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China's GCI and the CPEC 2.0 People's Corridor

Connecting the People of Pakistan and China

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Pakistan and China share close political ties, yet contact between their people is still thin, mostly one-way and concentrated in a few large cities. Nearly 29,000 Pakistanis study in China, but only 85,575 visitors came from China to Pakistan in 2025, and the communities that host China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects see little of this exchange. This brief proposes a People's Corridor under CPEC 2.0, anchored in China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), to make contact two-way, secure and broad-based.

The proposals in this brief are the author's own. Facts and figures drawn from published sources are cited to their source. Names of new programmes, such as the People's Corridor Fund or the Youth Fellowship, are suggestions for discussion, not existing schemes.

Introduction

Pakistan and China established diplomatic relations on 21 May 1951. Since then, the two countries have stood by each other in diplomacy, defence and development. The relationship has remained steady through changes of government in both countries and shifts in the wider region (Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad, n.d.). CPEC, launched in 2015 as a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, added an economic pillar to this relationship. Roads, power plants, the port of Gwadar and special economic zones have given the partnership a visible presence on the ground.

Infrastructure, however, is only one part of a lasting relationship. Roads and ports connect places. They do not, on their own, help people understand each other. That understanding is built by students who study abroad, artists who share their work, athletes who compete together, and journalists and researchers who explain one country to the other. These are the people who carry a friendship from one generation to the next.

This brief makes the case for a Pakistan-China People's Corridor under CPEC 2.0. It first sets out the current state of exchange and its gaps. It then explains why the timing is right, what the corridor would include, how it could be managed and kept secure, and what steps both governments could take in the coming years.

Current Situation and Gaps

Exchange between the two societies already exists, and it rests on strong public goodwill. It is, however, spread across many offices, flows mostly in one direction, is concentrated among a small group of students and officials in large cities, and seldom reaches the communities that live alongside CPEC projects. The figures below show the pattern.

Area	Latest evidence	What it shows
Pakistani students in China	Nearly 29,000 as of December 2025, about 6,000 of them on scholarships (Embassy of Pakistan, Beijing, 2025)	A strong flow from Pakistan to China
Chinese students in Pakistan	No consolidated official figure is published. Known flows are small, such as groups of about 20 Urdu students from Beijing Foreign Studies University who spend six months at the National University of Modern Languages (NUML) or Government College University Lahore (Associated Press of Pakistan [APP], 2017)	The education flow runs mostly one way
Chinese visitors to Pakistan	74,093 in 2024 and 85,575 in 2025, about 4 percent of some 2.2 million foreign arrivals (The Express Tribune, 2026). By comparison, Kazakhstan received more than 650,000 Chinese tourists in 2024 (CGTN, 2025)	Tourism is well below its potential
Chinese language in Pakistan	Five Confucius Institutes, at NUML, the University of the Punjab, the University of Agriculture Faisalabad, the University of Karachi and the University of Sargodha (Hanif, 2023). Nearly 30,000 Pakistanis were learning Chinese through Confucius Institute programmes in 2022 (Notezai, 2024)	Language learning is growing but centred in a few cities
Public opinion	90 percent of Pakistanis held a favourable view of China in a 2026 survey, and 83 percent expressed confidence in President Xi Jinping (Pew Research Center, 2026)	Goodwill is broad and ready to build on
Young population	67 percent of Pakistanis were under 30 at the 2023 Census (Malik, 2024)	Youth exchange can reach a very large audience

Three gaps follow from this picture.

- **One-way flow:** Pakistani students go to China in large numbers, while few Chinese students, researchers or tourists come to Pakistan.
- **Narrow reach:** most exchange runs through universities and offices in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, and through a small number of scholarship holders and officials.
- **Fragmented delivery:** people-to-people activities are handled by different offices on both sides, with no single owner or shared record of results.

Security of Chinese Nationals

The safety of Chinese nationals is the main consideration for people-to-people contact, not a side issue. Security concerns affect how readily Chinese students, teachers, professionals and tourists choose to visit Pakistan, and they shape where and how exchange can take place.

Exchange activity should therefore be planned with security in mind from the start, in every city and on every route. Pakistan has reaffirmed its commitment to the safety of every Chinese national working in the country (Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives [MoPDSI], 2025b), and a dedicated Special Security Division of the Pakistan Army protects CPEC personnel (Gulf News, 2019). The People's Corridor should build on these arrangements through a sequenced approach.

