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Fake News as a Propaganda Tool against CPEC

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ABSTRACT

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has increasingly been targeted by disinformation and fake news campaigns. This study critically examines how such narratives function as propaganda tools, strategically influencing public perception and policy debates across cultural, economic, and political dimensions. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research analyses documented instances of viral fake news, corroborated by fact-checking sources and media reports. Applying agenda-setting, framing, soft power, and information disorder theories, the paper uncovers how false narratives, ranging from the so-called 'debt trap' to cultural and sovereignty concerns, are deliberately constructed to erode confidence in CPEC. Findings indicate that while these narratives lack empirical validity, their widespread dissemination poses tangible risks to Pakistan's internal cohesion, foreign investment climate, and bilateral relations with China. The study concludes by proposing multi-layered counter-strategies including fact-checking mechanisms, media literacy programmes, enhanced transparency, and the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to mitigate disinformation threats. By offering a comprehensive perspective, this research contributes to a better understanding of the geopolitical information warfare surrounding CPEC.

Keywords: CPEC, Propaganda, Pak-China Relations, Disinformation, Hybrid Warfare, Public Perception.

JEL Classification Codes: D83, F51, F52, L82, O53

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1. INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a key project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and represents China's ambitious effort to enhance bilateral economic cooperation and improve regional infrastructure connectivity. Formally started in 2013, this project links the Gwadar Port in Pakistan to Kashgar in China through highways, railways, power projects, and information technology corridors, totalling more than USD 62 billion. Apart from its economic ramifications, CPEC captures the political and historical characteristics of cooperation between Pakistan and China (Hussain [2023](#); Hussain et al., [2022](#)), addressing persistent challenges such as the energy crisis, infrastructural deficiencies, and regional disparities that have affected Pakistan.

The recognised and anticipated benefits of CPEC in revitalising Pakistan's economy and strengthening its connectivity with neighbouring countries are well established in both policy and academic discourses. However, despite its projected potential, CPEC has been persistently targeted by rumours, misinformation, and disinformation campaigns emanating from diverse domestic and international sources, thereby shaping public perception and influencing the broader geopolitical narrative surrounding the project. Misinformation and propaganda stories have become a critical issue, including portraying it as the 'debt trap,' environmental exploitation, cultural colonialisation, and raising issues of sovereignty and regional imbalance (Nazar [2024](#)). Despite being debunked by reputable outlets like *Reuters Fact Check* and *AFP Fact Check*, these fake news stories continue to spread, primarily on social media reminiscent of Cold War-era propaganda strategies.

Consequently, fake news presents severe threats that may hinder the realisation of CPEC. On the economic front, disinformation has had the negative impact of discouraging both local and foreign investors, thus eradicating any confidence in the accomplishment of set project goals and objectives. On the political level, it has deepened provincial tensions and conflict, diminished the credibility of governmental authorities in the eyes of the public, and worsened relations between Pakistan and its neighbouring countries as well as the international community. Culturally, fake news manipulates religious and linguistic identities to undermine social cohesion and distract local communities from the developmental aspirations associated with regional progress (Khan and Sultan [2021](#)).

Sustainable infrastructure projects, such as CPEC, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to disinformation in the context of geopolitical rivalry. Bradshaw and Howard ([2018](#)) present a global perspective on state-sponsored social media disinformation, highlighting how coordinated actions like the deployment of computational propaganda are employed to shape public discourse either in favour of or against specific initiatives. This international phenomenon is equally relevant to CPEC, which occupies a position of significant visibility and has become a focal point of competing and often controversial narratives.

Comparative cases also serve as a reminder of how disinformation can distort infrastructure projects, in particular with debt trap diplomacy examples. The nature of the debt crisis experienced in Sri Lanka has been massively predetermined by pressures in global financial markets and a weak domestic fiscal regime instead of excessive dependence on Chinese borrowings, which comprised less than 10% of the debt burden.

CPEC challenges prevailing narratives of economic domination, threats to sovereignty, and cultural intrusion. These tensions unfold within Pakistan's complex socio-political context, marked by regional disparities, economic instability, and institutional weaknesses that render the country vulnerable to targeted disinformation campaigns. By examining the creation and spread of fake news surrounding CPEC, this paper seeks to understand how a development project can become susceptible to such campaigns and how these narratives affect public trust, economic confidence, and bilateral relations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) describe 'fake news' as any content that is similar to news media content in both form and content. However, in terms of its production and intended purpose, fake news is entirely different. Disinformation has been used in numerous geopolitical settings to sway the public, disrupt peaceful socioeconomic systems, and threaten global cooperation (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017).

