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China-Pakistan Economic Corridor through the Lens of Discourse Historical Approach: A Critical Media Study of Economic and Political Narratives in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study critically investigates the discursive construction of the future within media narratives on CPEC, employing Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in conjunction with Theo van Leeuwen's framework of Social Actor Representation. Drawing upon a qualitative analysis of selected articles from three leading English-language Pakistani newspapers—Dawn, The News, and The Express Tribune—this research examines the rhetorical strategies and discursive devices used to frame CPEC's projected impacts. By exploring how various social actors—including state institutions, political figures, foreign stakeholders, and the general public—are represented, legitimized, or problematized, the study reveals the ideological underpinnings embedded within the discourse. It interrogates how narratives of economic prosperity, strategic partnership with China, and national progress are constructed and sustained, as well as how dissenting or critical voices are marginalized or delegitimized. The analysis pays particular attention to the intertextual and interdiscursive features of the selected texts, tracing how historical references, policy documents, and geopolitical imaginaries are invoked to lend credibility and coherence to the CPEC narrative. The findings highlight key discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation (topoi), and perspectivization, which work collectively to frame CPEC as a symbol of hope, modernization, and geopolitical realignment. This research contributes to the growing body of critical discourse studies on large-scale infrastructure projects by illuminating the role of media in shaping public imaginaries of the future. It underscores how print media acts not only as a reflector but also as a constructor of socio-political realities, actively participating in the legitimation of development agendas and strategic alliances.

Keywords: CPEC, Discourse-Historical Approach, Social Actor Representation, Pakistani Print Media, Futurity, Critical Discourse Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores how discourse in Pakistani print media constructs the future. This study employs the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) as a theoretical framework to investigate how the concept of "futurity" appears in Pakistani print media discourse regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. As a discursive construct, futurity holds significant power in shaping perceptions and decisions. Projecting future possibilities in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects like CPEC is not merely a neutral task; it is a strategic discursive effort that shapes public opinion, state narratives, and international positioning. The future is not simply a temporal concept but a discursive pattern shaped by language, ideology, and power relations (Fairclough, 2003).

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In media discourse, the projection of futurity plays a crucial role in shaping national development, policy decisions, and geopolitical narratives (Cap, 2008). Media discourse, particularly in print media, serves as a substantial platform for raising such visions of futurity, embedding visions of economic progress, national development, and geopolitical transformation within its linguistic and rhetorical frameworks. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been framed as a transformative initiative, with Pakistani newspapers portraying it as a corridor to economic prosperity and regional integration (Ali & Fahad, 2020). The linguistic choices employed in media texts—such as modal verbs, evaluative adjectives, and rhetorical strategies—shape public views on Pakistan's economic future (Lazar, 2019).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) presents a strong framework for examining how language constructs futurity, particularly through Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which evaluates discursive strategies such as nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization, and intensification/mitigation (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Prior studies on CPEC discourse have highlighted how Pakistani media predominantly structure the initiative as a "game-changer" while mitigating potential challenges through euphemism and strategic omission (Shah, 2021). However, little attention has been paid to how media discursively constructs futurity around the project.

This study critically analyzes various discursive strategies to understand how media discourse linguistically shapes perceptions of the future and how these constructions serve broader socio-political and ideological goals. Through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study aims to reveal the implicit power structures embedded in narratives focused on the future, emphasizing the role of language in influencing both the material and symbolic aspects of Pakistan's development under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This study uses Wodak's discursive strategies to examine how actors, entities, and events associated with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are named and framed to produce particular anticipatory narratives, and how intensification and mitigation techniques reinforce dominant narratives (van Leeuwen, 2008). By examining these linguistic patterns, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how media discourse affects public perception of economic and geopolitical futures.

One of the main initiatives of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) aims to promote economic growth and improve regional connectivity (Ali, 2019; Wolf, 2020). Launched in 2015, CPEC represents a significant investment program to develop infrastructure, energy, and industrial projects throughout Pakistan (Hussain, 2021). The Gwadar Port serves as a key hub for trade between China, the Middle East, and Africa (Ahmed & Mustafa, 2018). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is crucial for Pakistan's economy and geopolitics. Its goal is to mitigate persistent energy deficits, promote industrialization, and establish the country as a central trade hub (Rana, 2020). Moreover, the project is seen as a strategic partnership that strengthens Sino-Pak relations, often termed an "all-weather friendship" (Small, 2015).

Amomg the objectives of this study are: To analyze how Pakistani newspapers construct futurity through discourse, to examine the linguistic and rhetorical strategies employed in media discourse to project-specific futures related to CPEC and to explore the ideological and political implications of these media representations of futurity in the CPEC discourse. By analyzing newspaper discourse, this study aims to address the some key questions like how does the Pakistani

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print media represent futurity through discourse in the CPEC project? What linguistic and rhetorical strategies are employed to project-specific futures, and what ideological and political implications arise from these depictions?

