

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Social Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis

By Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Silada Rojratanakiat & Soravis Taekasem

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in Social Media: A Critical Discourse
Analysis of Tweets from Pakistan**

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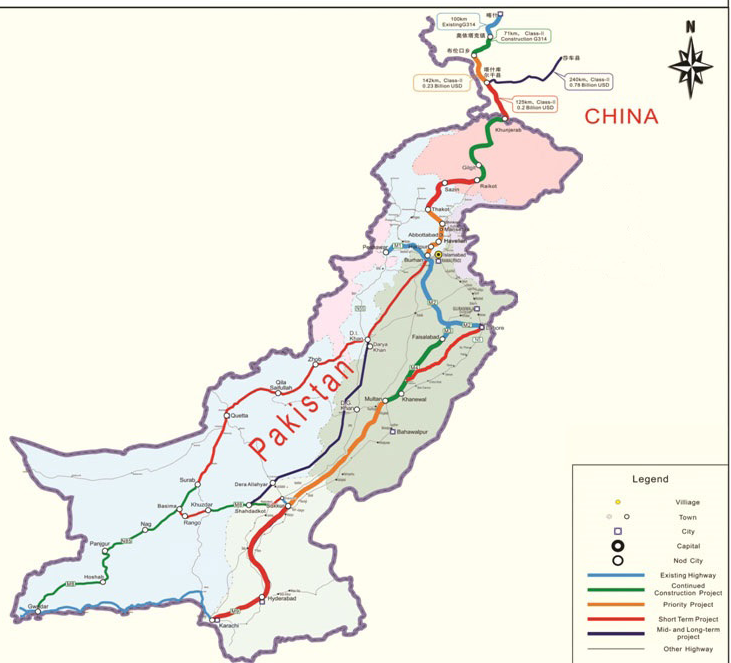
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Highway Network of CPEC



The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in Social Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Tweets From Pakistan

Zahid Shahab Ahmed, Silada Rojratanakiat, Soravis Taekasem

Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is among the six corridors envisaged in China's ambitious infrastructural development project called the Belt and Road Initiative. Officially launched in April 2015 during the visit of President Xi Jinping to Pakistan, the CPEC is viewed as an unprecedented example of the strong relationship between China and Pakistan. While the CPEC led to India's criticism of the corridor involving Gilgit-Baltistan, which is a part of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir, the CPEC also triggered differences at home based on historic inter-provincial dynamics in Pakistan. This paper aims to understand how social media, in particular Twitter, was used by individuals and organizations that tweeted the most about the CPEC. The study reveals that the most prominent Twitter accounts from the selected period, i.e. January to June 2015, were from Pakistan, therefore, the findings of this paper help in understanding the discourse that has been promoted in relation to not just the CPEC but also the relationship between China and Pakistan. Based on the findings of this research, it is reported that government officials and institutions in Pakistan were engaged in actively promoting the CPEC and China's goodwill in Pakistan.

Keywords: China, Pakistan, CPEC, Twitter

Introduction

South Asia holds a key place in China's foreign policy. Other than economic opportunities in one of the biggest markets of the world, China is seeking the strategic benefits that come with a greater role in the Indian Ocean region. Historically, several factors shaped China's South Asia policy. Primarily, South Asia was important due to its geographical location because it is located midway between the oil-rich Middle East and Southeast Asia. Secondly, China was interested in South Asia due to natural resources such as coal and iron. In the present context, this region has both geo-economic and geostrategic importance to Beijing because South Asia holds a key place within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and because of India's growing relations with the U.S. and Japan (Madan 2014, Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2018). A flagship project of the BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through which China has invested US\$62 billion in Pakistan with the hope of increasing its trade with Pakistan to US\$150 billion (Kumar 2015, 305). The commencement of the BRI followed the signing of agreements between China and Pakistan during President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in April 2015. While officially the CPEC was applauded as being a turning point in the countries' bilateral relations and a game changer for Pakistan, domestically within Pakistan it led to tensions linked to the country's historic inter-provincial discord. This was witnessed through many opposition parties and provincial governments questioning the federal and Punjab governments for unfairly planning the CPEC routes (Ahmed 2018). The first half of 2015, therefore, is crucial to understanding how certain key institutions and individuals in Pakistan portrayed the CPEC. This study aims to present a critical discourse analysis of the most prominent individual and organizational Twitter handles that were active with #CPEC during the first half of 2015. As we will report in

this paper, most of the prominent Twitter handles were from Pakistan, especially from government institutions. The analysis in this paper helps to understand the official discourse on the CPEC during its defining moments as well as the relationship between China and Pakistan.

