

Prospects of Religious Tourism to Pakistan under CPEC Tourism Corridor

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Executive Summary

The essence of Chinese culture is in ‘Confucianism’. The characteristics of Chinese culture are kindheartedness, honesty, justice, peace, harmony and unity. Pakistan, unlike China, identifies itself as a Muslim majority state with Islam as its foundational base. Religious extremism qualifies as one of Pakistan’s cultural and societal vulnerabilities, with a history of sectarian friction. Deep-seated religious beliefs accompany blasphemy and the revolts spearheaded by segmented jihadist outfits.¹ Contrarily, China’s approach to religious extremism is guided by a strategy of countering ideological deviations. In particular, China does not entertain a convergence between religion and state. Despite these disparities, the China-Pakistan relation is a testimony to the fact that the ideological and cultural differences have never been a point of obstruction towards a meaningful cooperation. There is a need to take this cooperation to newer heights with focus on economic integration, and religious / cultural exchange.

CPEC would connect northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang with the Pakistani port of Gwadar through a forward-looking network of roads. The corridor would constitute energy transfer. There would be economic growth in the less-developed areas of Pakistan through which the corridor would pass.

Analysis

CPEC is reflective of the geopolitical convergence between Pakistan and China. CPEC linking Gwadar to China’s Western city of Kashgar would enhance China’s access to the markets of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Likewise, the corridor would give an impetus to Pakistan’s struggling economy, battling terrorists for over a decade. China’s interest in CPEC is to secure oil routes and diversify trading options. For Pakistan, with operation of Gwadar seaport, the country will be transformed into a trading hub. However, to reap the benefits of economic cooperation, other than political and military factors, socio-cultural aspects are equally important.

Prospects of Religious Tourism

Archeological and Religious Sites in China

In the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China’s northwest province of Gansu has been identified as a portal for opening up to the West and building links with countries along the Silk Road. The province of Gansu is strategically located at a meeting point of Eastern and Western China. The ancient Silk Road for over 1,600 kilometres passes through Gansu. The Silk Road is also known as Hexi Corridor. The Silk Road is bound from north by the Gobi Desert and Qilian Mountains in the south. The Silk Road linked Asia and Europe more than 2,000 years ago. Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Jia Yuguan Pass

¹ Amil Khan, “Pakistan and the Narratives of Extremism,” Special Report, *United States Institute of Peace (USIP)*, March 2013, accessed August 29, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR327-Pakistan-and-the-Narratives-of-Extremism.pdf>.

and Dunhuang city form part of the province. Linxia is a pre-dominant Muslim area, in which the population follows their customs and traditions in accordance to their religious beliefs. The Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture had been a major cultural and religious centre for the Tibetans. The Labrang Monastery in the prefecture was established by the First Jamyang Living Buddha in 1720. The monastery represented the highest institution of Buddhist teachings, theology, medicine, astrology and law.²

Gansu province is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. A total of 55 minority groups lived in Gansu. Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism and Protestantism are the major religions. There were about 4,600 mosques in Gansu, and the Muslim tribes are Hui, Dongxiang, Baoan, Sala and Kazak. The Zang, Mongol, Yugu and Tu minority groups believe in Buddhism. Gansu's cultural diversity and multi-ethnic character enhance the province's importance for tourism and cultural exchange. The archeological sites in Gansu and the Buddha statues in Mogao Grottoes and Bingling Temple Grottoes are an attraction for tourists from world over.³

Taxila Ancient Learning Centre of Buddhism

Pakistan is home to a large number of archeological Buddhist sites. Buddhists pilgrims from Southeast Asia, Far East and world over visit Pakistan to pay homage to their religious places. In April 2021, a delegation of Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka visited Taxila, Lahore, Shahbaz Garhi, Takht-e-Bhai and Jehanabad (Swat). Buddhists' mostly associate themselves with Taxila. Taxila is known as "Taketo" in Burmese;⁴ the area had remained part of ancient 'Gandhara Civilization' and has also been a centre of 'Buddhist Learning'. Other than Buddhism, subjects like philosophy, political warfare and medicine were taught at university of ancient Taxila. The university produced literate names like Charaka, father of Indian medicine, Panini, Sanskrit grammarian and Acharya Chanakya, political philosopher all studied at the university.

The Buddhist sites in Pakistan are spread across the entire country. Some of the important Buddhist sites include the Najigram (Swat), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). There are 150 Buddhist sites across the Malakand Division. The remains of sleeping Buddha statue are found in Bamala, KPK. The Buddhists' ruins of Takhtbai have been included in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage sites. The cultural capital of Lahore houses the Buddhist relics, including the 'Fasting Buddha' and 'Sikri Stupa'; these are in Lahore Museum. To facilitate the Buddhist pilgrims to pay respect to their religious sites, Pakistan is working on creating a 'Holy Buddhist Trail'.

The emerging regional connectivity in backdrop of CPEC will link the East Asian region with Pakistan. This linkage other than creating prospects of socio-economic cooperation will also

² "Gansu and Regional Connectivity," 10th Gansu International Fellowship Programme, Organized by *Gansu Provincial Foreign Affairs Office* (Lanzhou, 2015).

³ "Gansu and Regional Connectivity."

⁴ "Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies-IPRI Bilateral Exchange Seminar," IPRI Delegation visit to Yangon, July 2019.

promote the inter-cultural exchange. In particular, the religious and historical sites in Pakistan will be an attraction for people of East Asia. People visiting Pakistan to pay respect to their religious places will get a chance to see the Pakistani society. It will open up culture of dialogue among the people of varied religions'. The respect for each other's faith will promote understanding among people, and will significantly contribute towards inter-religious harmony.

ETIM, Challenge for Pakistan. The religion factor, in the context of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) could be employed against Pakistan. The presence of ETIM in province of Xinjiang, a Muslim majority area bordering Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, Afghanistan, India and the entirety of China's 250 kilometers border with Pakistan had been a source of concern for China.⁵ The anti-Pakistan elements might use ETIM linkage with other extremist groups to create mistrust between Pakistan and China.

Policy Recommendations

- Pakistan has been home to the Gandhara civilization. The ancient sites will be of interest to the Buddhist population of China. The plan of creating a 'Holy Buddhist Trail' needs to be pursued.
- In the context of Islam and extremism, Pakistan needs to strengthen its soft power, and develop a counter narrative. The ideological mindset needs to be defeated, in particular the notion of Islamic radicalism.

⁵ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). 69.