The use of fake news as an instrument of soft power has increasingly become a common strategy in countering major international initiatives such as BRI. In this context, Zhao (2020) observes that BRI has frequently been subjected to political criticism from Western actors, including the popularised notion of 'debt trap diplomacy,' despite limited empirical evidence to support such claims. Similarly, Hurley et al., (2018) argue that the debt trap narrative oversimplifies complex investment relationships and overlooks the agency of participating countries in shaping their economic engagements.

About CPEC, misinformation without scruples has aimed at destabilising the project by portraying it as China's strategic tool that seeks to impose its cultural values and economically dominate partner countries (Hussain et al., 2022; Najam 2023). Cheema et al., (2024) argue that fake news related to CPEC reveals that disinformation regarding the project seeks to capitalise on divisions within Pakistani society, based on religion, provincial disparities, or historical grievances, to spur opposition.

Fact-checking organisations like *AFP Fact Check*, *Reuters Fact Check*, and *Soch Fact Check* have addressed most myths regarding CPEC. For instance, claims associated with the so-called 'debt trap' narrative have been systematically refuted, as empirical evidence indicates that CPEC-related debts constitute only a minor portion of Pakistan's overall international financial obligations.

Use of various social media platforms to spread fake news has also been well-documented. Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrate that false information spreads farther, faster, and more broadly than factual content on social media, making such platforms fertile ground for disinformation campaigns particularly against initiatives like CPEC.

2.1. Disinformation in South Asia and Pakistan's Media Landscape

Low levels of digital literacy, political competition, and institutional gaps have contributed to the role of organised disinformation, especially in South Asia and Pakistan in particular. Computational propaganda is ubiquitous, and state and non-state actors influence narratives on the Internet (Bradshaw et al. 2021). The digital divide further compounds this challenge: unequal digital skills increase individuals' vulnerability to misinformation, as highlighted in urban surveys (Ali and Qazi 2022). Moreover, interventions that fail to provide personalised feedback have shown limited effectiveness in improving digital resilience (Ali and Qazi 2021). Regional disagreements and geopolitical rivalries have also fuelled propaganda wars (Hussain et al., 2021), exacerbated by low levels of trust, prevalence of conspiracy theories, and constraints on press freedom (Mir and Siddiqui 2022; Reporters Without Borders 2022). Widespread circulation of health-related misinformation, as demonstrated in recent studies (Khan et al., 2019; Ittefaq et al., 2024), further exemplifies the broader societal risks posed by these disinformation dynamics.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This theoretical scope is based on 'Agenda Setting', 'Framing', and 'Soft Power' Theories, which, altogether, contribute to the understanding of the process involving fake news and its impact on the process of shaping public perceptions and, therefore, geopolitical narratives concerning CPEC.

3.1. Agenda Setting Theory

Proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the *Agenda Setting Theory* posits that while the media may not control what people think, it does influence what people think about. Through this reasoning, fake news acts as a weapon used to set the agenda even strongly when the agenda setting powers are enhanced with the help of digital media. Specific motives of disinformation campaigns against CPEC are that it highlights some concerns, e.g., a country drowning in debt, loss of sovereignty, or a marginalised ethnic population, rather than developmental rewards. By repeatedly emphasising negative frames, disinformation agents can influence prioritisation of issues within political and public discourse, marginalising evidence-based outcomes and instead amplifying fabricated crises.

3.2. Framing Theory

The *Theory of Framing* considers the manner through which media and communicators construct information that favours specific interpretations (Entman [1993](#)). When looking at CPEC, the discourse of disinformation is often deployed to make the initiative appear neocolonial or exploitative, which is done using emotional appeals, cherry-picked facts, and other imagery that appeals to already established fears in society. As an example, cultural fears of Chinese influence tend to be couched in terms of threats to religious and national identity to provoke the anger of Pakistan's conservative audience. The theory, therefore, helps in getting a better perspective of how stories are built to not inform, but to convince and divide.

