

Chinese soft Diplomacy and CPEC: A Case study of Geo News and ARY News in Shaping Public Opinion in Pakistan

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Abstract: *This research explores how the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is portrayed in Pakistani television media, focusing on two prominent programs: “Jirga” (Geo News) and “Asim Saleem’s Briefing” (ARY News). By examining episodes aired from 2021 to 2022, the study investigates the influence of media framing, shaped by Chinese diplomatic efforts, on public opinion about CPEC. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines qualitative content analysis of program narratives with quantitative evaluation of audience feedback to uncover recurring themes, tones, and engagement patterns. The findings indicate that both programs predominantly highlight positive narratives, such as economic development and regional connectivity, aligning with China’s soft power objectives. However, issues like transparency, resource allocation, and regional disparities are often underrepresented, contributing to divided public perceptions. “Jirga” stands out for its reliance on expert analysis, fostering deeper and more informed discussions, whereas “Asim Saleem’s Briefing” provides direct updates that, while valued, are less effective in shaping nuanced perspectives. This study highlights the influential role of television media in shaping public attitudes toward large-scale infrastructure projects and emphasizes the need for balanced reporting to enhance transparency and build public trust. The research contributes to the understanding of media’s intersection with international relations, offering insights valuable to policymakers, journalists, and scholars alike.*

Keywords: CPEC, Media Framing, Public Opinion, Chinese Diplomacy, Geo News, ARY News

Introduction:

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has emerged as a transformative venture aimed at boosting regional connectivity and economic development. Encompassing a huge investment in infrastructure, trade and energy, CPEC keeps strategic importance for Pakistan’s economy and China’s geopolitical aspirations. However, the success of such major projects is closely linked to public perception, which is strongly shaped by media narratives.

In Pakistan, Media houses such as Geo News and ARY News play a significant role in shaping public perceptions about CPEC. These media outlets not only highlight the developments but also playing a role for diplomatic channels, shaping narratives that either encourage support or provoke skepticism. Crucial to this process is China’s strategic involvement with media outlets to present an encouraging narrative related to CPEC.

The study aims to analyze how these two prominent news outlets portray CPEC and the degree to which their coverage is influenced by Chinese diplomats and government officials. By focusing on the program “Jirga” (Geo News) and “Asim Saleem’s Briefing” (ARY News), the research investigates the interplay between diplomatic initiatives, media framing and public perception. The findings provide insights into how media can intensify or impede the success of initiatives like CPEC, providing insights for policy makers, journalists and scholars alike.

By examining the convergence of soft diplomacy, media representation, and public opinion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the role of media in international relations and development initiatives, particularly in the context of Pakistan-China relations.

Literature Review

This study builds upon prior research exploring the intersections of media, diplomacy, and public perception, particularly within the framework of large-scale development initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). By synthesizing these themes, it highlights significant contributions from existing scholarship while identifying critical gaps addressed in this study.

Media Framing and Public Perception

Li Qianqian and Liu Yijun (2023) examine how mainstream Pakistani English newspapers (The News International, The Nation, and Dawn) frame CPEC. Their findings suggest that media narratives predominantly emphasize economic benefits while occasionally addressing concerns such as regional security and transparency. These observations establish a foundation for understanding the media's influential role in shaping public trust and skepticism, which this study extends to the realm of television media as a more immediate medium of communication.

Similarly, Lubna and Sajida (2020) explore the polarized narratives surrounding CPEC in media outlets. While some portray it as a transformative project, others amplify concerns over transparency and regional disparities, particularly in Baluchistan. Their work highlights the importance of local dynamics in framing national projects, offering a lens for evaluating the distinct approaches of Geo News and ARY News.

Chinese Digital Diplomacy

Alessandra Cappelletti (2019) provides insights into how Chinese diplomats in Pakistan utilize social media platforms, such as Twitter, to complement traditional diplomacy. Cappelletti demonstrates how these platforms are employed to project soft power, counter criticisms, and shape public narratives. This work parallels the influence of digital and televised media strategies examined in this study, particularly in framing public perceptions of CPEC.

Role of Influencers and Key Figures

Research by Lubna et al. (2020) highlights the importance of credible figures in shaping public opinion. For instance, Mushahid Hussain's expertise and commentary on CPEC have been instrumental in promoting its benefits and addressing public concerns. These insights align with this study's findings, underscoring the significant role of trusted individuals in enhancing media narratives.

Gaps in Existing Literature

While existing studies have explored CPEC's portrayal in print and digital media, the role of television media remains under examined, particularly in most famous programs in Pakistan's elite media outlets like Jirga (Geo News) and Asim Saleem's Briefing (ARY News). Furthermore, the influence of Chinese diplomatic efforts on shaping television narratives has received limited attention. By focusing on these aspects, this study fills a crucial gap, providing fresh insights into how soft diplomacy, media framing, and public opinion intersect within the Pakistani context.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in Agenda-Setting theory and framing theory. Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media plays a very important role in shaping public opinion by highlighting certain issues, making them more prominent in the mind of the audience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This theory aids in analyzing how Geo News and ARY News prioritize topics related to China's diplomacy and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), thereby influencing public perception.

