

MANAGING CROSS-CULTURAL DYNAMICS IN EMERGING MARKETS: EVIDENCE FROM CHINESE- INVESTED ENERGY ENTERPRISES IN PAKISTAN UNDER CPEC

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Abstract

This study explores how cultural diversity affects communication, collaboration, conflict, and outcomes in Chinese-invested energy enterprises in Pakistan under CPEC. Drawing on interviews with Chinese and Pakistani employees at different levels, it identifies key themes shaping workplace dynamics. The findings show that Chinese staff often hold leadership roles, while Pakistani employees manage operational work, creating structural imbalances. Communication gaps, contrasting leadership styles, and differing views on time frequently cause tension. Conflicts, especially over prayer breaks, overtime, and technical misunderstandings, were eased through bilingual mediation, hybrid communication tools, and respect for cultural norms. When integration worked well, it boosted innovation, morale, and compliance; when it failed, it led to mistrust, delays, and staff turnover. The study concludes that lasting collaboration depends on culturally aware leadership, bilingual systems, and inclusive HR policies that adapt to local realities and build everyday trust.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Management, Cpec, Chinese-Invested Enterprises, Communication Barriers, Team Dynamics, Project Outcomes, Emerging Markets.

Introduction

In the context of globalization, the importance of understanding cultural diversity in cross-cultural contexts is vital to multinational operations (Chang et al., 2023). Asia, and particularly China and Pakistan, provides unique challenges to team integration and organizational integration (Safdar, 2024). Emerging markets, particularly cross-cultural management in Asia, have been the focus of less research (Menon, 2024). The cross-cultural challenges that energy firms face due to inexperience in cross-cultural management are not unique to firms operating under CPEC, as overseas expansion by

Chinese firms has been notable (Ullah et al., 2024). Contributions to the energy sector in Pakistan are commendable, but considerable managerial challenges persist (Imakwuchu & Billy, 2018).

The most significant of these challenges is still communication (Iqbal & Masroor, 2023). In the case of Chinese expatriates and Pakistani employees, cultural and even non-verbal communication barriers are documented, and so are the complications that these barriers present (Jabbar & Jabbar, 2025). The lack of alignment of values and belief systems is one of the most common, and potentially destructive, clashes that can lead to conflict, lack of cohesion, and failure of the project (Mazhar & Iqbal, 2022). Differences in working styles and especially in work ethic, time orientation, and approaches to problem-solving (Liu et al., 2020), can lead to collaboration friction (Karlsen & Nazar, 2024). Integration difficulties are compounded by leadership behaviours rooted in organizational culture that are not aligned with local expectations (Sharma & Makhija, 2024).

Balancing the local context and the corporate identity is yet another challenge (Safdar, 2025). There are sovereign legal boundaries, Islamic culture, and social intimacy for all Chinese enterprises in Pakistan (Sheeraz et al., 2022). Motivation and engagement through cultural change are the primary drivers (Sulaiman, 2024). To maintain profitability and mitigate the risk of employee attrition, thoughtful accommodation of different aspirations is required (Morin & Talbot, 2023). Lack of accommodation will likely result in lack of engagement, poor performance, and the risk of failure (Mumtaz & Nadeem, 2024).

The impact of poorly aligned practices speaks to the need for contextualized approaches to challenges and reinforces the value of contextualized frameworks (Guillouet et al., 2024). Tensions in the system and relations of cross-border Chinese energy enterprises demonstrate the value of addressing the system and relation tensions (Shahbaz et al., 2024). Tension of culture manifests through different leadership styles, social and technical organization of work, and different communication routines (Huang et al., 2024). The conflicts of integration and operational target attainment bring forth an enormous challenge (Erfan, 2024). Cultural insensitivity in the HRM system will bring dysfunction to the whole system and disorderly functioning to the system (Murphy, 2023). The impact of poor alignment will include the loss of communication, trust, and the delivery of the work (Backmann et al., 2020).

Regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, this study investigates the cross-cultural challenges faced by diversified teams within the Chinese-invested energy industry within Pakistan. These challenges include structural asymmetries, language differences, and cross-cultural friction. Findings uncovered that while Chinese employees within the Pakistan teams assumed the operational roles, the Chinese managers held all the power and strategic positions. Communication, under the constraints of limited English and indirect vs direct communication styles, and reliance on third-party translators, proved to be a persistent challenge. There are adaptations, such as the use of simplified forms of English, hybrid forms of communication, and reverence to religious obligations, while variations in patterns of work, expectations of leadership, and HR principles within the teams continue to fuel friction. Integration of

teams and collaboration at work, while joint alignment on regulatory requirements is met, promotes high levels of innovation and morale, while misalignment promotes high levels of distrust, attrition, and delays. Decent project success under CPEC coordination hinges on weakly aligned communication in English, cross-culturally empathic leadership, and HR integration to command effusive morale.

Literature Review

At the highly acclaimed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China makes joint investment ventures into Pakistan's energy sector. Each project needs effective collaboration between Chinese supervisors and Pakistani team members. However, barriers to collaboration posed by differences in culture, practice and structure of organizations, languages, and attitudes of managers tend to complicate joint Pakistan-China managerial relations. Established to stimulate economic development, CPEC and the CPEC joint trade ventures were built during the 2020s infrastructure of energy and trade (Nawaz et al., 2020). The bond between China and Pakistan has developed since relations were built in 1950, mutual relations and assistance often being called "all-weather". Within the construction of the CPEC, China established the 62 billion investments, signaling the value placed on mutual economic partnership (Safdar, 2024). The opinions of different groups are not cohesive: the civilians focus on the aspects of development, while the military sees the CPEC as a tool of strategy to minimize U.S. dominance (Gao & Zhen, 2023). According to Ullah et al. (2024), while there are short-term benefits to the relationship for China, the long-term costs for Pakistan are significant. The relationship-building and knowledge-sharing aspects of the exchanges between Chinese and Pakistani personnel are crucial (Mukhtar et al., 2022).

Scholars such as Khan et al. (2023) highlighted that among the positive impacts attributed to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are the enhancement of infrastructure and the creation of jobs. However, heightened terrorism and instability in Pakistan pose geopolitical complications for China (Wen & Saleem, 2021). Even after the commissioning of more than half of Pakistan's CPEC energy projects, the country continues to grapple with circular debt, shortages, and other inefficiencies in the energy sector. The energy sector remains the priority, with an investment of nearly 33.79 billion USD targeted at 17,045 MW by 2030 (Mirza et al., 2019). Expected benefits involve an increase of 2.5% to the GDP and an increase in the workforce. However, challenges in the system persist. The circular debt problem stems from the problem of delayed payments, which leads to lucrative opportunities and the culmination of lawsuits and arbitration (Safdar, 2024). The ease of militant attacks on projects and the people involved (Khan & Bukhari, 2024) and economic factors, such as instability, currency depreciation, and fiscal deficits, lead to a loss of confidence in the economy (Hussain et al., 2023). The signing of bilateral contracts that focus on smart grids and other renewable energy tools has proven that confidence still exists (Afzal et al., 2023). However, smart cultural integration with cross-cultural coordination remained a problem. Cross-cultural management thus emerges as defining challenge, with leadership, communication, and decision-making differences obstructing delivery (Mukhtar et al., 2022).

Aside from the culture, problems such as delays in the supply chain and mismatches in the grid infrastructure led to inefficiencies for these businesses as well (Ullah et al., 2024). Bureaucratic delays in securing land, clearing customs, and shifting tariffs increase unpredictability (Khan & Bukhari, 2024). Conflicts in the land and employment issues lead the communities to protest, which indirectly impacts the development of the infrastructure. An understanding of the culture is imperative. Political, socio-economic, and ideological models influence practices of leadership, communication, and problem solving (Safdar, 2024). While there is an increase in cross-cultural conflict (Khan & Huraira, 2024). Confucian Chinese managers prefer to engage in communication that is less direct (Noman et al., 2023), while Pakistanis do the opposite (Kumar et al., 2022). These differences increase the likelihood of misinterpretation. While age and rank govern one's position in a Chinese corporation (Lo & Nguyen, 2023), in Pakistan, authority rests on religious and kinship ties (Mazhar & Iqbal, 2022). This suggests that disparate norms on authority impact the integration of vertical and horizontal lifters of a team.

