JOURNALISTIC NORMS AND THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT REPORTING: ANALYZING CPEC NEWS COVERAGE

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Abstract
The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has emerged as one of the most significant development initiatives in Pakistan's recent history, yet its representation in news media remains deeply shaped by journalistic norms, political interests, and competing narratives. This study examines how Pakistani and international news outlets construct CPEC through development reporting practices, with attention to sourcing patterns, news values, and frame selection. Using a mixed-method content analysis of 600 news articles from leading Pakistani and international media published between 2015 and 2023, the study identifies dominant frames including national development, geopolitical competition, economic opportunity, governance challenges, and regional security. Results show that Pakistani media predominantly adopt a development-supportive frame driven by official sources and elite indexing, whereas international agencies employ a more critical lens emphasizing transparency, debt, and regional power dynamics. These differences reflect broader journalistic cultures and political contexts influencing development communication. The study argues that the politics of development journalism, shaped by state influence, editorial priorities, and global strategic interests, play a central role in determining how CPEC is portrayed for domestic and global audiences. Findings contribute to scholarship on development communication, media framing, and the political economy of journalism in South Asia, offering insights into how mega-projects are legitimized, contested, or reframed in news discourse.

Keywords: CPEC; development journalism; media framing; political economy of news; Pakistan; geopolitical communication; China–Pakistan relations; international news agencies

Introduction
Development reporting occupies a central yet contested space in contemporary journalism, especially within countries struggling to balance national priorities, international partnerships, and political sensitivities. In contexts like Pakistan, where economic development is not merely an internal concern but deeply intertwined with geopolitics, the role of the media becomes profoundly consequential. One of the most significant cases exemplifying this intersection is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that promises infrastructural transformation, regional connectivity, and socio-economic opportunity (Wolf, 2020; Small, 2015). Since its announcement in 2015,

CPEC has generated intense media attention inside Pakistan and across the world, making it a valuable site for investigating how journalistic norms, routines, and institutional pressures shape news narratives about development (Adnan et al., 2019; Aslam & Ahmad, 2019a, 2019b).

At the heart of development journalism lies an enduring tension: Should journalists act primarily as watchdogs scrutinizing government policies, or as nation-building actors supporting state-led development? Scholars have long debated whether development reporting ought to challenge power structures or promote national unity and economic goals (Hachten & Scotton, 2016; Manyozo, 2012). In countries of the Global South, including Pakistan, journalism often operates within complex political, economic, and institutional environments where development news is linked to national identity, economic survival, and political legitimacy (Rahman, 2020). CPEC, portrayed by many as a "game changer," thus represents not only an economic initiative but a journalistic dilemma (Ahmad et al., 2021; Aslam et al., 2024; Faizullah et al., 2021; S. Hussain et al., 2021; S. A. Hussain et al., 2024; Sohail Riaz et al., 2024): How should the media report on a mega-project that is simultaneously framed as a national necessity, a geopolitical strategy, and a controversial, elite-driven development scheme?

Existing scholarship on CPEC has largely examined themes such as geopolitical competition, security dynamics, economic benefits, and China's regional strategy (Garcia, 2019; Wolf, 2020). However, relatively few studies focus specifically on media reporting practices or the journalistic norms that shape CPEC coverage (Rafique & Zubair, 2021). When media studies on CPEC do exist, they often highlight framing patterns such as portrayal of the project as a development opportunity, an economic burden, or a political tool (Bing, 2019; Rehman, 2020). Yet, little attention has been given to how journalistic values, objectivity, balance, national interest, gatekeeping, and editorial constraints influence these frames. This presents a significant gap, because understanding the mediating role of journalism is essential to comprehending why development news is constructed in particular ways and how these constructions affect public perception and policy discourse.

Development reporting is not merely the transmission of factual updates about infrastructure projects. It is shaped by wider political-economic environments, including ownership structures, editorial pressures, access to sources, and ideological inclinations (Waisbord, 2018). In Pakistan, where media freedom fluctuates with political transitions and where state institutions maintain influence over news agendas, development issues often receive coverage that aligns with national priorities or avoids critical scrutiny (Yusuf, 2013). In this context, CPEC coverage becomes a lens through which the interplay between journalistic norms and political power can be examined. Journalists operate under pressures from state institutions, political parties, economic stakeholders, and advertisers, all of which can shape how development news is framed and prioritized (Iftikhar, 2021).

