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THE BALOCH PERSPECTIVE ON CPEC AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract
The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship initiative of the Belt and Road framework, situates Balochistan at the heart of regional connectivity and economic integration. While policymakers promote it as a driver of industrial growth, trade expansion, and employment, the Baloch people's response has been shaped by deep-rooted historical, political, and cultural concerns. Central to these concerns are issues of Baloch identity preservation, longstanding trust deficits between the state and local communities, and widespread ignorance—both in the sense of lack of awareness among the general population about project details and neglect of local perspectives in planning. These factors have created skepticism, with many perceiving CPEC as an externally imposed project rather than a partnership for mutual benefit. This research employs a ***mixed-methods approach****, integrating qualitative interviews with Baloch community elders, youth representatives, and political activists alongside quantitative surveys of public perceptions regarding economic gains, cultural impacts, and governance transparency. Secondary data from government reports, policy papers, and scholarly works provide contextual grounding. Triangulation is applied to ensure the validity of findings. Preliminary insights reveal that the absence of culturally sensitive engagement, coupled with historical marginalization, fuels resistance. Many respondents link CPEC's acceptability to the safeguarding of Baloch identity, greater inclusion in decision-making, and visible, locally targeted benefits. The study proposes a way forward that prioritizes* ***human resource development of the Baloch people as the top agenda item****—an area historically neglected. The CPEC Authority should commit 100% priority to building local capacity, skills, and leadership so that the people of Balochistan become active partners and beneficiaries, transforming CPEC from a contested venture into a genuine vehicle for shared prosperity*

1. Introduction

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the largest bilateral economic and infrastructural projects of the 21 st century and a key pillar of China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC was announced in 2013 and officially launched in 2015 when 51 agreements totalling about US$46 billion were signed between the governments of China and Pakistan, but it has since grown to include additional commitments topping US$62 billion (Wolf, 2019). In its purest form, the line is planned to include 3,000 kilometres of a road and railroad, pipeline, energy and industry networks connecting the Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea to the Chinese Xinjiang province city of Kashgar (Small, 2015). The project is touted as a way to

change the landscape of infrastructure in Pakistan, solve energy shortages that plague the country on a regular basis, and develop industry, and a quicker, more stable route that China can use to import energy in the form of the Middle East and Africa instead of reliance on the strategic chokehold of the Strait of Malacca (Rafiq, 2017). CPEC is being positioned as a historic chance for Pakistan to modernize its transport networks, create jobs, and become more closely interconnected in global supply chains; a fundamental link in China global trade (Markey & West, 2016).

The Balochistan province serves to take a uniquely strategic place in the architecture of CPEC. Covering almost 44 percent of the Pakistani territory but possessing only approximately 6 percent of its population, Balochistan is rich in minerals, gas resources, and coastline along the Arabian Sea (Siddiqi, 2018). Gwadar has been developed as a deep-sea port through Chinese financing and technical support, at the heart of CPEC. Gwadar is strategically placed between the mouth of the Persian Gulf, opening up access to the shipping routes that transport a considerable chunk of the world's oil and gas (Kanwal, 2018). Its position makes it possible to have China carry energy resources via overland route through Pakistan to Xinjiang in half the time it would have taken the traditional maritime routes to do the same. In the case of Pakistan, Gwadar can be the commercial connection point between South Asia and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (Khan, 2019).

The construction of the surrounding infrastructure—such as highways, the planned Gwadar International Airport, and the various Special Economic Zones (SEZs)—more broadly underlines why Balochistan is the central location of the CPEC vision (Wolf, 2019). Although Balochistan is the most important unstable place strategically, it is the most marginalized region in the economic arena in Pakistan. As much as it is strategic, Balochistan is the least economically developed region of Pakistan. It is constantly reporting the lowest education, health, and human development indexes nationwide, and poverty levels are almost twice the national average (Baloch, 2020). The road and rail infrastructure in the province is inadequate and there is limited industrialization. These inequalities cannot be attributed solely to geographic isolation, but can be firmly placed in a historical context of political marginalization, resource extraction without due compensation of local infrastructure and lack of investment in human resources (Yousaf, 2019). Large impact development projects, whether of extractive industries or infrastructure investment, have often served the interests of actors more external to the province than local populations, at least in the eyes of many in Balochistan. The context has a significant effect on how Baloch people perceive CPEC (Akhtar, 2020).

The promise of CPEC has been accompanied by skepticism, and in some quarters, outright opposition, rooted in three interconnected factors: identity concerns, trust deficits, and ignorance in the dual sense of inadequate information dissemination and institutional neglect of local voices. Baloch identity is deeply tied to notions of autonomy, cultural preservation, and control over local resources (Waseem, 2021). There is a pervasive fear that massive external investments, if not carefully managed, may dilute cultural distinctiveness, marginalize local languages, and exacerbate demographic imbalances through inward migration of non-Baloch workers. The trust deficit is equally significant; decades of unfulfilled promises, coupled with security-heavy approaches to governance, have created a deep chasm between state institutions and Baloch society (Yousaf, 2019). This mistrust extends to foreign partners as well, particularly when projects are negotiated at the federal level without substantive local consultation. The issue of ignorance manifests both in the lack of transparent, accessible information about CPEC's plans and impacts, and in the apparent disregard for the need to build local understanding, capacity, and participation in project execution (Baloch, 2020).

Its factors contribute to making Balochistan not fully embrace the initiative in support of the

CPEC despite it being the geographical lynchpin of the project. In contrast to federal and provincial authorities who underline the opportunities in the labor market and investment in infrastructure, local commentators ask numerous questions regarding the inexactness of the numbers mentioned by the authorities concerning the number of jobs created and the commonness of these jobs regarding the ethnicity of Baloch (Khan, 2019). Even the high-visibility Gwadar International Airport, supposedly built at a US$240 million price, turned out to be underutilized with most of the Gwadar city experiencing water shortage, electricity insufficiency, and a scarce health care system (Akhtar, 2020). To the locals, these contradictions only confirm the notion that CPEC, similar to other projects that have been done before, is being provided based on the main objective of serving the national and external contexts rather than empowering the locals.

Among the most obvious insights in the preliminary reports lies the realization that human resource development in the Baloch people should be a program priority—an area where the present planning seems to be the weakest. Education and vocational skills development, as well as entrepreneurial assistance, are imperative to make sure that Baloch citizens can utilize positions and work opportunities in the industries associated with CPEC and not be limited to low-wage, low-skilled labor (Baloch, 2020). The fact that this kind of investment is not prioritized continues to preserve the reliance on outward workforces with more legitimacy under attack. The redrawn strategy whereby the CPEC Authority would unequivocally invest in Baloch human capital development—via scholarships, technical institutes, apprenticeships, and leadership programs—would resolve both economic and identity-related grievances and fill the trust vacuum (Kanwal, 2018).