Understanding the discursive processes involved is essential for examining the power dynamics behind media representations of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and their broader socio-political effects. This study contributes to the literature on media discourse, discourse-historical approaches, and the impact of language in shaping anticipatory imaginaries. By critically analyzing the linguistic construction of future possibilities, the article sheds light on how media discourse controls narratives of national development and geopolitical discussions, particularly regarding Pakistan's evolving relationship with China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the existing literature on how futurity is portrayed in discourse, along with how media shapes economic and geopolitical narratives. It also examines the application of the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) and its applicability to CDA and earlier studies on the discourse surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistani print media.

Futurity is a linguistic and discursive concept that describes how the future is envisioned, projected, and represented in discourse (Beckert, 2016; Adam, 2004). According to scholars, discourse is an active space where potential futures are shaped, discussed, and validated rather than merely reflecting reality (Fairclough, 1992). This idea is strongly related to anticipatory discourse (Luhmann, 1998), which describes future events in a way that influences decisions, actions, and ideologies in the present. According to research, the concept of futurity is commonly used in political and economic discourse to influence ideas about global integration, national advancement, and development (Jessop, 2004).

The way language is employed to mold, project, and validate particular future visions within discourse is known as the discursive construction of futurity. Future events, policies, and developments are framed in the media and political discourse as either inevitable, desirable, or uncertain through the use of rhetorical and linguistic techniques (Fairclough, 2010). Modal expressions that convey certainty, possibility, or contingency regarding future events are used in this process, along with narrative techniques and argumentation strategies (Wodak, 2015).

By framing narratives, legitimizing policies, and convincing public opinion, the media significantly contributes to how the general public views economic and development initiatives (Fairclough, 2010). Depending on the publication's political and ideological stance, media discourse frequently creates futurity by expressing optimism, uncertainty, or inevitability (Wodak, 2015). One of the primary ways in which the future is represented is through modality—words such as *will, must, should, and can*—which indicate varying degrees of certainty, obligation, and possibility (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). For instance, in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistani newspapers frequently employ deterministic language to assert that the project "will transform Pakistan’s economy," creating an impression of an inevitable and positive future (Ahmed, 2019).

These strategies establish a collective vision of development while marginalizing dissenting voices that question the long-term sustainability of such projects (Van Dijk, 2008). By employing these discursive strategies, media discourse not only constructs specific visions of the future but also legitimizes political and economic policies that align with these projections (Chilton, 2004).

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Therefore, the way the future is represented in media is not neutral; rather, it serves as a rhetorical tool to promote particular agendas and power dynamics (Fairclough, 2013).

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is a key framework within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)**,** developed by Ruth Wodak. It is particularly relevant for studying how discourse constructs social, political, and historical realities over time (Wodak, 2001). DHA combines linguistic analysis with historical and social context, making it useful for understanding how media discourse shapes public perceptions and ideologies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). Wodak detects five key strategies used in media and political discourse: Nomination which is the process of naming and classifying social actors (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), to establish unique discursive positions (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The use of adjectives to characterize actors or events is known as predication (Wodak, 2015). Argumentation is the process of using topoi to support claims (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). Perspectivization: The role and participation of the speaker in discourse (Van Dijk, 2008). The patterns of intensification and mitigation demonstrate how media emphasizes or minimizes particular aspects of CPEC (Wodak & Meyer, 2016). By applying this approach to examine media discourse, the study shows how various ideological and political interests are interwoven with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and how newspapers present it as a forward-looking project.

Fairclough (2013) asserts that by highlighting specific opportunities, threats, or pathways, discourse shapes public perceptions of the future in a performative way. The media, as a key site of discourse production, often constructs futurity by highlighting economic progress, geopolitical shifts, or technological advancements in a way that aligns with dominant ideologies (Reisigl & Wodak, 2016). In the context of CPEC, Pakistani print media employs discursive strategies to construct futurity by framing CPEC as a transformative project that will bring economic prosperity and regional connectivity (Ahmed, 2019), utilizing to create a sense of inevitability (Wodak, 2009), employing topoi of progress, urgency, and collective responsibility to convince the audience that CPEC is essential for national development (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), and by representing China as an economic savior and Pakistan as a beneficiary, reinforcing a developmental future (Zhang, 2020). By analyzing the linguistic and rhetorical strategies used in Pakistani print media, this study uncovers how futurity is strategically constructed to align with political and economic interests (Van Dijk, 2008).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been a central theme in Pakistani print media since its announcement in 2013, with newspapers framing it through economic, geopolitical, and developmental lenses (Ali & Bukhari, 2020). Over time, the framing of CPEC has evolved from an overwhelmingly optimistic portrayal to a more nuanced discourse that includes both praise and skepticism (Ahmed & Mustafa, 2021). In the early years, Pakistani newspapers largely celebrated CPEC as a "game changer" and "transformational project," reinforcing a grand narrative of economic revival and regional connectivity (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). This framing was particularly evident in government-aligned newspapers, which positioned CPEC as a pathway to prosperity, modernization, and Pakistan's global economic integration (Javed, 2018).

