, first giving a presentation on his research topic, and then solving all the queries of the respondents. All questionnaires were to be filled out carefully. The use of statistical formulas in SPSS, mainly Correlation and Regression formulas, analyzes the data.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this research is to analyse how much the fake news about CPEC is affecting the perception of university students in the Punjab province of Pakistan, how much the patterns of thinking are changing because of the fake news, and how these University students perceive and process this fake information. What are the primary and secondary sources of fake news, and is this process running or not? What are the major factors and elements that clearly describe the adversaries propaganda against the CPEC process? For this purpose, we took data from the four Universities of Pakistan, i.e., the University of Sargodha, Punjab University, the University of Okara, and the National University of Science and Technology Islamabad. After applying the formulas in SPSS Software, we analyse the data and find these results: Especially those young people who live in the areas that the CPEC covers are worried about their lands, farms, and other resources. They claim that the government does not do justice to their local area resources. Baluchistan Liberation Army and some other militant groups, at a small level, attack the Chinese workers and try to sabotage the CPEC activities.

Adversaries will create a propaganda structure to harm CPEC activities, and this research study will contribute to understanding it. The European Union disinformation lab report is the best example to understand this whole scenario and how our adversaries try their best to discredit Pakistan at the international level. According to Machado et al. (2020) India has conducted fake operations since 2005 against Pakistan. The basic purpose of these operations was to discredit Pakistan at the international level in terms of minority and women's rights. The Srivastava group is responsible for operating this campaign. According to the European Union disinformation lab, there are

265 fabricated media outlets operating across 65 different countries, allegedly serving Indian interests, along with several questionable think tanks and NGOs. This network disseminates information mainly through ANI (Asian News International) and 4U News Agency, as well as prominent news networks and digital marketers, aiming to discredit Pakistan and sway policymakers in favour of Indian objectives. These spurious organization's attempt to create a false impression on the international stage by portraying the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a controversial project and discouraging other nations from investing in it. Additionally, they raise concerns about environmental issues in the region and the fact that the CPEC route passes through disputed territory.

Table 1.1 Descriptive of Fake news about China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Statements	Mean	SD	
CPEC projects create environmental issues for the region in the future?	2.83	1.24	
China wants to control the dairy form industry of Pakistan via CPEC?	3.09	1.15	
Online media is the big source of fake news?	3.66	1.20	Tabl
People who read news on online media, cross check the accuracy of that news from other sources.	3.09	1.24	e
In this digital era, it is not possible to stop the spread of false news content on media?	3.56	1.17	5.10
In social media sites, the concept of speed and accuracy of news seems too dead?	3.28	1.14	refle
Online media sites play the fair role in the free flow of information?	3.31	1.21	cths

respondents who show a neutral response ($M = 2.83$) on whether CPEC projects create environmental issues for the region in the future, and a deviation of (1.24) means participants show a strongly disagree and slightly disagree attitude about environmental issues created by CPEC. While the statement about China wanting to control the dairy industry of Pakistan via CPEC, respondents have a neutral or very little but agree attitude ($M = 3.09$) and a deviation of 1.15, which means respondents almost disagree with this statement. However, online media is the biggest source of fake news. Respondents almost agree with this statement ($M = 3.66$) and the deviation is 1.20, which means respondents show a disagree and slightly neutral response. However, respondents show a neutral response ($M = 3.09$) to this statement. People who read news on online media cross-check the accuracy of that news from other sources. And the deviation is 1.24, which means respondents almost always disagree with this statement.

While talking about the spread of false news content in the media, respondents are mostly neutral and slightly agree ($M = 3.56$), and the deviation is 1.17, meaning respondents disagree and give a slightly neutral response. And when we ask about this statement that on social media sites, the concept of speed and accuracy of news seems too dead, respondents are neutral and slightly agree ($M = 3.28$), and the deviation is (1.14), which means respondents almost disagree with this statement. Lastly, in the statement that Online media sites play a fair role in the free flow of information, Respondents show a neutral and slightly agreeing response ($M = 3.31$), and the deviation is 1.21, which means respondents disagree that Online media sites play a fair role in the free flow of information.

It is clearly discovered with facts in the European Union disinformation lab report that India has, for a long time and astonishingly, still engaged in negative activities against Pakistan at the international level to discredit Pakistan. India majorly runs the successful campaign with fake organizations, websites, and NGOs to distort the positive image of Pakistan. Especially the fake campaigns in which they sprint for the freedom and rights of Baluchistan province at the international level, create a misperception in the minds of Baluchi people and affect their perception of their country negatively. In this regard, whether our country's people, especially the youth, which comprise more than 60% of our population, are aware of this propaganda or not, it is time to check their perception.