CPEC coverage also intersects with the broader phenomenon of developmentalism, the belief that infrastructure-led growth is essential to national progress. Developmentalism often leads the media to adopt positive, progress-oriented narratives and downplay controversies such as displacement, environmental damage, debt risks, and local grievances (Escobar, 2011; Hickle, 2018). Early analyses of CPEC reporting suggest that certain Pakistani outlets reproduce promotional narratives aligned with government perspectives, while others adopt more critical tones focusing on transparency, governance, or inequalities (Javaid, 2020). This variation raises fundamental questions: To what extent do journalistic norms influence the selection of sources? Do media rely predominantly on government officials, Chinese representatives, and business

elites? Do journalists treat CPEC as a political issue, a development project, or a geopolitical contestation? And how do newsroom routines and organizational constraints shape these choices?

Globally, scholarship on development communication emphasizes the importance of participation, inclusivity, and accountability in reporting development issues (Servaes, 2016). Effective development journalism requires attention not only to economic indicators but also to communities affected by projects, local voices, marginalized groups, environmental concerns, and social impacts. Yet, in many countries, such voices are underrepresented, as development reporting heavily depends on official sources and elite perspectives (Cottle, 2009; McQuail, 2010). Preliminary analyses of CPEC coverage suggest similar tendencies: media rely predominantly on government officials, business leaders, and foreign diplomats, while local perspectives, especially from communities in Gwadar, Balochistan, and northern Pakistan, remain underreported (Bing, 2019; Rafique & Zubair, 2021). Understanding this source imbalance is crucial because it influences how the public interprets development priorities and whose interests are reflected in national discourse.

The politics surrounding CPEC further complicate journalistic roles. As a strategic geopolitical collaboration between Pakistan and China, CPEC coverage frequently intersects with state narratives emphasizing national security and diplomatic friendship. These contexts raise questions about self-censorship, selective framing, and the boundaries of critical reporting. Media outlets may be reluctant to challenge or question government or Chinese authorities due to political sensitivities, risks of backlash, or decreased access to information. In this sense, CPEC becomes an example of how development journalism can be shaped by broader power structures, reinforcing the importance of analyzing not only what the media report, but how and why they report it.

Moreover, CPEC coverage has evolved significantly over time. Earlier reports, especially between 2015–2018, were dominated by celebratory narratives highlighting economic opportunity, employment, and infrastructure development (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). Subsequent years witnessed more nuanced reporting as delays, financial concerns, controversies, and local grievances emerged (Garcia, 2019; Rehman, 2020). This temporal shift underscores the need for a longitudinal perspective on journalistic norms, exploring whether media adopt watchdog roles consistently or only when development narratives become less politically sensitive.

Journalistic norms, although widely studied globally, do not operate uniformly across contexts. They are shaped by national media cultures, political pressures, organizational routines, and economic constraints (Hallin & Mancini, 2016). In Pakistan's case, the hybrid nature of media—combining periods of liberalization with episodes of state control—creates a unique environment where journalists negotiate between norms of objectivity and pressures of nationalism, security, and political patronage. CPEC coverage thus provides a case through which to explore how global journalistic standards interact with local political realities.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to critically examine how journalistic norms shape the politics of development reporting in Pakistani media, with a specific focus on CPEC. By analyzing how news outlets frame CPEC, select sources, prioritize topics, and adopt particular tones, this research investigates the intersection of journalistic decision-making, political power, and development narratives. It explores whether news organizations act as critical watchdogs monitoring project risks, or as nation-building institutions promoting state-led development. It also seeks to understand how newsroom constraints—such as editorial

influence, limited access to independent information, and reliance on official sources—shape the contours of CPEC coverage.

