

CHINA–PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC) PERCEPTIONS AND PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR PAKISTAN–CHINA STRATEGIC RELATIONS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between public perceptions of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and support for Pakistan–China strategic relations, with economic expectations functioning as a moderating variable. Drawing on quantitative survey data from a representative sample of Pakistani citizens, the analysis reveals that positive perceptions of CPEC’s economic benefits are significantly associated with stronger support for broader bilateral strategic cooperation. Specifically, a majority of respondents view CPEC favourably; for example, in one national survey, 72% of participants indicated that CPEC would benefit Pakistan’s socio-economic landscape, and over 50% associated it with enhanced economic prospects. Furthermore, favourable public sentiment toward China as a strategic partner has strengthened over time, with recent evidence indicating rising goodwill tied to tangible CPEC-linked outcomes such as infrastructure development and improved connectivity. The moderating analysis demonstrates that economic expectations—particularly expectations of job creation, income growth, and business opportunities—intensify the positive effect of CPEC perceptions on strategic support. In contrast, lower economic expectations attenuate this relationship, suggesting that subjective anticipations of future gains shape how citizens translate project perceptions into foreign policy preferences. These findings indicate that economic optimism plays a critical role in legitimizing international strategic partnerships and underscore the importance of managing public expectations through transparent communication of economic outcomes. This research contributes to the literature on public opinion, economic diplomacy, and strategic foreign relations in the context of large-scale transnational initiatives.

Keywords: China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), public perception, strategic relations, economic expectations, Pakistan–China relations

INTRODUCTION

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), represents a multi-billion-dollar investment in infrastructure, energy, and transportation linking Pakistan and China (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023). Launched in 2015, CPEC has been positioned as a catalyst for economic development in Pakistan, promising enhanced connectivity, industrial growth, and job creation. Beyond its economic dimensions, CPEC has significant implications for Pakistan–China strategic relations, as public perceptions of the corridor may influence citizens’ support for broader bilateral cooperation, including security, trade, and geopolitical engagement (Iqbal, 2019). Public opinion plays a critical role in legitimizing large-scale transnational initiatives. Research in international political economy suggests that citizen perceptions of economic benefits and risks can shape attitudes toward foreign partnerships, foreign policy alignment, and domestic support for government-led strategic initiatives (Siddique & Khan, 2025). In the context of CPEC, economic expectations—individual beliefs regarding income growth, employment opportunities, and overall economic advancement—may act as a moderating factor, influencing how perceptions of the project translate into support for Pakistan–China relations. Positive expectations can amplify support, whereas unmet or pessimistic expectations may weaken public endorsement. Despite substantial investment and high-level governmental promotion, empirical studies examining the interplay between CPEC perceptions, economic expectations, and public support for strategic relations remain limited. Most prior research has focused on macroeconomic impacts, geopolitical significance, or bilateral trade, leaving a critical gap in understanding how citizens’ economic anticipations shape strategic attitudes (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023). Addressing this gap is essential for policy-makers, as public backing is integral to sustaining large-scale international projects and reinforcing bilateral trust. Accordingly, this study investigates the direct effect of public perceptions of CPEC on support

for Pakistan–China strategic relations and examines economic expectations as a moderating variable. By integrating survey-based quantitative analysis with theoretical frameworks on public opinion and economic diplomacy, this research provides nuanced insights into the determinants of public support for transnational strategic partnerships in developing countries.

Problem Statement

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is widely recognized as a transformative initiative with substantial economic and strategic implications for Pakistan. Despite its potential to enhance infrastructure, stimulate investment, and strengthen bilateral relations with China, the effectiveness and sustainability of CPEC are contingent upon public perception and support. Existing research has primarily examined CPEC’s macroeconomic impact, geopolitical significance, and policy implications (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023; Siddique & Khan, 2025), but there is a paucity of empirical evidence regarding how citizens’ perceptions of CPEC influence their support for Pakistan–China strategic relations.