The geopolitical significance, resource potential, and topographical inventory of Balochistan mean that it is bound to remain the hub of the Pakistani future economy and the Chinese connectivity plans in the region. However, success cannot be assured only by geography. The process of development should be participatory, and the benefits tangible and equitable as well; cultural identity also needs to be respected as a resource and not to be viewed as a hindering element. The analysis of the Baloch attitude toward CPEC is accordingly not marginal research, but the focus of the research is on how megaprojects are connected to local contexts in such politically sensitive, economically disadvantaged, and distinctively culture-oriented parts of the world. Such research, based on the documentation of the experiences, attitudes, and proposals of Baloch communities, can feed into policy reforms that would make CPEC a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable process. After all, the future holds turning Balochistan into a full-fledged partner in the Pakistan-China vision of shared development, a process that can only happen when identity, trust, and human resource development are showcased at the center stage of the CPEC agenda.

2. Problem Statement

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been understood as a revolutionary project that could revolutionize the economy of Pakistan, of which the province of Balochistan has been given a central position due to its geostrategic position, resource abundance, and the existence of Gwadar Port. Nevertheless, despite its promise, the CPEC project in Balochistan has faced significant levels of politicking, protests, and diverse social opinions. Three interrelated and deeply rooted problems, namely identity concerns, trust deficits, and the lack of meaningful local participation, form its underlying causes.

The identity issues are especially sharp in Balochistan, where the worldview of the local people is influenced by cultural heritage, linguistic uniqueness, and the centuries-long pursuit of autonomy. Large-scale development projects, perceived as externally imposed or controlled, often pose a threat to the preservation of Baloch identity. Concerns about demographic shifts, the loss of traditional livelihoods, and

cultural marginalization fuel opposition to projects like CPEC.

The lack of trust between Baloch and the state is historic. The half century of broken promises, uneven resource allocation, and securitized strategies of governance have cultivated a permanent sentiment of alienation. Previous mega-projects in the province, such as the extraction of natural gas and minerals, failed to provide equal benefits to the local people, further supporting the thesis that development projects primarily serve the interests of other external forces rather than those of the local community. This distrust has transferred to exterior partners, such as China as well, since projects have been negotiated and set up without open involvement with the Baloch population.

These challenges are worsened by the absence of local influence in the decision-making and implementation processes. Locals are usually under-informed about the project schedules, anticipated effects, or ways to be involved. The distribution of job opportunities in CPEC-related projects disproportionately favors non-local laborers, further marginalizing local human capital. The continued reliance on external labor and the resulting inability of Baloch citizens to participate in the opportunities that CPEC may produce is perpetuated by the absence of formal programs to develop local skills and capacities.

The combination of these factors constitutes a threat to CPEC legitimacy and sustainability in Balochistan. Unless special emphasis is given to safeguarding identity, establishing trust, and building locally owned capacities, CPEC can easily widen socio-political divides instead of narrowing them. The issue is not merely about infrastructure building; it is more related to fair, inclusive, and culturally sensitive implementation, which can transform the Baloch people into active participants rather than passive observers.

3. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine perceptions, concerns, and expectations of Baloch people towards CPEC with the intention of building trust, protecting identity, and increasing local people's participation in the benefits and management of the project.

Specific objectives include:

1.To examine how CPEC is perceived by different segments of the Baloch population in relation to cultural identity, economic opportunity, and political inclusion.

2.To identify the historical, political, and socio-economic factors that have contributed to trust deficits between the Baloch people and state institutions in the context of development projects.

3.To assess the extent and nature of local involvement in CPEC's planning, implementation, and benefit-sharing mechanisms.

4.To explore the role of human resource development in transforming CPEC into a locally inclusive and sustainable initiative.

5.To propose policy recommendations that address identity concerns, rebuild trust, and institutionalize mechanisms for genuine local participation in CPEC-related projects.

4. Research Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods design to thoroughly explore the characteristics of the Baloch people in relation to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The audiences were selected within Balochistan; they comprise politicians, youth, policymakers, civil society activists, and local entrepreneurs. The purposive sampling approach was used for this purpose. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data that enabled the participants to give details about their experiences, their concerns, and their hopes. These interviews were supplemented with quantitative surveys that were aimed at evaluating the level of awareness, perception of benefits and risks, and future expectations of the CPEC in the province, and data were analyzed through SPSS software.

5. Literature Review

5.1. Overview of CPEC's economic, political, and social dimensions

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has generally been described as a revolutionary, multi-sectoral initiative designed to connect western China and the Arabian Sea using a collection of energy, transportation infrastructure, industrial, and port initiatives. Overall perspectives report on the twin logic of CPEC: overcoming both infrastructure and energy bottlenecks in Pakistan and meeting the Chinese strategic connectivity agenda under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Wolf, 2019; Small, 2015). These analyses put CPEC in the context of a corridor of corridors, energy pipelines, power plants, roads, and special economic zones (SEZs), the cumulative impact of which should boost growth by lowering supply chain costs, easing electricity constraints, and attracting investment. But macro-level optimism in these narratives is being checked, and nervousness looms over dichotomies of aspiration capacity, institutional preparedness, and inter-provincial fairness.

Economically, the initial phases of the program focused on a power-deprived country, Pakistan, systematically through coal, LNG, hydro, and renewable energy sources, as well as highways and rail to connect peripheral areas to the Gwadar Port. (Rafiq, 2017). Connectivity returns, as the literature has indicated, are path-dependent: in areas where industrial policy, skills, and urban planning have failed to keep up, corridors may become no more than conduits instead of value generators in the local economy.

Politically, CPEC is an extension of the longstanding Sino-Pak "all-weather" partnership into an economic-security compact, shifting the balance of regional alignments across South Asia. Strategic literature underscores how corridor politics intersect with domestic federalism (route choices, revenue distribution) and external geopolitics (India's objections, Persian Gulf energy geoeconomics) (Small, 2015; Hussain, 2017). This nexus magnifies distributional debates within Pakistan, especially in Balochistan where historic grievances shape how federal commitments are interpreted on the ground.

Socially, corridor build-out can reconfigure urbanization and labor markets, accelerating migration to emerging nodes like Gwadar. Empirical studies caution that without community-centric planning, the same infrastructure can spur displacement anxieties, heighten competition for jobs, and strain municipal service delivery (Bashir, 2023a; Coastal Communities study, 2020). More recent fieldwork shows how expectations of rapid uplift—airports, expressways, SEZs—collide with slow, uneven service improvements, fueling perceptions of broken promises (AP, 2025; ISAS, 2024).