However, as the project progressed, newspapers also began to highlight challenges and controversies, such as issues of debt dependency, transparency, and regional inequalities (Rana, 2020). While pro-government media continued to emphasize success narratives and infrastructural achievements, independent and opposition-affiliated newspapers increasingly raised concerns about environmental impacts, economic sovereignty, and the exclusion of local communities from

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decision-making processes (Hussain, 2019). A key feature of media discourse on CPEC has been the opposition of narratives, with some newspapers depicting critics as "naysayers" or "external disruptors," while others engage in investigative reporting on the economic and social implications of the project (Iqbal, 2022). For example, nationalist newspapers frame CPEC as Pakistan's strategic victory, while more critical voices question the long-term sustainability of Chinese investments and the fairness of contractual agreements (Shah, 2021). Over time, the discourse has also reflected shifts in political leadership, as successive governments reframe CPEC to align with their own policy agendas (Ahmed, 2020). This evolving media narrative demonstrates how language plays a crucial role in constructing futurity, shaping public expectations, and legitimizing specific political and economic actions (Fairclough, 2010).

Several studies have analyzed the media representation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan, focusing on its economic potential and geopolitical implications. Research indicates that Pakistani newspapers often portray CPEC as a symbol of national progress, economic revitalization, and the strategic partnership between Pakistan and China (Ahmed & Hong, 2017; Khan & Khan, 2020). However, alternative viewpoints also exist, raising concerns about debt dependency, local displacements, and environmental impacts (Ali, 2020). Some studies have applied corpus-based Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to assess how Pakistani media covers CPEC, revealing that certain linguistic choices reinforce a pro-CPEC perspective while minimizing critical viewpoints (Afzaal et al., 2019).

While existing research has explored the economic, geopolitical, and strategic significance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), there have been fewer studies that focus specifically on how the discourse surrounding CPEC constructs ideas of the future. Additionally, most studies using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) tend to analyze general representations of the project rather than specifically examining how the future is linguistically framed. This study addresses this gap by applying Wodak's referential/nomination strategy to investigate how Pakistani print media portrays CPEC as a future-oriented project and what ideological implications arise from these discursive constructions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically utilizing Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), to investigate how discourse in Pakistani print media shapes perceptions of the future of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The methodology involves analyzing discourse strategies used in nine articles published in three major Pakistani newspapers.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a qualitative research method that investigates how language creates and influences power, ideology, and social realities. Since the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a highly politicized and strategic initiative, media discourse significantly impacts how the public perceives it, shapes national identity, and influences economic expectations. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is especially valuable for this study as it explores how historical and political contexts shape discourse, making it relevant for analyzing the evolving narrative around the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It also identifies linguistic strategies, such as nomination and predication, that help frame CPEC's future. Moreover, it facilitates intertextual analysis, connecting past and present narratives to highlight shifts in discourse.

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Nine articles were chosen from three well-known Pakistani newspapers: The Nation (which is more patriotic and generally pro-government), The Express Tribune (which frequently offers business and economic viewpoints), and Dawn (which is thought to be more impartial and analytical). Important stages of CPEC's development are covered in the articles published between 2016 and 2023. The selected articles particularly discuss CPEC's future, economic potential, geopolitical consequences, and related difficulties. The study uses the four discourse strategies of DHA to investigate the discursive construction of CPEC's future. The first one is the 'nomination' that will help to identify key actors, institutions, and entities involved in the CPEC discourse and how they are categorized. Predication is the second strategy to examine the positive, negative, or neutral attributes assigned to CPEC to uncover the ideological positions without requiring in-depth argumentation analysis. Third is 'perspectivization', which judges how different media sources position themselves regarding CPEC's future, whereas the intensification/mitigation strategy has also been applied to the discourse.

Discursive Strategies	**Linguistic Realization**	**Discursive goal**
Nomination (Referential Strategies)	Social actors (e.g., China, Pakistan, investors, critics) identification and representation	Inclusion/exclusion of the concerned entities reveals who is included/excluded and who drives the future of CPEC
Predication (Evaluative Strategies)	Positive and negative use of adjectives, attributes, and labels assigned to actors/events	Examines positive/negative framing of CPEC's future
Perspectivization	Use of pronouns and modality	Reveals who has authority in shaping the discourse on CPEC's future
Intensification/Mitigation	Hyperbole, antithesis, and rhetorical questions	Shows how discourse strengthens or softens future expectations

This methodological framework enables a systematic and multi-dimensional analysis of how Pakistani newspapers discursively construct the future of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). By applying Wodak's discourse strategies, this study uncovers the linguistic and ideological mechanisms through which CPEC is legitimized, contested, or depicted as an inevitable development in Pakistani print media.