The BRI is China's ambitious plan to expand the reach of its trade connectivity by land and sea for access to markets across Asia, Africa and Europe. This is estimated to cost China around US\$1 trillion. A question to be asked, however, is why Beijing decided that the CPEC would be the BRI's flagship project. The selection of the CPEC as the BRI's pilot project could be because it is one of the easiest and shortest compared to the other five corridors within the BRI, as the CPEC mainly involves Pakistan (Nazir 2017). In South Asia, Pakistan has been China's most trusted partner, and this is evident through strong economic and defense relations. A key indicator of a strong friendship between countries can be their backing of each other's stance at multilateral levels—meaning relations moving beyond areas limited to bilateral levels. In nearly 70 years of China-Pakistan friendship, both countries have wholeheartedly backed each other at multilateral forums, especially at the United Nations. Other than supporting Pakistan's position on the Kashmir dispute with India, Beijing has been favoring Pakistan on a range of issues, for example terrorism. In 2016, China helped Pakistan by blocking India's bid to designate Jaish-e-Mohammed's leader Masood Azhar a terrorist at the UN. This also happened in 2019, when again China vetoed India's move to declare Masood Azhar a terrorist. For its position, China has faced a lot of international criticism (Kugelman 2019). Pakistan played a key role at the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to pave the way for China's observer status, and Beijing reciprocated by helping Pakistan obtain a full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These are but a few examples demonstrating a strong

bilateral relationship that might have played a role in Beijing's decision to start its BRI through the CPEC.

The relationship between China, Pakistan and the CPEC has been covered in many scholarly papers. Particular attention has been paid to the geo-economic and geopolitical dimensions of the countries' relations, in general, and the CPEC, in particular (Ahmed and Bhatnagar 2018, Rashid 2018, Choudhry 2017, Ahmar 2014). On the CPEC, scholars have covered a range of issues, such as trade and economic development in Pakistan and South Asia (Tong 2014, Shulin 2014, Rizvi 2014, Irshad, Xin, and Arshad 2015), domestic politics in Pakistan (Ahmed 2018), and the India factor or India's opposition to the CPEC (Khan, Farooq, and Gul 2016, Bhardwaj 2017). As clear from these examples, little attention has been devoted to studying internal dimensions, such as domestic politics and discourse, vis-à-vis the CPEC in Pakistan. While there has been discourse analysis of the Indian media in relation to the CPEC (Khan, Farooq, and Gul 2016), there is no work done on the use of social media in the context of the CPEC. This study addresses that gap in scholarship through critical discourse analysis of how the CPEC was framed on social media during its foundational period in 2015.

With a population of over 200 million people, Pakistan has one of the largest and fastest-growing populations of social media users, with 1.26 million on Twitter and 36 million on Facebook (Farooq 2019). This is partly due to the affordability of telecommunication services in the country. The World Economic Forum's Network Readiness Index report placed Pakistan number 1 in terms of the most affordable telecommunication services, including the internet access (PTA 2019). The growing use of social media is a major reason that almost all government offices and political parties have a presence on social media, and especially on Twitter and

Facebook. The government realizes the importance of using social media to promote its discourse on key policy issues to audiences within and outside of Pakistan. Domestically there have been many instances when social media tools, for example WhatsApp, were used to promulgate propaganda against certain individuals and institutions. Recent examples include propaganda against the Beaconhouse School System in Pakistan (Jahangir 2019). Then there are talks of the ongoing fifth-generation warfare between India and Pakistan in which India has been directly targeting the CPEC (Rasool 2018). The analysis in this paper therefore helps to understand not just the discourse that was being promoted by the government of Pakistan on the CPEC, but also how some public institutions and officials responded to internal and external (i.e. from India) challenges to the CPEC.

For our analysis, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach is often used to study identities and inter-state relations (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004, Mirzaee and Gharibeh 2015). CDA first emerged in the 1980s through the work of Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun A. van Dijk (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). CDA is problem-oriented and in international relations can help us understand intergovernmental relations with a focus on the constitutive effects of discourse through, for example, summit declarations and treaties (Farrelly 2010). With regard to CDA's contribution to political science, Farrelly argues that "[CDA] offers a general theoretical perspective on discourse, which recognizes the constitutive potential of discourse within and across social practices without reducing social practices to their discursive aspect" (2010, 99). CDA is often employed to investigate discourses as forms of social practices. This methodology itself takes into consideration the context of discourse (Wodak and Meyer 2002). Fairclough, a prominent scholar of CDA, goes beyond the mere analysis of text to "genre," which he defines as

"the genre of language associated with a particular social activity" (1993, 138). Farrelly further simplifies the definition of genre, which, according to him, "are the forms of action that language takes when one is speaking or writing" (2010, 100). Another key aspect that Fairclough focuses on is a discursive event: "instance of language use, analyzed as text, discursive practice, social practice" (1993, 138).

In terms of the methodology of this paper, the data is based on Twitter posts that were collected using the keyword "#CPEC" for the period between January and June 2015. Through our initial search, we found 11,837 tweets for the selected period, and then we divided them into several categories, such as monthly data and the top Twitter accounts of individuals and organizations, to also perform a computerized sentiment analysis based on positive, neutral and negative categorization. It is important to mention that most of these tweets (11,022) were in English and there were only 815 in languages other than English, such as Urdu, Chinese and Hindi. In the application of CDA, key discursive moments are crucial. For this research, we picked the official start of the CPEC following President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan during April 20–21, 2015. Our data is therefore divided into pre- and post-Xi's visit to Pakistan (January–March and April–June) to see if Twitter posts reveal anything about the impact of the CPEC on social media and popular discourse on the CPEC. To understand the contents, we performed a computerized sentiment analysis for the selected months (January–June 2015) and the top organizational and individual Twitter handles for their tweets in English. In each of the selected frames, we have provided examples of relevant tweets based on their qualitative importance and not because they were retweeted the most. The following paragraph provides a more detailed description of the methodology.