Studying CPEC coverage is significant for several reasons. First, as Pakistan's largest development initiative in recent decades, CPEC has profound political, economic, and social implications. Media representations play a key role in shaping public support, influencing policy debates, and affecting foreign relations. Second, by analyzing journalistic norms in CPEC reporting, the study contributes to broader debates on media freedom, development communication, and political journalism in Pakistan. Third, understanding how the media report on mega-development projects can offer insights into how public discourse on development is shaped, whether through critical inquiry, political alignment, or promotional storytelling.

Finally, this research contributes to theoretical discussions on development journalism, framing theory, and political communication. It demonstrates how journalistic routines mediate the representation of development projects, how frames are constructed and maintained, and how political pressures influence media practices. These insights have broader relevance beyond Pakistan, offering lessons for understanding media roles in development reporting across the Global South, especially in countries grappling with geopolitical entanglements and ambitious infrastructure agendas.

Literature Review

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become a major site of scholarly attention, not only for its geopolitical and economic implications but also for its discursive construction in media systems. To situate this study, the literature review is organized into three key areas: (1) development journalism and media practices, (2) politics of news production and journalistic norms, and (3) media framing and discourse surrounding CPEC.

1. Development Journalism and Media Practices

Development journalism emerged as a response to Western-centric news models that prioritized conflict, negativity, and elite sources over issues of national development (McQuail, 2010; Manyozo, 2012). In the Global South, development journalism is often normative—encouraging the media to promote national growth, mobilize public support, and advance state-led development projects (Hachten & Scotton, 2016). However, critics argue that development journalism may shift the media's role from watchdog to supporter, reducing investigative scrutiny and privileging official narratives (Waisbord, 2018).

In Pakistan, development reporting is shaped by political, economic, and institutional pressures that influence how media portray development initiatives (Rahman, 2020). Studies indicate that development stories often prioritize government perspectives, focus on economic benefits, and underrepresent marginalized communities (Yusuf, 2013; Iftikhar, 2021). This trend aligns with global critiques that development reporting tends to reproduce dominant political narratives, overlook structural inequalities, and frame development primarily as economic growth (Escobar, 2011; Hickel, 2018).

Infrastructural mega-projects—such as highways, dams, or international corridors—often receive celebratory media coverage, emphasizing opportunity rather than risk (Cottle, 2009). At the same time, dynamic political contexts can influence shifts in tone or emphasis. Thus, development journalism is not neutral; it is deeply intertwined with power relations, state interests, and media ownership structures.

2. Politics of News Production and Journalistic Norms

Journalistic norms such as objectivity, balance, and reliance on official sources profoundly influence how news content is produced. These norms operate within broader political and

organizational constraints (Hallin & Mancini, 2016). Scholars argue that news routines, including habitual dependence on government officials, preference for elite sources, and editorial gatekeeping, shape the selection and framing of development stories (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014; McQuail, 2010).

In politically sensitive environments, journalistic autonomy may be constrained by formal censorship, informal pressures, economic interests, or risks of backlash. This results in self-censorship, selective omission, and the privileging of "safe" narratives that align with state positions (Yusuf, 2013). As media organizations rely heavily on official statements and briefings, development projects tend to be framed through government agendas rather than investigative accounts .

Pakistani journalism operates within what scholars describe as a hybrid media system, where both democratic norms and authoritarian pressures coexist (Rahman, 2020). Studies show that journalists negotiate between ideals of objectivity and state-driven narratives of national interest, especially when reporting on strategic or geopolitical issues (Javaid, 2020). Media ownership also plays a role: corporate interests may influence the portrayal of development projects linked to foreign investment or political elites (Iftikhar, 2021).

Development news production is thus inherently political. Journalists may seek balance but face constraints that shape which voices are heard, which concerns are downplayed, and which narratives dominate public discourse.

3. Media Framing and Discourse on CPEC

CPEC has attracted considerable academic interest, particularly in relation to framing and geopolitical discourse. Early media analyses indicate that Pakistani outlets predominantly framed CPEC as a development opportunity and national "game changer," emphasizing employment, investment, and modernization (Small, 2015; Wolf, 2020). These optimistic narratives are consistent with development journalism norms in growth-oriented economies.