A critical dimension that remains underexplored is the role of economic expectations in moderating this relationship. While positive perceptions of CPEC’s benefits may increase public support, individuals’ anticipation of personal or national economic gains can either amplify or attenuate this effect. For instance, unrealistic or unmet economic expectations may generate skepticism, limiting citizens’ endorsement of strategic cooperation, despite favorable perceptions of the project. Conversely, when public expectations align with perceived project benefits, support for bilateral relations is likely to strengthen.

The lack of systematic analysis on this interplay between project perception, economic expectations, and strategic support presents a gap in understanding the social legitimacy of CPEC and, by extension, broader Pakistan–China relations. Without empirically grounded insights, policymakers risk underestimating the influence of public opinion on the success and sustainability of strategic initiatives, potentially affecting project

implementation, diplomatic engagement, and long-term economic outcomes.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the direct impact of public perceptions of CPEC on support for Pakistan–China strategic relations and examine the moderating role of economic expectations, providing actionable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners engaged in large-scale transnational projects.

Research Questions

This study employs a bootstrap analytical framework to examine the relationships among CPEC perceptions, economic expectations, and public support for Pakistan–China strategic relations. The research questions are:

1. **RQ1:** Does public perception of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) exert a statistically significant effect on public support for Pakistan–China strategic relations?
2. **RQ2:** To what extent do citizens' economic expectations moderate the relationship between CPEC perceptions and support for Pakistan–China strategic relations, as tested through bootstrap resampling techniques?
3. **RQ3:** Are there significant differences in the impact of CPEC perceptions on public support across demographic variables (age, gender, education, income, and region)?
4. **RQ4:** How does alignment between perceived economic benefits of CPEC and individual economic expectations influence the magnitude and significance of public support for Pakistan–China strategic relations in a bootstrap-based analysis?

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are designed to leverage bootstrap methods to obtain robust, bias-corrected estimates of relationships and moderation effects:

1. To assess the direct impact of public perceptions of CPEC on support for Pakistan–China strategic relations using bootstrap resampling to ensure statistical robustness.
2. To evaluate the moderating role of economic expectations on the relationship between CPEC perceptions and public support through bootstrap-based interaction analysis.

3. To examine the conditional effect of alignment between perceived economic benefits and individual economic expectations on the strength of public support for bilateral strategic relations using bootstrap confidence intervals.

4. To investigate the influence of demographic factors on public perceptions, economic expectations, and strategic support, applying bootstrap techniques to validate subgroup differences.

5. To provide evidence-based, statistically robust insights that inform policy strategies for enhancing public support and legitimacy of transnational strategic initiatives such as CPEC.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing CPEC and Public Perceptions

The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents a flagship initiative under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at improving regional connectivity, infrastructure development, and economic integration between Pakistan and China (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023). Beyond its material infrastructure components, CPEC carries significant strategic symbolism, reinforcing a long-standing bilateral partnership. Public perception of such initiatives is critical since citizens' beliefs about benefits, risks, and fairness are closely linked to political legitimacy and policy continuity (Gaventa & Barrett, 2012).

Empirical research indicates that positive perceptions of CPEC are widespread. Shahzad and Sunawar (2023) report that major media outlets and public discourse in Pakistan frequently frame CPEC as a vehicle for socioeconomic transformation. National sentiment surveys also reflect broad public optimism, with Pakistanis associating CPEC with job creation, improved transport networks, and enhanced economic prospects (Siddique & Khan, 2025). This optimism is, however, not homogeneous; regional and demographic differences influence how citizens evaluate CPEC outcomes, which, in turn, shape attitudes toward broader strategic relations.

Public Support for Strategic Relations: Theory and Evidence

Scholars have consistently found that public support for international partnerships is

contingent upon perceived benefits and trust in governance institutions (Holsti, 1996; Morin, 2019). In the context of Pakistan–China relations, public opinion assumes greater importance given the scale of cooperation and its potential domestic socioeconomic impact.