The raw data acquired from Twitter contained various elements such as retweet counts, “like” counts, geolocation and coordinates. The tweets underwent a data-cleaning process, through which their irrelevant components, like URLs and hashtags, were removed. Then, those tweets went through a language-recognition step where Python script performed a language-detection function by using the Langdetect library with help from Unicode and word corpus. The next step was text translation, where we translated non-English tweets to English in order to facilitate the sentiment analysis process. We implemented a spelling-correction function to detect any misspelled word or missing letters and correct it. Stop words, such as “a,” “an,” “the,” “in,” “on” and “at” were removed from the tweets as they contributed to neither meaning nor sentiment. Stemming was meant to find the root words, and lemmatization was used to group words with a same root meaning together. Emoticon and emoji recognition detected sentiments from visual icons. The output of this phase was stored in the database. During the last phase, tokenization separated sentences into individual words. Then we conducted a sentiment analysis using three Natural Language Programming (NLP) libraries: TextBlob, VaderSentiment and SentiWordNet. We used three libraries to compare the results among these sentiment analyzers. Afterward, the voting system helped to prove accuracy and consistency. The sentiment analysis ended with polarity classification, which classified the sentiment of the tweets into three categories: positive, negative and neutral. In the end, data visualizations incorporated elements like retweet count, “like” count and time with analyzed data to generate visualization graphics for further understanding of the data.

The structure of this paper begins with an overview of the CPEC in connection to its background, criticism at domestic and external levels, and progress to date. This follows a comprehensive analysis of results and discussion.

An Overview of the CPEC

The official relationship between China and Pakistan started in 1950 and reached its new height in 2015 through the CPEC. President Xi of China visited Pakistan between April 20–21, 2015, which marked the official birth of the CPEC. What started as a \$46 billion endeavor has since reached \$62 billion (Kugelman 2018). The plan for this 15-year project is roughly divided into four phases: an early harvest that ends in 2020, a short-term ending in 2025, a medium-term that ends in 2030, and a long-term. The CPEC is arguably a primary existence of Pakistan within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Inspired by the ancient trade network called the Silk Road that used to fasten East and West, the BRI is an economic belt and maritime silk road. This is indeed part of China's grand dream of being "strong and powerful" as well as a responsible world leader with obligations to assist other countries' development (Ferdinand 2016). The CPEC particularly holds an important position in the BRI as an intersection of a land-based "belt" in Eurasia and a maritime "road" in Southeast Asia. The CPEC grants a way for China, through Pakistan, to access the Arabian Sea, the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean. As a result, the benefits of this mega land and sea project are not limited to the two countries. It also has the potential to benefit other countries in South Asia, such as Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics. Geostrategic benefits from the CPEC include an increase in investment, a proliferation of trade, production of new technology, and acceleration of people-to-people contacts. This corridor includes energy projects, transportation infrastructures, communication infrastructure and industrial areas that span over 3,000 km between China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and Pakistan's Gwadar. The Gwadar Port, a warm water deep seaport in Balochistan, is near the Strait of Hormuz where approximately 20 percent of global oil passes through (Butt and Butt 2015). The CPEC

connects the world's largest oil consumers in East Asia to the largest oil producers in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the CPEC also intervenes with the China-Pakistan-India nexus in term of military considerations. As ensuring the safety of the CPEC is important, the militaries of China and Pakistan now have greater cooperation, which can be a cause of tensions within South Asia (Afzal and Naseem 2018).

Conflicts between provinces and the federal government in Pakistan have prevailed since the early launch of the CPEC. One of the critical issues is an unequal division of the CPEC's benefits across the provinces and key regions within Pakistan. Specifically, internal differences result from controversies surrounding the unequal distribution of economic, development and infrastructure benefits among the provinces and the routes that serve the interests of pre-existing industrial zones. These differences emerged soon after Xi's visit to Pakistan in April 2015. Initially opposition parties, mainly the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf, demanded more information about the CPEC and questioned the Punjabi-led government of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) for further marginalizing the already marginalized areas of Pakistan. This also disturbed China, as it was not expecting this level of resistance against the CPEC from Pakistan. Ultimately, the PML-N government was pressured to hold the All Parties Conference (APC), during which issues linked to equitable distribution of CPEC dividends were resolved (Ahmed 2018). There have been concerns over the ability of Pakistan to cope with liabilities from the CPEC projects, such as loan repayments. Large loans that China lends to Pakistan may raise Pakistan's public debt to US\$90 by mid-2019. Since the CPEC is a long-term project, for the next two decades Pakistan is expected to repay US\$3.5 billion to China each year. Furthermore, as projects under the CPEC have experienced delays due to inadequate resources, cost escalation is unavoidable. Solutions to increase debt

repayment capacity may include boosting Pakistan's export and better management of CPEC projects. There are also questions related to expected return on investment for Pakistan following debt repayment (Chen, Joseph, and Tariq 2018, Pasha 2018).

