

Pakistan in the 21st Century – Perception Management

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‘Perception Management’ is an important concept that a country protects and promotes its reputation, and there are more ways to do it nowadays than ever before. Soft power brings respect, which in turn invites investment, development, and sociocultural growth, all of which improve the lives of ordinary citizens and sustain the country’s political stability. Pakistan has an historic opportunity to finally achieve all of these at the level that they are enjoyed by many leading countries today, but it must not let this God-given chance slip through its fingers.

CPEC is poised to fundamentally transform Pakistan, but the consequences will be entirely dependent on how this country choose to use this opportunity. If, it is taken for granted that the Chinese will do everything for Pakistan and that foreign investors will all of a sudden flock to Pakistan, then this mistaken belief will lead to nothing, but false hopes and failure. On the other hand, if Pakistan takes the initiative and uses CPEC as a springboard for robust global engagement, then this project will turn into one of the best blessings that Pakistan has ever received. Now, the point is how CPEC can form the core of Pakistan’s rebranded 21st-century identity, and what are the reasons and methods for bringing this about. Generally, a country moves from geopolitics to economics to information wars in achieving its objectives, but all of this is strongly interconnected and fits together.

Today, the world is in the midst of the ‘New Cold War,’ which can be simplified as a multifaceted struggle between the unipolar and multipolar forces. The first one led by the US and its traditional allies, and the second one represented by Russia and China. The world system is undergoing fundamental changes as the US erstwhile dominance over the globe after the end of the ‘Old Cold War’ is coming to an end. This process is occurring for many reasons, mostly owing to the US own inefficiency and overreach, but also the inevitable rise of non-Western countries, which seek to carve out a more just and equitable World Order to accommodate their national interests.

Russia and China are the two leading countries, which fit into this category, and they each realized in the 1990s and especially over the past couple of years that they would have a lot more to gain by working together than continuing their historical rivalry. Moscow has more military potential in carrying this out, while

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Beijing relies on the economic element of power in promoting its objectives. These two complementary sides began an unprecedented strategic convergence ever since the US simultaneously threatened their core national security interests in Ukraine and the South China Sea. The resultant Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership has sought to pool each party's relevant resources in pushing back against the US and its allies' aggression in the best way that they're able to, which is evidenced by Moscow's anti-terrorist intervention in Syria and Beijing's ambitious globally transformative economic plans.

It is the Chinese vector, which is most directly relevant for Pakistan. China's 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) global vision seeks to build a network of New Silk Roads all across the world premised on the belief that interconnected countries are less likely to fight with one another. By increasing the number of stakeholders in this new apolitical global system, it is believed that everyone will gain some sort of benefit from each other's development, thereby, epitomizing the ultimate "win-win" outcome. Prioritizing the modernization of dozens of non-Western countries, such as, Pakistan with Chinese capital is anticipated to gently introduce them to this alternative global system that is being built in parallel with the weakening of the existing Western-dominated one, thereby, allowing them to progressively transition from the exploitative and double standards-infested one run by the US to the equitable and just system being spearheaded by China.

CPEC is OBOR's flagship project, and it is much more important than any number of financial figures would indicate. This corridor is absolutely vital to the future of China's New Silk Roads, because it provides the People's Republic with its only reliable non-Malacca access route to the Indian Ocean, from where China can then more freely trade with the Mideast, Europe, and importantly East Africa without having to worry about the US possibly obstructing its East-West bottleneck in Southeast Asia in the event of hostilities. As for the other chokepoints, such as, the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canals, China has entered into fast-moving and high-level partnerships with Saudi Arabia, Iran, Djibouti, and Egypt respectively, over the past couple of years in order to ensure free access across these routes.

By detouring around the Strait of Malacca and correspondingly avoiding the ever more contentious South China Sea, CPEC provides China with its most reliable maritime gateway to the Western half of the Eastern Hemisphere. Together with this project, it is envisioned that China will eventually streamline a series of high-speed railroads across mainland Eurasia through Central Asia, Russia, and the Mideast, in order to connect East Asia with Western Europe and completely eliminate any threat that the US Navy could ever pose to Beijing's globally transformative OBOR vision.

That, however, is still at least a few decades away, and Hybrid Wars – externally provoked identity conflicts – could be employed to destabilize strategic transit states and stalemata these plans. Thus, for all intents and purposes, CPEC is and will always remain the most important New Silk Road project for the geostrategic reasons, and this immensely works to Pakistan's benefit.