In family-owned Pakistani businesses, trust is highly valued (Arif et al., 2023). 'Paternalistic leadership' styles predominately characterize Pakistani businesses, meaning that leaders are expected to combine authority with care. Local trust systems, such as 'Hawala', priorities informal agreements over formal contracts (Mukhtar et al., 2022). In contrast, Chinese firms embrace decision-making on a collective basis (Liu et al., 2021). This collective approach is said to undermine negotiations, which are central to Pakistan's business culture (Fan et al., 2022). Moreover, Chinese state-owned enterprises' organizational discipline and long working hours are likely to clash with local business hours, which are flexible to accommodate prayer (Huang et al., 2024). Pakistani managers are expected to provide an opportunity to consult as part of a decision (Warraich, 2024). Many Chinese businesspeople use Mandarin, which may result in gaps in technical discourse and contribute to communication problems (Azhar, 2024). This is compounded by a lack of training and interpreters. Cross-cultural management was explained under cultural factors, values, and decision-making (Arif et al., 2023). Adaptation is possible with high cultural intelligence, which is said to support collaboration (Ng et al., 2024). For multinational companies, cultural intelligence utilizes HR systems (Lo & Nguyen, 2023). Training and awareness are essential to bridge gaps. Intercultural cohesion is built through investment in gaps in intercultural awareness (Demes, 2023). Awareness facilitates integration, which is crucial for cohesion. Ethnography is increasingly recommended to ground context-specific dynamics in IHRM theory, which is largely fragmented.

Methodology

This study adopted an inductive research approach, which is consistent with interpretivism and a qualitative approach. This study utilized semi-structured interviews which recorded rich and detailed data from individual, collective and organizational levels. For this study, five Chinese-invested energy enterprises in Pakistan were selected as case organizations. In each enterprise, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted, which provided a total of 60 interviews. The interviewees

were divided into three groups: two senior management (whose interviews focused on strategic perspectives related to cross-cultural management challenges), four middle management (who provided practical insights into typical challenges encountered in the field), and six general employees (who offered frontline perspectives on culture shock, communication styles, and interpersonal interaction), including both Chinese and Pakistani participants.

Notably, there was a lack of Pakistani inclusion in the senior management position. Chinese participants of the interviews were in Chinese, while Pakistani participants were in English. For Pakistani interviewees with limited English skills, a translator was arranged by the organization, a bilingual employee. The interview was conducted in Urdu, which was later translated to English. For consistency and higher reliability, the final transcripts were all in English. The sample size was determined by data saturation. The criteria for participant inclusion were based on the ascertainment of cross-cultural team participation, a minimum of one year's experience with the organization, and the willingness to share honest and reflective narratives on their experience. The qualitative data was organized and thematically analyzed through NVivo software.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the study and integrates primary findings with existing literature. It indicates the lived experience of the participants in relation to cultural plurality, the obstacles faced in cross-cultural relationships, and the effect of these relationships on cooperation, trust, and results of the projects in the China-invested energy sector in Pakistan.

Experience with Cultural Diversity

Table 1

Thematic Analysis for Experiences with Cultural Diversity

Theme	Subtheme
1. Nature of Cultural Diversity	Multinational Team Composition Roles Based on Expertise
2. Communication Dynamics	Communication Barriers Adaptation in Communication
3. Cultural Awareness and Adaptation	Prior Cross-Cultural Exposure Learning and Adjustment
4. Collaboration and Integration	Teamwork Experience Informal Interactions
5. Organizational Practices	Management Approach Inclusivity Measures
6. Challenges of Cultural Diversity	Work Style Differences Trust and Relationship Building

Theme 1: Nature of Cultural Diversity.

In Pakistan's Chinese-invested energy companies, the Chinese and Pakistani employees

attain different levels of authority and responsibility, resulting in lopsided imbalances in work culture. Chinese employees largely dominate management and strategic positions, while the Pakistanis take on operational, financial and external liaison roles. “Our team comprises six Chinese and six Pakistani employees... Pakistanis handle inspections and external coordination, and Chinese manage administration and safety,” recalls one manager (Participant A-8). Others articulated the importance of equity, stating, “Roles are based on expertise, not nationality” (Participant A-9). Subgroup diversity can ease creativity but become a problem when trust is involved (Jones et al., 2020; Moore, 2025). While the distribution of administrative roles/tasks is often competency-based (Cizmas et al., 2020; Nissila & Virkkula, 2024), the strategic and high-level roles are still, for the most part, Chinese (Rocha, 2025; Wang, 2020).