China's influence has grown as the country moves to pursue its strategic ambition in South Asia. The CPEC reveals how China will reshape the connectivity and infrastructure of the region. China's growing trade and military relationship with Pakistan has a negative impact on India's views on the CPEC. Due to historic rivalry with Pakistan and China, naturally India views the CPEC with concerns. India has declared the construction of the CPEC unacceptable because it involves the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir, i.e. Gilgit-Baltistan. Its transit through the disputed Kashmir demonstrates that China does not seek to balance interests between India and Pakistan, as India argues that the Pakistani-administered part of Jammu and Kashmir is illegally occupied by Pakistan (Sachdeva 2018). The CPEC also opens the door for China's presence in the western Indian Ocean where China now can place its warships and submarines to pursue its unilateral interests. This has ignited India's historic concerns in relation to the "string of pearls" of China surrounding India by building seaports and naval bases in the Indian Ocean region (Khurana 2008, Brewster 2017, Ashraf 2017). Beijing continues to invite India to participate in the BRI, but it seems highly unlikely that New Delhi will positively respond to opportunities emerging from the BRI while India has increased in economic and security cooperation with the United States.

The CPEC is making steady progress in terms of its infrastructural and energy projects. The foreign ministers from China and Pakistan updated the progress of the CPEC at the China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue

in March 2019. Approximately five years after its official launch, the CPEC already has 22 projects on transportation and electrical power providing over 10,000 jobs to locals. China claims that progress has been possible due to mutual understanding between the two countries. Both China and Pakistan agree to expand the projects around Pakistan, including to regions in the west of Pakistan. One of the CPEC projects that recently has received attention is the New Gwadar International Airport, which had its first day of construction ceremony on March 29, 2019 (Ahmed 2019). This will be the biggest airport in Pakistan. The airport will not only connect the Gwadar Port, which is soon to become a trade and transportation center, to the rest of the world, but also signifies that both China and Pakistan intend to mitigate slow progress of the CPEC in the Baluchistan province. As the second phase of the CPEC approaches, the direction is to emphasize socio-economic development issues such as education, poverty and health (Khan 2019).

Results and Discussion

Monthly data of tweets during the selected period shows that there was hardly any discussion related to the CPEC on Twitter up until the official launch of the project in April 2015. This is reflected through our data (see Figure 1) in which there were fewer than 500 tweets between January and March, before the official launch of the CPEC following Xi's visit to Pakistan in April 2015. In April, there was a sudden increase in the number of tweets to over 1,000 that continued to grow during April to its peak in May 2015 with over 5,000 tweets. Our weekly data (see Figure 2) shows how there was a sudden increase in tweets leading up to Xi's visit. After that, there was a decline in June 2015 to a little over 4,000 tweets.

It is important to examine factors other than Xi's visit that may have led to the remarkable increase in tweets in

May 2015. Previous research on the CPEC discussed how the endeavor became very controversial domestically in Pakistan due to historic inter-provincial fissures (Ahmed 2018). Soon after the signing of the CPEC agreements, the provincial governments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh and Baluchistan raised concerns about who would benefit the most from the CPEC and about a lack of transparency in relation to the CPEC. While several political parties in the parliament raised concerns about the CPEC, their members also used social media, especially Twitter, to share their concerns. This led to the APC which was held at the Prime Minister's House on May 28, 2015 (Haider 2015). Our weekly data in Figure 2 shows a sudden increase in activity during the week in which the APC meeting was held.

Figure 1: CPEC Tweets between January and June 2015

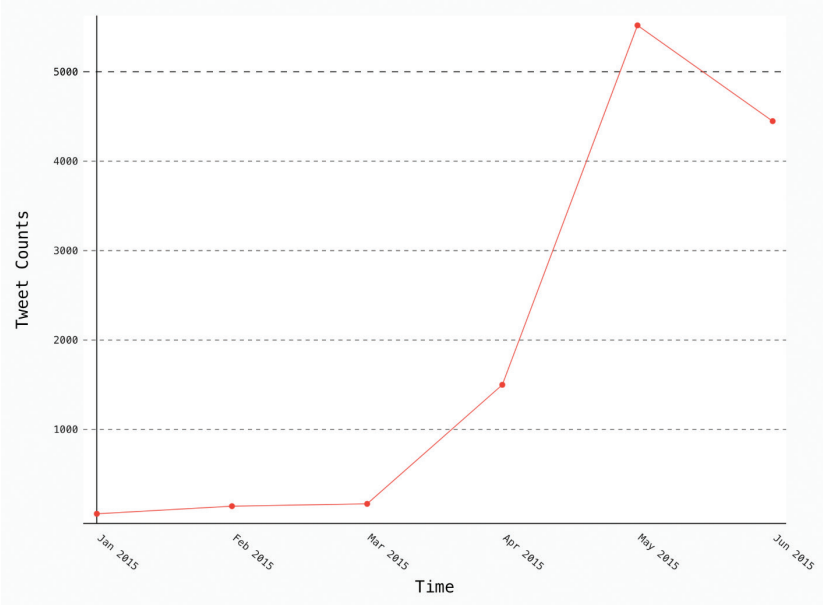
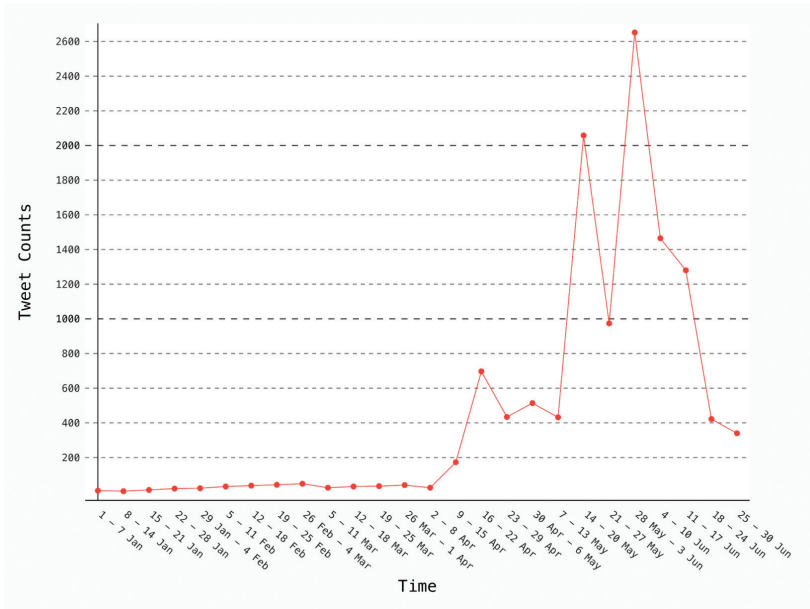