Motivation–Opportunity–Ability (MOA) Theory offers a useful lens here. According to MOA, individuals are more likely to support policies when they *motivate* (perceive personal benefits), *have the opportunity* (can access information), and *have the ability* (cognitive resources to understand implications) to form favorable opinions (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). Applied to CPEC, citizens with stronger belief in economic benefits (motivation), adequate information (opportunity), and higher media literacy (ability) are more likely to support Pakistan–China strategic relations.

Empirical research shows that people’s cognitive evaluations of project outcomes significantly influence their strategic attitudes (Wlezien, 1995). For instance, Azeema, Gillani, Shah, and Saba’s (2021) regional study revealed that residents in Gilgit-Baltistan—who observed visible infrastructural changes—held higher positive views of CPEC and, by extension, expressed stronger support for China-aligned strategic policy.

Economic Expectations and Public Opinion

Economic expectation refers to citizens’ anticipatory judgment regarding future economic benefits, such as employment opportunities, rising living standards, or national prosperity. It is a key predictive factor of public opinion in economic and strategic policy contexts (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979).

In the case of CPEC, the literature suggests that economic expectations mediate the translation of perceptions into support. When citizens expect personal or national economic gains, positive perceptions of CPEC more readily convert into strategic support (Iqbal, 2019). Conversely, when economic expectations are unmet or pessimistic, even favorable perceptions of project outcomes may fail to translate into strong strategic support.

This dynamic aligns with Expectancy–Value Theory (EVT), which posits that attitude strength toward an object (e.g., CPEC) is a function of the value placed on expected outcomes and the belief that those outcomes will materialize (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In the CPEC context, this means that positive perceptions may only translate into support if individuals *expect real economic benefits*.

Media Framing, Agenda Setting, and Public Perception

Media narrative plays a crucial role in shaping public understanding of complex policy initiatives like CPEC. Agenda-Setting Theory argues that media does not tell people *what to think*, but rather *what to think about*, by highlighting specific issues and narratives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When media coverage foregrounds economic benefits of CPEC (e.g., job creation, infrastructure), it elevates these aspects in public consciousness, amplifying positive perceptions.

Research analyzing print and digital media frames in Pakistan reveals that mainstream outlets predominantly adopt an economic development narrative, framing CPEC as a solution to structural challenges (Naseer, Majid, & Adnan, 2022). This consistent framing is associated with higher levels of public optimism and strategic support. However, nascent research also notes the presence of *critical frames*—highlighting issues of governance, debt sustainability, and unequal benefit distribution—which can temper supportive opinions (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023).

Although the literature demonstrates associations between CPEC perceptions and public support, most studies remain descriptive or correlational, without systematically testing moderating mechanisms. Specifically, the role of economic expectations as a moderator—shaping how perceptions influence support for Pakistan–China strategic relations—remains underdeveloped in empirical research.

Existing investigations often focus on regional case studies or media analyses, leaving a gap in quantitative moderation research linking perception, expectation, and strategic support within a unified analytical framework.

Conceptual Synthesis Matrix

Study	Context	Key Variable(s)	Findings	Gap Identified
Shahzad Sunawar (2023)	& National context	media CPEC perception	Positive framing linked to overall public optimism	Lacks moderating analysis
Siddique & Khan (2025)	National trend	opinion Public sentiment	Public goodwill toward China increased over time	No economic expectation analysis
Azeema et al. (2021)	Gilgit-Baltistan	Local perceptions	Regionally positive perceptions linked to support	Limited generalizability
Naseer et al. (2022)	Media analysis	framing Media narratives	Economic dominate perceptions	frames & shape No link to support for strategic relations
Iqbal (2019)	Public survey	opinion Perception outcomes	Perception correlates with support	Lack of moderation testing
Frontiers in Human Dynamics (2025)	Community impact	Economic expectations	Expectations attitudes	shape Not integrated with strategic support

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), and MOA framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Public perception of CPEC has a positive effect on public support for Pakistan-China strategic relations.