However, later studies reveal increasing diversity in coverage. Some media highlight political contestation, transparency debates, security concerns, provincial inequalities, environmental impacts, and local grievances, especially in regions such as Gwadar and Gilgit-Baltistan (Garcia, 2019; Rehman, 2020). International media often frame CPEC within the strategic context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing geopolitical competition, debt diplomacy, or regional security dynamics (Bing, 2019).

Scholars note that elite sourcing dominates CPEC coverage, with government officials, economists, business leaders, and Chinese representatives cited far more frequently than affected communities (Rafique & Zubair, 2021). This imbalance reflects broader trends in development journalism and indicates the influence of institutional power structures on framing.

Despite these contributions, gaps remain. Few studies have examined how journalistic norms—such as objectivity, balance, nationalism, or newsroom routines—shape CPEC narratives. Similarly, there is limited research on how media organizations navigate political sensitivities or how development reporting is influenced by state narratives, editorial policies, or foreign diplomatic pressures. This study addresses these lacunae by analyzing journalistic norms and political constraints embedded in CPEC reporting.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon Framing Theory, Political Economy of Media, and Development Journalism Theory to analyze how journalistic norms shape CPEC coverage.

1. Framing Theory

Framing theory posits that media do not simply report events—they construct reality by selecting and highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). Frames influence how audiences interpret development projects, assign responsibility, and evaluate outcomes.

In CPEC reporting, frames may emphasize:

- economic benefits (investment, jobs, growth),
- risks (debt, inequality, displacement),
- geopolitical narratives (strategic partnership, regional competition), or
- political perspectives (government success, opposition criticism).

By analyzing dominant frames, this study identifies the interpretive structures through which journalists present CPEC.

2. Political Economy of Media

The political economy framework highlights how media systems are shaped by ownership patterns, state power, commercial pressures, and institutional constraints (Waisbord, 2018; McChesney, 2008). For development reporting, this perspective is essential, as economic and political interests often shape news agendas.

In Pakistan, political economy factors influencing CPEC reporting include:

- state influence over strategic communication,
- media dependence on advertising and corporate interests,
- political pressures affecting editorial autonomy,
- diplomatic considerations involving China.

This lens helps explain why certain narratives dominate and why critical reporting may be limited.

3. Development Journalism Theory

Development journalism emphasizes national development goals, social responsibility, and constructive reporting. While it promotes positive coverage of development initiatives, it risks neglecting critical or marginalized perspectives (Manyozo, 2012).

This framework is used to:

- examine how Pakistani media balance watchdog roles with nation-building narratives,
- evaluate whether journalism supports state-led development narratives,
- identify gaps between development rhetoric and inclusive, people-centered reporting.

Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for analyzing journalistic norms and the politics of CPEC coverage.

Research Questions

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Pakistani news media frame the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in their development reporting?

RQ2: What journalistic norms (e.g., sourcing practices, balance, objectivity, national interest) are reflected in CPEC news coverage?

RQ3: To what extent does CPEC reporting demonstrate influences from political, institutional, or economic pressures?

RQ4: How are local communities, marginalized groups, and affected populations represented—or underrepresented—in CPEC media narratives?

RQ5: How do different media outlets vary in their portrayal of CPEC, and what factors explain these differences?

4. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-method qualitative content analysis to examine how journalistic norms and political considerations shape news coverage of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The methodology is structured to capture not only the manifest content of media texts but also their underlying frames, narrative structures, and ideological orientations. The section outlines the research design, sampling procedure, units of analysis, coding categories, and analytical techniques.

4.1 Research Design

A qualitative content analysis combined with framing analysis is adopted to systematically evaluate how Pakistani print and online news media construct narratives around CPEC. This design allows the study to uncover:

- Journalistic routines that shape coverage
- How development is framed as opportunity, risk, or geopolitical tension
- The political influences reflected in media narratives
- Patterns of responsibility attribution and evaluative tone

Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for uncovering meaning-making strategies (Schreier, 2012), while framing analysis provides tools to identify problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations (Entman, 1993). Together, these approaches provide a robust structure for analyzing development reporting within political contexts.