Since, it bridges the mainland and maritime components of OBOR, as well as opening up the prospect for trade to traverse across the entire West-East distance of China, CPEC can be described as the “Zipper of Pan-Eurasian Integration.” The concept is that the full geographic development of CPEC will allow for the linkage of North, South, East, West, and Central Asia via Pakistani territory, thereby, helping to zip together the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and its Central Asian members, China, Iran, and SAARC member Pakistan through a single extended economic corridor. All of these countries are in one way or another associated with the SCO, and most of the region coincides with the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), so this provides yet another layer of overlap between all of the most directly involved prospective countries and advances the argument that CPEC is integral to fostering deeper integration in the Heartland of Eurasia.

Complementary with being the Zipper of Eurasia, Pakistan will also become the Convergence Point of Civilizations, which could go a long way towards mitigating the prospect for a so-called “Clash of Civilizations.” Considering how Pakistan will be the common ground through which a diverse variety of cultures will intersect – be they Persian, Arabian, Russian, Central Asian, Chinese, South Asian, and even East African – it goes without saying that the country will function as one of the most pivotal locations in the world for civilizational connectivity. The pragmatic and “win-win” interaction of multiple cultures across Pakistani territory, motivated chiefly by trade and similar interests, could provide the foundation for enhanced multilateral partnerships between them. This might sound very theoretical at this point, but Pakistanis must take the time to ponder their future role and how they plan to leverage it, if they are to ensure that the civilizational exchanges taking place on their territory are to everyone's ultimate benefit.

Socio-cultural, academic, civil society, media, and other sorts of cooperation could flourish so long as Pakistanis recognize the opportunity that they have to transform CPEC's economic attractiveness into tangible soft power dividends. In order to get to this point, Pakistan must accept and work towards attaining its future dual roles in being the Zipper of Eurasia and the Convergence of Civilizations, and after feeling comfortable with these newfound and inevitable responsibilities, the country will then understand its irreplaceably powerful position in being the heart of Greater South Asia at the center of the Indo-Pacific Century. This pronouncement

sounds dramatic, and in a sense, it is, but it is not hyperbole. If it is accepted that CPEC allows Pakistan to zip or integrate Eurasia, and thereby, serve as the Convergence of Civilizations, then it is fair to say that this will also expand Islamabad's influence across these geographic domains.

The SAARC group has been heavily politicized by India and it is known that how New Delhi sabotaged last year's gathering, the effect of which was to prompt Pakistan to look Westward, while, India sought to move in the opposite direction towards the East. Just as Pakistan is rapidly building its relations with Central Asia, India is doing the same with Southeast Asia. Taken together, these dual cores of South Asia are visibly expanding their sway across a broad spectrum of the Asian landmass. If we incorporate Pakistan's longstanding relationships with the Mideast, project that East Africa will increasingly trade with China through CPEC, and take a look at how India is slated to compete with China in this part of Africa too, then it is fair to say that Greater South Asia will include parts of Central, West, and Southeast Asia, as well as East Africa, or in other words, is a mainland expansion of the broader Indian Ocean Region.

It is mentioned earlier that China relies more on the Indian Ocean than ever before, and CPEC is designed to give the People's Republic dependable and direct access to this ocean. China conducts all of its trade with Africa in one way or another through the Indian Ocean, and the lion's share of its commercial relations with Western Europe and the Mideast also go through this body of water as well. Sure, China aims to build a series of high-speed railways all across the Eurasian landmass in the coming century, but these will take a lot of time to complete and could be offset by the identity-driven Hybrid Wars.

Therefore, recognizing that CPEC will become China's main access route to the Indian Ocean, and appreciating the role that the Indian Ocean and the concept of Greater South Asia will hold for global politics all throughout the 21st century. It is not an Asian Century or even a Pacific one, but in an Indo-Pacific Century, which sees Pakistan located smack dab in the center of the most important global geopolitical processes. Pakistan's position as the Zipper of Eurasia and Convergence of Civilizations makes it one of the most important states in the world, and every Pakistani needs to understand and embrace this in order to have a chance at receiving all of the future benefits that this entails. Correspondingly, Pakistan must explain these concepts to its foreign friends and work on rebranding its international image in order to intimately associate itself with all of these interconnected ideas. To reiterate, they are CPEC, OBOR, Multipolarity, the Zipper of Eurasia, the Convergence of Civilizations, Greater South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific Century.