Theme 2: Communication Dynamics

Managers in China and Pakistan implement and experience different systems of intercultural communicative behaviour. Communication patterns within and between cultures can be problematic: “Language is the biggest barrier; most Chinese colleagues are hesitant in English and avoid interaction” (Participant B-2). Another participant noticed that “Pakistani colleagues are very direct, unlike Chinese, who often communicate indirectly” (Participant A-2). Mentioning the use of “WeChat” (Participant C-5) and “organizing cultural activities during national festivals” (Participant B-3) are examples of intercultural adaptations. Trust can be diminished when people are uncommunicative (Salih, 2024). The reliance on direct speech and extreme indirect forms can be discordant (Levitt, 2022). Inter-collaborative work can be fostered through the use of simple language, digital collaboration tools, and even the alignment of cultural practice (Jabbar & Jabbar, 2025; Ye, 2024).

Theme 3: Cultural Awareness and Adaptation

Previous experiences and learn adaptability boost cross-cultural team cooperation. Staff that worked overseas described their transition as seamless, one saying, “I stayed in China for almost two years and learnt a lot about the Chinese culture...” (Participant A-4). “I have extensive experience with multicultural teams... awareness makes smooth adaptation possible...” Participant A-3 noted another. “We have to adapt our working style... respecting prayer times for our Pakistani colleagues is crucial.” Participant C-4 highlights another. This has been documented in literature where prior international experience is connected to an increase in one’s cultural intelligence (Setti et al., 2022) and described the adaptation of ‘norms’ as a means to increasing one’s productivity (Sani, 2024; Shirish et al., 2023).

Theme 4: Collaboration and Integration

Common purpose and respect are foundational to team cooperation. “Our team works like a family... integration is generally good” (Participant B-6; Participant C-1). However, “Differences in work pace, communication style, and job expectations

sometimes cause friction” (Participant A-7) describes tensions that exist in the partnership and team. “We organized annual functions, went for dinners, and even had Chinese colleagues visit my home” (Participant B-4) describes when informal relationships were vibrant, prior to security concerns. Literature describes the way collaboration works as driven by trust and respect (Yu et al., 2021), while informal relationships that foster cohesion are often lacking in high-security environments (Amosco & Galigao, 2024; Weissinger, 2022).

Theme 5: Organizational Practices

To facilitate integration, enterprises have developed various approaches. For example, “Our GM encourages all employees to improve their English... to integrate into the Pakistani cultural environment” (Participant B-8). Localization was also described as “Currently, the composition is about 40% Chinese and 60% Pakistani staff” (Participant B-6). Encouragement of inclusivity was described as, “Roles are assigned based on expertise rather than nationality” (Participant C-8). Cultural events also bridged gaps (Participant B-3). Prior studies indicate that shared communication standards and localization improve inclusion (Malik et al., 2023). The implementation of cultural programmers, as well as CSR, improves social cohesion and is regarded positively as their social legitimacy is gained (Cahyono, 2025; Iqbal & Parray, 2025).

Theme 6: Challenges of Cultural Diversity

Cultural diversity can generate some friction. Some participants noted, “Occasional differences arise... such as prioritization of prayer times versus strict deadlines” (Participant C-4). The comment, “cultural gaps exist in time management, work habits, and communication styles” (Participant C-2), may refer to some forms of cultural friction. In the comment, “Cultural interaction is generally positive... but trust takes time to build” (Participant B-1), the idea of trust-building describes a slow and, perhaps, painful process, as little legislation or body of literature stems from trust and work style. Monochronic versus polychronic work styles is a well-studied phenomenon (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2025). The lack of cohesive decision is dominated by power distance and hierarchy sensitivity (Rachwal-Mueller, 2023). Research has shown that gaps in cohesion generated by informal subgrouping can be reduced by continuous interaction and training (Hankimaa, 2021; Kalra & Danis, 2024; Zafari et al., 2020).

Figure 1

Word Cloud Depicting Key Themes in Cross-Cultural Team Dynamics



This word cloud visually represents the most frequently used terms in interviews and reports related to cross-cultural management in Chinese-invested enterprises in Pakistan. Prominent words like cultural, employees, communication, and differences highlight the core focus areas of collaboration challenges and integration strategies.