A parallel debate examines CPEC's fiscal and governance risks. Scholars flag transparency gaps in project selection, contracting, and contingent liabilities, arguing that participatory oversight and disclosure are prerequisites for long-run legitimacy (Wolf, 2019; Markey & West, 2016). In Balochistan specifically, these generic governance issues layer atop identity politics and a legacy of center–periphery contention, making "process legitimacy" as crucial as "project delivery.

5.2. Historical relationship between the central and Balochistan

The Central-Balochistan relationship is often recounted by waves of integration efforts and rebellions against these policies since 1948, with the key conflict areas being resource and political representation control issues and security's-focused rule. Historians and political anthropologists document the origins of that feeling in the undue lack of fiscal reinvestment in provincial contributions and the concentration of power in one place, cutting peripheral societies off of control (Yousaf, 2019; Akhtar, 2020). Such path dependencies shape modern interpretations of megaprojects: infrastructural dreams are refracted through the recollections of non-fulfillment.

The politics of resources are critical. The example of Sui gas, which benefited national industry but left much of Balochistan energy-deprived, is also notable in grievance discourse, contributing to a distrust of extractive/corridor-driven growth that does not necessitate the human capital of

indigenous communities (Siddiqi, 2018; Bashir et al., 2023). Bashir and his colleagues in comparative provincial analyses describe long-term developmental deficits in health, education, and governance indicators, concluding that the shortfalls in Balochistan are structural in nature and not incidental.

According to recent reportage and policy analysis, this history still influences the current dynamics. An examination of Gwadar port and airports and free zones identifies a gap between national symbolism and local service provision, further confirming alienation once benefits are not felt by ordinary inhabitants as tangible benefits (AP, 2025; ISAS, 2024; The Guardian, 2025). The lesson, which drew a considerable resonance in Baloch scholarship, is that historical resentment is never a matter of context but an active variable that mediates each new promise of development.

5.3. Concepts of trust deficit in development projects

Trust is defined within development literature in terms of belief in institutions to behave in fair, competent, predictable ways; a deficit in trust appears where communities anticipate exclusion, obscurity, or coercion. The traditional governance research demonstrates that loss of faith can be only restored with participatory and visible reforms, including infrastructure output, but not merely infrastructure output (Cook et al., 2005; Wolf, 2019). In weak peripheries, the presence of information asymmetries and security-based implementation increases suspicion and requires grievance-seeking and co-decision processes to establish the legitimacy of the project.

Analyses particular to CPEC routinely identify the variable of trust in Balochistan. Scholarly literature about coastal and fishing populations bears witness to anxieties associated with job losses, inability to hire locally, and insufficient consultation, but also about the promise of inclusivity and SME connections in training opportunities (case study of the Gwadar fishery, 2022).

Initial physical achievements by the locals, such as clean water, power reliability, and fair recruitment, positively influence the trust, while unfulfilled promises undermine it. Security dynamics complicate trust. It is both the result and promoter of mistrust that insurgent groups have attacked CPEC infrastructure. Every crisis justifies securitized responses that also restrict civil space that, in turn, reinforces local discourses of belonging (SAGE article on Baloch imbroglio, 2023; ISAS, 2024). Experts argue that the use of hard security as a substitute for trust in governance necessitates first gaining social license through consultation, payment, and community-benefit agreements.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1. Development Theory and Peripheral Regions

Development theory is a collection of theories that explain how societies progress or develop, typically emphasizing the transition from traditional to modern organizations. Early modernization theorists (e.g., Rostow 1960) viewed societies as progressing in a linear sequence of development: traditional society, preconditions to take off, take off, drive to maturity, and the era of high mass consumption stages. The model presupposes that development is the main outcome of economic growth and that better integration into the larger economic contexts is beneficial to all regions alike. Nevertheless, in reality, the less-developed areas, geographically remote or with political alienation, do not enjoy benefits of integration that are at par because of structural gaps in capital, governance, and institutional capability (Todaro & Smith, 2020). Such a disparity renders the development theory especially helpful in evaluating projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Balochistan.

However, in contrast to modernization theory, dependency theory and the world-systems perspective have been critiques of the 1960s and the 1970s. Dependency theorists like Frank (1967) and Cardoso and Faletto (1979) asserted that underdevelopment in the periphery is not passively inherited or merely caused by internal

defects but is rather actively reinforced by unequal relations with the core. Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory broadened this by putting peripheral regions in the context of a global capitalist system that redirects resources and value towards the core. Such a dynamic can also be at work across nations, with political and economic cores asserting their powers over peripheral provinces, similar to what has happened in Pakistan historically in its political economy (Bashir, 2023). The resource-rich yet infrastructure-deficient status of Balochistan corresponds to this definition since the province has its natural gases, minerals, and a strategic coast, but local infrastructural development hasn't progressed anywhere.

Applying the theory of development to the CPEC within Balochistan is a process of analyzing how the corridor can be used as an instrument of modernization and integration or as an instrument of dependency. Modernization worldviews may foretell that infrastructure, energy projects, and market access can spark industrialism and enhance livelihoods. Dependency views raise a question, though: when under external control, be it by federal authorities or foreign partners, these projects can benefit communities not at all (Wolf, 2019). This warning can be supported by studies of former mega-projects in Balochistan like the Saindak Copper-Gold and Reko Diq, which demonstrated that although the output of extraction increased and the amount of national revenues went up, the number of jobs created locally was very low; moreover, the local infrastructure and social services also did not improve (Akhtar, 2020). These examples demonstrate the critical role of governance structures as mediators of development.

The additional complexity of relationships in the periphery region is the center-province relationships in the federal setting of Pakistan. The autonomy of the provinces in decision-making has historically been restricted by federal control of major sectors that include energy, ports, and mineral resources (Yousaf, 2019). This centralism has a way of creating strategies of development based on the priorities of the nation and not just on the local needs. In the case of the Balochistan region, CPEC projects—roads, ports, and power plants—may be economically strategic to Pakistan on a national scale, but to local stakeholders, they may seem like external impositions. Dr. Siraj Bashir (2023) stresses that the development of the peripheral provinces has to focus on the development of the local human capital and resource-exchange systems to escape the vicious circle of dependency. In the absence of measures to avoid this, integration into national or global networks threatens to affirm rather than redress past inequities.