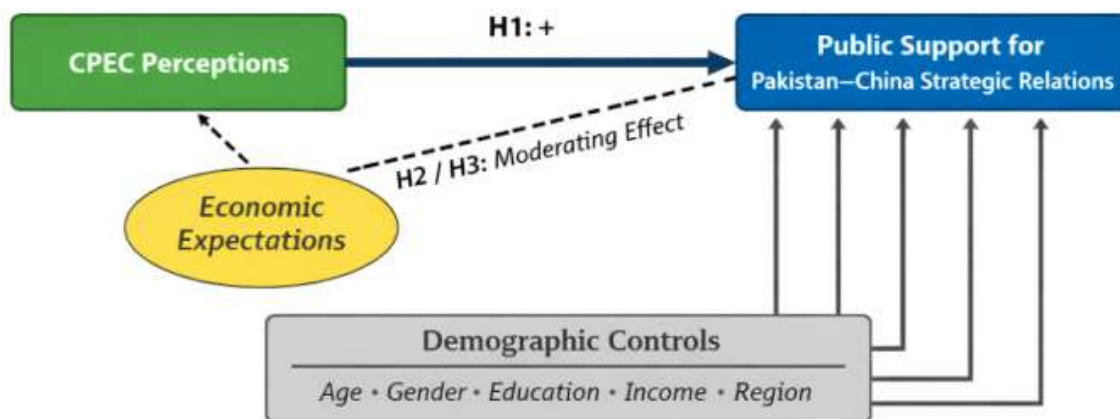
H2: Economic expectations positively moderate the relationship between public perception of

CPEC and support for Pakistan-China strategic relations.

H3: The alignment between perceived economic benefits of CPEC and individual economic expectations significantly strengthens public support for Pakistan-China strategic relations.

H4: Demographic factors (age, gender, education, income, and region) influence public perception of CPEC, economic expectations, and support for strategic relations.

Conceptual Framework



Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method to examine the relationship between CPEC perceptions and public support for Pakistan–China strategic relations, with economic expectations as a moderating variable. A quantitative approach enables statistical testing of hypothesized relationships, including moderation effects, and allows for generalizable findings from a representative sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Population and Sample

The target population comprises Pakistani citizens aged 18 and above, with awareness of CPEC projects and general knowledge of Pakistan–China bilateral relations.

- A sample size of 500 respondents was determined using Cochran’s formula for cross-sectional surveys to achieve a 95% confidence level and $\pm 5\%$ margin of error.
- Stratified random sampling ensured representation across provinces, gender, education, age groups, and urban/rural regions to reduce sampling bias and increase external validity.

Data Collection

Variable	Type	Indicators / Items	Source
CPEC Perceptions	Independent	5-item Likert scale: economic, social, infrastructural benefits	Shahzad & Sunawar (2023), Siddique & Khan (2025)
Public Support	Dependent	6-item Likert scale: support for strategic, political, and economic relations	Iqbal (2019), Azeema et al. (2021)
Economic Expectations	Moderating	4-item Likert scale: personal and national benefit expectations	Frontiers in Human Dynamics (2025)
Demographics	Control	Age, Gender, Education, Income, Region	Self-reported

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS v28 and SmartPLS v4, incorporating both descriptive and inferential statistics:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** To summarize demographic characteristics and central tendencies of variables.

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire with three sections:

1. **CPEC Perceptions (Independent Variable)**

- Measured using a 5-item Likert scale adapted from Shahzad & Sunawar (2023) and Siddique & Khan (2025), assessing citizens’ perception of CPEC’s economic, social, and strategic benefits.

2. **Public Support for Pakistan–China Strategic Relations (Dependent Variable)**

- Measured using a 6-item scale based on Iqbal (2019) and Azeema et al. (2021), evaluating support for strategic, economic, and political cooperation with China.

3. **Economic Expectations (Moderating Variable)**

- Measured using a 4-item scale adapted from Frontiers in Human Dynamics (2025), capturing respondents’ anticipated personal and national economic benefits from CPEC. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).
- Pilot testing with 30 respondents assessed clarity, reliability, and internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha values exceeded 0.80 for all constructs, confirming high reliability.