Framing and Tone

The strategies and tactics used in framing attempts differ depending on who is framing and/ or who is being framed (Mintz and Redd 2003). The news frame is a conceptual tool that media and journalists rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information (Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992). Thus, framing is an important element to project soft power of a country. At initial stage the study has analyzed that how GEO News and ARY News frame their coverage of CPEC in ways influenced by Chinese diplomats and government officials? This involves highlighting the positive, aspects of the project specifically the economic development opportunities and infrastructure improvements, while downplaying potential challenges or criticisms.

Narrative Consistency:

The increasing interaction among journalists from the two countries is directly linked to the CPEC, as is clear from the themes of many such exchange programs, for instance, a recent delegation of journalists and stake holders from Pakistan visited Kunming to discuss collaboration with Chinese counterparts on the media's role in the success of CPEC (Jirga 2023). The study has reveal a consistent narrative across both media outlets regarding CPEC, reflecting the messaging advocated by Chinese diplomats and officials. This part includes themes of bilateral cooperation, mutual benefits, and the strategic importance of CPEC for Pakistan's development and regional connectivity.

Public Perception:

Through examining public discourse and reactions to CPEC-related news coverage in Pakistan, the study has found that the portrayal of CPEC in GEO News and ARY News influences local public perception of the project. The study reveals that Positive or negative framing of CPEC in the media could shape how the public views the initiative and its potential benefits or drawbacks.

Research Questions

1. How do Geo News and ARY News frame their coverage of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) during 2021–2022?
2. What influence does Chinese digital diplomacy have on shaping media narratives about CPEC in Pakistan?
3. How do policymakers, journalists, and the general public perceive the portrayal of CPEC in Pakistani television media?
4. To what extent do media framing and diplomatic messaging impact public support or opposition to CPEC?

Hypotheses

H1: Chinese diplomats and officials strategically shape the discourse on CPEC in Geo News and ARY News to promote favorable narratives and sway public opinion.

H2: Geo News and ARY News play a pivotal role in influencing public perceptions of CPEC through their framing strategies and narrative consistency.

H3: A balanced or critical portrayal of CPEC in media coverage fosters a more comprehensive public understanding of the project.

H4: Media programs featuring expert opinions and in-depth discussions are more effective in shaping public opinion compared to those relying solely on official briefings.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how Geo News and ARY News frame their coverage of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the resulting impact on public opinion. This approach ensures a thorough analysis of media narratives and their alignment with Chinese diplomatic efforts.

Research Design

The research focuses on two influential television programs:

1. Jirga (Geo News), hosted by Saleem Safi.
2. Asim Saleem's Briefing (ARY News), featuring updates on CPEC by Asim Saleem Bajwa.

These programs were chosen for their prominence and ability to shape public discourse on CPEC in Pakistan.

Population and Sample

The population includes all episodes of Jirga and Asim Saleem's Briefing aired between January 2021 and December 2022. Purposive sampling was used to select episodes specifically addressing CPEC, ensuring their relevance to the study.

Data Collection

1. Content Analysis

Systematic analysis of the selected episodes, focusing on:

- **Tone:** Positive, negative, or neutral.
- **Framing:** Economic benefits, security concerns, geopolitical implications.
- **Frequency:** of CPEC-related coverage.
- **Textual and visual elements:** including language, imagery, and guest contributions, are coded to identify recurring themes and patterns.

2. Audience Feedback Analysis

Viewer engagement metrics, such as comments, likes, shares, and views from platforms like YouTube and social media, are analyzed to understand public reactions to the programs.

3. Secondary Data

Reports, interviews, and statements from Chinese diplomats and officials are reviewed to provide context for the media narratives.

Data Analysis

1. Qualitative Analysis

Thematic analysis is employed to uncover patterns in media coverage and audience responses. Expert opinions featured in the programs are evaluated to assess the depth and quality of CPEC discussions.

2. Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages) are used to analyze audience engagement and sentiment. Cross-tabulations compare the narratives presented in the two programs.

Scope and Limitations

1. Scope

The study examines two major television programs in Pakistan, focusing on their portrayal of CPEC. It emphasizes the interplay between media narratives, public perception, and Chinese diplomatic efforts.

2. Limitations

The analysis is limited to a two-year period and two specific programs, which may restrict its broader applicability. Audience feedback is drawn from digital platforms, which may not fully capture the perspectives of all segments of the population.

