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ECONOMIC AND TOURISM DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A LOCAL STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVE FROM GILGIT-BALTISTAN, PAKISTAN

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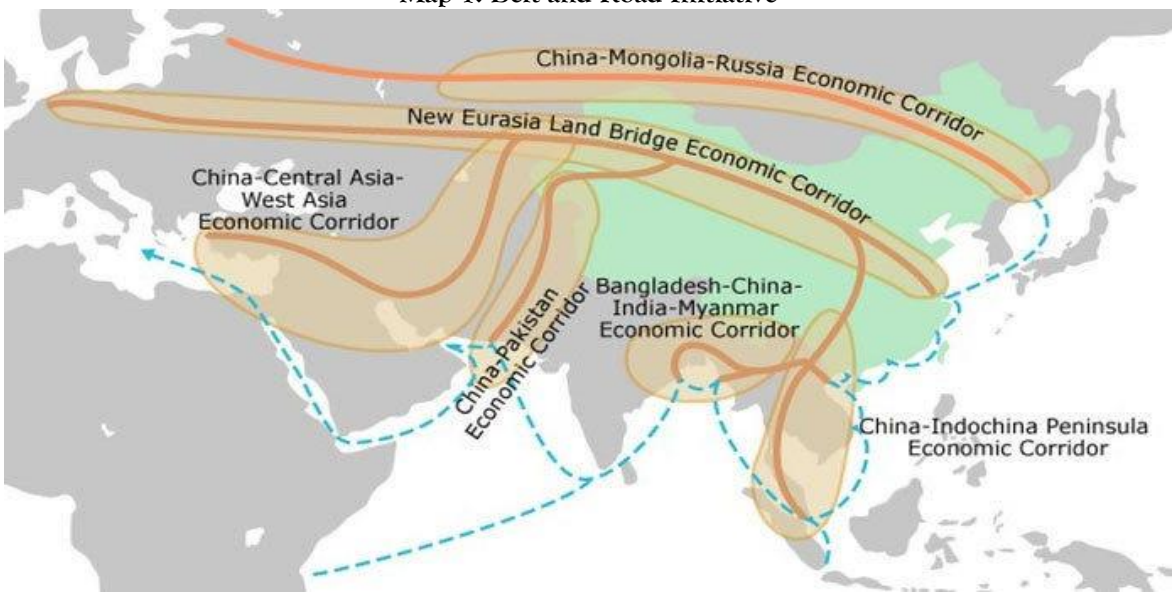
Abstract

The primary objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are to enhance connectivity, advance infrastructure development, facilitate trade, and foster people-to-people connectivity to promote inclusive development in partner countries. Infrastructure projects under the BRI have enhanced tourism and economic activities in partner countries. Therefore, the current research explores the role of the BRI in tourism and economic development in Gilgit-Baltistan from the stakeholders' perspective. Therefore, to achieve the objective of the study, we employed the Partial Least Square Method (PLS-SEM), and the data were processed using Smart PLS-4 software. Primary data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire in the study area. The results reveal that the BRI has a significant and positive effect on tourism development in Gilgit-Baltistan. On the same note, the results of the study show that the BRI has a significant and positive effect on the economy.

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled the BRI, also known as One Belt and One Road (OBOR). Since its inception in 2013, the BRI has grown to include a wide range of infrastructure initiatives, trade enhancement, and tourism development across Asia, Africa, and Europe (Hongyu, 2023; Ahmed & Ullah, 2023). The BRI comprises six corridors (Map 1), representing a modern iteration of the Silk Road. In 1877, the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term "Silk Road," using the expressions Seidenstrasse (Silk Road) and Seidenstrassen (Silk Roads). Historically, these routes were instrumental in facilitating cultural exchanges between the West and the East, traversing the Asian continent and involving traders, pilgrims, explorers, soldiers, and citizens of China and other regions of the world (Johnson, 2015). The Old Silk Road was not only a trade route but also facilitated the expansion of Buddhism in Asia through Gilgit-Baltistan (Hussain, 2018). For centuries, the Silk Road has been used for trade and commerce by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Map 1: Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Google Map