Figure 2: Weekly Data on CPEC between January-June 2015



A comparison of the top Twitter handles for the selected period also reveals some interesting findings. We have divided the data here again between January-March and April-June (see Table 1). For the first period, it is interesting to observe that the accounts with most of the tweets were from government departments in Pakistan: (1) @PlanComPakistan of the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform; (2) @pid_gov of the Press Information Department; and (3) RadioPakistan of the government-run Radio Pakistan. In the second phase during April-June, we see a visible change from the dominance of government Twitter handles to the emergence of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) (@PTIofficial) and Xinjiang News Links (@dlXinjiang).

Looking at individual Twitter handles also shows that there were a few tweets related to the CPEC during January-

March not just from government officials but from journalists such as @Mazdaki and @ithegul, from Pakistan. We see a clear change in this ranking of the top Twitter handles commenting on the CPEC for April-June 2015. Domestic concerns were reflected through a critique from the PTI (@PTIofficial), and statements from the Inter-Services Public Relations (@AsimBajwalSPR). It is important to mention that there were only three tweets from @AsimBajwalSPR in June 2015, but they were retweeted 1,346 times and received 2,760 likes. In comparison there were nine tweets from the PTI's official account that collectively received 190 retweets.

During April-June 2015, there were more tweets from Pakistani citizens with no government affiliation, such as @AyishaBaloch with 20 tweets (retweeted 308 times), and @RehamKhan1 with 17 tweets (retweeted 791 times). However, then-Minister for Planning, Development and Reform, Ahsan Iqbal @betterpakistan, was also active on Twitter with 23 tweets. Interestingly, the Minister had used his personal account to tweet only once about the CPEC during January-March 2015. This shows that at the time the government was very keen on sharing more information about the CPEC to promote a favorable environment and positive discourse about this mega project. The last notable mention is the Twitter handle of Reham Khan, who at the time of this activity was married to the chairman of PTI, Imran Khan, and was an active member of the party.

Table 1: Top Twitter handles, January-June 2015

January-March 2015		April-June 2015	
Group	Individual	Group	Individual
@SkillCiti	@Mazdaki	@PTIofficial	@AsimBajwalSPR
@PlanComPakistan	@Mandanr	@PlanComPakistan	@ShireenMazari1
@pid_gov	@Huzefa1983	@RadioPakistan	@betterpakistan
@BreakingNewPak	@ectopic_tweet	@CapitalTV_News	@RehamKhan1
@RadioPakistan		@DIXinjiang	@AsiyaBaloch

While analyzing the most active Twitter handles in relation to the CPEC, let us take into consideration the timing of when most of these accounts were created. Here we focus on organizational accounts just to show when they realized the importance of Twitter. The data clearly shows that the PTI has been leading the Twittersphere by having the oldest and the most followed organizational account from Pakistan (see Table 2).

Table 2: Date of joining of Twitter and number of followers

Account	Joined Twitter on	Followers
@PTIofficial	March 2010	4.23 million
@RadioPakistan	August 2010	446,000
@pid_gov	August 2011	638,000
@CapitalTV_News	February 2013	524,000
@PlanComPakistan	August 2013	617,000
@BreakingNewPak	May 2014	10,400

For this analysis, it is important to look at the key themes revealed through the data. One way of examining this is by looking at the top keywords (See table 3). While most of the keywords are the same across our two sets of data, we did not see a mention of India during January-March 2015 tweets but did observe more and more tweets mentioning India during April-June 2015. This is also a crucial point when, following the signing of the CPEC agreements, there was criticism of the agreement from India due to the corridor's positioning through the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. Based on this India has been opposed to the CPEC. This sentiment was reflected in many tweets from the Indian government and media on the CPEC.