Only, when Pakistanis finally understand and identify with these concepts can the country begin the process of rebranding itself in accordance with these ideas and promoting a brand-new image, which is positively received by the rest of the world in the 21st century. None of the points that are mentioned – CPEC, OBOR, Multipolarity, the Zipper of Eurasia, the Convergence of Civilizations, Greater South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific Century – are divisive, controversial, or exclusionary, but to the contrary, they are unifying, agreeable, and inclusive, and therefore, attractive to foreign partners. These points should form the basis of Pakistan's 21st-century image and should serve as the prism through which the rest of the world perceives Pakistan. The steps that need to be taken in order to improve Pakistan's international reputation for the better and surmount some of the negative stereotypes, which are unfortunately still associated with its name to many non-Muslim Westerners.

The challenges and opportunities inherent with this nationwide rebranding effort, which have been proposed for Pakistan, beginning with the reputational benefits, which the country has inherited. It is already described that the future geostrategic prospects that Pakistan is poised to attain, which to go over them once more, are CPEC, OBOR, Multipolarity, the Zipper of Eurasia, the Convergence of Civilizations, Greater South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific Century, so there's no need to explain them any further, though, they should always be kept in mind. Apart from these forthcoming opportunities, there's also the fact that Pakistan is one of the most important leaders of the global Muslim community, or Ummah.

Pakistan has a large population, which correlates with an enormous investment, production, and market potential, and it is at the center of the Indo-Pacific Century through CPEC and all of the other related concepts, which have already been described. On top of that, Pakistan military is top notch, both in the conventional and unconventional senses, the latter of which was proven through retired General Sharif's anti-terrorist successes in the legendary Operation Zarb-e-Azb. Pakistan is also the only Muslim country with nuclear weapons, which must not forget. In addition, Pakistan is equal partners with China, the world's leading economic engine, and Saudi Arabia, the symbolic leader of the Ummah and the location of the two Holy Mosques. This makes Pakistan trusted and respected, which explains why Pakistan has always been sought by others to serve as a middleman in different Great Power arrangements, such as, what happened in the contextual run-up to the Saudi King's visit to China recently, and what might be in the cards as regards future Russian-Saudi relations.

It is well-known fact that Muslim countries are becoming more influential and acquiring extra attention from the rest of the world nowadays, for better or for

worse, so it's foreseeable that Pakistan's diplomatic skills will be relied on by non-Muslim countries more and more in the future as they seek to make inroads with some of their non-traditional Muslim counterparts. Pakistan's relationship with and prominence within the Ummah is something that it has a lot to be proud of, and rightfully so. The country must continue to flaunt this advantage on the international stage in order to reap the resultant strategic benefits. Islam is perhaps one of the most well-known characteristics of Pakistan's overall national identity, though, it is by no means the only one, but this has also had the inadvertent effect of promoting negative stereotypes about the country in the eyes of those, who misunderstand the religion.

There are many people in the West, who hold the inaccurate view that Pakistan is a country rife with Islamic fundamentalism and, therefore, a dangerous hotbed of terrorism, relying on talking points from the 1980s and the country's assistance to the Afghan Mujahedeen in order to back up their misleading claims. It is not about racists and Islamophobes here, since it's unlikely that their views will ever change no matter what factual evidence they are presented with, but average well-intentioned individuals, businessmen, and government officials, who have been led astray by the Mainstream Media's fake or over-exaggerated 'reporting' about Pakistan. There are a lot of people, who associate the name of Pakistan with the Taliban, Islamic terrorism, and Osama bin Laden, and many of them see Pakistan as being important only in relevance to Afghanistan, hence, the media-driven neologism of "AfPak".

These negative perceptions need to change if Pakistan is to fully grow into its new 21st-century role. Instead of conjuring up outdated and decontextualized images of terrorist-inflicted devastation along the Afghan border regions, people need to think differently about Pakistan, which is a thriving, developed, and safe place. It's not by accident that many non-Muslim foreigners think of negative stereotypes, when they hear the word Pakistan, as this was all done on purpose as part of a larger information war against Pakistan, which is, nowadays, also reinforced by the powerful influence that India exerts on the Mainstream Media's discourse. What Pakistan needs to do is debunk these stereotypes through a multifaceted approach, which combines all elements of soft power, both high and low, and the first place to start is by emphasizing several key points.