4.2 Sampling and Data Collection

4.2.1 Selection of Media Outlets

Four major Pakistani news outlets were selected based on their national reach, political orientation, language, and influence:

1. **Dawn** (English; liberal-centrist; high credibility)
2. **The News International** (English; mainstream corporate media)
3. **Daily Jang** (Urdu; highest readership; populist leaning)
4. **Daily Express** (Urdu; centrist; mass audience)

These outlets represent both elite and popular media spheres, allowing comparison between Urdu and English-language discourses.

4.2.2 Time Frame

News articles were collected from January 2015 to December 2023, covering:

- The announcement and early implementation of CPEC
- Major political transitions (PML-N, PTI, and caretaker governments)
- Key milestones, controversies, financing issues, and security developments

This longitudinal timeframe helps capture evolving journalistic norms and political influences.

4.2.3 Sampling Method

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify news reports containing keywords such as:

- "CPEC,"
- "China–Pakistan Economic Corridor,"
- "Belt and Road Initiative,"
- "development projects,"
- "economic corridor,"
- "Chinese investment,"
- "Gwadar,"
- "special economic zones," etc.

A total of 240 news articles (60 from each newspaper) were systematically selected to ensure thematic, temporal, and typological diversity.

4.3 Units and Levels of Analysis

- **Unit of Analysis:** Individual news articles (straight news, features, explanatory reports).
- **Unit of Coding:**
  - Headlines
  - Lead paragraphs
  - Quoted sources
  - Problem definitions
  - Frames (economic, political, geopolitical, development, security)
  - Attribution of responsibility
  - Evaluative tone

Analyzing these components helps identify how journalistic norms shape narrative construction.

4.4 Coding Procedure

A coding scheme was developed based on prior literature on development reporting, media framing, and political communication. Coding proceeded through three stages:

4.4.1 Open Coding

Initial reading to identify emergent themes related to:

- economic opportunity
- infrastructure modernization
- debt concerns
- political contestation
- corruption allegations
- security challenges
- China's role and influence

4.4.2 Axial Coding

Grouping themes into broader categories, such as:

- Development Frames
- Political Frames
- Geopolitical Frames
- Security Frames
- Socioeconomic Impact Frames
- National Interest Frames

4.4.3 Selective Coding

Integrating categories to identify dominant interpretive patterns, journalistic routines, and ideological tendencies.

To ensure reliability, a second trained coder analyzed 20% of the sample. Inter-coder agreement reached 0.82 (Cohen's Kappa), indicating strong reliability.

4.5 Framing Categories

Drawing from Entman's (1993) four framing functions and development communication scholarship, the following analytical categories were used:

1. **Problem Definition:**
   - What aspect of CPEC is being portrayed as the central issue? (development, economy, security, politics, diplomacy)

2. **Causal Attribution:**
   o Who is responsible for successes or failures? (government, China, previous governments, opposition, institutions)
3. **Moral Evaluation:**
   o Is CPEC presented as beneficial, controversial, risky, or transformative?
4. **Treatment Recommendation:**
   o Does the article propose solutions or policy actions? (regulation, transparency, reforms, cooperation, criticism)

4.6 Analytical Strategy

Analysis consisted of both textual framing analysis and comparative cross-media interpretation.

4.6.1 Textual Analysis

Interpretations were supported through systematic coding and close reading to identify:

- symbolic metaphors
- intertextual references
- narrative structures
- evaluative cues
- source dominance patterns

4.6.2 Cross-Newspaper Comparison

Comparisons were made across:

- Urdu vs. English media
- Liberal vs. populist editorial orientations
- Elite vs. mass readership outlets

This enabled assessment of how journalistic norms and political contexts shape variability in reporting.

4.6.3 Triangulation

Data triangulation was performed by comparing patterns with:

- parliamentary debates
- government reports
- policy announcements
- statements by Chinese officials

This enhances the interpretive validity of the results.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Since the study analyzes publicly available media content, it did not involve human subjects and thus did not require formal ethical approval. However, academic standards of systematic analysis, integrity, transparency, and respectful interpretation were followed.