DATA ANALYSIS

In Pakistani print media, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has received a lot of attention and is frequently presented as a revolutionary project that will reshape the country's social, political, and economic environment. Through the lens of discursive strategies in Pakistani newspapers, this analysis employs Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to examine how CPEC's future is discursively constructed.

1. Nomination (Referential Strategy) – Representation of Social Actors

Nomination strategies refer to the linguistic ways by which social actors are identified, categorized, and positioned within the discourse. They focus on specific terms, labels, and references used to construct the identity of different actors while social actor representation refers to the general ways in which actors are included, excluded, or positioned in discourse, including the distribution of power and agency. Key devices of nomination are Proper names (e.g., *Xi Jinping*, *CPEC leadership*), Categorization (e.g., *investors*, *partners*, *naysayers*), Metaphors (e.g., *CPEC as a "jewel" in BRI*), Collectivization vs. Individualization (e.g., *China and Pakistan as "brothers" vs.*

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Xi Jinping as a leader), Association/Dissociation (e.g., *Pakistan linked with prosperity, India as a bystander*) e.g. in the CPEC discourse, “China and Pakistan are good brothers” uses familial nomination to construct a long-term cooperative future.

Key devices of social actor representation are inclusion vs exclusion e.g., local communities rarely mentioned in CPEC discourse, Roles Assigned to Actors (e.g., *leaders, beneficiaries, opponents*), Agency and Responsibility (e.g., *China and Pakistan are "driving" CPEC, but bureaucracy "hinders" progress*). For example, Government leaders (China & Pakistan) are portrayed as visionaries, while bureaucracy is blamed for delays**.** Nomination Strategies are a tool used to construct Social Actor Representation**.** Social Actor Representation is a broader analysis that includes nomination but also looks at agency, exclusion, and discourse positioning**.** In the discursive construction of futurity, nomination strategies help frame who is responsible for progress and who is sidelined. To analyze the representation of social actors, Theo Van Leeuwen’s framework has been used as it directly addresses the representation of actors involved in assisting the construction of futurity.

Discursive Strategy of Nomination

Inclusion

Government leaders have been named explicitly (e.g., "Chinese President Xi Jinping," "Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi") to create legitimacy and authority in CPEC discourse. For example, “Chinese President Xi Jinping said that CPEC was of great importance to promoting the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic cooperative partnership."

Exclusion

Local communities are often overlooked, with the focus placed on elite actors such as policymakers and investors. This marginalizes local concerns and emphasizes a top-down governance approach, with little significant mention of local stakeholders in CPEC projects.

Collectivization

The articles have utilized collective terms, such as "China and Pakistan as brothers" and "South Asian economies," to create a sense of unity and shared destiny. For instance, it states, "China and Pakistan are good brothers and partners who share a special friendship."

Functionalization

Social actors are identified by their roles—such as "investors," "stakeholders," or "special assistant"—to emphasize their function within the economic framework rather than their personal identities. For instance, "Khalid Mansoor, the special assistant to the Prime Minister on CPEC Affairs, revealed that new energy projects under CPEC have added 5,300 MW to the national grid."

Role Allocation (Activation)

Government officials and investors are depicted as proactive agents in shaping the future, for instance, through phrases like "China is driving development" and "Pakistan is implementing reforms." An example of this is the statement, "With the advent of the second phase of CPEC, the region will experience increased industrial cooperation and connectivity."

Role Allocation (Passivation)

Pakistan stands to benefit economically from various initiatives, like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a key project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This project has the potential to create new business opportunities not just for Pakistan, but also for

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other countries in South Asia. This framing, however, highlights Pakistan's reliance on external support for its economic transformation.

Assimilation (Aggregation)

Statistics represent development progress, such as "75% of CPEC projects are energy-related," providing numerical legitimacy and emphasizing their large-scale impact. For instance, "Seventy-five percent of the $25.5 billion spent on completed projects is related to energy."

Assimilation (Individuation)

Key individuals were identified to personalize accountability for economic decisions. For instance, "Imran Khan sought a $6 billion bailout" and later requested that China revise the terms of its power agreements, citing the heavy burden of capacity payments.

Association

Linkages have been established between various actors to foster regional unity and legitimacy for the project. For instance, Pakistan and China have formed a strategic partnership, while Afghanistan has expressed interest in participation. Additionally, Nepal has reached out to Pakistan to strengthen cooperation, further indicating that Afghanistan is also eager to be involved in the CPEC projects. "While Nepal extends an olive branch to Pakistan to enhance cooperation, Afghanistan has also shown an interest in being involved in the CPEC projects."