The first one is that the Pakistan of 2017 is not the Pakistan of the past, and whatever impressions that most outsiders might have about her are probably outdated. Pakistan is no longer supporting the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, as it was a case in the 1980s. The tribal areas along the border have been largely pacified and stabilized, and far from being the seemingly backwards failed state that the West

portrayed Pakistan as in the 2000s. Forbes recently announced that Pakistan has one of the best performing markets in the world. The point here is that past perceptions – whether accurate or not – are not always reliable in judging the present. As a few good examples, modern-day Russia and Germany are not the Soviet Union and Nazis, just as China under President Xi is not the same country that it was under Chairman Mao.

Relatedly, the next point that needs to be promoted is that Pakistan, like all mature societies, has moved past the controversial periods of its history and is embracing a new era of relations with the world. Too many outsiders are so fixated on Pakistan's role in supporting the Mujahedeen in the 1980s and later the US in Afghanistan in the 2000s that they are almost incapable of comprehending that Pakistan could have any other interests at all, let alone imagining that previous ones from a different time period could change in the present one. This is relevant to bring up because Pakistan is still being judged according to what it did in the past, and its enemies are exploiting this in order to craft false narratives about it. What immediately comes to one's mind is how Indians, and those sympathetic to them and/or hostile to Pakistan, went on a very intense social media campaign to demonize Pakistan on Russian-friendly Facebook pages in the run-up to last fall's Druzhba joint military exercises.

Some of the hostile comments on Facebook include "remember the 1980s!", "Pakistan never changes!", "Russia can't trust this terrorist state!", and other sorts of brainless slogans, which interestingly, caught on with a lot of people. It is now realized that Pakistan has not yet explained its new position in the world, nor its changing relations with Russia and other states. Sure, Pakistan's governmental counterparts in Russia and other places understand the true and pragmatic nature of the relationship and no elaboration is necessary for them, but there is a considerable gap between the state and civil society, and Pakistan has not yet conveyed a cohesive narrative, which fills in the space between the past and the present. This is where the media comes in, and it is now Pakistan's job to help people understand what's changed and why.

Here, it is not the domestic audience, which is referred rather those Pakistanis, who are living abroad, since that is where these impressions will matter the most in the coming century as Pakistan rebrands itself according to the CPEC-related concepts outlined earlier. However, Pakistanis should do it in their own individual-way. Pakistanis need to express the fact that other mature societies have also overcome difficult moments in their bilateral relations with others, such as, Russia and the US as two separate sets of examples. Unlike in past periods, Russia is now very close with Germany, Turkey, and China, just like the US is now partnered with

Germany, Japan, China, and India, despite each pair of countries having previously experienced differing degrees of problems with one another at various stages of their shared histories. With this in mind, there's nothing strange about Russia entering into a mutually advantageous rapprochement with Pakistan nowadays. Russia is not the Soviet Union same as Pakistan; both countries have changed.

Another key point to emphasize is how Pakistan has been one of the world's top victims of terrorism alongside Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. It is not an exporter of terrorism like India says, but a victim, and tens of thousands of innocent people have been killed, because of it. Pakistan needs to communicate this more clearly to the global audience, and while, it already does this through the UN and other official channels, it does not seem to have seeped through to the general public. There is a need to highlight the brilliant anti-terrorist successes of retired General Sharif during Operation Zarb-e-Azb, as well as the recent Radd-ul-Fassad under present Chief of Army Staff General Bajwa. The audiences, which are already receptive to Russia's anti-terrorist gains in Syria will likely also be eager to learn more about this, while, those which are hostile to Moscow will probably be much more difficult to get through to.

This is because Westerners, who are trained to dislike or distrust Russia usually also hold the same feelings about Pakistan too, and that is because both countries are independently minded and strongly sovereign states, which advance their own interests in a manner that unnerves the West, hence the heavy-handed information warfare campaigns against both in feverishly attempting to tarnish their international reputations. On the topic of Russian-Pakistani convergences once more, there is obviously no avoiding Afghanistan, but as a supplementary point, it could not hurt, if the idea was informally expressed that Pakistan learned how its former support of foreign insurgents backfired against it many years after the war. Pakistan does not have to apologize for anything.

