



# Pakistan Journal of Economic Studies

ISSN (E) 2708-1486 (P) 2708-1478

Volume 7: Issue 3 September 2024

Journal homepage: <https://journals.iub.edu.pk/index.php/pjes/index>

## Beyond Economics: The Politico-cultural Implications of Chinese Economic Engagements with Pakistan

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### History:

Accepted: 11 September 2024

Available Online: 30 September 2024

#### Keywords:

CPEC; Hedging Alignment;

Soft Power;

NeoColonialism;

Economic Imperialism

#### JEL Codes:

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study intends to explore the possibility of politico-cultural implications of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan in the wake of CPEC.

**Research Gap:** The economic engagement between Pakistan and China has achieved a flamboyant zenith in the wake of the Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) and one of its flagship projects: the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While several researchers have highlighted the potential positive and negative aspects of this engagement, there is a lack of research exploring the possibility of politico-cultural implications of these engagements.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Qualitative content analysis of the existing literature on Chinese economic engagements with South East Asia and Africa, and of the salient features of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan.

**The Main Findings:** Chinese economic engagements around the world and with Pakistan are not strictly limited to the economic sphere and there can be various politico-cultural implications.

**Theoretical / Practical Implications of the Findings:** Employs theoretical framework of neo-colonialism and Marxist theories of imperialism for the scrutiny of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan. It paves the way for future field researches on politico-cultural implications of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan till date and their critical scrutiny.

**Originality/Value:** Unlike both overoptimistic and reactionary analysis of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan, this research attempts to theoretically examine various dimensions of these engagements.

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### Recommended Citation:

Ahad, A., & Qureshi, A. (2024). Beyond economics: The politico-cultural implications of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Economic Studies*, 7(3), 217-225. Available at: <https://journals.iub.edu.pk/index.php/pjes/article/view/2730>

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### 1. Introduction

Though China and Pakistan are set apart due to many political and ideological differences, e.g., China became independent after the communist revolution, and Pakistan committed itself to Western models of popular democracy. However, these ideological differences get in the way of maintaining cordial ties. This process continued unhampered, even when Pakistan overtly sided with the Western bloc on many ideological fronts, even though the Western block did not recognize China (Sattar, 2010). Pakistan helped America open up to China in the 1970s.

China has also provided loan facilities to Pakistan at critical junctures in its economic history. Contrarily, Pakistani relationship with the Western block, with the US as its leader, have encountered frequent highs and lows (Hussain, 2016). However, a strong perception exists in Pakistan that the USA had embraced Pakistan when needed it, and

abandoned Pakistan when it did not need it anymore. The US interest in Pakistan has also varied over time (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015). This perception resulted in the rise of anti-US sentiments in Pakistan.

China also seems ready to engage with the world more than it has ever done in the past. The Chinese One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative is one of its textbook examples. A project of Chinese initiative, known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), envisages economic activities with Pakistan (Kayani et al., 2013). It is a multi-billion dollar project; which, in its first phase, seeks to develop infrastructure and economic zones in Pakistan.

Some think-tanks and scholars are critics of Chinese economic engagements with the world, which they see as a tacit imperialist project (Muhammad et al., 2017; Lampert et al., 2014; Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011). To support their argument with evidence, they often rely on examples such as the Chinese economic engagement with Sri Lanka (Iqbal & Javaid, 2020). As a prime example of what they commonly refer to as the Chinese debt trap, they often cite the example of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, when China initially invested more than 2 billion USD in the Hambantota Port development project. This port and its loss led Sri Lanka into heavy debt of USD 8 billion to China. In a 2016 agreement, Sri Lanka inevitably had to sell 80% of the shares in the port to China for a 99 year lease, the remaining 20% of shares remaining with the Sri Lankan Port Authority (SLPA). Critics see this as a classic example of Chinese imperialistic design (Patrick, 2017). Indicating concern over the nature of Chinese economic relations with other countries, they highlight the subtle imperialist potential of these activities.