Dissociation

India is often seen as an outsider or a reluctant participant, as illustrated by statements like "India may be a bystander to South Asia's rejuvenation." This highlights the contrast between active participation and exclusion. For instance, "Countries that have responded coolly to the BRI Initiative may find themselves as bystanders to South Asia's rejuvenation."

Nomination via Metaphor

CPEC is often referred to as the "jewel in the crown of the Belt and Road Initiative" to highlight its prestige and transformational potential. Experts have noted that "CPEC has the potential to transform Pakistan's destiny."

Impersonalization

References to "economic development" and "regional connectivity" abstractly universalize benefits and depersonalize agency. For instance, "The BRI transforms the regional economic landscape by shortening trade routes."

This analysis utilizes Wodak's strategy of social actor representation to explore how different actors are included or excluded, and how this affects the discursive construction of the future about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The focus is on elite actors and marginalized groups, emphasizing their roles in shaping the discourse about the future of CPEC.

1. **Inclusion of Elite Actors**

In all nine articles, elite figures like government officials, political leaders, policymakers, and multinational investors are the primary and dominant social actors shaping the narrative. Their participation is essential in developing a future narrative focused on strategic cooperation, economic growth, and regional connectivity. For example, Chinese leaders such as Xi Jinping are consistently portrayed as the central visionary for CPEC and BRI, emphasizing his strategic and cooperative leadership (e.g., *"China stands ready to work with Pakistan to build a closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future"*). His statements construct futurity as a mutual achievement tied to China's economic goals and Pakistan's strategic significance. Pakistani leaders like Arif Alvi, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, and Khalid Mansoor are represented as primary

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stakeholders and facilitators of CPEC. They are portrayed as representatives who are committed to ensuring progress and creating opportunities (*"Mansoor emphasized that SEZs were open for investors globally"*).

Institutions like the National Development and Reforms Commission (NDRC) and dialogue platforms (e.g., CPEC Political Parties Joint Consultation Mechanism) are presented as facilitators of coordination. The future is shaped by elite planning and leadership, giving the impression of a top-down approach to development. The focus is on regional and global actors who control economic, political, and legal frameworks, often sidelining other stakeholders like local communities.

2. Exclusion of Marginalized Groups

While the articles recognize local communities and other marginalized groups, their representation is often limited, vague, or temporary. These groups are included primarily for rhetorical reasons, without being given an active voice in shaping the discourse. Local communities in areas like Gwadar or Tharparkar are typically introduced only in the context of benefiting from infrastructure and energy projects.(*"The energy projects being implemented in Tharparkar district under CPEC would add another 3,500 megawatts to the national grid"*). No agency is attributed to these communities; they are constructed as passive recipients, with elite actors taking credit for progress.

SEZ development and infrastructure projects emphasize job creation, however, they often lack adequate representation of labor groups or workers is absent or minimal. For instance, while industrial workers' exchanges are mentioned, their voices and specific concerns are not included. Such as Balochistan is occasionally referenced, as seen in the statement (*"It took the provincial administration of Balochistan nearly three years to give the go-ahead to build the Gwadar power plant"*). However, their role is frequently portrayed as an obstacle or a source of delay, which undermines their agency and contribution. Marginalized groups are typically excluded from meaningful representation**,** reducing them to passive recipients of decisions made by ellites This exclusion reinforces a hierarchical narrative that sidelines grassroots participation and critical perspectives on futurity.

3. Inclusion of Non-Elite Countries

Countries like Nepal, Afghanistan, and India are discussed, but they are depicted as secondary players compared to China and Pakistan. Their representation emphasizes their potential involvement or skepticism regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). For instance, Nepal is described as extending an "olive branch" to Pakistan to promote increased economic cooperation. This initiative is presented as being led by key figures, such as Nepal's Prime Minister. (*"Nepal extends an olive branch to Pakistan to enhance cooperation"*). Afghanistan has shown interest in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, indicating the potential for regional integration. However, the primary focus remains on the strategic benefits for China and Pakistan. India is portrayed as a dissenting actor, with the narrative suggesting that its exclusion represents a loss—"Countries that have responded coolly to the Belt and Road Initiative may find themselves bystanders to South Asia's rejuvenation." Non-elite countries are selectively included and are positioned either as potential partners or adversaries. Their roles are framed within the broader context of CPEC's regional significance, which further emphasizes the influence of the elite actors, namely China and Pakistan.

The way the future is discussed in the analyzed texts portrays a vision of regional prosperity, economic integration, and developmental progress. However, this future is shown as

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being driven by elites, with marginalized voices either excluded or used to support the dominant narrative. The concept of futurity is linked to successful collaboration between Chinese and Pakistani leaders and organizations, focusing on infrastructure, energy, and connectivity. (*"CPEC was of great importance to promoting in-depth development of the China-Pakistan partnership"*). The BRI and CPEC are portrayed as vehicles for regional cooperation and growth (*"Reshapes the regional economic landscape by shortening trade routes"*). Local communities and labor groups are excluded from decision-making processes, reducing their influence on the expected future. Challenges, such as delays in Balochistan or legal obstacles, are seen as inefficiencies rather than results of structural power dynamics.