Continuing along, Pakistan and its media need to promote the image of a stable and developing country in order to debunk the clichéd stereotypes of it being a terrorist-riddled failing state. Like, it is mentioned before, the false perceptions about Pakistan were deliberately propagated through the mainstream Media repeatedly pairing country's name with on-the-ground footage from the aftermath of American drone strikes in the borderland region. Viewers, who were extra impressionable in the immediate post-9/11 period, were left with the perception that all of Pakistan is like the tribal areas, even though this is just a small portion of the country and one which was victimized by terrorism at that same time anyhow. It cannot be repeated enough that while, Pakistan's periphery was chaotic and lawless at times, that is because the country is one of the world's top victims of terrorism,

but that it is moved past those dark days and is now on pace to have one of the most impressive-performing markets in the world, according to the universally respected Forbes magazine.

If Pakistan was really as “backwards” as some people inaccurately think that it is, then why would one of the top economic publications in the world laud it for its high-performing equity markets and other attractive structural factors. The cognitive dissonance that this single fact brings – carried by such a well-regarded outlet as Forbes – should be enough to make ordinary people think twice about whether their longstanding stereotypical impressions about Pakistan are accurate, which could make it an irresistible lead-in for informing people of the truth about Pakistan today. Let’s not forget that the country is located at the geographic center of Greater South Asia and is poised to play a pivotal role in the Indo-Pacific Century. All of Pakistan’s economic and corresponding reputational benefits in the future derive in one way or another from CPEC, which in turn endows the country with strong economic growth potential given its role as the Zipper of Eurasia. This is not a slogan, but an economic-strategic fact, and one which needs to be repeated and explained enough times that other people finally begin to understand it.

Underscoring the importance of CPEC to Pakistan’s strategic vision, China’s global one, and the present Indo-Pacific Century will also carry with it important security undertones. The premier role that this project is slated to play in the future means that it must be protected, so how can one still believe that Pakistan is some kind of insecure ‘third world’ country, if it is supposed to host such a major game-changing transport and investment corridor. It does not make sense, and that is the point; the more people learn about CPEC and its significance, the easier it will be for them to accept that their former stereotypes about Pakistan were wrong, and that it is much more stable and secure than they previously thought. After all, if it was not, the stereotypically wise, prudent, and far-sighted Chinese would not be investing over \$50 billion in constructing a South Asian shortcut to their country and the future Convergence Point of Civilizations.

So, with all of that in mind, some actionable proposals include followings: Conferences and workshops have an important function in changing perceptions, but they do not mean much, if larger audiences do not know about them, and this is where the media comes into play once more. Whether, it is an international academic, business, professional, or civil society event organized in Pakistan around CPEC or any of its derived concepts, it absolutely must be reported on not only in the Pakistani press, but also internationally. This is difficult to do if not having contacts with, or the direct participation of, the intended media outlet, whose audience are required to reach. For this purpose, their representatives should be identified

beforehand and invite them to participate in such events. Although, there are already all sorts of CPEC-related functions going on in Pakistan, but what should happen is that a brand-new, high-level, much-publicized, and yearly international forum be launched in Pakistan in order to attract the necessary global attention. As a starter, Gwadar be chosen as the location to host these prospective events.

There's no city like Gwadar which better epitomizes the CPEC vision and everything related to it, and it would serve as the perfect place for such events. The "Gwadar-Gathering", a tentative name for this proposal, should incorporate a mix of expert discussion panels and civil society events, being a Pakistani version of the American SXSW Conference in the sense that it aims to bring together all levels of international society for a common purpose, that being the advancement of the larger strategic concepts, such as, the Zipper of Eurasia, the Convergence of Civilizations, Greater South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific Century. To this end, the "Gwadar-Gathering" should aspire to become as prominent as the Boao Forum, the Shangri-La Dialogue, and the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, including civil society, media, academia, and other such events in order to hammer home the point that Pakistan is a globally significant actor capable of bringing together a diverse array of parties for the common multipolar good.

In short, Pakistanis need to rethink their country's global geostrategic significance and embrace the interconnected concepts of the Zipper of Eurasia, Convergence of Civilizations, Greater South Asia, and the Indo-Pacific Century, which all derive from CPEC in one way or another, and urgently embark on a fresh marketing campaign to dispel old and inaccurate stereotypes in order to promote and reinforce new narratives. Full-spectrum engagement of all levels of the intended audiences, from high-level experts to the casual man in civil society, needs to be prioritized, and the optimal outreach techniques, strategies, and guidelines should be adopted. By doing so, Pakistan will be able to successfully rebrand itself in the 21st century, and the international perception associated with Pakistan will greatly improve in the coming years as more and more people become receptive to the allure of CPEC and everything associated with it.