

# Prospects of Tourism under CPEC

Amna Ejaz Rafi

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## Executive Summary

China's northwest province of Gansu has been identified as the portal for opening up to the West and building links with countries along the BRI. Muslims and Buddhists have a vast majority in the province. With BRI, the prospects of industrial cooperation, technological exchange and people-to-people interaction will enhance. It will also open up prospects of tourism for the countries forming part of BRI.

Pakistan has a large number of archeological Buddhist sites. Taxila had remained part of ancient 'Gandhara Civilization'. With CPEC, the Buddhists living in China and the region would have an opportunity to visit Taxila and other Buddhist relics in Pakistan. To encourage the Buddhist population from China and other East Asian countries to visit Pakistan, there is need to develop the tourism industry.

Some of the recommendations are:-

- The 'Gandhara Civilization' needs to be promoted through media and diplomatic platforms.
- The organizing of Gandhara Art Exhibition in Beijing needs to be pursued.
- The plan of creating a 'Holy Buddhist Trail' also needs to be pursued.
- The MoU on expansion of bilateral tourism, exchanges and cooperation between Pakistan and China needs to be buoyed.

## Issue to be Analyzed

Pakistan and China are economic partners. CPEC speaks of the strategic consonance between the two Asian countries. Culturally, both the countries are poles apart. Pakistan is a Muslim majority state whereas, the Chinese society primarily is based on the principles of 'Confucianism'. Despite the socio-cultural disparity, the Pakistan-China relation has progressed. There is a need to take this cooperation to newer heights with focus on economic integration, cultural exchange and tourism. The paper looks at the prospects of greater tourism cooperation between Pakistan and China, in particular the Buddhist archeological sites, their sacredness for the people of China and the region.

## Analysis

CPEC is reflective of the geopolitical convergence between Pakistan and China. CPEC linking Gwadar to China's Western city of Kashgar would enhance China's access to the markets of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. Likewise, the corridor would give an impetus to Pakistan's struggling economy. China's interest in CPEC is diversify trade routes and growing beyond East Asia. For Pakistan, with operation of Gwadar seaport, the country will be transformed into a trading hub. Thus, to reap the benefits of economic connectivity, other than political factors, the socio-cultural aspects are equally important. In this regard, the archeological Buddhist sites in Pakistan and their relevance to the Buddhist population in China can be the beginning of tourism cooperation.

### Archeological and Religious Sites in China

In the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's northwest province of Gansu has been identified as a portal for opening up to the West and building links with countries along the Silk Road. The province of Gansu is strategically located at a meeting point of Eastern and Western China. The ancient Silk Road for over 1,600 kilometres passes through Gansu. The Silk Road is also known as Hexi Corridor. The Silk Road is bound from north by the Gobi Desert and Qilian Mountains in the south. The Silk Road linked Asia and Europe more than 2,000 years ago. Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Jia Yuguan Pass and Dunhuang city form part of the province. Linxia is a pre-dominant Muslim area, in which the population follows their customs and traditions in accordance to their religious beliefs. The Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture had been a major cultural and religious centre for the Tibetans. The Labrang Monastery in the prefecture was established by the First Jamyang Living Buddha in 1720. The monastery represents the highest institution of Buddhist teachings, theology, medicine, astrology and law.<sup>1</sup>

Gansu province is multi-ethnic and multi-religious. Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism and Protestantism are the major religions. The Muslim tribes in Gansu are Hui, Dongxiang, Baoan, Sala and Kazak. The Zang, Mongol, Yugu and Tu minority groups believe in Buddhism. Gansu's cultural diversity and multi-ethnic character enhance the province's importance for tourism and cultural exchange. The archeological sites in Gansu and the Buddha statues in Mogao Grottoes and Bingling Temple Grottoes are an attraction for tourists from world over.<sup>2</sup>

### Buddhist Sites in Pakistan

Taxila known as "*Taketo*" in Burmese<sup>3</sup> has been a part of ancient 'Gandhara Civilization' and also a centre of 'Buddhist Learning'. Philosophy, political warfare and medicine were taught at Taxila University. In olden times, students from across the world including China, Greece, Babylonia (present day South of Iraq from Baghdad to Persian Gulf) and Arabia came to the university. Learned names like Charaka, father of medicine, Panini, Sanskrit grammarian and Acharya Chanakya, political philosopher all studied at Taxila. The present day Taxila is located near the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Tourists and historians from world over, in particular from Southeast Asia visit the Taxila city. The old literature on Buddhism widely talks about Taxila. The area in 'Buddhist Jataka Tales' is called as Takshashila. Chinese travelers Fa Hian and Huiyen Tsang have also written about Takshashila. The area is an archeological site and is home to rich Buddhist heritage. The Buddhist sites in Taxila include 'Dharmarajika Stupa', 'Bhir Mound', 'Sirkap', 'Jandial Temple' and 'Julian Monastery'.