4.8 Limitations

- Limited to print and online news; television narratives not included.
- Focuses on four national newspapers; the regional press is excluded.
- Qualitative coding does not measure frequency; future studies may add quantitative analysis.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a rigorous and comprehensive system for examining journalistic norms and the politics of development reporting on CPEC.

5. Results

This section presents the major findings derived from qualitative content and framing analysis of 240 news articles across four Pakistani newspapers (Dawn, The News, Jang, Express)

published between 2015 and 2023. Results are organized around dominant frames, journalistic norms, political influences, and cross-linguistic differences.

5.1 Dominant Frames in CPEC Coverage

5.1.1 Development Opportunity Frame

Across outlets, particularly The News**,** Express, and Jang, CPEC was predominantly portrayed as an economic opportunity, especially during 2015–2018. Articles emphasized:

- infrastructure modernization
- energy security
- job creation
- regional integration

This frame aligned with government narratives during the early implementation phase. Urdu newspapers especially framed CPEC as a national achievement and "game changer," echoing official rhetoric.

5.1.2 Political Contestation Frame

During the post-2018 period, political conflict increasingly shaped CPEC narratives. The content frequently highlighted:

- delays in Special Economic Zones (SEZs)
- accountability and corruption debates
- opposition criticism
- bureaucratic inefficiencies

Dawn provided more critical and investigative reporting, questioning transparency, governance, and long-term sustainability. Urdu outlets were comparatively more supportive of government positions, often minimizing political disagreements.

5.1.3 Geopolitical and Security Frame

English-language media, particularly Dawn, emphasized:

- China–US rivalry
- regional security implications
- Balochistan militancy
- maritime geopolitics in Gwadar

Jang and Express focused less on geopolitics and more on national security threats, presenting security concerns as externalized (e.g., "hostile foreign elements"), reflecting nationalistic framing norms.

5.1.4 Debt and Dependency Frame

This frame appeared more prominently after 2020. Dawn and The News raised concerns about:

- debt burden
- opaque financial agreements
- China's strategic leverage

Urdu newspapers largely avoided questioning financial risks, adhering to pro-development narratives.

5.2 Journalistic Norms and Reporting Practices

5.2.1 Reliance on Official Sources

Across all newspapers, government officials dominated sourcing, particularly:

- Planning Commission
- CPEC Authority
- Chinese Embassy
- Provincial ministers

This reliance reinforced pro-development framing and limited independent scrutiny—an indication of "indexing" to government narratives.

5.2.2 Episodic Reporting and Event-Centered Narratives

Coverage often followed project inaugurations**,** MoUs**,** high-level visits, and political statements. Themes such as long-term economic impact or community concerns received less consistent attention.

5.2.3 Limited Inclusion of Local Voices

Residents of Gwadar, Thar, and northern areas, directly impacted by CPEC, were rarely quoted. Their perspectives appeared mostly in Dawn, focusing on displacement, environmental concerns, and unmet promises.

5.3 Differences Between Urdu and English Media

English Press (Dawn, The News):
- critical analysis
- Focus on transparency, governance, and geopolitical dimensions
- thematic framing
- Inclusion of expert and analyst viewpoints

Urdu Press (Jang, Express):
- nationalistic tone
- emphasis on positive economic impact
- episodic reporting
- heavy alignment with political narratives

These differences reflect divergent audience expectations and journalistic cultures in Pakistan.

6. Discussion

This study set out to examine how journalistic norms and political dynamics shape Pakistani media coverage of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The findings reveal that CPEC reporting is not merely a reflection of economic developments but is embedded in broader contestations over political legitimacy, national identity, and development ideology. These patterns demonstrate how journalism in Pakistan remains intertwined with political power structures, echoing trends highlighted in comparative media research across the Global South (Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Siddiqi, 2019).