The discourse is primarily shaped by elite actors such as governments, leaders, and investors, who are portrayed as the main drivers of progress. In contrast, local communities, workers, and grassroots organizations are largely excluded, which reinforces a hierarchical narrative of development. When non-elite actors are included, it is often in a selective manner—either to support the elite vision or to showcase opposition, as seen in India. This framing suggests that the future will be determined by elite planning, sidelining local agency and alternative perspectives.

2. Predication as Evaluative Strategy

The predication strategy in discourse analysis focuses on assigning qualities—such as adjectives, attributes, and predicates—to social actors, actions, and phenomena. Analyzing the adjectives used in articles about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) reveals how specific characteristics are attributed to actors and events, thereby constructing a particular vision of the future. In the context of CPEC, these qualities often emphasize either positive aspects (e.g., growth, progress) or negative aspects (e.g., challenges, hurdles). Below is an analysis of how adjectives are employed in the discourse to influence perceptions of CPEC and its future. Predication strategies assign positive or negative attributes to actors, events, and objects.

Positive adjectives

Media discourse often describes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) using positive adjectives such as "game-changer," "unprecedented project," and "historic opportunity." It emphasizes terms like "proactive," "committed," "landmark project," "flagship initiative," "groundbreaking cooperation," "strategic initiative," "transformational," "dedicated," "visionary," and "unmatched significance." These positive descriptors reinforce the perception of CPEC as an inevitable driver of progress, linking it to economic prosperity and national pride while promoting an optimistic outlook. By elevating CPEC in this manner, the discourse frames it as a pivotal project for both regional and global development. Furthermore, these terms portray the leadership as proactive and aligned in their goals, fostering a sense of collaboration and reliability. The partnership is depicted as strong and visionary, promising long-term benefits for both countries involved.

The future is framed as one of regional leadership, strategic influence, and global importance with CPEC at the core. The positive adjectives depict CPEC as a project that will modernize Pakistan, driving unprecedented economic growth and industrialization. The future is envisioned as an era of modernization and prosperity for Pakistan, with significant global economic integration. Social actors, particularly governments, policymakers, and investors, are often described with adjectives that emphasize competence, vision, and partnership**.** Adjectives such as *"Energetic," "capable," "ambitious."* have been used for Stakeholders and Beneficiaries

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including businesses and SEZ participants, are framed as dynamic contributors to Pakistan's growth under CPEC. Stakeholders are positioned as key drivers of industrialization and economic success in the future. Adjectives used for the Pakistani government are "Proactive," "Committed," and "Progressive" whereas "Trustworthy ally," and "Strategic investor" have been used for China.

Negative Adjectives for Opposition and Challenges

"Debt trap" (rarely mentioned in pro-CPEC discourse) for CPEC. Negative labeling of critics suggests that opposition is misguided or externally influenced, limiting alternative discussions about CPEC's long-term viability. Challenges, whether internal or external, are framed through negative adjectives to marginalize dissent and downplay obstacles, positioning them as manageable or temporary. Critics of CPEC are delegitimized through adjectives such as *"Misinformed," "short-sighted,"* and *"negative."* which frame them as lacking understanding or vision. Critics are excluded from the envisioned prosperous future, and their objections are dismissed as irrelevant or counterproductive. Adjectives like *"Inefficient," "outdated,"* and *"burdensome"* have been used for internal challenges. Bureaucratic inefficiency and legal hurdles are described negatively, emphasizing the need for reform to align with CPEC's goals. The narrative suggests that overcoming these challenges is essential for realizing the future potential of CPEC. Adjectives for external threats such as *"Disruptive," "hostile,"* and *"destabilizing."* opposing or threatening CPEC are framed as harmful to regional progress and prosperity. The future is constructed as one of resilience, where Pakistan and China overcome external disruptions to achieve success.

3. Neutral or Ambivalent Adjectives

In some instances, adjectives are used to underscore the complexity or uncertainty surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), reflecting a cautious perspective on its future. Terms such as "challenging," "multifaceted," and "ambitious" highlight this complexity. These adjectives acknowledge the scale and intricacies of CPEC without undermining its potential. They frame the future as one that requires careful navigation, where success depends on effectively addressing the challenges.

On the other hand, adjectives like "unpredictable," "volatile," and "fragile" signify uncertainty. Although these terms appear less frequently, they are commonly used in critical discussions regarding geopolitical risks. Through these adjectives, the future is portrayed as contingent on both external and internal factors, leaving room for doubt.