- **Stage 1, virtual and campus-based:** online courses, joint classes, virtual exhibitions and exchanges held inside secured university campuses and institutions.

- **Stage 2, security-cleared circuits:** small, escorted groups on fixed itineraries, cleared in advance with the Ministry of Interior, the Special Security Division and provincial Special Protection Units.

- **Stage 3, wider travel:** open tourism and independent travel, added area by area as security agencies clear each route.

Each programme in this brief should state which stage it belongs to before it starts.

The People of CPEC Host Areas

A People's Corridor must also reach the Pakistanis who live alongside CPEC projects. Communities in host districts such as Gwadar look to the corridor for jobs, skills, clean water and stronger local livelihoods, including fisheries. Local hiring, skills training and community programmes in these districts would help people share directly in the gains of CPEC, and would make the corridor more credible to Pakistani policymakers and to the communities themselves.

Why a People's Corridor Now

Two recent developments make this the right time.

The Global Civilization Initiative

President Xi Jinping proposed the GCI in Beijing on 15 March 2023. It rests on four ideas: respect for the variety of civilizations, shared human values, learning from the past while renewing it, and stronger people-to-people exchange (Khan, 2024). The idea gained wide support in June 2024, when the United Nations (UN) General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by China. The resolution made 10 June the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

Among China's global initiatives, the GCI places the most direct emphasis on contact between people. Pakistan, one of China's closest partners and home to an ancient heritage of its own, is well placed to show how the GCI can work in practice between two countries.

CPEC 2.0 and the Joint Action Plan

The second phase of CPEC was formally taken forward at the 14th meeting of the CPEC Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC), held in Beijing on 26 September 2025 (MoPDSI, 2025b). CPEC 2.0 is organised around five corridors: growth, innovation, green development, livelihood and regional connectivity (MoPDSI, 2025a). Its Livelihood Corridor focuses on modern agriculture, poverty reduction and rural incomes, while the wider Phase II agenda includes PhD scholarships, vocational training and youth innovation centres (MoPDSI, 2025a). A People's Corridor would add a social and cultural layer that runs across all five corridors.

The China-Pakistan Joint Action Plan for 2025–2029 points the same way. It includes film and television projects, sports exchanges, archaeological research, media and think tank exchanges, cultural festivals and 3,000 study and training places for Pakistanis over five years (Government of Pakistan & Government of the People's Republic of China, 2025). At present these items sit in different parts of the plan and are handled by different offices. Placing them inside the People's Corridor would give each one a named owner, a target that can be counted and a review once a year.

What the People's Corridor Means

In this brief, the People's Corridor means a standing programme of exchange between Pakistani and Chinese society, planned in advance and repeated each year. It has no physical route. Where the first phase of CPEC joined cities, ports and power grids, this part of CPEC 2.0 would join students, families, artists and professionals. The work would follow four principles.

- **Two-way exchange:** every programme should move in both directions, so that Chinese citizens learn about Pakistan as much as Pakistanis learn about China.
- **Continuity:** exchanges should run every year under long-term agreements, not as one-off events.
- **Reach:** the benefits should reach all provinces and regions, smaller cities as well as large ones, the districts that host CPEC projects, and women and young people in particular.
- **Shared ownership:** the two governments would agree the overall plan and its funding. Day-to-day delivery would sit with universities, museums, broadcasters, firms, think tanks and youth organisations, since they are closest to the people taking part.

The corridor would rest on six pillars, each with a clear aim and a flagship initiative.

Pillar	Main aim	Flagship initiative
1. Civilizational and heritage exchange	Build awareness of shared history and roots	Gandhara-China Civilization Exchange Programme
2. Education, youth and language	Build a lasting network of young professionals	Pakistan-China Youth Fellowship
3. Culture and media	Let each country see the other through its own stories	Cultural Content Exchange Programme
4. Sports	Give young people a direct experience of friendship	Jinnah–Mao Zedong Friendship Games
5. Tourism	Increase travel in both directions	Silk Road Heritage Trail
6. Institutional and professional links	Build trust among future leaders	Pakistan-China Think Tank Network

Strengths Pakistan Brings to the Corridor

Pakistan already has several assets that suit this kind of programme. Five of them stand out.