Cross-Cultural Challenges

Table 2

Thematic Analysis for Cross-Cultural Challenges

In-Depth Analysis for Cross-Cultural Challenges	
Theme	Subtheme
1. Communication Barriers	Language Limitations
	Communication Style Differences
2. Work Habits and Time Orientation	Time Management Differences
	Speed and Efficiency Expectations
3. Hierarchical and Structural Perceptions	Leadership Style Differences
	Hierarchy Sensitivity
4. Cultural and Religious Sensitivities	Religious Practices
	Social Norms
5. HR and Compensation Expectations	Salary and Promotion Issues
	Job Stability and Loyalty
6. Organizational and External Constraints	Security Restrictions
	Geographical and Structural Challenges
7. Professional Standards and Work Quality	Work Standards Differences
8. Trust and Relationship Building	Commitment and Accountability
Theme 1: Communication Barriers	

The first challenge is communication. Some Chinese staff have limited English proficiency, and problems with accents put barriers to seamless communication. This is especially true for communication in English during technical and financial discussions. One participant said, "Language is the biggest barrier; most Chinese colleagues are hesitant in English and avoid interaction, leading to misinterpretation." Another participant said, "The biggest challenge is language. Many Chinese colleagues are not fluent in English, which makes communication difficult, especially in technical or financial details." Research describes the use of translators and decision-making apps as a major barrier to the rapid execution of business plans (Woesler, 2021). Another participant said, "Pakistani colleagues are much more direct, as opposed to the Chinese, who tend to communicate in a roundabout fashion." Literature describes these problems as communication patterns from "high-context" and "low-context" (Adair et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Work Habits and Time Orientation

Differences in time and productivity perspectives may cause delays. Given shifts in workload, the personal time needs for the week – Chinese time staff work more closely, prioritising clock settings to achieve completion (Participant B-9). Pakistani counterparts often work in deliberate patterns, highlighting imbalances in productivity perspectives. As evidenced in the quote "Pakistani staff prefer to keep weekends for personal time, while Chinese staff usually accommodate urgent weekend tasks." (Participant C-1) At the end of the week, particularly in Pakistan, cultural shifts contribute to an easing of work expectations. The Pakistani staff, for personal time, before Monday, prefer weeks to be closed on weekends, suggesting work habits that could be termed 'closed'. This is more likely, but a loose reading of Chinese time could have permitted an extension of completion in the frame, but "Chinese staff expect rapid responses" (Participant B-9) clearly rejects this. The described patterns can be theorised in the context of monochronic and polychronic time frameworks (Bahrami et al., 2023; Shah, 2021).

Theme 3: Hierarchical and Structural Perceptions

Differences in culture and management explain the variances in leadership expectations. "Hierarchy awareness differs: Chinese follow strong top-down authority, while Pakistanis prefer democratic consultation" (Participant A-2). Informal local contexts may be more flexible, but structural rigidity tends to be more constrained. As one participant noted: "Chinese tend to follow structured protocols... whereas Pakistani staff often aim to reach conclusions faster" (Participant C-7). Inter-culture communication challenges also add to the complexities of the local context. Pakistani staff's resistance, especially from juniors, to give instructions points to the local structural rigidity: "Hierarchy sensitivity is strong among Pakistani staff—they accept instructions from senior managers but resist when junior staff deliver messages." (Participant C-5). This lack of alignment is reflected in literature on power distance (Farzana & Charoensukmongkol, 2023).

Theme 4: Cultural and Religious Sensitivities

The fourth theme centres on cultural and religious sensitivities. The ‘immediate’ needs of the workplace sometimes fail to take into consideration the ‘immediate’ needs of an employee’s religion. “Islam has specific prayer times, which initially caused misunderstandings,” explains Participant A-1. Participant C-4 gives the example, “Pakistani colleagues abide by prayers even at times urgent tasks need completing, while Chinese counterparts generally assume work ought to take precedence.” In the context of the religious frameworks, it is true, however, that within social frameworks, there are conditions that may be imposed on teams. For example, Participant B-8 said, “Pakistani men usually do not have contact with Chinese women colleagues outside of work.” Participant C-5, for example, described a difference in social activities that, once again, reduces opportunities for bonding, and said, “Food habits were mentioned.” These, like the other examples, illustrate the extent of cultural adjustment that is necessary in order to foster a spirit of cooperation (Khan & Afzal, 2025; Singh & Babbar, 2021).