In the wake of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, China is engaging extensively with Pakistan and many Chinese are coming to Pakistan, starting businesses here. Similarly, many Pakistani students are enrolling in Chinese universities. With this exchange of people, there are plenty of cultural exchange opportunities. Hundreds of students are travelling to the larger Chinese learning institutes every year for educational purposes, and there is a mushrooming of Chinese culture inspired by the Confucius Institutes in Pakistani universities, such as a Chinese TV show named 'Beijing Youth' which is being broadcast on Pakistan's national television (Asif et al., 2021). Many scholars have declared the increase in cultural exchange opportunities as imperative for the success of CPEC, and have suggested potential novel methods of broadening the scope of these cultural exchange opportunities (Jiqiong & Keyu, 2017).

China has maintained that it has never been a colonial power in history and has been the victim of colonialism (Budd, 2021). A group of scholars suggests that China had been the subject of semi-colonialism or quasi-colonialism. Although the territory remained Chinese property, the influence of foreign presences and foreign enclaves, e.g., the British and the Americans, was very effective. This group maintains that with the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, discrimination against China started, and a semblance of semi-colonialism developed in China (Osterhammel, 1986; Goodman et al., 2012). In this semi-colonialism, although China was able to maintain its territory, and Chinese cultural values were less infringed upon when compared to other colonies, there was still a visible atmosphere of imperial control. These included, but were not limited to, the growth of foreign territorial enclaves which were beyond Chinese jurisdiction; discrimination against natives in areas of foreign settlement; stationing of foreign troops within China's mainland; and unfavorable loans and indemnities to be paid as a result of defeats of the Chinese armed forces (Osterhammel, 1986). This colonial experience of China is also sometimes explained as the cause behind the recent close contact of the underdeveloped world with China, and to explain why the global south views China differently from the West (Maru, 2019).

Pakistan emerged out of British India, that was part of a colonial empire. Colonial forces and mentalities played crucial roles in the formation of Pakistan and its future development (Wilder, 2009). Pakistan's decision to side with the Western camp in the cold war resulted in the continuation of a Western influence (Sunawar & Coutto, 2015). This post-independence Western influence was multi-dimensional. However, a plethora of literature highlighted imperial connotations and tried to make sense of them with the help of neo-colonial theory (Shabbir, 2019). At the same time, Pakistan has been a close ally of China and has moved closer to China in recent years. With an increase in the economic strength of China, its economic engagements with Pakistan have also increased (Allauddin et al., 2020). As these engagements are asymmetrical in nature, there exists academic suspicion over the motives of Chinese economic engagements in other regions of the world; and while some existing literature has also tried to question Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan, it is imperative to explore them and their

perception in detail. There are two primary questions to explore: (i) how can the Chinese economic engagements with different parts of the world be studied in terms of imperialistic designs? and (ii) what do Chinese economic engagements with different parts of the world indicate about the politico-cultural implications of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan? The objectives of this research are to highlight potential politico-cultural implications of Chinese economic engagements, and to subject these engagements and their impacts to critical scrutiny.

Qualitative content analysis of the available academic literature and critical theoretical frameworks are employed and conclusions are drawn from the evidence inferred from them. The following paragraphs provide a detailed account of relevant critical theories for understanding Chinese economic engagements, and this account is followed by an analysis of Chinese economic engagements with Africa, South East Asia and finally, Pakistan.

## **2. Problematizing China as a Neo-colonial Power**

### **2.1 Critical Theory**

With the help of critical theory and theories of economic imperialism, this research deconstructs Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan. Max Horkheimer contends that the traditional paradigms of International Relations tend to legitimise the state of affairs. However, the critical theory allows the deconstruction and rethinking of the present (Horkheimer, 1972). While the Chinese engagements with Pakistan appear to be traditional and benign interactions between two neighbouring states driven by mutual interests, there can be a devil in the details. Critical theory provides a lens to explore those details.

One of its major strengths is its remarkable diversity, which is comprised of many offshoots which have definite unifying points, bringing crucial perspectives into the limelight that classical theories of international relations tend to overlook.

### **2.2 Post-colonial Theory**

The theoretical framework of this article also takes insight from the post-colonial theory. Post-colonialists gained prominence during the twentieth century. The scholars of post-colonialism maintain that the 'post' in post-colonialism does not merely stand for what happened after decolonisation, but also represents how colonialism and its structures have decisively shaped the world (Seth, 2013). However, post-colonialists have deconstructed and highlighted how post-colonial structures have maintained themselves in a supposedly post-colonial world, i.e., in a world of countries that have gained apparent independence from their colonial masters (Abrahamsen, 2007). Post-colonialists faced vociferous criticism over their methods and techniques; many questioned its place as a theory of International Relations. However, lately, the post-colonial theory has been recognised in International Relations and has also shown the lingering colonial structures in the relations between states (Griffiths, 2007).