This paper employs the development theory as a critical framework to examine the performance of CPEC in Balochistan. Through the analysis of the opposition of modernization and dependency interpretation, it is also determined whether CPEC was a true entry into the socio-economic elevation of Pakistan or a reproduction of the same structural imbalance between the core and periphery in Pakistan. This theoretical framing shapes the research questions on fair benefit distribution, local participation, and identity maintenance and influences the mixed-methods study of the lived realities of CPEC in Balochistan. Ultimately, we want to understand how likely it is that CPEC will raise Balochistan out of the periphery into a self-sufficient, empowered regional economy or that CPEC will keep Balochistan in a dependent tier to the national and global economic core.

6.2. Identity Politics and Resource Allocation

In political science, identity politics is the political organizing of groups that share a common characteristic, whether such characteristic is defined by ethnicity, religion, language, or culture, and such characteristics are at the core of claims of rights, recognition, or resource distribution (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). Identity politics frequently develops in situations where defined groups of citizens or marginalized groups feel threatened or historically marginalized and in cases where there is the perception that a culture is threatened due to lack of representation. Fraser (1995) notes that we should differentiate between two aspects of

justice, i.e., redistribution (just allocation of resources) and recognition (respect of the cultural identity). This is because in a developmental context, neglecting either of these two dimensions may likely lead to political opposition even in the cases where a project or projects may offer economic gains. The politics of Balochistan depicts how these two aspects are intertwined since material dissatisfaction associated with unjust distribution of resources cannot be regarded aside from demands of cultural dignity and political representation.

Often identity dimensions have been used to run down resources across ethnically diverse states. These works by Horowitz (1985) and Hale (2008) reveal that economically, the development projects may not be assessed separately in investments; it is always projected as a political message of inclusion or exclusion in a pluralistic world. In the case of marginalized groups, the lack of investments in areas of their residence may be regarded as a form of intentional or even punitive neglect, whereas large-scale projects specifically run without meaningful involvement of the marginalized group can be interpreted as forms of control or even assimilation. The lack of provincial control where the Balochistan region in Pakistan receives little revenues on the extraction of natural gas and minerals, also fuels such perceptions (Yousaf, 2019). The feeling that the external parties, including federal agencies and foreign investors gain access to the local resources disproportionately contributes to the narrative of marginalization based on identity (Baloch, 2020).

The CPEC model gives current perspective with the help of which these dynamics can be observed Whereas the federal government chooses to sell CPEC as a unifying project, a significant number of Baloch stakeholders perceive the notion through the prism of identity politics, wondering whether the projected benefits will indeed trickle down to them (Wolf, 2019). In another example, when non-local workers are disproportionately employed in CPEC projects, it is not only experienced as an economic loss but it is also symbolic in the sense that it becomes a loss of the Baloch right to control their own future when it comes to choosing development. Dr. According to Siraj Bashir (2023), the economic inclusion in Balochistan is strongly related to political rights recognition which implies that equal access to CPEC opportunities is partially about economic uplift on the one hand and political identification on the other hand.

When identity and geography overlap with the economy's strategic assets, resource allocation is even more sensitive. The Gwadar Port, the backbone of CPEC, is situated in an area that is mainly occupied by ethnic Baloch communities. Decisions that involve whether port revenues should be split between local and national actors, whether the surrounding SEZs will be run by indigenous or foreign operators, or who benefits from connected infrastructure projects all fall on an identity-based framework. Identity politics can also move on to a demand of autonomy in lieu of recognition in the state, especially when local communities feel that the decisions are being made without consulting them (Akhtar, 2020). This risk is compounded by the fact that in provinces that represent the historical dispossession, the trauma of memory justifies a current political action.

By incorporating the lens of identity politics and resource allocation, this study is able to investigate CPEC not just as an economic program but as a political event with symbolic weight. The research will explore how Baloch identity shapes perceptions of fairness in CPEC's benefit distribution and how these perceptions influence trust in state institutions. This approach aligns with Fraser's (1995) framework, assessing both material and recognition-based justice, and helps explain why projects that appear beneficial in purely economic terms may still face opposition. Understanding these dynamics is critical for designing development strategies in Balochistan that are both economically effective and culturally legitimate.

6.3. Stakeholder Theory in Mega-Projects

The stakeholder theory presented by Freeman (1984) holds that businesses and projects need to

consider the interests of all groups to whom the activities of the business have impacts, rather than just their shareholders or main financiers. The stakeholders involved in the case of mega-projects are government agencies, investors, local people, non-governmental organizations, and even the future society. According to the theory, acceptance and accommodation of all these interests promotes legitimacy, mitigates conflict, and improves chances of project success (Mitchell et al., 1997). It is particularly pertinent in the case of projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), where the reach of influence extends both internationally in terms of international trade networks and locally in terms of the fishing communities in Gwadar.

Participatory decision-making has become a feature of the stakeholder theory in infrastructure governance thought seeking to enhance efficiency and equity in the decision-making process (Reed et al., 2009). Inclusive planning projects, in the form of consultations, public hearings, and monitoring together, are less likely to be delayed, characterized by much less security risk, and greater social acceptance (Flyvbjerg, 2014). By contrast, the decision to ignore some groups of stakeholders may generate crevices around the long-term legitimacy of the project even in its successful technical aspects. Historical examples such as Saindak and Reko Diq have been facing backlash in Balochistan due to the perceived lack of any sort of local consultation giving way to resistance and accusations of exploitation (Akhtar, 2020). The sensitivity of CPEC implementation in the province has increased the need for earnest stakeholder engagement to be not only a best practice but also a political need.

To understand the application of stakeholder theory to CPEC in Balochistan, it would be important to map a dense network of stakeholders whose interests frequently conflict. At the federal level, the ministries represent the federal government and state-owned corporations that seek to gain both geopolitical and commercial advantages; at the provincial level, the Balochistan government is focused on revenue, infrastructure, and political capital; locally, communities prioritize jobs, services, and the protection of their culture. These layers of stakeholders are not meant to be hierarchically important, as none of them would be sufficient without local consent, Siraj Bashir (2023) points out, since mega-projects would not be able to acquire a social license to operate without the consent of local people. In the absence of this license, projects run the risk of being flashpoints to instability rather than stability engines.

The experience at Gwadar Port development demonstrates the results of poor stakeholder engagement. Despite CPEC's national acclaim, Gwadar residents feel excluded from major city decisions. The local promise of employment and better utilities has not come fast enough, and due to added security presence as well as limiting access to areas, resentment has risen (Baloch, 2020). The discussion reflects on the fact that the interests of the stakeholders of the community project are blurred with the operational goals, which should have been remedied with dialogues implemented and conducted consecutively in order to facilitate the narrowing of the gap between the community and the project's operational aim.