Table 3: Key themes in the data

January-March 2015		April-June 2015	
Keyword	Frequency	Keyword	Frequency
China	40	Pakistan	2,380
Economic	37	China	1,589
Corridor	34	Route	1,330
Route	33	India	1,287
Pakistan	33	Economic	727

Internal Differences

As discussed earlier in this paper, the CPEC became controversial in its initial phase due to a range of factors, including a lack of transparency and the historic inter-provincial/ethnic dynamics in Pakistan (Ahmed 2018). Soon after the visit of President Xi, there was substantial criticism of the CPEC by opposition parties, especially the PTI, and ethno-nationalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. Among the key aspects of the discussion taking place on Twitter were issues relating to a lack of trust in the government of Pakistan due to changes in the CPEC routes to benefit Punjab more than the other provinces. Initially, the government, especially through the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform (@PlanComPakistan), was critical of any opposition to the CPEC and used social media to spread its message that the opposition parties were “insincere” to Pakistan by criticizing the CPEC. The examples of tweets below capture the essence of this discussion.

#CPEC is a framework consisting of various routes, multiple mega projects, insincere leaders spreading misconceptions @betterpakistan (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)¹

Anti #CPEC lobby spreading disinformation abt route change 2 deny Pakistan project of century. No route change, DIK-QT-Gwdr is 1st 2 open IA (@betterpakistan, 19 April 2015)²

No change in route of CPEC. DIKhan-Zhob-Quetta-Gawadar link to be completed first by 2016 work already underway by FWO. (@betterpakistan, 19 April 2015)³

The PTI was among the most active on Twitter in raising concerns related to the CPEC. The party used its official account (@PTIofficial) and some of its members were active, such as @RehamKhan1. The official party account was however used less than some of its members on the topic. Through the official account there were only nine tweets posted during April-May 2015. In addition, the official account was mostly used to share statements of the party's chairperson, Imran Khan (IK). Overall, the key messages of the PTI's tweets emphasized the need to address the marginalization of Baluchistan through the CPEC, demanded more information on the CPEC, and criticized the government of not being transparent. Its members, especially Reham Khan, also used Twitter to criticize the intentions of the government behind the CPEC and its routes within Pakistan (see examples below).

If they change the route of CPEC there will be more sense of deprivation in the two smaller provinces! #IKOnSamaa (@PTIofficial, 22 April 2015)⁴

Its a golden opportunity to develop the underdeveloped areas of Balochistan and KP through CPEC #IKOnSamaa (@PTIofficial, 22 April 2015)⁵

CPEC is in talks since 2013 & we come to know of this MoU in 2015. Only CM Punjab has been visiting China & included in discussion #IKonDawn (@PTIofficial, 22 May 2015)⁶

We require more briefing and details from Federal Government on Economic Corridor (CPEC). @ImranKhanPTI (@PTIofficial, 15 May 2015)⁷

Yes but brainiac long term alignment of CPEC runs through Punjab bypassing KPK FATA & Baluchistan. Why avoid shortest route? (@RehamKhan1, 11 May 2015)⁸

#CPEC Pakistan must move towards prosperity by giving all provinces their due share. (@RehamKhan1, 17 May 2015)⁹

What was remarkable during that time was not just the criticism of the CPEC but how quickly the government of Pakistan reversed its initial position of confrontation or being defensive to information sharing and engagement in dialogue with all political parties in order to reach a national consensus on the CPEC—for example, the government started actively sharing information through regular sessions with journalists. Tweets from that time period also captured every moment of discussion during the All Parties Conference (APC) and how that led to a meaningful dialogue and an overall agreement in which all parties came to fully support the CPEC. The government accounts used social media to promote that all parties were fully on board in support of the CPEC (see examples below).

Minister @betterpakistan held press conference to dispel misunderstandings surrounding China-Pak

Economic Corridor #CPEC (@PlanComPakistan, 6 February 2015)¹⁰

APC demands to restore original route of CPEC (@BreakinNewPakistan, 17 May 2015)¹¹

All provinces are benefitting equally under #CPEC, it is misconception that smaller provinces are missing out (@PlanComPakistan, 20 May 2015)¹²

Hon Min Ahsan Iqbal taking leading journalists in confidence about CPEC and explaining misconceptions (@PlanComPakistan, 20 May 2015)¹³

All Parties extend full support to Govt on CPEC project: PM (@pid_gov, 28 May 2018)¹⁴

Framing of the CPEC

Understanding the discourse that was promoted through social media in relation to the CPEC is very important. In this regard, we have seen that the most prominent Twitter accounts were run by government institutions, especially government-run media and ministries that directly deal with the CPEC. As shown in our data (Table 1), Pakistan government institutions dominated in posting tweets on the topic under investigation. This included Radio Pakistan, the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, and the Press Information Department. For this research, it is important to see how they were positively framing the CPEC through their various tweets. If we look at the tweets from the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform (@PlanComPakistan), it is clear that it was covering a range of issues, from sharing information and progress on the CPEC to deal with internal

misunderstanding, to promoting the CPEC as a regional project not just limited to Pakistan.