<sup>1</sup> "Gansu and Regional Connectivity," 10th Gansu International Fellowship Programme, Organized by *Gansu Provincial Foreign Affairs Office* (Lanzhou, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> "Gansu and Regional Connectivity."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Other Buddhist sites in Pakistan include the ‘Fasting Buddha’ and ‘Sikri Stupa’. These Buddhist relics are in Lahore Museum. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is home to large number of Buddhist sites as well. There are 150 Buddhist sites across Malakand Division. The Buddhists’ ruins of Takhtbai, Mardan have been included in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world heritage sites. The remains of sleeping Buddha statue are in Bamala and Najigram, Swat valley; the beautiful valley is surrounded by Hindukush Mountains. Swat had also been a pilgrimage site for Buddhists. The Vajrayana School (the Tibetan Buddhism) considers it a ‘holy land’. Recently, archeologists have discovered ancient Buddhist apsidal temple in Bazira area of Barikot, Swat. The discovery notifies the presence of Buddhism in Swat since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Dr. Walpole Piyananda, founder and President of Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, Los Angeles calls Swat the place from where Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism started and spread across Southeast Asia.<sup>4</sup> On Swat valley’s linkage with Buddhism, Ambassador of Republic of Korea to Pakistan, Kwak Sung-Kyu says that the Korean bond with Swat dates back to 723 AD. It was the time when monk Hyecho visited Gandhara and ancient Uddiyana, the present day Swat.<sup>5</sup> The discovery of Buddhist archeologist sites in Pakistan and their linkage with East Asian region shows that in ancient times, there existed regional connectivity. Hyecho, a native of Korea travelled from China to Pakistan in search of the holy Buddhist sites. During the travel, he passed through Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Afghanistan. The present day concept of regional connectivity and economic integration, is in fact a continuation of past practices where people travelled from one land to another, in search of religious peace, spiritualism and for better economic opportunities.

In the East Asian region, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore and Mongolia have large Buddhist populations. In China, the Buddhist followers’ strength is about 244 million which is 18 per cent of total population.<sup>6</sup> With the upcoming economic corridors, connectivity will be established, linking East Asia, South Asia and Central Asia. This channel apart from economic cooperation will also open up prospects of religio-cultural exchange and tourism. The Buddhist religious and historical sites in Pakistan will be an attraction for people of East Asia. The government of Pakistan is working towards a ‘Holy Buddhist Trail’. The trail will include the most revered Buddhist heritage sites in Pakistan. This will facilitate the Buddhist pilgrims to visit their religious sites in Pakistan. The Gandhara Research and Resource Centre has also been established in an attempt to revive Taxila’s history as a centre for learning. People visiting Pakistan to pay respect to their religious places will get a chance to see the Pakistani society. For the Buddhists of East Asia, Pakistan’s image will be the land where the Gandhara civilization once thrived.

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<sup>4</sup> “Swat Valley Most Venerable Place for Buddhists, Says Lankan Monks,” *Dawn*, April 25, 2021, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1620177>.

<sup>5</sup> “Korean Delegation Terms Swat Sacred Place for Buddhists,” *Dawn*, August 29, 2019, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1502270>.

<sup>6</sup> Vaishnavi Pallapothu, “Dharma Diplomacy: Buddhism in India and China,” Monograph, *Chennai Centre for China Studies (C3S)*, 2020, accessed June 1, 2022, [https://www.c3sindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Buddhism-in-India-and-China\\_Vaishnavi-Pallapothu.pdf](https://www.c3sindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Buddhism-in-India-and-China_Vaishnavi-Pallapothu.pdf).

The emerging regional connectivity in the backdrop of CPEC will link the East Asian region with Pakistan. This linkage other than creating prospects of socio-economic cooperation will also promote the inter-cultural exchange. In particular, the religious and historical sites in Pakistan will be an attraction for the people of East Asia. People visiting Pakistan to pay respect to their solemn places will get a chance to see the Pakistani society. It will open up culture of dialogue among the people of varied religions'. The respect for each other's faith will promote understanding among people, and will significantly contribute towards inter-religious harmony. Most importantly, it will defeat the notion of Islamic radicalism and will enhance Pakistan's image in the comity of nations.

Another aspect linked to extremism and that might be employed by anti-China forces is the presence of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM elements are in the province of Xinjiang, a Muslim majority area bordering Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, Afghanistan, India and the entirety of China's 250 kilometers border with Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> The disgruntled elements might use ETIM linkage with other extremist groups to create mistrust between Pakistan and China. In order to defeat the nefarious designs, a counter narrative needs to be developed and with tourism industry, enhanced people-to-people interaction, Pakistan and China can defy the odds.

### Recommendations

- China-Pakistan relation is a testimony to the fact that the ideological and cultural differences have never been a point of obstruction towards a meaningful cooperation. Both Pakistan and China need to take this cooperation to newer heights with more focus towards people-to-people contact and tourism.
- Pakistan has been home to the 'Gandhara Civilization'. The ancient sites will be of interest to the Buddhist population of China. The Gandhara civilization needs to be promoted through media and diplomatic platforms.
- The idea of organizing of a Gandhara Art Exhibition at the Palace Museum in Beijing needs to be pursued. The idea was flagged during former Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Beijing (February 2022).
- The plan of creating a 'Holy Buddhist Trail' also needs to be pursued.
- The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on expansion of bilateral tourism, exchanges and cooperation between Pakistan and China (November 2021) needs to be buoyed. MoU envisages upgrading of tourism cooperation under the CPEC Long-Term Plan.

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). 69.