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a significant component of the BRI, exemplifies this transformation by linking China's western regions to Pakistan's Gwadar port. This connection enhances transportation infrastructure and establishes new avenues for tourism (Alam, 2020; Ali et al., 2017). Initially, the Chinese government's total investment in CPEC projects was 46 billion USD and later increased to 62 billion USD. CPEC has the potential to enhance economic growth and long-term prosperity in all regions (Khan & Ahmed, 2024). In addition to economic benefits (Fazal et al., 2023), the projects under CPEC are important from the perspective of strategy and the military (Khurshid et al., 2018). These projects will enhance employment opportunities and reduce poverty in Pakistan (Manzoor et al., 2017). Similarly, the quality of life will improve because of the CPEC projects in Pakistan (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, CPEC projects have the potential to play a role in integration and enhance economic and social development (Ali, 2015). The key threats to CPEC projects are political instability and terrorism (Irshad et al., 2015). Therefore, ensuring political stability is key to obtaining the maximum benefits and proper implementation of the projects.

Gilgit-Baltistan is a gateway to CPEC and has huge potential to gain maximum benefits from the Corridor. Gilgit-Baltistan, formerly known as the "Norther Areas of Pakistan" has a unique geography. It is bordered by the Xinjiang province of China, Indian-occupied Kashmir, and Ladakh, and the Wakhan belt separates it from the Central Asian countries (Hussain, 2018). The long history of the relationship between Gilgit-Baltistan and China and the relationship between Hunza and the Qing Empire dates to 1761 (Lin, 2009).

Gilgit-Baltistan has the world's highest mountain ranges, and the region's natural beauty is a source of attraction for local and foreign tourists. Three mountain ranges in the region, namely the Karakorum, Himalaya, and Hindu Kush and other 50 peaks have attracted travelers from around the world. Other attractions include glaciers and wild rivers in this region. The expansion of the KKH has attracted international and national tourist inflow to Gilgit Baltistan (Karim, Muhammad & Ullah, 2020a; Karim et al., 2020b).

The current research study explores stakeholders' views on the role of belt and road initiatives in tourism and economic development in Gilgit Baltistan. The overall study was divided into five sections. The first part discusses an overview of the Belt and Road Initiative, and a thorough literature

review is presented in the second section. The third part of the study highlights the materials and methods, followed by the results. Finally, the chapter is concluded in the last section.

Literature Review

Many studies (Menhas et al., 2019; Rehman et al., 2018) have examined the influence of the BRI on various aspects such as the economy, society, and environment. Zulfaqar et al. (2023) and Mahmood et al. (2022) find that BRI and CPEC projects play a pivotal role in improving infrastructure and connectivity, which enhances tourism and increases economic opportunities. However, some studies (Muhammad et al., 2020) have highlighted the environmental issues associated with CPEC projects. Similarly, many studies (Ahmed et al., 2025; Khan & Ahmed, 2024; Gul et al., 2023; Muhammad et al., 2023; Ullah et al., 2018) have explored the role of the CPEC in tourism and culture.

Ahmad and Ullah (2023) findings indicate that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) significantly contribute to the increase in the number of tourists by 17.2% and enhances inbound tourism revenue by 8.0%. Sustainable development goals have been associated with tourism development due to its huge economic potential. BRI was found to be more helpful to the South Asian, Western Asian, and Middle Eastern countries in the tourism industry. Such regional disparities can be explained by tourist attraction sites, accessibility of foreigners, quality of services provided in the tourism sector and amenities provided to the tourists (Ahmad & Ullah, 2023). According to the Ahmad (2021) the infrastructure projects under the CPEC are projected to have lasting positive effects on the economic growth of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). It is expected that CPEC will create job opportunities for the local population in the area. Additionally, the initiative is likely to draw foreign investment into GB's tourism sector. However, there are concerns about the potential harm to the region's natural beauty and the possible extinction of local plant and animal species due to the extensive development activities. The research of Alam et al.,(2020) suggests that CPEC initiatives could greatly boost Pakistan's tourism sector. It underscores the necessity for better infrastructure and facilities to foster tourism development, especially in Pakistan's northern areas. The study also stresses the significance of establishing halal tourism to accommodate Muslim tourists, particularly those from Gulf Arab countries. Likewise, the findings of Karim et al., (2020b) indicate that the residents regard the CPEC as a transformative initiative for the economy of Hunza. Furthermore, CPEC projects exert a substantial positive impact on the development of tourism in Hunza. Nonetheless, residents perceive that CPEC projects adversely affect the environment and local culture.