3.3. Soft Power

The *Theory of Soft Power*, outlined by Nye ([2004](#)), indicates how to gain influence by controlling information, culture, and ideology without use of coercion. The disinformation around CPEC is staged by geopolitical powers trying to limit China's progress in South Asia. These players have been trying to sabotage trust in CPEC with the aim of clogging the wheels of the wider BRI proposed by the Chinese government as a project of peaceful and shared economic development. In this lens, fake news has become a low cost high-impact tool used to discredit the credibility of the foreign policy aims of the rival states.

3.4. Information Disorder Framework

Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017) notion of information disorder distinguishes three categories of false or misleading information: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. This framework is particularly relevant to the thematic analysis in this study, as fake news related to CPEC may be categorised according to the intent and severity of the content. Misinformation refers to false information shared without harmful intent; disinformation denotes deliberately false information disseminated to deceive or manipulate; and malinformation involves the misuse of genuine information to cause harm or advance a particular agenda.

4. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how fake news has been utilised as a propaganda instrument against CPEC. The chosen research design allows for an in-depth exploration of the types, origins, and impacts of disinformation campaigns targeting CPEC, thereby offering a systematic understanding of the dynamics and broader implications of such campaigns.

4.1. Research Design

In the present research project, the aspect of a qualitative case study research approach is considered to analyse the purpose of the fake news, as a propaganda instrument in opposition to CPEC. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for research that seeks to explore socio-political phenomena embedded within real life contexts (Yin [2018](#)). In light of the documented cases of disinformation against CPEC discussed in the literature, this study aims to show the underlying mechanisms of deceptive and manipulative mass communication practices through a qualitative lens. Adopting an interpretivist approach, the research examines the construction, dissemination, and reception of propaganda manifested in the form of fake news within its broader geopolitical context.

4.2. Research Philosophy

This research is ethnographical with an interpretivist-constructivist philosophy, which believes that reality is multifaceted and is co-constructed in meanings, symbols, and discourse instead of being real and measurable facts. Disinformation with respect to CPEC is an interpretation-making phenomenon-created, exchanged and perceived in definite sociopolitical settings. Its investigation is, therefore, better suited to exploring the sense-making processes of the actors involved rather than testing variable-based relationships. The naturalistic tradition of inquiry seeks to focus on the understanding of phenomenon in real life contexts by seeking to achieve credibility and transferability rather than statistical generalisation (Lincoln and Guba [1985](#)). Ontologically, the paper takes a relative perspective in which there is co-existence of various narrations about what is really going on (e.g. debt trap, sovereignty risk claims). Epistemologically, the paper takes a constructionism perspective where constructed knowledge is seen as a product of social interaction, language, and cultural frames (Crotty [1998](#)). This stance agrees with traditional descriptions of competing paradigms in qualitative research that distinguish between constructivism/interpretivism and positivism and critical theory and the importance of methodological fit between questions and worldview (Guba and Lincoln [1994](#)). The interpretivist lens provides a methodological justification of the use of case study and thematic analysis to help identify patterns of how false narratives can be framed, legitimised and challenged. It also promotes reflexive (e.g., audit trails, peer debriefs) to boost trustworthiness instead of relying on measuring tool's reliability. Although alternative frameworks, such as post-positivism, could enable the quantification of rumour dissemination, the interpretivist-constructivist paradigm is more appropriate for this study, as it seeks to explain the underlying meanings, motives, and mechanisms of disinformation (Saunders et al., [2019](#); Yin [2018](#)).

4.3. Research Approach

The study has an abductive-inductive methodology. To infer plausible explanations, abduction starts with puzzling observations (e.g., recurrent debt trap, cultural-colonisation and sovereignty frames), iterates back and forth between data and theory (Dubois and Gadde 2002). This is suitable in the context where previous theories (agenda setting, framing, soft power) are informative but not yet exhaustive, in that they are in need of successive deformations against specific instances of CPEC-related disinformation. The detailed understanding of concepts and relationships is then established in the systematic comparison of the cases, which leads to thematic patterns becoming gradually stronger (Eisenhardt 1989). This was conducted in practice via thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, developing themes, reviewing/updating, and defining so as to isolate recurring mechanisms (e.g., motivators of moral panic cue, appeals to identity, elite support) and outcome (Braun and Clarke 2006). Pattern matching and explanation-building across sources (within and across news, fact-checks, official statements) used case study logic throughout, consistent with the analytic generalisation principles of case studies (Yin 2018). The study used strategies linked to inductive theory building—line of evidence, chains of evidence, clear data structures, constant comparison and iterative memoing, to ensure rigour and increase transparency and credibility (Gioia et al., 2013; Eisenhardt 1989). This type of abductive-inductive combination suits the phenomenon: it permits the study to be responsive to emergent ideas through real disinformation artefacts but constrains construction through theoretically grounded repetition. It produces an approach that is able to produce explanatory propositions of how, why, and why fakenews narratives around CPEC emerge, spread and persist.