3. Ethical Considerations

All data used in the study, including audience comments and program content, is publicly available. The research maintains confidentiality and ensures an unbiased approach in data selection and analysis.

Audience Engagement and analysis: Saleem Safi's Jirga on Geo News

The research delves into the popular talk show "Jirga" hosted by Saleem Safi, a respected journalist and anchor known for his significant role in shaping public opinion on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The show airs on Geo News, one of Pakistan's largest and most influential news channels. In this particular episode, Safi hosted Senator Mushahid Hussain, the former chairman of the parliamentary committee on CPEC. Mushahid Hussain has been instrumental in shaping public discourse, fostering transparency, and generating support for CPEC projects. The program shed light on the benefits of CPEC while addressing strategies to counter Western narratives against the initiative.

This episode of "Jirga" attracted a notable level of public engagement, with 74,000 views and 1,100 likes. The show's comment section provided a rich mix of public perspectives and reactions. Among those who participated, 34.27% found the episode highly informative. One viewer remarked, "Safi, we need more programs like this to educate the public and politicians about CPEC." Another praised Senator Mushahid Hussain, saying, "He is one of Pakistan's finest minds on security, geopolitics, and related issues—his clarity of thought is remarkable."

While many appreciated the discussion, others voiced their concerns and frustrations, particularly regarding Western propaganda against CPEC. One individual passionately commented, "We would rather live in poverty than maintain any friendship with the United States." Another viewer lauded the senator's efforts to promote Pakistan-China relations, saying, "Mushahid Hussain has done an excellent job in advancing Pak-China friendship." Yet, some viewers criticized politicians and institutions, highlighting the delays and challenges in CPEC's implementation. A disgruntled viewer wrote, "Our politicians are creating unnecessary hurdles in the country's progress."

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Very informative	61	34.27%
Demand for more shows	42	23.60%
Criticism on Army	28	15.73%
Cultural exchange with China	16	8.99%
Blame on PTI and PMLN	10	5.62%
Concerns on gawadar port	10	5.37%
Questions from M.H	6	3.37%
Criticism from Indian audiences	3	1.69%
Criticism from Afghan audiences	2	1.12%

Table 1.1

Interpretations

The analysis revealed a spectrum of responses: 34.27% of viewers praised the program for its informativeness, while 23.60% demanded more programs like it. Around 15.73% expressed their discontent with the role of politicians and the military in CPEC's delays and controversies. Additionally, 8.99% advocated for stronger cultural exchanges with China, while 5.62% raised concerns about Gwadar port. A smaller fraction—3.37%—posed personal questions to Senator Mushahid Hussain, while criticisms of CPEC from Indian and Afghan perspectives accounted for 1.69% and 1.12% of the responses, respectively.

Public Perception and insights: Asim Saleem Bajwa's briefing on ARY News

The study also analyzed a media briefing presented by Asim Saleem Bajwa, the former chairman of CPEC, on ARY News, Pakistan's second-most-watched news channel after Geo News. The briefing, held in Gwadar, provided important updates and insights into the progress of CPEC projects. What made this briefing stand out was the direct communication style Bajwa employed—addressing viewers without intermediaries. This approach allowed for real-time dissemination of information while fostering transparency and engagement with the audience.

The broadcast garnered 25,000 views, with 725 likes and 85 comments reflecting a wide range of public reactions. A significant majority, about 64.29%, appreciated Bajwa's efforts and expressed optimism about CPEC's future. One viewer remarked, "This is great information. There's no doubt Pakistan will now progress rapidly. These projects can neither be stopped nor reversed. Every Pakistani will feel the benefits in the years ahead." Another praised Bajwa, saying, "He is a brave and intelligent personality. May God bless our country with progress." Many respondents shared the sentiment that Bajwa's briefing instilled confidence in CPEC, with one person commenting, "Thanks to his briefing, every Pakistani is now more confident about CPEC."

However, not all feedback was positive. A significant portion of the audience, particularly those from Baluchistan, voiced concerns over discrimination and the lack of representation in CPEC’s leadership and project execution. One viewer asked, “Why can’t the CPEC chairman be an economist instead of an army officer?” Another suggested, “A Baluchi should hold the post of CPEC chairman.” Some respondents emphasized the need for further development in Baluchistan, with comments like, “Please include Baluchistan’s phase 2 and 3 so we can get water for our land and benefit from CPEC.” Others expressed frustration over the lack of basic amenities in Gwadar, saying, “We have no water here, yet they are giving media briefings,” and “Give water to Gwadar before anything else.”

Additionally, a significant number of respondents criticized the establishment’s involvement in public projects. This group raised issues related to accountability and decision-making, with comments like, “All jobs are going to security personnel and their relatives,” and, “There isn’t a single job for ordinary people.”