- **A shared heritage with China:** the Gandhara region was a meeting point of Buddhist art and learning that travelled to China, and Chinese pilgrim scholars such as Faxian and Xuanzang visited it centuries ago.
- **A large student community in China:** nearly 29,000 Pakistani students were studying in China as of December 2025, about 6,000 of them on scholarships (Embassy of Pakistan, Beijing, 2025).
- **Strong public goodwill:** in a 2026 survey, 90 percent of Pakistanis held a favourable view of China (Pew Research Center, 2026).
- **Cultural content with potential:** Pakistani dramas, music and films could reach Chinese viewers with good translation, and broadcasters on both sides already have a framework for joint work (APP, 2026).
- **A young population:** 67 percent of Pakistanis were under 30 at the 2023 Census (Malik, 2024), which makes youth and education exchange a natural focus.

1. Civilizational and heritage exchange

Gandhara offers a natural starting point. For centuries it linked South Asia, Central Asia and China through Buddhism, art and learning. Its value was clear in 2023, when the Palace Museum in Beijing held "Gandhara Heritage along the Silk Road", the largest show of Gandharan art ever held in China. Around 173 of its 203 objects came from seven Pakistani museums (Beijing Municipal Government, 2023).

A **Gandhara-China Civilization Exchange Programme** could build on this success. It could include travelling exhibitions, joint digs and conservation work at sites such as Taxila, Takht-i-Bahi and Swat, academic conferences and online museums open to people in both countries. A joint centre for Gandhara studies at a Pakistani university, with a Chinese partner, would give the work a permanent home. Both countries could also mark 10 June each year with joint events.

2. Education, youth and language

Education is already one of the strongest links between the two societies. The next step is to widen it and make it more two-way, by also bringing Chinese students and researchers to Pakistan. A **Pakistan-China Youth Fellowship** could bring together young researchers, entrepreneurs, journalists, artists and public servants each year for study visits and joint projects.

Other steps could include joint degrees in fields linked to CPEC 2.0 such as artificial intelligence, farming, clean energy and logistics; semester exchanges and summer schools; more Chinese language centres in Pakistani universities; and more Urdu and Pakistan studies in Chinese universities. An alumni network for Pakistani graduates of Chinese universities would turn personal experience into a lasting professional link.

3. Culture and media

Films, dramas and documentaries often reach a wider audience than official visits do. In September 2026, Pakistan Television (PTV) and China's Zhongshan Studio renewed their five-year agreement on documentaries, film screenings and filmmaker exchanges (APP, 2026). This gives the corridor a ready base to build on.

A **Cultural Content Exchange Programme** could pay for translating, dubbing and subtitling Pakistani dramas and films into Chinese, and Chinese shows into Urdu, English and regional languages. It could also back joint documentaries, animation and placements on streaming platforms. Reporters and editors could also spend time in each other's newsrooms. Much of the coverage of Pakistan in China, and of China in Pakistan, focuses on politics and security. Time on the ground would give journalists material on daily life, business and culture as well.

4. Sports

Young people often meet more easily on a playing field than in a meeting room. An annual **Jinnah–Mao Zedong Friendship Games,** hosted by Pakistan one year and China the next, could follow a multi-sport format for students and young athletes. Cricket and hockey are natural choices on the Pakistani side, and table tennis and badminton on the Chinese side. Football, athletics and martial arts could be added, along with one traditional sport from each country, such as kabaddi and wushu. In the years between, coaches could train in each other's academies. Sialkot's sports goods makers and Chinese manufacturers could also look at joint production.

5. Tourism

Pakistan's Buddhist sites and the Karakoram Highway hold clear interest for Chinese travellers, yet only 85,575 visitors came from China in 2025 (The Express Tribune, 2026). A **Silk Road Heritage Trail** could take them from the Buddhist sites of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, up through Gilgit-Baltistan and across the Khunjerab Pass into Xinjiang. The trail should open in stages, in line with the security approach set out above. It could begin with escorted, fly-in visits to sites such as Taxila and to Gilgit-Baltistan, and add road travel along the Karakoram Highway only once security agencies clear it. Group visas, guides and signboards in Chinese at the main sites, and a few more direct flights from cities such as Lahore and Peshawar would make the trip practical. In the other direction, Pakistani travellers could be offered packages to Xi'an, Dunhuang and Kashgar.

6. Institutional and professional links

Professional links form the sixth pillar. Doctors, engineers, lawyers, young civil servants, chamber members and women in business all have counterparts across the border with whom contact is still limited. Short placements and joint training between their institutions would change that. A **Pakistan-China Think Tank Network** could link research centres in both countries, run shared studies on CPEC 2.0 and the GCI, and present the results each year at the annual People's Corridor Forum.