### **2.3 Neo-colonialism**

While post-colonialism emphasizes on the ways colonialism has shaped the current world, neo-colonialism signifies monetary domination or hegemony over the underdeveloped world by using a capitalist economic structure (Nkrumah, 1965). Instead of direct rule via territorial acquisition, a stronger country exploits by creating a financial dependency. It refers to the use and maintenance of colonial structures and colonial-like influence with the help of more subtle and discreet practices. For instance, in traditional colonialism, there was direct control over the territory, and in neo-colonialism, economic engagements maintain a colonial-like influence. In this new type, neo-colonialism, more emphasis has been given to the non-traditional aspects of colonialism, e.g., financial control (Jian & Donata, 2014). It has also become known as economic imperialism or economic colonialism.

Nkrumah (1965) was able to highlight that the colonial grasp of South Vietnam was in the hands of France, but its neo-colonial master was the United States. This flexibility makes it an effective tool in analysing the Chinese engagements with Pakistan because Pakistan was never a colony of China.

Neo-colonialism, broadly, signifies the engagements and works carried out on and in the former colonies by the non-colonised, predominantly Western, countries. It encompasses all kinds of literary, cultural, political, diplomatic, and economic engagements in which there remains an asymmetry of power (Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2018). In this research, the theoretical framework built to describe Western engagements with formerly colonised

countries, i.e., neo-colonialism, is extended to China in its dealings with a previously subjugated country, i.e., Pakistan.

In this spirit, Paris (2002), for instance, argued that the peace-building missions undertaken in war-ravaged countries were, in reality, conducted by the developed countries, predominantly by the Western countries up till the 20th century, in the name of rebuilding and reconstructing these countries and leading them towards modern peace. However, the term "Modern Peace" and the method to obtain it came as a dictation from these developed countries. In the name of democracy and free market economics, they pursued a path that reflects the ideology of the developed West and follows the allegedly "right" path shown to them by Western success.

Many authors distinguish colonialism from neo-colonialism based on the manifest motive of both exercises. For instance, many pieces of research support the thesis that the colonial project overtly and practically exploited the resources of the colonised nation and benefitted the home country, e.g., the colonisation of India (Tharoor, 2018). However, the difference it has to neo-colonial politics is that the neo-colonial engagements, such as the peacebuilding missions, have an overt objective to benefit the receiving country (Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2018). Hence, Neo-colonialism requires more hair-splitting to see the exploitation, intended or unintended, which becomes a part of it.

## **2.4 Marxist Theories of Imperialism**

These theories focus on the economic aspect of imperialism. They broadly maintain that imperialism in the modern world happens with the help of control over financial resources. This control paves the way for other influences, e.g., cultural, psychological, etc. For instance, one such theory is the world systems theory, presented by Immanuel Wallerstein. It is a well-known theory and argues that the economic development and progress in one part of the world makes the simultaneous loss of, or causes control over, another part of the world (Wallerstein, 1987).

With such suspicions, Marxist theories of imperialism provide a relevant framework to analyse these economic engagements. As the economic relationship between China and Pakistan is highly asymmetrical, there are suspicions that it might lead towards a virtual financial control exercised by China over Pakistan.

## **3 Analysis of Chinese Economic Engagements**

### **3.1 Chinese Engagements with Africa and South East Asia**

In one recent and relevant work, Alden (2017) reviews the interaction between China and Africa. In the 1990s, Taiwan initiated a foreign aid policy or, as it is known popularly, a "dollar diplomacy" with the African states. This policy successfully helped Taiwan earn official recognition from some African states (Lee, 1993). Alden (2017) also identified a "desire to exploit commercial opportunities with increased trade" as a motivator behind this recent engagement of China with Africa. Researchers also indicate that in the first half of the 21st century, the people-to-people interaction between Chinese people and African people has increased exponentially, and that due to this engagement drive, China has also started to affect the lives of ordinary Africans in an unprecedented way (Peterson, 2008). It pinpoints that economic engagements have the potential to transcend their economic boundary and become involved in the people's, or cultural sphere.