Opinion	Frequency	Percentage
Appreciate CPEC and Asim Saleem's Briefing	54	64.29%
Concerns on selection of Chairman CPEC, Progress of CPEC and Discrimination in Baluchistan	18	21.43%
Direct criticism on Army	12	14.29%

Table 2.1

Interpretations

Out of 84 responses, 54 (approximately 64.29%) were positive, showing strong public support for CPEC and Asim Saleem Bajwa’s media briefing. However, 18 respondents (21%) expressed concerns, particularly those from Baluchistan, who highlighted issues of discrimination and uneven development. They also emphasized the need for more inclusive decision-making in CPEC projects. Meanwhile, 21% of the comments were critical of the army’s involvement in public projects, reflecting broader skepticism about the role of the establishment in the initiative’s implementation.

Findings

This study uncovers important insights into how “Jirga” (Geo News) and “Asim saleem’s Briefing” (ARY News) shape public

perceptions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through their framing strategies and audience engagement.

Narrative Framing and Diplomatic Influence:

Both programs closely align their narratives with the messaging advocated by Chinese diplomats, emphasizing CPEC's benefits such as economic growth, regional connectivity, and strategic collaboration. At the same time, they downplay concerns regarding transparency, security, and equitable resource distribution, reflecting the influence of Chinese soft diplomacy on media content.

Audience Perception and Program Impact:

"Jirga", hosted by Saleem Safi, resonated more strongly with viewers due to its inclusion of expert voices, like Mushahid Hussain, and its ability to critically engage with key issues. Approximately 34.27% of the audience found the program highly informative, praising its efforts to counter Western narratives and promote transparency, which boosted confidence in CPEC.

Conversely, "Asim Saleem Bajwa's Briefing" on ARY News, though appreciated by 64.29% of viewers for its straightforward delivery, lacked the same critical depth. Concerns were raised about the program's limited focus on regional representation and unresolved local issues in Baluchistan, such as water shortages and employment disparities, which dampened enthusiasm for CPEC.

Polarization of Public Opinion:

Media portrayals of CPEC contributed to a divided public response. While many viewers expressed optimism and support, a notable minority voiced skepticism, particularly regarding the military's role in civilian projects and inequitable development in regions like Baluchistan.

Influence of Media Personalities:

The credibility and expertise of individuals like Mushahid Hussain played a crucial role in shaping public trust. Programs featuring well-informed and articulate guests were more effective in engaging audiences compared to those relying heavily on official statements.

Media Accountability and Balanced Reporting:

While both programs succeeded in promoting CPEC's positive aspects, they lacked balance in their coverage. The absence of critical perspectives and diverse viewpoints limited public understanding of the broader challenges associated with the project.

These findings emphasize the media's powerful role in shaping public perceptions of CPEC. They highlight the need for balanced reporting that not only supports developmental initiatives but also fosters transparency and critical engagement to build long-term public trust in transformative projects like CPEC.

Conclusion

This study critically examines the role of two leading Pakistani news channels, Geo News and ARY News, in shaping public perceptions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). By focusing on programs like "Jirga" and "Asim Saleem's Briefing", the research sheds light on how media coverage interacts with Chinese diplomatic strategies to influence public attitudes toward CPEC.

The analysis reveals contrasting approaches by the two channels. Geo News, through Saleem Safi's "Jirga", presents a more structured and analytical discourse, incorporating expert opinions to foster informed discussions. On the other hand, ARY News, particularly through "Asim Saleem Bajwa's Briefing", relies more on direct communication and official narratives, which, while impactful, lack the depth to spark critical public engagement. Despite these differences, both channels largely align with the strategic messaging promoted by Chinese diplomats, focusing on CPEC's economic benefits while minimizing discussions of its challenges.

This study highlights the pivotal role of media framing in shaping public opinion about large-scale infrastructure projects like CPEC. Positive portrayals can build enthusiasm and public support, while critical narratives may fuel skepticism or opposition. For projects as transformative as CPEC, the media bears a dual responsibility: to champion developmental initiatives while ensuring balanced and transparent reporting.

Nonetheless, this research acknowledges its limitations, such as the narrow focus on two programs and the absence of a broader media landscape analysis. Future studies could explore a wider range of media outlets, examine different time frames, and evaluate the long-term impact of media narratives on public trust and engagement with international development projects.

In conclusion, the media plays an indispensable role in shaping public perceptions of CPEC. Through thoughtful narratives and strategic communication, programs like those on Geo News and ARY News influence not only the public's understanding of such initiatives but also their ultimate success in Pakistan. This study reinforces the importance of media responsibility in bridging the gap between policy, public perception, and development outcomes.

Future scope of the study

Future studies could expand the sample size, include additional media outlets, or use a chronological approach to analyze changes over time. Studies could also incorporate audience perception surveys and cross-country analyses to deepen insights into media framing of CPEC and China's role.

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