The inclusion of the stakeholder theory in the analytical framework of this study will allow a systematic analysis of whose voices are considered when such decisions are made in the context of the CPEC in Balochistan and whose voices are disregarded. It also provides factors on which the governance of the project can be evaluated: transparency, inclusivity, accountability, and responsiveness. This lens would be used to examine whether the CPEC governance model in Balochistan has been effective in balancing the interests of various stakeholders or whether it has favored some at the expense of others, especially the federal and the foreign actors. Finally, the stakeholder theory supports the study in casting light on the issue of local involvement as a determinant of legitimacy and sustainability of a mega-project in a politically sensitive area.

6.4. Social Capital and Trust-Building

Social capital can be considered an expression of networks, norms, and trust that enables

cooperation mutually beneficial to individuals and society (Putnam, 1993). Social capital has been both defined as a resource (e.g., good networks and trust can increase the effectiveness of initiatives) and an outcome (e.g., effective projects can contribute to social cohesion) in development environments. According to Woolcock, there are three kinds of social capital: bonding capital (the relationship within a group), bridging capital (the relationship between groups), and linking capital (vertical relationship with centers of power). In a periphery or conflict-affected zone like Balochistan, capital connection is almost dysfunctional because of sustained marginalization, and, thus, trust-building with state and external actors becomes central to development interventions like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

One of the pivots of social capital theory is trust-building, especially in low-governance systems. Fukuyama (1995) points out that trust minimizes costs of transactions, exchange of information, and collective action. Conversely, a lack of trust, in the sense of communities losing confidence in the motives or ability of institutions, can compromise the legitimacy of the projects and lead to any form of resistance. In Balochistan, securitization of governance, failure to address decades of unmet development promises, and perceived resource exploitation have compounded a lack of trust (Yousaf, 2019). This background suggests that even the well-intended initiatives like that of CPEC will remain suspicious unless they can show statistically early and locally visible impacts (Bashir, 2023).

In practice, intentional interventions are necessary to build social capital in Balochistan, taking into account all three types of capital. Bonding capital can also be utilized, as existing community networks will help leverage bonding capital, i.e., tribal councils and local cooperatives should be engaged in project planning. The idea of bridging capital can be encouraged by collaborations between a local community and external stakeholders, including NGOs, provincial authorities, and private sector actors. Capital politicking, which is the most challenging aspect, would require institutional changes that give regional players significant input into CPEC-related decision-making and obligate them to share information about the project schedule, budgets, and dividends (Wolf, 2019).

The case studies of other situations reiterate the need to incorporate social capital into the development planning. In post-conflict places in Africa and in Southeast Asia, projects that involve not only the aspects of construction but also of community engagement programs like the quota of local workers, participatory monitoring, and outreach tailored towards the culture of the place attain greater levels of trust and project acceptance (Colletta & Cullen, 2000). In Balochistan, the possible strategies may include accessible centers with information about CPEC, multilingual mass outreach, and involvement in oversight committees of local leaders. Trust dividends can be issued early for project initiatives, according to Siraj Bashir (2023), in areas that include visible improvements of electricity, water, and healthcare services to demonstrate that the company is serious about local well-being.

Incorporating the concepts of social capital and trust-building into the theoretical framework, the proposed study will be able to consider CPEC in Balochistan as a relational process, in addition to assessing it as an economic initiative. Changes in bonding, bridging, and linking capital will be measured to assess whether there is a drift towards a sustainable type of cooperation or something of a further alienation pattern under the CPEC. This is only because infrastructure would never guarantee development success and trust is the currency that would ultimately produce success or failure in large-scale development efforts. In areas with political sensitivity such as Balochistan, social wealth is not a side effect of development: it is a precondition.

7. Findings & Analysis

Table 7.1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 250)

District	No. of Respondents	Gender (Male/Female)	Age Range (Years)	Education Level*	Occupation**
Kech	50	35 / 15	20–60	12% Primary, 40% Secondary, 48% Higher	36% Govt/Private Jobs, 44% Self-employed, 20% Unemployed
Gwadar	50	37 / 13	18–65	8% Primary, 42% Secondary, 50% Higher	30% Govt/Private Jobs, 50% Fisheries/Trade, 20% Unemployed
Panjgur	50	34 / 16	21–58	10% Primary, 38% Secondary, 52% Higher	28% Govt/Private Jobs, 46% Agriculture/Trade, 26% Unemployed
Quetta	50	32 / 18	19–62	6% Primary, 30% Secondary, 64% Higher	40% Govt/Private Jobs, 44% Business, 16% Unemployed
Kalat	50	33 / 17	20–55	14% Primary, 48% Secondary, 38% Higher	34% Govt/Private Jobs, 46% Agriculture/Livestock, 20% Unemployed
Total	**250**	**171 / 79**	**18–65**	**10% Primary, 40% Secondary, 50% Higher**	**33.6% Govt/Private Jobs, 46% Trade/Agriculture/Fisheries, 20.4% Unemployed**

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Interpretation

The study sample consisted of 250 respondents drawn equally from five key districts in Balochistan that are directly or indirectly affected by CPEC activities: Kech, Gwadar, Panjgur, Quetta, and Kalat. Each district contributed 50 respondents to ensure equal representation across the province. The selection of these districts was strategic—Kech, Gwadar, and Panjgur lie along CPEC's coastal and western routes, directly impacted by infrastructure and port developments, while Quetta and Kalat represent inland and administrative centers with socio-political significance.

Gender distribution shows a predominance of male respondents (68.4%) compared to females (31.6%). This imbalance reflects both socio-cultural norms limiting female public participation and practical challenges in accessing female respondents in some rural areas. However, efforts were made to ensure female voices were included in each district sample.

The age range of respondents spans from 18 to 65 years, ensuring that perspectives were gathered from youth, working-age adults, and older community members. This diversity is critical in capturing generational differences in awareness, expectations, and attitudes toward CPEC.

In terms of educational attainment, half of the respondents (50%) had completed higher education (college or university), 40% had secondary-level education, and 10% had only primary-level education. The relatively high proportion of educated respondents in this sample is partly due to purposive sampling targeting individuals able to engage with the survey questions and CPEC-related issues.

Occupational distribution reveals that 33.6% of respondents were employed in government or private sector jobs, while 46% were engaged in trade, agriculture, livestock, or fisheries—sectors

closely tied to local economies. Unemployment was reported by 20.4% of respondents, with notable variation between districts; for example, Panjgur recorded higher unemployment rates than Quetta.

Overall, this demographic profile reflects a cross-section of stakeholders with varying degrees of exposure to CPEC projects, enabling the study to capture both direct and indirect perspectives on the corridor's economic, social, and cultural impacts across Balochistan.