Daye et al. (2020) found that there is a positive impact on Kazakhstan's economic development. Similarly, Li et al. (2020) results show a significant positive impact of BRI on tourism development: an increase in inbound tourists is 17.2%and tourism revenue is 8.0 % to enhance tourism development. Lee and Shen (2020) argue that the BRI represents a significant and enduring endeavor initiated by the Chinese government, in collaboration with numerous other nations, to enhance trade and foster global economic development. Mamirkulova et al. (2020) found that the Silk Route has a positive impact on tourism infrastructure, promotes sustainable development in rural areas, and changes the quality of life of residents. According to Niu and Li (2019), the BRI is helpful and fruitful for economic growth in different countries. Telecommunications and airline transportation are key to promoting economic growth and reducing interregional inequality in developing regions. Liu and Dunford (2016) argue that the BRI is an open model based on a win-win approach. In addition, Wang et al. (2019) indicated that BRI infrastructure promotes geo-tourism and geo-diversity.

Huang (2016) research shows that BRI aims to connect regions like Asia, Europe, and Africa to boost economic growth and trade. China has created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to fund infrastructure. Çalışkan et al. (2019) showed that the relationship between international trade among countries plays an important role in tourism development. Li et

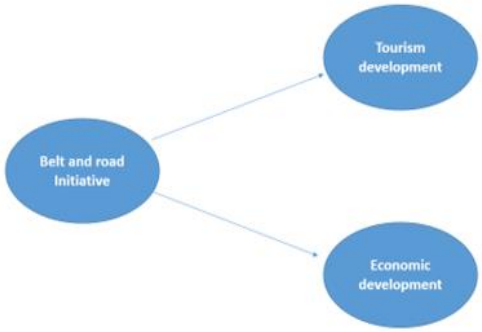
al. (2018) argue that the BRI is important to promote economic development, as initial stage infrastructure development is required to connect with other regions. Under the BRI, telecommunication, transportation services, and airways play an important role in economic growth, which would reduce inter-regional economic inequalities. The outcomes of the study by Wen and Saleem (2021) show there is a positive contribution to promoting trade. In addition, infrastructure development will boost economic development in both Pakistan and China. On the other hand, the main ambition of BRI is to boost international economics in the sub-region in Asia, Europe, and Africa (Huang, 2016), which has 64%of the world's population and 30% of the world's GDP.

Murton and Lord (2020) investigated the impact of the China Belt and Road Initiative in Nepal. The main Chinese investment is in construction in remote areas and border villages. People perceive that the BRI will improve the standard of living of the people in Nepal and have a significant impact on economic development. Deng and Hu (2019) explored that the BRI aims to enhance regional tourism development in the participating countries. In addition, they found that the BRI has positive spillover geographic and cultural proximity effects. Finally, the massive BRI project promotes sustainable industrialization to enhance sustainable development (Zhao et al. 2020).

Material and Methods

This study examines the BRI's impact on tourism and economic development in Gilgit-Baltistan. The BRI is viewed as the primary factor influencing both tourism and economic development (Figure 1). Enhancements in transportation infrastructure, accessibility, and regional integration are anticipated to boost tourism. Investments associated with the BRI are expected to drive economic expansion by improving trade, investment, and productivity. Tourism and economic development are considered parallel outcomes that are directly impacted by the BRI.

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework



In this study, we utilized Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) for empirical analysis, which facilitates the estimation of causal relationships in models incorporating latent variables. Data was collected using a questionnaire divided into three sections. The first section covered demographic details such as gender, area, age, and occupation. The following sections included questions related to three latent constructs: Road Initiatives, tourism development, and economic development. All questions concerning the latent constructs were rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5. The study selected 240 respondents from different districts of Gilgit-Baltistan, consisting of 106 male and 134 female participants.

Results

This study employs the PLS-SEM approach to investigate stakeholders' perceptions of the BRI's impact on tourism development and the economy in Gilgit-Baltistan. Initially, construct validity and reliability were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and composite reliability.

Table 1 Construct reliability and validity

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
BRI	0.773	0.778	0.854	0.595
ECD	0.789	0.795	0.854	0.540
TRD	0.762	0.761	0.848	0.583

As shown in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha values for all constructs are higher than 0.70, indicating internal consistency. Likewise, composite reliability measures construct reliability, and the values of composite reliability are higher than 0.70, indicating good reliability. The estimated values for both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability of the latent construct were found to be above the advised minimum of 0.5. (Latan & Noonan, 2017). The AVE exceeded its recommended value of 0.5 (Hair et al., 2013; Wong, 2013), suggesting that the constructs were valid, as they captured a significant portion of the variance in their respective indicators.