4.4. Data Collection

To provide the best coverage and triangulation, improve validity of the conclusions, primary and secondary sources of data were used (Saunders et al., 2019). The sources of primary data were publicly available fake news articles, viral content of social media postings, and official statements of the government or organisations about CPEC. The search for disinformation campaigns was conducted on social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube through keyword searches. Confirmed cases were cross-matched with fact-checkers that are well-established, such as *AFP Fact Check*, *Reuters Fact Check*, *Soch Fact Check*, and *FactFocus*. These websites are characterised by strict verification processes, and the reliability of the data is assured (Graves 2018).

The secondary data sample included scholarly publications (academic literature) that underwent a peer-review process, governmental and institutional reports, and publications by media watchdogs that produced CPEC-related false news.

4.5. Sampling Strategy

A non-probability sampling method was selected based on the fact that it is effective in the identification of cases that are information-rich, which is particularly relevant to qualitative research (Patton [2015](#)). The selection criteria comprised three aspects: the given piece relates to CPEC infrastructure or diplomatic aspect, such news inevitably gained the assumption that it was viral on social or mainstream media platforms, and political, economic, or cultural influence can be measured. Through the selection of high-profile and effective cases, the sampling strategy ensured that the study obtained the overall outlines of the disinformation landscape against CPEC.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

The primary method employed in the interpretation of the data was thematic analysis. The process involved familiarisation with the data, creating preliminary codes, seeking codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and creating a final analysis following the six-phase model established by Braun and Clarke ([2006](#)). Cases of disinformation were coded systematically based on common themes, including economic sabotage, diluting cultures, and the fears of sovereignty. Cases were further distinguished by types, i.e., fabricated, misleading, or exaggerated cases, depending on their content and intent. With this classification, it was possible to have a more precise comprehension of the types of fake news present in the public flow and their tactical goals. Lastly, the effects of such campaigns were analysed in terms of their impact on the general perception, policy deliberation, and diplomatic relationship between China and Pakistan.

5.1. Limitations

The methodology appreciates various shortcomings. To begin with, focusing on publicly available data may help avoid some disinformation efforts, such as those that are undercover or suppressed. Second, due to the dynamic nature of social media platforms, the temporal scope of the research could be restricted as some of the episodes of fake news could be removed earlier. Third, it is not entirely excluded that the media reporting and fact-checking agencies have certain biases; these organisations might be subject to institutional or geopolitical interests (Marwick and Lewis [2017](#)). However, through the method of triangulated data and thorough thematic analysis, the work gives a plausible and detailed discussion of fake news as a tool of propaganda against CPEC.

6. RESULTS

This section explores the themes of fake news related to CPEC, including cultural, economic, and political aspects. Every thematic domain outlines primary narratives, sources of misinformation, spread channels, and impacts that aim at shaping views about CPEC, along with influencing the respective domain's implementation.

6.1. Cultural Impact

Fake news targeting CPEC often exploits cultural sensitivities to erode trust between Chinese and Pakistani communities. The major cultural disinformation narratives identified are summarised in Table 1:

Table 1: Cultural Disinformation Narratives Targeting CPEC

Fake News Narrative	Factual Reality	Key Sources for Refutation
Chinese culture dominates local traditions	Mutual respect for cultural values is promoted	Khan (2019)
Mandarin replacing Urdu in schools	Mandarin language training is optional for employment enhancement	Human Rights Watch (2024)

Source: Authors' own.

Key narratives of cultural impact include:

Threat to Local Culture: Hate speech intensified to argue that the increase in Chinese workers and Chinese businesses is leading to cultural invasion in the country. However, the evidence suggests that CPEC respects cultural differences by paying special attention to cultural relations between the two countries and even encourages people-to-people interaction (Khan [2019](#)).

Language Imposition: Misinformation circulated claims that Mandarin was being enforced as the medium of instruction in local schools. In reality, Mandarin training programmes are optional and aim to enhance employment opportunities for Pakistani workers (Human Rights Watch [2024](#)).