Table 2: Respondents' Awareness and Perceptions of CPEC (N = 250)

District	High Awareness (%)	Moderate Awareness (%)	Low/No Awareness (%)	Positive Perception (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative Perception (%)
Kech	64	26	10	24	24	56
Gwadar	78	16	6	32	24	56
Panjgur	58	28	14	20	22	54
Quetta	70	20	10	28	18	54
Kalat	52	32	16	18	26	56
Total	**64.4**	**24.4**	**11.2**	**24.4**	**21.6**	**54**

Interpretation

The survey indicated that the awareness level of CPEC among the respondents in the five districts was highly elevated, as 64.4 percent of the respondents reported being highly aware of its concept, 24.4 percent said they are moderately aware of it, and only 11.2 percent indicated that they are not very aware or at all aware. The most affected districts in direct exposure to CPEC activities, i.e., Gwadar (78%) and Quetta (70%), registered the most significant levels of awareness, which can be explained by the visible infrastructure activity, increased media coverage, and government involvement. In comparison, Kalat (52%) and Panjgur (58%) had lower awareness, attributing it to their distance from the main CPEC nodes and close engagement with the project processes.

Regarding the perceptions, 54% of the interviewees stated negative perceptions toward CPEC in general. The greater proportion of negative perceptions were found in Gwadar (56) and Kech (56), in which respondents commonly expressed worries about being neglected in project decision-making, lack of direct job opportunities for locals, and fear of cultural marginalization. Pajgure and Quetta also registered a 54 percent negative perception, and this is understandable given their close vicinity to the provincial capital. Similarly, despite being the focus of CPEC, the port of Gwadar also registered a slightly lower negative perception (50%). The decrease is perhaps due to a larger number of residents who benefit through opportunities associated with this port.

Positive perceptions only constituted 24.4 percent of the entire responses, with Gwadar (32 percent) and Quetta (28 percent) registering the highest in optimism, perhaps due to the visible signs of economic activity and government investments in these urban centers. In Kalat and Panjgur, the positive sentiment was much lower, and it conforms to the notion that most of the CPEC projects are geared toward national and international interests at the expense of the local population.

Table 3: Perceived Trust in Government and Impact on Baloch Identity (N = 250)

District	High Trust (%)	Moderate Trust (%)	Low Trust (%)	Believe CPEC Benefits Baloch Identity (%)	Believe CPEC Threatens Baloch Identity (%)
Kech	16	28	56	20	58
Gwadar	22	32	46	28	50
Panjgur	14	30	56	18	60
Quetta	20	34	46	26	52
Kalat	12	32	56	16	62
Total	**16.8**	**31.2**	**52**	**21.6**	**56.4**

Interpretation

The results indicate that there is a large level of lack of trust between local communities and government institutions in Balochistan in terms of the action of CPEC. On average, 52 percent of the respondents across all the districts stated that they do not trust much about government promises concerning CPEC. The great distrust was registered in Kech (56%), Panjgur (56%), and Kalat (56%), where the respondents made frequent allusions to past experiences of the resources being exploited at their expense in cases like the Saindak and Sui gas diseases. In Gwadar and Quetta, there was a little less distrust, 46 percent, which might be attributable to visible infrastructure improvements and employment available, though in a lopsided manner.

When asked whether CPEC would be beneficial to Baloch identity, only 21.6 percent of people agreed with this opinion, with the largest number in Gwadar (28%) and the lowest in Kalat (16 percent). In contrast, 56.4 percent of respondents felt that CPEC poses a threat to Baloch identity. Among the issues were demographics after the arrival of non-local workers and loss of culture and language identity, as well as political influence. These results are quite consistent with the identity politics approach, according to which material principles of allocating resources are perceived as indicators of political recognition or non-recognition (Laitin, 2000).

Overall, these findings suggest that addressing the trust deficit and safeguarding Baloch identity are inseparable goals. Policies aimed at increasing local hiring, integrating Baloch cultural considerations into development planning, and establishing inclusive governance mechanisms could help shift perceptions. Without such measures, high awareness of CPEC may continue to coexist with high skepticism, making it difficult to transform the project from a symbol of exclusion into one of shared prosperity.

Table 5: Participation in CPEC-Related Activities and Access to Benefits (N = 250)

District	Involved in CPEC Planning Meetings (%)	Employed in CPEC Projects (%)	Own/Manage CPEC-related Business (%)	Feel Adequately Consulted (%)	Believe Locals Receive Fair Share of Benefits (%)
Kech	10	18	6	14	20
Gwadar	14	26	10	20	28
Panjgur	8	16	4	12	18
Quetta	12	20	8	18	26
Kalat	6	14	4	10	16
Total	**10**	**18.8**	**6.4**	**14.8**	**21.6**

Interpretation

The data indicates that there is very little local control over the decisions, as well as economic gains of CPEC projects, in Balochistan. Out of the five districts, just 10 percent of those surveyed said they took part in or affiliated themselves with formal CPEC planning sessions or community consultations. The highest figure (14%) was recorded in Gwadar, possibly because the area is the key point in CPEC activities and the offices of the projects are based there. Due to its distance from the prominent CPEC infrastructures and the lack of interest from implementing agencies, Kalat recorded the lowest percentage (6%).

Regarding employment, 18.8 percent of respondents were found to have worked in one way or another on CPEC-related projects. Although Gwadar again had the largest share of employment at 26 percent, primarily in port operations, construction work, and other services, opportunities in most other districts are limited. Respondents frequently commented that more skilled work is occupied by out-of-town workers brought over from other provinces, whereas Baloch workers will be offered in lower paid, temporary work.

The percentage of ownership or control of CPEC-related businesses (e.g., logistics, hospitality, construction supply) was even lower, that is, 6.4 percent of the total. This indicates that small- and medium-scale firms in Balochistan have not been able to access the CPEC-related supply chains. The interviews with local traders suggested that the reasons why they were excluded were the lack of capital, absence of the opportunity to procure goods, and lack of information about tenders. When questioned regarding the degree to which they have been consulted relative to CPEC projects, one in every seven persons was in agreement. In Gwadar, where consultation rates were superior (20%), respondents termed these processes symbolic/one-way with no evidence of community input making any difference at the final stages of decision-making. This conclusion is consistent with the critique of stakeholder theory that consultation without any decision-making role does not result in the formation of legitimacy (Reed et al., 2009). The opinions regarding the distribution of fair benefits were similar, with only 21.6% of respondents believing that locals receive their fair share. The sentiment was lowest in Kalat (16%) and Panjgur (18%), with respondents explaining their frustrations about the fact that infrastructure in their areas passes without directly affecting them.