China Pak Economic Corridor #CPEC are apolitical schemes for Pak's future, vested interests shd not come in the way (@PlanComPakistan, 6 February 2015)¹⁵

#CPEC is not the name of a single route, its amalgamation of trade links between whole region way (@PlanComPakistan, 6 February 2015)¹⁶

#CPEC financially beneficial for both countries (@PlanComPakistan, 19 March 2015)¹⁷

#CPEC will be based on inclusive development benefitting all parts of Pakistan, we must not lose this opportunity (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)¹⁸

#CPEC is 21st century's most transformational project, #Asia will be the new center of globe (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)¹⁹

The ultimate objective [of CPEC] is peace, prosperity and well being of the people of the two countries (@PlanComPakistan, 22 May 2015)²⁰

CPEC projects to benefit entire country and boost our economy making us next Asian Tiger (@PlanComPakistan, 16 May 2015)²¹

CPEC to be a fate changer for Pakistan, region: Ahsan Iqbal (@RadioPakistan, 22 April 2015)²²

Framing of the China-Pakistan Relationship

As mentioned above, @PlanComPakistan was the most active Twitter handle tweeting from within Pakistan. Its role as the key public institution dealing with the CPEC has been crucial in shaping the national discourse surrounding not just the CPEC but also the relationship between China and Pakistan. The discourse that was promoted in relation to the CPEC had several key aspects. First it was linked to the ancient Silk Road which went through Pakistan. In this regard, the government promoted the idea that the CPEC was not completely about creating something new but is about reviving the Silk Road. Second, Twitter was used to promote China's goodwill by highlighting that the CPEC supports infrastructural and human development in Pakistan. Here again the popular slogan of all-weather friendship between China and Pakistan was promoted.

#China and #Pakistan's All-Weather Friendship (@PlanComPakistan, 13 March 2015)²³

China Govt holds #Baluchistan province very dear, will assist in infrastructure and human development under #CPEC says Chinese Ambassador (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)²⁴

#CPEC to bring our two countries even closer- Chinese Ambassador (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)²⁵

CPEC project will benefit the people: Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi addresses press conference in Islamabad (@RadioPakistan, 12 February 2015)²⁶

Hall rings with Pak-China friendship slogans as Chinese Ambassador addresses #CPEC Council event (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)²⁷

Centuries old Silk Route will b revived through #CPEC (@PlanComPakistan, 8 April 2015)²⁸

SINO-PAK RELATIONS & CPEC: Courtesy:- Sultan M HaliThe traditional and time tested Sino-Pak friendship (@pid_gov, 6 March 2015)²⁹

The India Factor

The discourse analyzed in this paper also shows that many prominent persons from Pakistan used Twitter to criticize the Indian position on the CPEC. Soon after the launching of the CPEC, the project came under attack in the digital space from home and abroad,. According to Ramay (2018), "campaigns have been designed in the digital space to malign countries to create stumbling blocks for hindering the course of development. Best example for Pakistan is the undue criticism on [the CPEC]." Most of the criticism toward the CPEC has been from India, especially the Indian media that is also active on social media. Considering that Pakistani media is not watched as widely as Indian media, the only viable option to combat India's criticism is to use social media to target any propaganda aimed against Pakistan. As seen in the case of the CPEC, the government and certain politicians used Twitter to target Indian propaganda against the CPEC.

As shown from the tweets, there was a sense of unity observed among the political parties within Pakistan who unanimously criticized Indian propaganda against the CPEC (see examples below of tweets from Shireen Mazari of the PTI and from @BreakingNewPak quoting the then-interior

minister of Pakistan). In the case of tweets from a then-key representative of the PTI in discussions with the government on the CPEC, @ShireenMazari1 was the most outspoken on this issue by not just criticizing India's position on the CPEC but by being against anyone (from Pakistan) speaking about normalization of the relationship between India and Pakistan, for example through cricket.

1st Pigeon spies; now India finds CPEC unacceptable"! 2 bad! Learn to live with it! BJP seriously needs to get over its Pakistan-phobia!" (@ShireenMazari1, 2 June 2015)³⁰

Modi has really lost it! His govt can't see beyond their Pak obsession - or it trauma? Nightmares of CPEC interspersed with pigeons! (@ShireenMazari1, 3 June 2015)³¹

Inexplicable how v can have cricket series with india when RAW actively destabilising Balochistan & sabotaging CPEC acc 2 r state & govt! (@ShireenMazari1, 14 May 2015)³²

India's reaction on CPEC exposes them: Ch Nisar (@BreakingNewPak, 3 June 2015)³³

Analysts condemn Indian govt's dirty tactics to create hurdles in CPEC project (special report) (@RadioPakistan, 25 May 2015)³⁴

RAW wants to sabotage the CPEC, China warns Pakistan (@AyishaBaloch, 23 May 2015)³⁵

In tweets from the most active Twitter handles from Pakistan, it is clear that there was a criticism of India's

position from individuals of diverse backgrounds. Among such individuals is a key figure that needs more attention to understand the Pakistan army's discourse on the CPEC. The army is a key guarantor of security to the Chinese people and businesses in Pakistan, and there are two dedicated regiments comprising 10,000 soldiers for this purpose. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) is the military's media wing and, interestingly, it's then-director general, Major General Asim Bajwa, tweeted thrice in a single day in June 2015 (see below). His tweets were retweeted 1,346 times and received 2,760 likes. One tweet indirectly referred to India while mentioning "enemy campaigns" against the CPEC, while the others emphasized the importance of eradicating terrorism and the geostrategic importance of the Gwadar Port as a central component of the CPEC.