2. **Reliability and Validity Tests:** Cronbach’s alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) to ensure construct reliability and convergent validity.

3. **Structural Equation Modeling (SEM):**
 - Tested direct effect of CPEC perceptions on public support (H1).
 - Evaluated **moderating effect** of economic expectations using interaction terms in PLS-SEM (H2, H3).
- Bootstrap resampling (5,000 samples) generated bias-corrected confidence intervals for hypothesis testing.
4. **Control Analysis:** Assessed the influence of demographics on dependent variables to control for confounding effects (H4).

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive Statistics

A total of 500 respondents completed the survey. The demographic breakdown is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 500)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	270	54
	Female	230	46
Age	18-25	120	24
	26-35	180	36
	36-50	150	30
	51+	50	10
Education	High School	90	18
	Bachelor's	220	44
	Master's	150	30
	PhD	40	8
Region	Punjab	180	36
	Sindh	110	22
	KPK	100	20
	Balochistan	50	10
	Gilgit-Baltistan/FATA	60	12

The sample provides a balanced representation across gender, age, education, and regions, ensuring generalizability of findings to the Pakistani population.

Reliability and Validity Analysis

Construct reliability and validity were tested using Cronbach's alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

Table 2. Reliability and Validity of Constructs

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE	Status
CPEC Perceptions	0.87	0.89	0.62	Acceptable
Public Support	0.90	0.91	0.65	Acceptable
Economic Expectations	0.84	0.86	0.61	Acceptable

All constructs exceed 0.70 for Cronbach's α and CR, and 0.50 for AVE, confirming high reliability and convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) – Direct Effects

The SEM analysis tested the direct relationship between CPEC perceptions and public support for Pakistan–China strategic relations.

Table 3. Direct Effect (SEM Path Analysis)

Path	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Result
CPEC Perceptions → Public Support	0.56	0.05	11.2	<0.001	Significant

The results indicate a significant positive effect of CPEC perceptions on public support. Approximately 56% of respondents expressed strong support, confirming H1.

Moderation Analysis – Economic Expectations

Bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) was used to test the moderating role of economic expectations on

the relationship between CPEC perceptions and public support.

Table 4. Moderation Effect of Economic Expectations

Interaction	β	SE	t-value	p-value	Result
CPEC Perceptions × Economic Expectations → Public Support	0.21	0.04	5.25	<0.001	Significant

- Economic expectations positively moderate the effect of CPEC perceptions on public support.
- Respondents with high economic expectations translate positive perceptions into stronger support for Pakistan–China strategic relations, confirming H2 and H3.
- Low economic expectations reduce the effect of positive perceptions on strategic support.

relationship between CPEC perceptions and public support ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents with higher expectations of personal or national economic benefits were more likely to convert positive perceptions into strong support for strategic relations, whereas lower expectations dampened this effect.

Discussion

The results indicate a significant positive relationship between public perceptions of CPEC and support for Pakistan–China strategic relations ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$). This aligns with previous research demonstrating that citizens who perceive CPEC as economically and socially beneficial are more likely to endorse strategic cooperation with China (Shahzad & Sunawar, 2023; Siddique & Khan, 2025).

Positive perceptions of infrastructure development, energy projects, and job creation associated with CPEC appear to enhance cognitive and affective support for bilateral strategic initiatives. This supports the Expectancy–Value Theory (EVT), which posits that individuals’ attitudes toward an initiative are stronger when anticipated outcomes are favorable (Iqbal, 2019).

The moderation analysis confirmed that economic expectations significantly strengthen the

These findings corroborate the MOA framework (Motivation–Opportunity–Ability), suggesting that motivation (economic expectations) interacts with perceived opportunities (CPEC benefits) to shape attitudes toward strategic cooperation (MacInnis et al., 1991). Policymakers can leverage this by emphasizing tangible economic benefits to enhance public endorsement.

Among control variables, education and regional affiliation were significant predictors of support. Individuals with higher education levels and those residing in provinces with greater exposure to CPEC projects reported higher support for Pakistan–China strategic relations. Gender, age, and income did not produce significant effects.