This leads to multiple crucial insights. Firstly, this apparently economic interaction also has political motivations, i.e., the regional competition with Taiwan. Moreover, researchers have identified a "desire to exploit" as an ingredient of this engagement (Alden, 2017). It means that although, at least apparently, it appears to be hugely beneficial to African countries, it has potential parasitic elements. It also establishes that the impact of this engagement is not limited to the economic domain, but is more far-reaching. For instance, China has penetrated its way into the lives of ordinary Africans. All of them are the ingredients of a neo-colonial exercise (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2011). If the Chinese engagement with Africa has potential neo-colonial components, it is only logical to analyse Chinese financial relations with Pakistan.

Some argue the futility of comparing the engagement with Africa with that of Pakistan. The underlying reason is that the political realities of both regions are fundamentally different (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015). In Africa, there was Taiwan, which motivated politically ambitious engagement with Africa to bring the African countries close to the Chinese view of the conflict, and with the Chinese world view in general. However, the point to be noted is not

Taiwanese presence, but political competition. Although Taiwan is not present in the Pakistani case as it was in the African case, another political competitor of China, perhaps a more serious one, exists here, i.e., the USA. Moreover, a good amount of evidence makes it possible to contemplate that as China becomes an increasingly important player in world affairs, it would try to sway as many countries as possible away from the US camp by offering them the Chinese alternative (Smith, 2011). A possible exercise of China can be to woo Pakistan away from the US camp towards itself by economically engaging with it, as it has pulled the African states into its camp from the Taiwanese camp.

Pakistan and China share a crucial aspect not shared by China and Africa: geographical proximity. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its relationship with China is a feasible case study. Over time, the engagement of China with these countries has dramatically increased. However, the nature and impacts of this engagement need to be studied diligently. In due time, ASEAN markets started to flood with Chinese imports, and the trade deficit between ASEAN and China increased to colossal levels. This happened due to a deliberate Chinese policy to incentivise its domestic players in this relationship (Chakraborty & Kumar, 2012). Ultimately, the beneficiaries of these engagements are China and the Chinese.

When these countries have recently tried to come out of this cycle of what was becoming Chinese dependency, not only has it become practically challenging for them, but it also received a narrative-building response from China. Chinese researchers are keen to show ASEAN nations as an example of 'hedging alignment' (Kuik, 2016). This broad allegation of hedging is a narrative explanation given by a great power when other countries are trying to re-negotiate their terms of engagement with that great power. Hedging alignment is, by definition, an alignment behaviour shown by some nations which are neither 'balancing alignment' nor 'bandwagoning alignment'. It is a combination of both resistance to power and acceptance of power (Pollack, 1996).

This engagement is invaluable in understanding neo-colonial aspects because maintaining hegemony over the narrative and discourse is part of the neo-colonial exercise. Moreover, the case bears uncanny similarities with the example of China-Pakistan. Firstly, China and Pakistan share the same asymmetrical relationship. The markets of Pakistan lag far behind China in competitiveness, and Chinese engagements can also make Pakistani markets dependent upon imports from China. Secondly, if Pakistan tries to re-negotiate its arrangements with China, it can easily label Pakistan as a country performing hedging alignment to maximise profits from the USA and China, in a possible neo-colonial attempt to establish narrative hegemony.

### **3.2 Soft Power of Chinese Engagements**

These indications of the peculiar nature of Chinese engagements with the world, especially with underdeveloped and developing countries, pose another striking question: whether the Chinese interactions would be limited to the economic sphere, or would there be other dimensions of them too, e.g., cultural. Joseph Nye (1990) popularised the term soft power and, in his analysis of the post-cold war role of the United States, advanced that countries heavily use soft power in the absence of traditional hard power traits. Soft power broadly means how 'attractive' a country appears and has three resources: culture (how much it influences and attracts others), political values, and foreign policy (how much others see it as 'legitimate' and 'moral') (Nye, 1990).