CPEC holds enormous potential for transforming lives of region's people. Acutely aware of enemy campaigns, will defeat designs against it (@AsimBajwaISPR, 13 June 2015)³⁶

CPEC with Gwadar Port as its catalyst will be built&developed as one of most strategic deep sea port in the region at any cost whatsoever (@AsimBajwaISPR, 13 June 2015)³⁷

Z-e-A:Will continue ops for terror free Pak. Few effects; improved envmt; Chinese Pres&other dignitaries' visits, Pak-Zimb cricket, CPEC (@AsimBajwaISPR, 13 June 2015)³⁸

Overall Sentiment Analysis

The frequency of tweets tell us only part of the story because we do not know much about the contents. To understand the contents, we performed a computerized

sentiment analysis for the selected months (January-June 2015) of the top organizational and individual Twitter handles for their tweets in English. Overall, the mood of the collected tweets was positive. Most of the positive tweets were recorded in January 2015 (56 percent) and the second highest (41 percent) in April at the time of Xi's visit to Pakistan. The decrease in positive tweets was mainly because of the criticism of the CPEC from within Pakistan and India. With regard to the Twitter handles that promoted positive messaging, number one was @PlanComPakistan, the Twitter handle of the Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform. Out of the ministry's 117 tweets, 60 were positive, 40 were neutral and just shared information on the CPEC, and 17 were negative (the ones questioning the CPEC). Some of the negative tweets targeted opposition to the CPEC, framing them as opposition parties against Pakistan's economic development. Neutral tweets were mainly from new agencies and channels in Pakistan and China, such as @dlXinjiang and @CapitalTV_News.

It was mentioned earlier that the commencement of the CPEC led to an intense discussion domestically within Pakistan. There were concerns expressed by most of the opposition parties in relation to transparency and the provincial share within the CPEC. Most of the parties and their members became overtly critical of the CPEC in the media in general and on Twitter in particular. This was reflected through the highest number of negative tweets, 840 (16 percent), posted during May 2015. The mood of tweets was somewhat negative in June 2015, too, with 640 (15 percent) negative tweets. The Twitter handles that tweeted more negatively about the CPEC than positively were from a prominent PTI member (@RehamKhan1) and certain ethno-nationalists, such as @Mandanr and @ectopic_tweet.

Table 3: Sentiment analysis of the collected Tweets

Month	Total tweets	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive%	Neutral%	Negative%
January	39	16	22	1	41.02	56.41	2.56
February	110	49	45	16	44.54	40.90	14.54
March	146	83	57	6	56.84	39.04	4.1
April	1,406	661	579	166	47.01	41.04	11.80
May	5,090	2,403	1,847	840	47.21	36.78	16.50
June	4,231	2,204	1,387	640	52.09	32.78	15.12
Total	11,022	5,416	3,937	1,669	49.13	35.71	15.14

Overall, most of the top individual and organizational Twitter handles were engaged in promoting the positive image of the CPEC and China-Pakistan relations by not just promoting certain aspects of the CPEC but by also addressing any criticism from inside and outside of Pakistan. A positive discourse promoting China's goodwill and the strength of China-Pakistan relations is responsible for the progress that the CPEC has achieved. Domestic consensus on the CPEC is important to both China and Pakistan to reap maximum benefits from the CPEC.

Conclusion

In nearly 70 years of friendship and close cooperation between China and Pakistan, the CPEC has emerged as a climax bringing both countries closer through greater Chinese investment under the BRI. The CPEC has geo-economic and geopolitical significance to both China and Pakistan. For Pakistan the CPEC is crucial to addressing its economic and energy crises; therefore, the government has been actively engaged in promoting the CPEC and China's positive image in Pakistan. As argued in this research, most of the top Twitter handles from the selected periods were

actively engaged in supporting and promoting not just the CPEC, but also China's positive intentions behind this project. Twitter was used to promote China's goodwill in Pakistan as a true friend of Pakistan that is helping in times of need, and this, for example, has been labeled as the all-weather friendship between China and Pakistan. It has also been reported in this study that the then-opposition party in Pakistan, PTI, was the most prominent in terms of its critique of the CPEC. The PTI used its dominance in social media, compared to other organizational accounts from Pakistan, to raise concerns about the CPEC. This might have played a role in China's actions to put pressure on the government to engage in a dialogue with provincial governments and reach a much-needed consensus on the CPEC. Despite criticism from within Pakistan and India, there was an overwhelming support for the CPEC, with nearly half of the tweets being positive. In the context in which the Pakistani media has less viewership compared to that of the Indian media, the top Twitter accounts from Pakistan used the platform to counter the Indian propaganda against the CPEC, and this also equally served the combined interest of Beijing and Islamabad.

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