Religious Sensitivities: Anti-CPEC factions have attempted to link Chinese policies in Xinjiang to alleged religious marginalisation within CPEC projects. These claims have been debunked, with project frameworks accommodating local religious practices (Khan [2019](#)).

Marginalisation of Local Cultures: False narratives suggested that CPEC projects culturally sidelined regions like Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. In reality, community engagement initiatives and cultural preservation programmes form integral components of CPEC's development strategy (Shabir [2024](#)).

Collectively, these narratives have fuelled distrust, created divisions, and hindered cultural collaboration between stakeholders.

6.2. Economic Impact

Disinformation targeting CPEC's economic aspects has aimed to discourage investment and distort the initiative's developmental potential. The significant economic disinformation narratives identified are summarised in Table 2:

Table 2: Economic Disinformation Narratives Targeting CPEC

Fake News Narrative	Factual Reality	Key Sources for Refutation
CPEC is pushing Pakistan into a debt trap	CPEC loans are concessional and form a minor share of total debt	Reuters (2019)
Chinese workers replacing Pakistani labour	Over 70% of jobs are filled by Pakistani nationals	Mengsheng (2019)

Source: Authors' own.

The impacts of economic misinformation are not limited to Table 2 and are detailed below:

Debt Trap Narrative: A widely circulated claim suggests that CPEC is plunging Pakistan into a debt crisis, risking the forfeiture of strategic assets like Gwadar Port. Contrary to these assertions, CPEC-related loans are concessional and form a minor share of Pakistan's external debt portfolio.

Employment Displacement: Disinformation propagated the idea that Chinese labourers were depriving Pakistanis of job opportunities. In reality, over 70% of CPEC project jobs are held by Pakistani nationals, with Chinese workers mainly occupying technical roles.

Gwadar Port Sovereignty: Misinformation alleged that Pakistan 'sold' Gwadar Port to China. However, the port remains under Pakistani ownership, operated through a standard lease agreement with a Chinese company.

CPEC as a Failure: Claims that CPEC projects are stalled or non-functional ignore the completion and operational success of major energy plants and transport networks.

Inflation Attribution: Narratives blaming CPEC for rising inflation fail to recognise broader macroeconomic factors influencing price levels (Khan and Sultan [2021](#)).

These economic disinformation campaigns have significantly eroded public trust, deterred investment, and complicated project execution timelines.

6.3. Political Impact

The political dimension of fake news has further complicated governance structures and regional diplomacy concerning CPEC, as shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Political Disinformation Narratives Targeting CPEC

Fake News Narrative	Factual Reality	Key Sources for Refutation
CPEC is a cover for Chinese military bases	No evidence of military bases; CPEC is an economic project	Reuters (2019)
Gwadar Port 'sold' to China	Operated under a lease; ownership remains with Pakistan	Raza (2013)
CPEC disproportionately benefits Punjab	Projects are distributed across multiple provinces	Khan (2019)

Source: Authors' own.

The impact of disinformation against CPEC has been observed across Pakistan:

Military Project Allegations: Disinformation framed CPEC as a front for Chinese military expansion in Pakistan. No credible evidence supports this claim; CPEC remains an economic initiative with a civilian mandate (Reuters [2019](#)).

False Accusations of Land Grabbing: It is crucial to dispel the notion that land grabbing claims in Gwadar are true, as the government has followed the correct land acquisition procedures and provided compensation to those affected (Shabir [2024](#)).

Provincial Bias Stores: This misinformation claims that CPEC exclusively favours Punjab province at the expense of other provinces. However, actual evidence and facts refute this claim.

Sovereignty Issues: Criticism that CPEC undermines Pakistan's sovereignty should be dismissed because the terms that both nations agreed to do not allow anyone but Pakistan to control project assets.

Corruption Allegations: To date, no evidence of systemic corruption involved in the CPEC projects has been confirmed under several audits and transparency measures in CPEC.

In general, these political disinformation campaigns have exacerbated inter-provincial rivalry; eroded public trust in the government; and negatively impacted Pakistan's diplomacy.

7. DISCUSSION

This paper provides an analysis of the current trends of fake news towards CPEC, showing that these trends are strategic, complex, and have connections with regional conflicts. Misinformation is used on cultural, economic, and political fronts to target weaknesses systematically and sabotage the achievement of CPEC's goals.