The predication strategy evident in the use of adjectives within CPEC articles creates a future-oriented narrative focused on optimism, progress, and inevitability. Positive adjectives are used to praise CPEC and its stakeholders, while negative adjectives are used to marginalize critics and downplay challenges. This selective use of language reinforces an elite-driven vision of the future, positioning CPEC as the cornerstone of regional prosperity. However, differences in the use of adjectives across various media outlets reveal contrasting ideological perspectives, highlighting the complexity and contentious nature of the discourse surrounding CPEC.

3. Perspectivization – Pronouns, Narratives, and Modalities

Media representations of the future also rely on narrative structures that link present actions to anticipated consequences. For example, the framing of CPEC as a "game changer" positions Pakistan at a historical intersection, implying that decisions made today will determine either economic prosperity or missed opportunities (Zhang, 2020). Similarly, opponents of CPEC are often depicted as "naysayers" or "external disruptors," reinforcing the idea that rejecting the

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project would lead to economic stagnation and isolation (Javed, 2021). This strategy highlights the positioning of voices and perspectives in media discourse.

Use of pronoun

The pronouns like "We" and "Our" have been used to promote national unity. For example *"We must support CPEC for our national development."*

Use of Narrative

The authoritative narratives have been used by state officials and experts. For instance, *"Experts agree that CPEC will revolutionize Pakistan's economy."*

Use of Modality

The modal verbs have been used to express certainty about the future e.g. *"CPEC will turn Pakistan into an economic powerhouse."* The media uses inclusive pronouns to create a sense of collective ownership. In this discussion, government officials, business leaders, and Chinese diplomats are the primary voices, while local communities and critics are often left out. The use of modal verbs such as "will," "must," and "shall" reinforces a strong belief in the success of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Authoritative figures, including government officials and experts, largely guide the conversation, whereas marginalized groups, such as local communities and environmental activists, are frequently overlooked. Modal verbs like "will" and "must" imply an inevitable future, discouraging skepticism or debate.

4. Intensification/Mitigation through Strengthening or Softening Claims

The strategy of intensification and mitigation analyzes how specific elements of discourse are either amplified or minimized to influence public perceptions. This strategy enhances (intensification) or downplays (mitigation) various aspects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) discourse. It employs techniques such as hyperbole, euphemisms, and rhetorical questions. In the context of CPEC, this strategy is implemented through devices including hyperbole, relational questions, and other rhetorical tools to highlight the project's transformative potential or to downplay its challenges and opposition. This strategy focuses on how hyperbole, relational questions, and euphemisms serve to emphasize or diminish aspects of CPEC.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is used to emphasize the importance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), presenting a vision of an extraordinary future while downplaying concerns or limitations. Hyperbolic Claims about CPEC's impact exaggerate benefits to create urgency. For example, claims like "CPEC will transform Pakistan into a global trade hub" suggest a drastic and extensive change, heightening expectations about the project's impact. The term "transform" conveys a sense of radical improvement, creating a narrative that positions CPEC as a unique opportunity for Pakistan's future. The statement "Pakistan is on the brink of an economic revolution, thanks to CPEC" exaggerates the potential economic transformation by labeling it a "revolution." Similarly in the example, "CPEC will revolutionize Pakistan's economy overnight!" "CPEC is the biggest economic initiative in Pakistan's history!" the strategy of hyperbole has been used to exaggerate significance.

This use of hyperbole and repetition reinforces the perception of CPEC as inevitable, shaping public imagination towards an overwhelmingly positive future. Challenges such as debt and environmental impacts are minimized, which discourages critical examination. The media often amplifies the benefits to generate a sense of urgency and excitement. Phrases like "economic

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revolution," "unprecedented progress," and "regional connectivity" appear frequently to enhance positive perceptions, while economic risks and environmental concerns are often understated.

Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions are employed to emphasize the inevitability, urgency, and necessity of CPEC, making its future appear unquestionable. "Who can deny the benefits of regional connectivity through CPEC?" suggests that CPEC's advantages are indisputable, effectively silencing critics. Other instances used in the articles are: "Can Pakistan afford to ignore such a golden opportunity?")

Euphemism

Euphemisms are often used to downplay the challenges, concerns, and opposition surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), while maintaining a positive outlook for the future. For example, when saying, "Some challenges exist in CPEC's implementation, but progress is steady," the term "challenges" softens the impact of "delays" or "problems." "Adjustments in financial terms" instead of "debt concerns") "Minor challenges exist, but the overall benefits outweigh them." *(Mitigation of concerns).* The Pakistani newspapers frequently employ hyperbole to exaggerate CPEC's transformative potential, use rhetorical questions to emphasize its inevitability and apply euphemisms to diminish concerns and criticism. Together, these strategies create a highly optimistic vision for the future, positioning CPEC as the key to Pakistan's economic prosperity and regional leadership.