Disaster response also deserves attention. The 2022 floods in Pakistan and the earthquakes that both countries have suffered show how much joint training and a shared plan for relief and rescue could save.

A Window for Host Communities

Across all six pillars, a fixed share of places and funds should go to the districts that host CPEC projects, starting with Gwadar. This window would include reserved fellowship and training places for young people from host districts, local hiring and apprenticeship targets for CPEC companies, and vocational centres run with Chinese firms on the model of China's Luban Workshops in Central Asia (CGTN, 2025). It would also fund community programmes in areas such as health, water and fisheries, chosen with local representatives.

Governance and Roadmap

On the Pakistani side alone, at least six federal bodies and every province would have a part to play, and China would have a similar spread of offices. Without one point of coordination, programmes could overlap or stall. The structure and sequence below are proposed.

Phase	Governance	Programme priorities	Lead institutions
Short term (2027)	Joint Working Group on People-to-People and Cultural Connectivity set up under the JCC to approve yearly work plans; small joint secretariat hosted by an existing CPEC research centre; national focal points named in both countries	Agree the six pillars; launch the first Youth Fellowship group; start the Cultural Content Exchange Programme; hold the first People's Corridor Forum; begin Stage 1 virtual and campus-based exchanges; open the host community window in Gwadar	Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Interior; Higher Education Commission (HEC); Chinese counterparts
Medium term (2028–2029)	People's Corridor Fund in place with multi-year support from both governments, CPEC companies, foundations and universities; annual Forum held in each country in turn; mid-term review in 2029	Hold the first Friendship Games; launch the Gandhara programme and joint study centre; begin joint productions; open Stage 2 security-cleared circuits, including the first legs of the Silk Road Heritage Trail	National Heritage and Culture Division; Pakistan Sports Board; PTV; Ministry of Interior; provincial tourism departments
Long term (2030–2032)	Secretariat publishes a yearly progress report; the corridor becomes a lasting part of the CPEC long-term plan	Expand the programmes that work; bring more Chinese students to Pakistan; grow the alumni and think tank networks; widen travel under Stage 3 as areas are cleared	Joint Working Group; universities; think tanks; private sector

Progress should be tracked through a few simple measures, such as the number of students and fellows in both directions, translated and joint cultural works, heritage projects, tourist visits and participants in the Forum and the Games. A review in 2029 would allow changes before the final phase.

Risks and How to Manage Them

Any plan of this size will face challenges. Naming them early helps both sides prepare.

Risk	What it means	How to manage it
Language gaps	Relatively few Pakistanis speak Chinese, and fewer Chinese speak Urdu	More language centres; funding for translation; short language courses before each exchange
Security of Chinese nationals	Security concerns are the main barrier to visits and contact	Sequenced approach: virtual and campus-based exchanges first, then security-cleared, escorted circuits coordinated with the Ministry of Interior and security agencies, then wider travel as areas are cleared
Steady funding	Yearly budgets can stop and start	Multi-year support through the People's Corridor Fund; a mix of public and private money
Coordination	Many offices are involved on both sides	One Joint Working Group, one Secretariat and a yearly plan with named leads
One-way flow	Exchange may move mostly in one direction	Set two-way targets; promote Pakistan as a place for Chinese students and tourists
Narrow reach	Benefits may stay with big cities and a few people	Places reserved for smaller cities and less developed areas; online access; targets for women and youth
Local benefit	Host communities should see direct benefits from CPEC	Host community window: reserved places, local hiring and skills targets, and community programmes chosen with local representatives

Policy Recommendations

1. **Make the People's Corridor a formal part of CPEC 2.0.** Set up a Joint Working Group under the JCC, a small joint secretariat and an annual People's Corridor Forum.

Lead: Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Chinese counterparts.

Timeline: Joint Working Group agreed at the next JCC meeting; secretariat working in 2027.

Target: a yearly work plan with a named lead for each pillar, and a first progress report presented at the Forum by the end of 2027.

Evidence: China and ASEAN held nearly 200 activities under a dedicated Year of People-to-People Exchanges in 2024–2025, with awards for the best projects (Xinhua, 2025).

2. **Put security first through a sequenced exchange plan.** Apply the three-stage approach in this brief to every programme.