It is evident from the cultural discordance analysis that disinformation campaigns use bigotry, tilted perception towards culturally invasive and religious disrespect towards the local people, to instil distrust between the Chinese investors and the local communities, as depicted in Table 4. These findings are in line with the existing knowledge by Najam (2023), which focuses on the applicability of identity-based narratives to erode strategic cooperation. Although well-established bodies have debunked such myths, they remain popular, indicating that countering them requires more than just correcting the facts; it also involves cultural change and community mobilisation.

Economically, the persistence of the 'debt trap' narrative and concerns about employment displacement reflect a deliberate attempt to undermine investor confidence and stall infrastructure development, as shown in Table 4. This confirms both Hurley et al., (2018) and Zhao (2020), whose discussion reveals that the simplified accounts on investments in China do not reflect the true nature of financial flow. Altogether, these factors indicate that more work still needs to be done to increase the quality of financial reporting of the companies and to ensure consistent flow of the anti-myth messages within the popular sphere to reduce the adverse economic conditions.

Table 4 shows that disinformation campaigns contribute to internal political polarisation and strain Pakistan's foreign relations, generating tensions among diplomats and deepening existing political divides. The portrayal of CPEC as a covert military initiative or a potential security threat appears to be driven by strategic interests, particularly those of regional competitors (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The findings bring up the necessity to strengthen the narrative of sovereignty of the country and apply information diplomacy in the international sphere to combat disinformation.

Table 4: Comparison of Findings with Existing Literature on Fake News and Strategic Projects

Study / Source	Focus Area	Alignment with Present Study
Cheema et al., (2024); Najam (2023)	Cultural exploitation through fake news	Confirmed: Cultural fear narratives weaponised
Hurley et al., (2018); Zhao (2020)	Debt trap diplomacy and economic disinformation	Confirmed: Misrepresentation of financial realities
Vosoughi et al., (2018)	Spread dynamics of fake news	Confirmed: Emotional fake news spreads faster
Current Study	Integrated impact across cultural, economic, and political domains	Extends existing literature with holistic categorisation

Source: Authors' own.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

a. Strengthen Fact-Checking Ecosystems

The CPEC Media and the Pakistan-China Information Corridor can be replicated and even stretched to legitimise refutation about fake news about more strategic initiatives even in few months.

b. Enhance Media Literacy Initiatives

Formulate a mass media campaign and educational programming, which would inculcate a critical attitude to information consumption in the media to the citizens of the country.

c. Ensure Transparency and Public Communication

The government should promote greater transparency in media reporting on CPEC's financial records, the progress of ongoing projects, and their socioeconomic impacts on Pakistan.

d. Promote Cultural and Community Engagement

Encouraging cross-cultural engagement and ensuring the inclusion of local communities in CPEC-related initiatives are essential for mitigating the sensationalisation of perceived cultural imperialism and for strengthening confidence in indigenous cultural identities.

e. Develop Technological Solutions

The government ought to consider investing in Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered applications to identify and report fake news especially during special and strategic projects such as CPEC.

f. Foster International Cooperation

Engage international players and organisations to help fight campaigns aimed at compromising collaborative infrastructure development projects.

g. Conduct Further Research

Potential directions for future research include examining the evolving dynamics of misinformation strategies, investigating the role of Artificial Intelligence in producing and spreading fake news, and conducting cross-country comparisons of disinformation campaigns related to BRI projects.

9. CONCLUSION

CPEC can transform the course of development in Pakistan and increase regional connectivity. However, fake news and disinformation campaigns are a threat to the success of the project. The further spread of fake news about CPEC, and the sole focus on the cultural, economic and political dimensions of the project, undermines the trust of people and investors, aggravates inter-provincial conflicts and hurts Pakistan's foreign relations.

This demonstrates that disinformation campaigns are effective in strategically framing sensitive and popular social issues such as debt, cultural erosion, loss of autonomy, and political corruption. These narratives persist because they appear plausible, are amplified by influential figures, and receive extensive circulation on social media platforms. The findings further reveal that fake news functions as a potent instrument in economic and geopolitical contestations, with such messaging proving both enduring and impactful over time. The proposed recommendations will make CPEC sustainable besides improving the information environment that surrounds it. The prosperity of CPEC will also lead to the economic elevation of the country, thus affirming the possibility of strategic collaboration despite the disinformation warfare.

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