6.1 Reinforcement of State-Led Development Narratives

One of the most striking findings is the dominance of the "economic opportunity" frame, particularly in Urdu-language newspapers. The repetition of phrases such as "game changer," "historic partnership," and "national prosperity" illustrates how development reporting often mirrors official discourse. This pattern aligns with the tradition of development journalism, where media prioritize nation-building narratives and legitimize state-led economic policies (Mansell, 2020). By heavily indexing government perspectives, Pakistani media construct CPEC as a symbol of national progress, thereby reinforcing the political agenda of successive governments.

6.2 Politicization of CPEC Across Electoral Cycles

The study also found that CPEC framing fluctuated significantly across political transitions. Early coverage (2015–2018) was overwhelmingly positive due to strong state support and political consensus. However, after 2018, narratives became more polarized, with increased emphasis on bureaucratic delays, accountability debates, and financial transparency. This indicates a form of political parallelism, where media narratives reflect the interests, pressures, and ideological alignments of ruling coalitions.

The politicization of CPEC illustrates how development projects in Pakistan are not insulated from political contestation; instead, they become tools in domestic power struggles. Media coverage thus performs both a communicative function, informing the public, and a political function—mediating elite competition.

6.3 Linguistic Media Spheres and Differential Framing

A key contribution of this study lies in highlighting the divergence between Urdu and English media. English-language outlets, Dawn and The News, adopted more critical, investigative, and geopolitically oriented narratives. Their reporting was more aligned with thematic framing, providing contextual explanations of CPEC's financial, administrative, and regional implications. In contrast, Urdu newspapers emphasized episodic framing, focusing on inaugurations, press conferences, political statements, and success stories.

These differences reflect distinct journalistic cultures and audience expectations:

- Urdu media prioritize nationalistic narratives and mass appeal.
- English media cater to urban elites and policy-oriented readerships.

This bifurcation contributes to the development of parallel public spheres, where different linguistic communities receive different political interpretations of the same project.

6.4 Underrepresentation of Local Voices and Community Concerns

Despite CPEC's significant impact on local communities, especially in Gwadar, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Thar, these voices remain marginal in national reporting. Local concerns regarding displacement, environmental degradation, and unmet economic promises seldom make it to mainstream headlines. When they appear, they are typically framed as minor obstacles rather than central development issues. This reflects a top-down communication structure in which elites dominate the narrative, while citizens most affected by development projects are underrepresented.

This imbalance raises questions about democratic participation in development planning and the media's role in amplifying marginalized perspectives.

6.5 Media and Geopolitical Imaginaries

English-language coverage demonstrated a strong tendency to interpret CPEC through geopolitical lenses, including China–US tensions, regional alliances, and maritime strategy. These narratives position CPEC within global power configurations, suggesting that Pakistani journalism, at least in English outlets, is increasingly responsive to international discourses surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative. This finding supports earlier research arguing that global geopolitical debates shape how domestic media construct large-scale development projects (Yousaf & Zaidi, 2023).

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Pakistani news coverage of CPEC is shaped by a complex interplay of journalistic norms, political interests, linguistic orientations, and geopolitical contexts. While CPEC is often portrayed as an emblem of national progress, this positive portrayal is neither uniform nor politically neutral.

The analysis underscores several key conclusions:

1. State-aligned development framing dominates, particularly in Urdu-language media, reflecting the enduring influence of development journalism.
2. Political transitions significantly shape CPEC narratives, transforming a once celebratory project into a contested political symbol.
3. Linguistic divides generate distinct media spheres, with English outlets providing more critical and thematic reporting than their Urdu counterparts.

4. Official sources overwhelmingly dominate coverage, limiting journalistic independence and narrowing the range of perspectives included.
5. Local community voices remain notably absent, raising concerns about representation, equity, and public engagement in development discourse.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that CPEC reporting in Pakistan operates at the intersection of politics, development ideology, and media culture. Strengthening independent journalism, encouraging source diversity, investing in field-based reporting, and integrating local perspectives are crucial for creating a more inclusive and accountable model of development communication.

Future research may extend this study by examining digital media narratives, comparing Pakistan's CPEC coverage with international representations, or investigating how public opinion is shaped by varying media frames. Understanding these dynamics is essential for improving democratic communication on major development initiatives and ensuring that national progress is narrated with transparency, accountability, and public inclusion.

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