We also find that university students in Pakistan heavily depend on social media for information purposes, and because this is the digital era, even the superpower country of the US cannot completely control the content of social media. Adversaries are continuously engaging in spreading false news content against CPEC, and our youth are less aware of information warfare; thus, this content is influencing their perception. The bombardment of news is very fast. Youth do not cross-check news; they share it with others, so false information spreads very quickly in society via various social media platforms.

The speedy flow of information and easy access to mass level sources and many other opportunities for social interaction make today youth dependent on modern media content. Due to credibility issues of the media channels and newspapers educated youth see social media sites as the platform of freedom of expression (Moravčíková, 2022).

So, it is a fact that we cannot control the free flow of information on social media, but we can make policies and try our best to make a mechanism for control of this misinformation. On the other side, we can prepare the minds of our youth for this type of

proxy war. We must educate our youth on the fact that our adversaries do not fight physically with us, but they can do so online, making the youth of Pakistan directionless and dimensionless, because they understand that the youth are the future of Pakistan. Our youth consume the content continuously without properly knowing the origin point or purpose of this content. According to Kok (2023), the billion-dollar initiative will significantly increase the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Because the project is focused on upgrading the country's infrastructure, it will benefit from increased economic activity. The trade between Pakistan, China, and other nations will increase as a result. When the project is finished, it will offer individuals many job chances. Opportunities for employment provide people with an opportunity to improve their lives.

If fake news against CPEC increases day by day, then it is possible that interested countries will not invest in CPEC. So, the Pakistani government must arrange the sessions, seminars, give presentations of the project, and try to solve all the misperceptions that are created by enemies to harm CPEC activities. The government must inform people how important CPEC projects are for the economy of Pakistan and for the local people of Pakistan. Government officials took the concerns of local people seriously and devised strategies to resolve all the issues, while adversaries used these concerns to discredit Pakistan at the international level and try to stop investment in this mega project. Along with local people, the Pakistani government must also solve the concerns of international countries, which want to invest in this mega project but, due to concerns, hesitate to do so. Especially with the concerns that CPEC will create environmental issues for the region, government officials must present the feasibility reports in front of those who raise this concern.

Figure 1.2 Correlation of Fake news and Youth Perception

Variables													
	Opponents misinformation	CPEC economy	Young people	Pakistani as a nation	Economic hub	Asian Champion	Environmental issues	Dairy form industry	Fake news	Accuracy of news	False news content	Speed and accuracy	Fair role
1) Opponents misinformation	1												
2) CPEC economy	.486**	1											
3) Young people	.364**	.414**	1										
4) Pakistani as a nation	.300**	.476**	.264**	1									
5) Economic hub	.295**	.485**	.320**	.320**	1								
6) Asian Champion	.248**	.400**	.292**	.350**	.359**	1							
7) Environmental issues	.034	.061	.014	-.018	.013	-.001	1						
8) Dairy form industry	.025	.040	.072	.085	-.042	.020	.377**	1					
9) Fake news	.205**	.191**	.157**	.081	.151**	.069	.085	.075	1				
10) Accuracy of news	.162**	.123*	.107*	.099*	.059	.059	.180**	.180**	.007	1			
11) False news content	.108*	.065	.022	.146**	.158**	.000	.132**	.147**	.163**	.294**	1		
12) Speed and accuracy	.164**	.134**	.115*	.124*	.123*	.096	.187**	.225**	.157**	.257**	.223**	1	
13) Fair role	-.015	.047	.129**	.142**	.036	.067	.096	.105*	.080	.214**	.189**	.063	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The values of figure 5.8 indicate a significant correlation (.486) between the youth of Pakistan perceiving that the economy of Pakistan will improve and India constantly spreading false information about the CPEC. This suggests that India's propaganda could potentially influence the economic impact of the CPEC. Additionally, there is a positive correlation (.364), meaning that India's dissemination of false information at the international level affects the minds of youth when they perceive it through online media. Therefore, the government should take the youth's perception into account while formulating policies. The correlation (.414) indicates that CPEC will improve Pakistan's economy in the future, but due to the large young population, their perception must be considered by the government. Further, the correlation (.300) indicates that India spread false information, but the Pakistani nation, especially the youth, fully supports the government initiatives at the CPEC project. And Correlation (.476) shows that CPEC will improve Pakistan's economy, with Pakistani people as a nation fully supporting these government initiatives. While correlation (.295) shows a positive relationship, CPEC will make Pakistan an economic hub in the future, but opponents try their best to