Table 6: Respondents' Views on CPEC's Contribution to Local Human Resource Development (N = 250)

District	Received Skills Training through CPEC (%)	Believe CPEC Has Improved Local Skills (%)	Believe CPEC Should Prioritize Training (%)	Believe Govt/CPEC Authority Has Clear Training Plan (%)
Kech	8	12	92	14
Gwadar	12	18	90	20
Panjgur	6	10	94	12
Quetta	10	16	88	18
Kalat	4	8	96	10
Total	**8**	**12.8**	**92**	**14.8**

Interpretation

The research results demonstrate that there is little contribution of CPEC in developing human

resource in Balochistan. Reporting on all five districts to be surveyed, on a personal level, only

8 percent of all respondents had personally received some kind of skills training related to the CPEC. The largest percentage was recorded in Gwaadar (12 percent), whereby port operations, logistics and basic construction skills were attributed to some of the training activities. Yet, in places such as Kalat (4%) and Panjgur (6%) the training possibilities for human capital are very minimal, which shows poor decentralized planning in this respect.

Only 12.8 percent of the respondents felt that CPEC had in any way helped in strengthening local skills. This concurs with the fact that although CPEC has introduced infrastructure and investments, it has not also invested in human capital to facilitate sustainable economic growth in the region involving local citizens. Respondents reported that in technical places—like engineers, port managers, and logistic coordinators—it is often non-Baloch who fill those roles because the locals lack access to training and certification. However, the opinion is grossly unanimous (92%) that human resource development must be an uppermost priority of the CPEC in Balochistan. This view was indeed strongest in Kalat (96 percent) and Panjgur (94 percent), where participants argue that unless specific training and education are provided, the local populations will continue to rely on the external workforce and will not be able to reap the economic dividends of the corridor. This priority could be connected to a more general vision of self-reliance in a wider meaning, as skills development can be seen as one of the ways of economic empowerment that would contribute to strengthening of the Baloch identity and reducing the trust deficit.

However, only 14.8 percent believed that the government and the CPEC Authority have a clear and effectively communicated training plan for Balochistan. This feeling of absence of planning further creates doubts on whether human resource development is a priority or a rhetorical commitment. Through interviews it was discovered that there was a grievance over a lack of local training centers, the lack of birdcage orientation on scholarship opportunities, and that the available training programs did not suit the exact skill requirements of the upcoming CPEC industries. These results provide significant support to the theory of development criticism that peripheral areas tend to be exposed to the infrastructure-led development with no capacity building of people that, instead, can be a form of dependency (Frank, 1967)

To achieve the potential of CPEC in Balochistan, investment in education, vocational training, and technical skills will have to be at par with or above investments in physical infrastructure. Such a practice would not only provide a local workforce that can be employed but will also provide Baloch communities with the power to take their economic future in their own hands.

Table: 6 Perceptions of CPEC in Relation to Cultural Identity, Economic Opportunity, and Political Inclusion (N = 250)

District	Positive on Cultural Identity (%)	Negative on Cultural Identity (%)	Positive on Economic Opportunity (%)	Negative on Economic Opportunity (%)	Positive on Political Inclusion (%)	Negative on Political Inclusion (%)
Kech	20	58	26	54	20	56
Gwadar	28	50	38	44	28	46
Panjgur	18	60	22	56	18	56
Quetta	26	52	34	48	26	46
Kalat	16	62	18	58	16	56

District	Positive on Cultural Identity (%)	Negative on Cultural Identity (%)	Positive on Economic Opportunity (%)	Negative on Economic Opportunity (%)	Positive on Political Inclusion (%)	Negative on Political Inclusion (%)
Total	21.6	56.4	27.6	52	21.6	52

Interpretation

The survey findings show that there is a highly critical perception toward CPEC in all three dimensions of cultural identity, economic opportunity, and political inclusion, with negative perceptions prevailing over positive ones. Regarding cultural identity, most respondents (56.4%) feel that CPEC does pose a threat to Baloch culture, language, and customs, whereas 21.6 percent of them answered that the CPEC fosters the identity. This was especially high in Kalat (62%) and Panjgur (60%), with respondents expressing fear that the presence of nonlocal labor and central government control were likely to undermine cultural independence. Although Gwadar is more economically integrated into the CPEC, half of the respondents had a negative identity perception.

On economic opportunity, a bare majority (52%) of respondents believed that CPEC had not brought fair economic opportunities to the local people: the strongest negative responses were again concentrated in Kech and Panjgur (over 54% negative). Optimistic responses to future economic benefits reached only 27.6 percent overall, with many referring to the possibility of expanding small businesses, increased access to markets, and other infrastructure-based trade. There were no variables in association with degree of positive sentiment other than it appeared highest in Gwadar (38%), with some residents receiving the direct benefits of the port and logistics that take place.

In political inclusion, 52 percent of the respondents were against decision-making in CPEC-related issues, with the largest sentiments of exclusion in the region of Kech, Panjgur, and Kalat (56 percent each). However, positive perceptions of being included in the political process were low on average (21.6%), and the views that decisions are made in Islamabad and Beijing devoid of meaningful consultation are widespread. In Quetta, the provincial capital, a minority of respondents (less than 30 percent) said that they felt politically involved in the CPEC governance process.

The results indicate that CPEC is largely viewed as being externally initiated, with its economic benefits being exclusive and the cultural preservation and local political empowerment causing great concern. These numbers also reiterate how identity politics and economic development are closely connected to one another: as long as people feel politically disadvantaged and culturally threatened, they are unlikely to consider large-scale infrastructure projects to have authenticity or be advantageous, even with economic benefits present.

8. Discussion

8.1. Comparing Baloch Perspectives with Official CPEC Narratives

The official discourse on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is centered on national integration, economic restructuring, and regional connectivity. The statements from the government and promo materials show that the CPEC is a game changer that can raise marginalized provinces with infrastructure, facilitating trade and inflows of investments. In this light, CPEC is marketed as a national endeavor, and the benefits are automatic and meted out equitably.

The implications of the study findings, however, indicate that there is a significant disconnect between this official discourse and the realities of the perceptions of Baloch communities. Sixty-four-point four percent of respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding CPEC, over 56 percent of them had the perception that CPEC is a threat to their cultural identity, and over half felt politically excluded. Economic optimism was also low, with only 27.6 percent citing concrete opportunities and 18.8

percent reporting employment in projects related to CPEC. These figures indicate that community confidence is not being matched by official optimism.

This disconnects stems largely from the top-down design of CPEC implementation in Balochistan. Official narratives emphasize large-scale outputs — kilometers of roads built, megawatts of power generated, port tonnage — but do not adequately address procedural fairness, local ownership, and cultural recognition, which are central to the Baloch perspective. The government's framing assumes that infrastructure-led growth will naturally benefit local populations, yet the data here supports that in peripheral regions, benefits require deliberate, targeted measures rather than trickle-down expectations.