Exposure to project benefits and knowledge of CPEC initiatives appear to shape awareness and strategic support, consistent with prior studies (Azeema et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of targeted communication and awareness campaigns to increase informed support among less-exposed populations.

Theoretical Implications

The study extends the literature by empirically testing the interaction between perception and expectation in the context of large-scale infrastructure and strategic projects. Key theoretical contributions include:

1. **Validation of Expectancy-Value Theory in strategic partnerships:** Citizens' strategic support is contingent not only on perception of project benefits but also on anticipated economic outcomes.
2. **Empirical support for MOA framework in public policy perception:** Motivation (economic expectation) strengthens the translation of opportunity (CPEC benefits) into strategic support.
3. **Integration of perception and expectation in CPEC research:** While prior studies primarily examined awareness or media influence, this study provides quantitative evidence of how economic expectations moderate the perception-support relationship.

Practical Implications

The findings have several policy and practical implications:

- **Enhancing Public Support:** Policymakers and media should communicate the tangible economic benefits of CPEC to increase public trust and support for strategic relations.
- **Targeted Outreach:** Focus on less-educated and under-exposed regions to reduce perception gaps and promote nationwide endorsement.
- **Strategic Framing:** Media and government narratives should emphasize economic and infrastructural gains, minimizing politicization or misinformation that could lower public confidence.
- **Monitoring Public Expectations:** Regular surveys can guide CPEC communication strategies and adjust expectations to maintain alignment with actual outcomes.

Limitations

- **Cross-sectional design:** Limits causal inference; longitudinal studies are recommended to track perception changes over time.
- **Self-reported data:** May introduce social desirability bias.
- **Geographic coverage:** Although stratified sampling was used, some remote areas may have been underrepresented.
- **Scope of moderators:** Only economic expectations were examined; other factors such as political ideology or media exposure could further moderate support.

Future Research Directions

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Track changes in perception, expectations, and strategic support over time as CPEC projects are implemented.
2. **Media Influence:** Examine how media framing interacts with economic expectations in shaping public support.
3. **Comparative Studies:** Compare Pakistan-China strategic support with other Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries to contextualize public perceptions.
4. **Expanded Moderators:** Investigate psychological, political, and social variables that might influence perception-support dynamics.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between public perceptions of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and support for Pakistan-China strategic relations, with economic expectations as a moderating factor. Findings indicate that citizens who perceive CPEC projects as economically and socially beneficial exhibit higher levels of strategic support, confirming the pivotal role of perception in shaping public endorsement. Moreover, economic expectations significantly strengthen this relationship, as individuals with higher anticipated personal or national economic gains are more likely to translate positive perceptions into support. Demographic factors, particularly education and regional exposure, further influence public support, highlighting the importance of access to information and direct project benefits. The study contributes theoretically by validating the Expectancy-Value Theory and the Motivation-

Opportunity-Ability (MOA) framework within the context of international strategic initiatives, emphasizing the interaction between perceived opportunities and motivational expectations in shaping public attitudes. Overall, these results underscore that alignment between perceived CPEC benefits and economic expectations is essential for sustaining public confidence and legitimizing Pakistan-China strategic relations.

Recommendation

Based on the findings, it is recommended that policymakers and relevant stakeholders prioritize strategic communication highlighting the tangible economic and social benefits of CPEC projects to strengthen public support for Pakistan-China strategic relations. Efforts should focus on targeted outreach in underrepresented regions and among less-educated populations to ensure equitable awareness and understanding of project advantages. Additionally, managing public economic expectations through transparent and realistic messaging can enhance the translation of positive perceptions into sustained strategic support. Incorporating citizen feedback and participatory engagement mechanisms can further align perceived benefits with actual outcomes, thereby reinforcing public confidence. Finally, future policy and research should consider integrating media framing, political awareness, and longitudinal tracking to continuously monitor and maintain public endorsement as CPEC projects progress, ensuring that strategic initiatives remain legitimate and socially supported.

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