In a recent study of Chinese soft power around the globe, Repnikova (2022) argued that the Chinese theoretical formulation of soft power is relatively different from the one which Nye had in mind. China believes in less rigid boundaries between hard power and soft power, especially in the relationship between material hard power, e.g., job opportunities, and soft power, e.g., the attractiveness of Chinese culture as being more integrated as compared to what was believed by Nye. The authors have also identified the main media for the propagation of Chinese soft power, i.e., the development of Confucius Institutes, international communication, education and training exchanges, and 'public policy spectacles', i.e., narratives focusing on Chinese public policy successes, such as the alleviation of poverty (Repnikova, 2022).

Three crucial insights come out from this recent research. First, the Chinese presence in African nations is the subject of many pieces of research, meaning that in areas in which there is extensive Chinese economic engagement, there can be cultural engagement as well. Second, the authors have argued that Chinese economic interactions are more localised, i.e., the author means that the institutes operating in another country consider the

context in which they are working and include the local population in many prime roles in these institutions. It indicates that the cultural influence of China can be subtle because it attempts to make it look like culture-inclusive locally. Finally, it shows from the comparison that Chinese soft power techniques are more successful in countries known as the 'global south' (Repnikova, 2022).

### **3.3 Media Perception**

Landmark scholarship in the African region has highlighted the presence of Chinese media in Africa (Madrid-Morales, 2016). According to some, media is used by China to increase its soft power and to counter stereotypes against China; both, in turn, result in greater cultural engagement (Leslie, 2016). The term media use includes both the presence of Chinese media in the region for possible propaganda purposes and the coordination with local media that helps portray a more 'positive image' of China and its engagement with the host country (Franks & Ribet, 2009). However, in an alternative expression, some scholars have refuted this obsession with the Chinese intentions in the region. They propose that the purpose of media engagement is to counter stereotypes against China. On the other hand, these countries feel attracted to China due to the presence of a feeling of previous exploitation by the West in the psychology of these people (Zhang et al., 2016). In the existence of such narratives and counter-narratives, it is imperative to explore the content and character of Chinese cultural engagements with Pakistan.

### **3.4 Possibility of Politico-cultural Implications of the Chinese Economic Activity**

The Chinese relations with other countries, particularly with the countries of the Global South, set the context for this scrutiny of Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan. In an insightful research, Afreen and Hashim (2021) considered the case of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Pakistan and, by analysing it with the help of various other scholars, concluded that it is possible to call the Chinese project and interest a neo-colonial project.

These concerns of Afreen and Hashim are not isolated. Over the period, various scholars have expressed concerns that this project would undermine the sovereignty of Pakistan as an independent nation in the future. Some researchers have taken the liberty to call the project an example of a Chinese 'debt trap' (Colley & van Noord, 2022). However, primary research on the topic remains rare.

### **3.5 Shortcomings of Over-optimistic Analysis of the Chinese Engagements with Pakistan**

A plethora of literature seeking to counter these critiques offered by these scholars and the West has also emerged. Scholars based in Pakistan are responsible for many of these pieces of research, and they often highlight the opportunities CPEC offers Pakistan and its economy (Shaukat & Bakht, 2022; Ali et al., 2021). Amidst growing criticism, Chinese scholars also share this enthusiasm to defend CPEC. An analysis of Pakistani and Chinese counter-critiques of CPEC reveals some common points of emphasis. First is the reiteration that China has never been a colonial power, and does not ever aim to become one. Second is the temptation to ascribe the criticism of CPEC to a US-Indo attempt to sabotage CPEC and, broadly, the BRI, due to their security and regional concerns (Hussain et al., 2022; Zaidi et al., 2022; Safdar et al., 2021).

A deeper analysis can identify that whereas abundant literature exists that seeks to defend CPEC from any criticism that indicates even a slight hint of exploitation or potential exploitation in the project, this literature has some obvious gaps. First of all, the defence provided is, at some levels, reactionary. It seeks to counter the criticism by highlighting the opportunities that CPEC or economic investments from China would offer Pakistan, but neglects the challenges and potential existence of exploitation in the process. In other words, it avoids a conversation with the criticism on points of criticism. Secondly, it might be true that the most vocal critics of the Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan are coming from India and the United States, and the criticism might be stemming out of their respective interests; it is not enough to discredit the points of criticism offered by the Indian and US scholars. A theoretical and practical dialogue with the content of the critique is required to respond to it. It means, most of the academic defence in the Chinese engagements with Pakistan offers an apologetic counter and, at the same time, remains oblivious to the need for scholarly interaction in a dialogue with the criticism.