8.2. Implications of Neglecting Local Identity and Human Resource Development

The results indicate two interrelated risks of cultural alienation and human capital stagnation. Regarding identity, the failure to initiate organized efforts to defend and promote Baloch language, cultures, and symbolic representation has given way to fears of cultural loss. As 56.4 percent understood CPEC as a threat to their culture, while 21.6 percent believed it would be identity reinforcing, the initiative runs the risk of being represented domestically as an outgrowth of past marginalization rather than a redress of that marginalization. This understanding undermines legitimacy and exacerbates the trust gap resulting from years of marginalization and inadequate resource distribution.

On human resource development (HRD), the numbers are equally telling: only 8% have received CPEC-linked training, and just 14.8% believe the government or CPEC Authority has a clear skills strategy. Without targeted capacity building, the influx of CPEC-related opportunities — in logistics, maritime services, energy operations, and industrial processing — will continue to be captured by non-local labor. This reinforces economic dependency, widens the skills gap, and perpetuates the narrative that development bypasses the local population.

Neglecting both identity and HRD is not just a missed development opportunity; it is a political liability. In the stakeholder theory framework, legitimacy is co-produced through recognition, representation, and redistribution. If Baloch identity concerns remain unaddressed while economic benefits remain elusive, resistance — whether in the form of disengagement, protest, or passive obstruction — is likely to increase, raising the transaction costs of project implementation.

9. The Way Forward

1. Making Human Resource Development the Top CPEC Priority

The sustainable future of CPEC in Balochistan rests with the transition to a people-driven development project and not an infrastructure focus. HRD should be seen as a priority in the corridor and not as a parallel activity. It will entail the creation of district-level talent and company hubs in Gwadar, Kech, Panjgur, Quetta, and Kalat, all targeting local economic opportunities: port logistics, fishing value chains, mining and agribusiness, and reusable energy. Any significant CPEC contracts must incorporate apprenticeship targets, transferability of industry licenses to individuals, and secured interview opportunities for those who have trained locally. We must proactively encourage the female presence by providing safe transport, allowing flexible training schedules, and introducing women-only groups. The integration of these steps within the institutionalized CPEC governance will establish HRD as a long-term job generator rather than being a one-off move.

2. Building Trust and Inclusivity

Rebuilding trust requires visible, enforceable commitments. Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) should be mandatory for all large-scale CPEC projects, specifying local hiring percentages, SME procurement targets, and social infrastructure investments. A Cultural Impact Note should be attached to every new project, ensuring that Baloch identity is respected and strengthened. Policies must be co-developed with local leadership and codified into provincial

regulations, giving them legal enforceability. Furthermore, revenue-sharing mechanisms — such as allocating a fixed percentage of port fees and SEZ revenues to local development funds — can provide a tangible and recurring dividend to communities, signaling that CPEC is a shared asset rather than an imposed scheme.

3. Mechanisms for Continuous Community Engagement

One-off consultations cannot substitute for institutionalized participation. District CPEC Councils (DCCs) should be established as permanent, legally recognized bodies comprising tribal elders, elected representatives, women and youth leaders, fisherfolk, and local business owners. These councils should hold decision-making power over project adjustments that affect land rights, compensation, and community facilities. Regular quarterly town halls and biannual community forums should be organized, where project progress is discussed openly and feedback is documented. Using local languages in all engagement activities will further strengthen inclusivity and reduce the perception of exclusion.

4. Transparency and Accountability Measures

Public trust will remain low unless transparency is embedded into the project's operating culture. A real-time procurement and hiring portal should display all CPEC tenders, job vacancies, applicant pools, and awarded contracts, along with the proportion of local hires. Independent social audits — conducted by neutral third parties and published online — can verify compliance with CBAs, hiring quotas, and SME set-asides. The introduction of a 30-day grievance redress mechanism with automatic escalation to an Ombudsperson will ensure that community complaints are addressed promptly. All these transparency measures should be bilingual (Balochi/Urdu) and easily accessible through mobile-friendly platforms.

5. Ensuring the Baloch People's Role as Active Stakeholders

For CPEC to achieve legitimacy in Balochistan, the people must be recognized as active co-owners, not passive recipients. This requires granting local representatives' formal seats in CPEC Authority decision-making committees and ensuring that provincial and district voices shape budget allocations, project sequencing, and HRD planning. Legislative amendments can mandate local content requirements — for both labor and procurement — across all CPEC projects. In addition, cultural recognition should be integrated into the physical and symbolic landscape of CPEC through bilingual signage, local art installations, and heritage protection initiatives.

By making HRD the central pillar, formalizing trust-building mechanisms, ensuring continuous engagement, guaranteeing transparency, and embedding Baloch participation in decision-making, CPEC can transition from being perceived as an externally driven venture to a genuinely shared project of mutual prosperity.

10. Conclusions

This study set out to explore how the Baloch people perceive the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), with a particular focus on cultural identity, economic opportunity, political inclusion, trust deficits, and human resource development. Drawing on data from 250 respondents across Kech, Gwadar, Panjgur, Quetta, and Kalat, the findings reveal a consistent pattern: while awareness of CPEC is high, optimism about its benefits is low, and skepticism is shaped by deep historical, political, and socio-economic factors.

The evidence shows that a majority of respondents view CPEC as threatening rather than strengthening Baloch identity. Economic expectations are tempered by the reality that most skilled jobs are going to non-locals, and political inclusion is perceived as minimal. Historical neglect, political marginalization, and uneven benefit distribution continue to define the relationship between the Baloch people and state institutions, creating a trust deficit that new infrastructure alone cannot resolve. Limited human resource development — with only 8%

reporting CPEC-related training — further compounds this exclusion, ensuring that even when economic opportunities exist, they remain out of reach for many locals.

The divergence between official CPEC narratives and community perspectives underscores the importance of reframing the project from an infrastructure-first initiative to a people-centered development process. Lessons from similar projects globally demonstrate that in politically sensitive and culturally distinct regions, success depends not only on physical outputs but also on recognition, representation, and redistribution. Without deliberate measures to protect cultural identity, build skills, and institutionalize local participation, CPEC risks reinforcing the very grievances it aims to address.

The way forward lies in making human resource development the top CPEC priority, embedding cultural respect into project governance, establishing permanent local decision-making bodies, ensuring transparent benefit-sharing, and creating tangible, early wins for communities. This is not just a matter of equity — it is a strategic necessity for the sustainability of CPEC in Balochistan. By treating the Baloch people as active stakeholders and co-owners, rather than passive beneficiaries, the corridor can transition from a contested venture into a genuine driver of shared prosperity, regional stability, and national integration.

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