spread misinformation about CPEC. With a correlation of .485, it is perceived that CPEC will make Pakistan an economic hub and improve its economy in the future. The significant correlation of .400 indicates that CPEC will not only improve Pakistan's economy but also position it as the Asian champion upon completion. Moreover, a correlation of .350 shows a positive relationship between Pakistan becoming an Asian champion after the completion of CPEC and the nation's full support for these government initiatives. However, with a correlation of .377, concerns arise that China may dominate the Pakistan dairy industry, leading to environmental issues for the region. Also, the correlation (.205) shows that Online media is the biggest source of fake news, and opponents spread fake information about CPEC via online media. The correlation (.191) shows that CPEC will improve Pakistan's economy in the future, while online media is the biggest source of fake news. By correlation (.162), we significantly perceived that the opponent spread misinformation, but people who read online news might check the accuracy of that news from multiple sources. By correlation (.180), we perceive that CPEC projects will create environmental issues for the region in the future, but people who read this type of news cross-check the accuracy of the news. By correlation (.108), we perceived that the opponent spread misinformation, but in this digital era, it is not possible to stop this fake content completely. By correlation (.163), we understood that there is a positive relationship and that online media is the biggest source of fake news, and it is not possible to control it in this digital era. We perceive a positive correlation (.164), i.e., opponents spread misinformation, and on online sites, the concept of speed and accuracy seems to be dead. Finally, the Correlation (.225) indicates that China wants to control the dairy industry. This is a concern developing with social media sites, but the concept of accuracy on social media seems to be dead.

This research study helps other researchers work on this topic, i.e., add knowledge to literature and resolve the concerns and queries that people have about the CPEC project. This research study highlights the importance of the CPEC project for Pakistan in the future, especially for the Pakistani economy and the tourism sector. This study provides awareness to investors and gives a detailed analysis of how adversaries try to sabotage CPEC activities with multiple disinformation campaigns. This research also gives suggestions to the policymakers and helps in making policies based on what Pakistani people think about this mega project, especially our major population's youth perception of it. This study also helps government officials and higher authorities who are currently working on the route of CPEC understand what local people think about their land, property, and other resources. The study also helps to predict the importance

of this mega project after completion and what the Pakistani economy can gain in the future after completion of this project.

Conclusion

The completion of the CPEC project will make Pakistan an economic hub. China's major issue in the Malacca Strait will be resolved in the future, and experts believe that a new axis of power between Pakistan, China, and Russia has emerged. At the international level, India has created many fake and bogus NGOs, as revealed by the European Union disinformation lab report. The South Asia Peace Forum, The "Baloch Forum," Free Baluchistan, and The International Council for Inter-Religious Cooperation (ICIRC) are some of the organization's established by India around the world to discredit Pakistan and China and serve Indian interests. Local people have concerns about their lands, farms, and other resources.

CPEC adversaries took advantage of these weak point and tried to hostile the local area people through fake news. Adversaries raise concerns, such as CPEC being the East India Company for China in Pakistan, China will capture Gwadar port, just as it did the Sri Lankan port. Agricultural lands and the dairy industry are threatened, they spread fake news at the international level that CPEC will cause environmental problems in the region and route of CPEC and Pakistan food security is in danger. China wants to do indirect control, will capture whole Pakistan and CPEC is the first step for dominance of China, also the CPEC is threat to Pakistan sovereignty and via CPEC China want to invade on Pakistan and its neighbor countries. The Baloch liberation army attacked Chinese workers. They claim that they are working for Baluchi people's rights, but in reality, they are working against their benefits. Baloch Liberation army attacks on workers are the result of these concerns created by the adversaries in the minds of the native people. This is totally fifth (5th) generation warfare in which the enemy does not fight directly but conceals their objective and combats with proxy war. Social media is the best tool for the spread of mis, information to the masses. This all-fake news campaign affecting the perception of youth, especially those who are living routes near to CPEC. So, the Pakistani government must make solid policies and strategies to counter this mass level propaganda. Government must also make teams for specific areas to organize sessions, seminars, and events and provide awareness to the local people and solve their concerns. It is also imperative that the government take the necessary steps to educate Pakistan's vast youth population about fifth generation warfare.

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