### **3.6 Impetus for Looking at Chinese Economic Engagements from a Neo-colonial Perspective**

The cultural and neo-colonial implications of these interactions, if any, are not yet very apparent. However, it is logical to study Chinese economic engagements with the underdeveloped world from the same lens that Roland

Paris (2002) used for understanding the peace-building interventions of Western countries. It maintains that the intervention from these Western countries came with a 'liberal bias' and, perhaps, an unconscious attempt to diffuse Western worldview values into these underdeveloped countries. Now, the question is: would the Chinese engagement with underdeveloped countries come with a 'Chinese world view' bias?

It has become clear that although ostensibly, and as propounded by the official Chinese narrative, it is advantageous for the receiving nations (Liang, 2019), a rigorous and critical analysis of the engagements such as the ones undertaken on Western projects to identify neo-colonial aspects, may offer valuable insights that might have skipped the attention of a shallower view. These arguments make a persuasive case for an in-depth study of Chinese economic engagements with other countries, e.g., Pakistan, and ascertain whether aspects of neo-colonialism are present within it, or not.

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

The literature discussed above confirms that China is extensively economically engaging with the world. South East Asia, Africa, and now South Asia (particularly Pakistan) are the potential epicenters of its international economic engagements. Almost all of these economic engagements highlight the asymmetrical nature of the relationship, with China being the dominant player. This asymmetry paves the way for critical analysis of potential imperialistic or hegemonic designs.

Although the traditional theory of neo-colonialism has generally been used in the past to scrutinize Western engagements with the third world, the neo-colonial framework is also apt to analyse asymmetrical Chinese economic engagements with the world and their politico-cultural implications as the neo-colonial framework does not require the countries under study to have shared a colonial relationship in the past.

The vast majority of literature suggests that Chinese economic engagements do not remain restricted to economic activity. There are also spillover effects of the Chinese economic activity, e.g., media presence, foreign policy influence, and educational and cultural engagements.

With the same power asymmetry existing in the Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan, analysing it using the lens of neo-colonial theory can help us understand the dynamics of these activities in an innovative and insightful way.

Finally, it is open for future research to analyse the exact politico-cultural implications of the Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan and the perceptions of Pakistanis regarding these engagements.

##### **4.1 Policy Implications for Pakistan**

Pakistan should remain cautious of debt dependency. Hence, it should seek favorable loan terms and variegate foreign investment. Moreover, the terms and conditions of current economic engagements should be carefully deliberated upon and properly audited.

Pakistan should protect its local industries to prevent them from Chinese competition. It can consider improving the competitiveness of Pakistani industries and applying tariffs on some Chinese projects in areas where local industry is most vulnerable.

As there exists the possibility of economic engagements spilling over to the cultural domain, it can lead to tensions between Chinese companies, Chinese personnel in Pakistan, and Pakistani citizens. Pakistan should prevent this with the help of an effective media strategy, promoting mutual understanding of Pakistani and Chinese culture and securing fair labor practices.

To prevent negative political implications, Pakistan must maintain a balance with China and its other allies like the United States with the help of interest-based foreign policy and maintain diverse alliances globally.

However, this article highlights that smaller partners also enjoy some leverage in asymmetrical relations. Hence, Pakistan has the prospect of using its leverage over China to get help on international issues like Kashmir, secure foreign investment, and build regional alliances.

## 4.2 Study Limitations

There is a lack of credible statistics and data on Chinese economic engagements with Pakistan and the rest of the world. Due to the unavailability of primary data, the research had to rely on peer-reviewed secondary literature published in journals of repute. Moreover, the research is not field research and only comes from existing literature on this topic. Nevertheless, aware of these shortcomings, it does not provide a conclusive judgement on the exact politico-cultural implications for Pakistan. It only underscores their possibility, relying on qualitative content analysis of literature and leaves it open for future primary research to determine the specific politico-cultural implications.

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### **Acknowledgments**

The authors are grateful for the support of Forman Christian College (A Chartered University) and of the editorial team.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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