Theme 5: HR and Compensation Expectations

A difference in employee compensation structure can lead to dissatisfaction. C-1 explained, “Pakistani employees ascertain the value of fixed monthly salaries and yearly increments more, whereas Chinese employees are accustomed to performance-based incentives.” Expectations around compensation can lead to confusion. C-2 explained, “Pakistani colleagues expect annual promotions and salary increments, which clash with our performance-based system.” Other expectations around the stability of a job are also problematic. As one participant explained, “Chinese employees value stability, while Pakistani employees often seek quick promotions and are comfortable with job hopping.” These differences and the complexities they bring to the alignment of HR and retention are outlined in the literature (Mazurkiewicz, 2020; Shinde, 2025b).

Theme 6: Organizational and External Constraints

Potential opportunities for integration can be affected by concerns surrounding security and geography. “The greatest challenges are language barriers and the decline of informal interactions due to security restrictions” (Participant B-4), it was noted. Another commented, “The security challenges and the distance of the company’s three locations tend to limit informal interaction” (Participant B-5). Cultural integration can also be weakened by over-reliance on digital tools for coordination. “The coordination of multiple locations relies on digital tools, and there is little face-to-face contact,” stated Participant C-7. Previous literature suggests that restriction of movement and excessive reliance on virtual means of interaction can lead to a deficit of trust (Morrison-Smith & Ruiz, 2020; Weissinger, 2022).

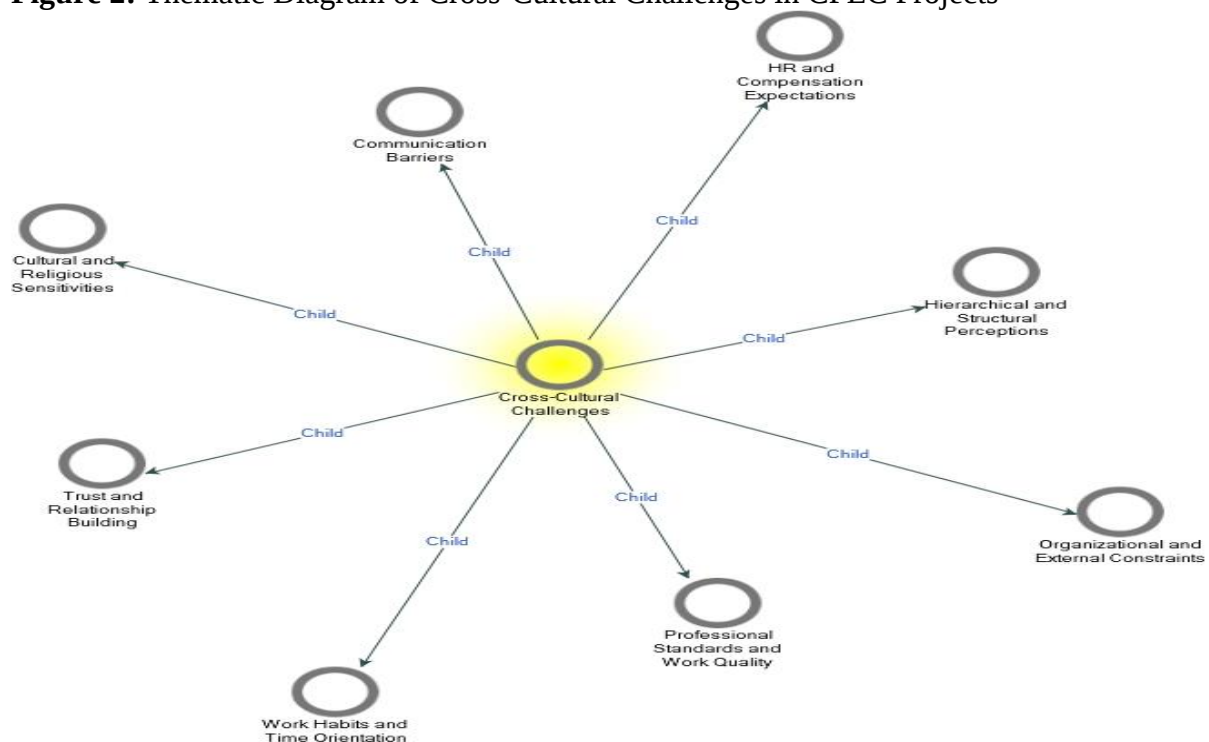
Theme 7: Professional Standards and Work Quality