Table 2 Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) – Matrix

	BRI	ECD	TRD
BRI			
ECD	0.663		
TRD	0.657	0.795	

The HTMT values in Table 3 demonstrate that all constructs are sufficiently distinct from one another, as each value is below 0.80. This lack of overlap supports the validity of the model. Additionally, the Fornell and Larcker method was employed to assess discriminant validity, and the results in Table 4 indicate that all three constructs satisfy the Fornell-Larcker criterion for discriminant validity. This is because the square root of each construct's AVE is larger than its correlations with the other constructs in the model.

Table 3 Fornell-Larcker Criteria

	BRI	ECD	TRD
BRI	**0.771**		
ECD	0.534	**0.735**	
TRD	0.511	0.624	**0.764**

Note: Values on the diagonal (bolded) are square root of the AVE while the off diagonals are correlations

The variance inflation factor (VIF) was employed to identify collinearity issues among the set of predictors. The recommended value of VIF should be five or lower (Hair et al., 2017). The VIF values were below 5 for all items, indicating that multicollinearity was not a significant issue.

Table 4 Structural Model

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P value
BRI->ECD	0.534	0.540	0.064	8.395	0.000
BRI->TRD	0.511	0.518	0.062	8.174	0.000

Before estimating the regression model, the researcher performed all the pre-testing steps of PLS-SEM. Therefore, two hypotheses were tested, and the results are presented in Table 4.

Hypothesis 1: "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have positive and significant effect on economic development"

From Table 5, the coefficient of BRI → ECD is 0.534 which shows a positive relationship between BRI and ECD, and the t-statistics are higher than the 1.96 critical value, showing a significant relationship. The p-value is 0.05, implying a significant effect of the BRI on economic development in Gilgit-Baltistan. The outcomes of Hongyu (2023) also showed that the BRI has played a crucial role in promoting economic progress in developing Asian countries over the last decade. The CPEC has significantly boosted Pakistan's infrastructure development and economic expansion. Ali (2023) indicates that the CPEC plays a crucial role in advancing infrastructure, boosting tourism, and fostering economic growth in Pakistan. Kousar et al. (2018) suggest that the CPEC will bring a substantial influx of foreign direct investment to Pakistan. The CPEC is anticipated to boost China's trade prospects by opening a new market for its products.

Hypothesis 2: "Belt and Road Initiative have positive and significant effect on tourism development"

The coefficient of BRI → TRD is 0.511 which indicates a positive relationship between BRI and TRD, and the t-statistics are higher than the critical value of 1.96, showing a significant relationship. The p-value is 0.000, which is smaller than 0.05, indicating a significant effect of the BRI on tourism development in Gilgit-Baltistan. Previous studies (Nazneen et al., 2022) have demonstrated that the BRI significantly influences tourism development in the region. The local community benefits from road and infrastructure development associated with BRI projects, which in turn enhances tourism development in the area

(Nazneen et al., 2019; Ullah et al., 2018). The findings of Kanwal et al. (2020) also indicate that the perceived effects of CPEC's road and transport infrastructure have a positive correlation with community support for tourism. Additionally, perceived tourism benefits and community satisfaction serve as mediators.

Table 5 Model Fit

	Saturated model	Estimated model
SRMR	0.080	0.121
d_ULS	0.587	1.343
d_G	0.166	0.224
Chi-square	231.891	282.643
NFI	0.787	0.741

The results of the model fit are shown in Table 5. The SRMR was used to assess the goodness of fit between the projected and estimated models (Brown, 2006). An SRMR value of 0.08 or lower signifies that the model is a good fit and is deemed acceptable. The findings indicate that the SRMR value of the model is 0.080, which is below the threshold value of 0.08; thus, our designed model demonstrates a satisfactory fit.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The objective of the current research is to examine stakeholders' perceptions of the influence of the BRI on tourism and economic development in Gilgit-Baltistan. To achieve the research objective, we employed the Partial Least Square Method (PLS-SEM) approach, and for empirical analysis, we used Smart PLS software. The research outcomes show that the BRI has a positive influence on tourism development in Gilgit-Baltistan. The study results also revealed that the BRI has a positive and significant effect on economic development. Therefore, policymakers should focus on improving tourism services and infrastructure in the study area. Moreover, the law-and-order situation is adversely affecting CPEC projects; therefore, measures are required to improve law and order in the area.

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