Lead: Ministry of Interior, with the Special Security Division, provincial Special Protection Units and the HEC for campus activities.

Timeline: security protocol agreed by mid-2027; Stage 1 from 2027; Stage 2 from 2028.

Target: every programme assigned a security stage before launch, and no exchange activity held outside an agreed security plan.

Evidence: Pakistan already has dedicated security arrangements for CPEC personnel, including a Special Security Division of the Pakistan Army (Gulf News, 2019), which provide a base to build on.

3. **Make education and youth exchange two-way.** Launch the Pakistan-China Youth Fellowship and bring more Chinese students and researchers to Pakistan.

Lead: HEC, with China's Ministry of Education and partner universities.

Timeline: first fellowship group in 2027.

Target: 200 fellows a year, at least 40 percent of them women and half from outside the largest cities; a published yearly count of Chinese students and researchers in Pakistan from 2027, rising to 1,000 a year by 2030.

Evidence: Japan's JENESYS programme set out to bring about 6,000 young people from East Asia to Japan over five years with a dedicated budget (Japan Foundation, n.d.). Erasmus+ has a budget of €26.2 billion to support some 10 million participants in 2021–2027 (European External Action Service, 2021).

4. **Open a host community window.** Reserve places and funds for the districts that host CPEC projects, starting with Gwadar.

Lead: Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives, the Government of Balochistan and CPEC companies.

Timeline: pilot in Gwadar in 2027; extended to other host districts from 2028.

Target: at least 20 percent of fellowship and training places for young people from host districts, and yearly reporting of local hiring by CPEC companies.

Evidence: China has opened Luban Workshops for vocational training in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (CGTN, 2025).

5. **Fund culture, heritage, sport and tourism over several years.** Create a jointly funded People's Corridor Fund for the Gandhara programme, the Cultural Content Exchange Programme, the Friendship Games and the Silk Road Heritage Trail, and mark 10 June each year with joint events.

Lead: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, National Heritage and Culture Division, Pakistan Sports Board and provincial tourism departments, with Chinese counterparts.

Timeline: Fund in place by 2028; first Friendship Games in 2028.

Target: Chinese visitor arrivals raised from 85,575 in 2025 to 150,000 by 2030, and at least ten translated or jointly produced films, dramas or documentaries a year.

Evidence: Pakistan's Fulbright programme, run through a binational commission since 1951, has supported about 4,100 Pakistanis, which shows the value of steady, multi-year funding (United States Educational Foundation in Pakistan, 2022). Kazakhstan offers Chinese tourists visa-free stays and received more than 650,000 of them in 2024 (CGTN, 2025).

Expected Outcomes

The corridor would bring lasting gains to both countries and to CPEC itself.

For Pakistan, it would widen access to Chinese universities, technical training and research, open a large new audience for Pakistani dramas, films and heritage, and bring more Chinese tourists to areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Young people in every province would see a direct personal benefit from CPEC.

For China, it would build a wider base of public understanding in a key partner country. Chinese firms would gain a larger pool of Pakistani graduates who speak Chinese and know Chinese working practices. The corridor would also give the GCI a practical, well-documented example in South Asia.

For CPEC, closer contact between people would make projects easier to deliver, help local communities see and share in the benefits, and give the partnership broad public support that carries beyond any single project cycle.

By 2032, success would be visible in a few measurable results.

- A two-way education flow, with a published yearly count of Chinese students and researchers in Pakistan reaching 1,000 a year by 2030.
- More than 1,000 Youth Fellowship alumni, at least 40 percent of them women.
- About 150,000 Chinese visitors a year by 2030, some 75 percent above the 2025 level.
- At least a fifth of fellowship and training places taken up by young people from CPEC host districts.
- Public goodwill sustained and tracked through repeat surveys such as those of the Pew Research Center and Gallup Pakistan.

Conclusion

The first phase of CPEC showed how infrastructure can strengthen economic links between two countries. The second phase can show how two societies can connect with each other. A People's Corridor based on the ideas of the Global Civilization Initiative would give the Pakistan-China relationship a human foundation to stand beside its strategic and economic ties.

Pakistan and China have already built roads, power plants, ports and economic zones together. The next task is to build something harder to see but just as important: a lasting bridge of understanding between their people. The 75th anniversary year is a fitting moment to begin. The friendship has been kept strong by governments for three quarters of a century. The People's Corridor would give the next generation of students, artists, athletes and researchers their own part in keeping it.

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