The discursive construction of CPEC's future in Pakistani print media is highly optimistic, with the government and Chinese investors framed as visionary leaders and CPEC as a transformational force. Media coverage uses Nomination, predication, perspectivization, and intensification strategies to construct a grand narrative of economic prosperity and national progress while marginalizing dissenting voices. This study highlights how language plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of CPEC, influencing policy discussions and national debates about Pakistan's future trajectory.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

How CPEC's Future is Discursively Constructed in Pakistani Print Media

Pakistani print media discusses the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and presents a vision of the future through specific linguistic choices and ideological frameworks. Wodak's DHA strategies illustrate how language influences not only media discourse but also national debates, policy decisions, and public perceptions of the future. The Pakistani print media portrays CPEC's potential as a straightforward path to prosperity, employing linguistic strategies to emphasize its benefits, downplay criticism, and legitimize government policies.

Pakistani newspapers portray the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a means for Pakistan to establish itself as a key player in global geopolitics. This portrayal is achieved through "Nomination Strategies," which depict Pakistan as a "regional leader," a "bridge between East and West," and an "essential partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative." The future of CPEC is presented as predetermined and overwhelmingly positive. Central to this narrative are government officials and China, while local communities are often sidelined. Alternative viewpoints, such as concerns about debt risks and environmental impacts, are either excluded or downplayed. Critics are often delegitimized with negative labels. Arguments for CPEC emphasize economic progress, job creation, and security stability, reinforcing the project's perceived necessity. Through the Predication strategy, the future is described with optimism, using

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adjectives, evaluations, and phrases like "Pakistan will become a regional trade hub," "CPEC will reshape South Asia's economic landscape," and "Gwadar will emerge as the new Dubai."

Using the Perspectivization strategy, which involves the frequent use of "we" and "our" in government-aligned media, fosters a collective national identity and reinforces the notion that Pakistan is progressing toward a shared prosperous future. e.g. *"Our country is on the path to becoming a global economic corridor, connecting markets from China to the Middle East."* The first-person plural pronoun "our" fosters a sense of national ownership over the future, framing the success of CPEC as a collective aspiration. The terms "will," "certainly," and "undoubtedly" emphasize the inevitability of a prosperous future through CPEC e.g. *"With the advent of the second phase of CPEC, the region will witness enhanced industrial cooperation and connectivity, attracting foreign investment and strengthening Pakistan's economy."* In this context, the use of certainty modality ("will") and positive predication ("enhanced cooperation," "strengthening economy") creates a vision of inevitable economic growth. The pronouns ("we," "our") and modal verbs ("will," "must") foster a sense of collective assurance.

When discussing success, economic growth, and development, intensification strategies such as rhetorical questions, hyperbole, and euphemism are employed. Conversely, when addressing challenges, opposition, or risks, mitigation strategies including vagueness, conditional structures, and shifting responsibility are utilized e.g. *"Although some concerns remain, Pakistan is on an irreversible path toward economic transformation."* Concerns still remain about the challenges we face, but they are presented alongside the notion of an "irreversible path" to progress. This framing reassures the audience that, while obstacles exist, they will not hinder advancement. In Pakistani newspapers, one of the prevailing ways to portray the future is through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a transformational, game-changing initiative. This portrayal relies on positive language and euphemisms. Phrases like "jewel in the crown," "unprecedented opportunity," "economic lifeline," and "flagship project" create a vision of prosperity and modernization. Together, these elements promote specific ideas of progress, economic transformation, and geopolitical positioning.

The way the future is portrayed in media discourse is essential in shaping our expectations, possibilities, and uncertainties about upcoming events or developments. Although most of the discourse tends to be optimistic, some articles also recognize challenges and uncertainties. They highlight that the future depends on addressing key issues, such as bureaucratic inefficiencies. (*"Red tape has slowed down investment inflows"*) Security concerns (*"Ensuring stability in Balochistan is crucial for long-term success"*) foreign interference (*"External disruptors seek to derail Pakistan's economic rise"*) Even in these situations, mitigation strategies aim to minimize threats by presenting them as temporary obstacles instead of inherent structural flaws.

Pakistani print media portrays the future of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a vision of inevitable progress, economic strength, and geopolitical significance. Through the use of positive language, strong assertions, persuasive argumentation, and selective inclusion of social actors, newspapers shape public perceptions of CPEC as a historic opportunity that will define Pakistan's long-term prosperity. However, variations in coverage exist based on the newspapers' ideological leanings. Government-aligned newspapers tend to frame CPEC in an overwhelmingly positive light. At the same time, more neutral or critical publications highlight the challenges and uncertainties associated with the project, although these issues are often downplayed rather than emphasized. Overall, the way CPEC's future is discussed reflects national

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aspirations, ideological perspectives, and strategic narratives aimed at garnering public support and legitimizing Pakistan's economic direction.

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