Substandard work can stem from a lack of alignment on operational standards across teams. One commented, "Pakistani colleagues demonstrate strong execution... but cultural differences appear in financial precision—such as their tolerance toward minor rounding differences, which contrasts with the stringent internal control standards of Chinese practices" (Participant A-3). Another mentioned, "The main challenge is ensuring alignment on time and efficiency standards" (Participant C-3). These issues resonate with the literature on differing risk compliance orientations (Cahya & Semnani, 2024). The alignment of standards involves continuous training and, as a focal responsibility, agreed standards for all (Rabasco et al., 2024).

Theme 8: Trust and Relationship Building

Contrasting meanings of accountability can cause trust complications. "The hardest part is when agreements are not kept. For me, trust and the spirit of the contract are non-negotiable." (Participant B-1). Other respondents highlighted the importance of flexibility, as in, "Pakistani staff often negotiate adjustments post-commitment, which Chinese colleagues interpret as a lack of contract discipline" (multiple participants). Prior to the current work, previous research detail how misalignment of expectations within collectivist and formalist cultures is detrimental to the relational health of collaborative partnerships and to the collaborative output itself (Backmann et al., 2020; Rachwal-Mueller, 2023).

Figure 2: Thematic Diagram of Cross-Cultural Challenges in CPEC Projects



This conceptual map outlines the eight core dimensions of cross-cultural challenges faced by Chinese and Pakistani teams. Key issues include communication barriers,

work habits, structural perceptions, and HR expectations that impact collaboration and project efficiency.

Cultural Differences Leading to Misunderstandings or Conflicts and Their Resolution Strategies

Table 3

Thematic Analysis of Cultural Differences Leading to Misunderstandings or Conflicts and Their Resolution Strategies

Theme	Subtheme
1. Religious and Cultural Sensitivities	Prayer Time Conflicts Social & Gender Norms Language Barriers
2. Communication Challenges	Misunderstood Terms & Expressions Different Communication Preferences Speed & Urgency Perception
3. Work Style and Process Differences	Decision-Making Approaches Compliance & Work Standards Leave Policies & Benefits
4. HR and Policy Conflicts	Salary & Incentive Differences
5. Operational and Safety Incidents	Miscommunication in Technical Tasks

Theme 1: Religious and Cultural Sensitivities

Considering how workflows align with the observance of cultural and religious routines, the result has been the optimisation of work processes in the observance of prayer times in Pakistani work culture. As described by one respondent, “During a meeting or key project stage, an employee left to pray, causing delays. Later, we adjusted schedules and assigned Chinese staff during those times while respecting religious practices” (Participant A-1). Other respondents also referred to recurring delays that had been caused by scheduled collective prayer breaks (Participant A-2). The need for flexible schedules as a way to improve the situation is well documented in the literature (Kolb, 2020). International gender norms from the Pakistani context as customs and meshed with assumptions from the Chinese context are also a source of discord. “Pakistani men usually do not have much contact with Chinese female colleagues outside of work” (Participant B-8). The crossing of culturally defined and contextually sensitive parameters of social interaction, such as a pat on the shoulder as described by Participant A-8 as aggression, is documented in the social psychology literature on multicultural work environments (Rudman et al., 2021; Sani, 2024)

Theme 2: Communication Challenges

Communication gaps were primarily due to language. One employee explained,

“Language barriers cause issues; we resolve them through repeated confirmation and local interpreters” (A-1). Limited English, phonetic misidentification of 'laji', and filler expressions were interpreted as insults, leading to misunderstandings. Media preferences also added to the friction: “Pakistanis preferred formal emails, while Chinese staff used WeChat—we adopted a hybrid model” (A-3). Silence, prevalent in Chinese communication, was often misinterpreted as agreement. Literature suggests that trust, coordination gaps, and communication friction are alleviated primarily through bilingual mediation and hybrid systems (Liu et al., 2023; Taylor, 2021).

Theme 3: Work Style and Process Differences

Variation in perceptions of urgency and workplace hierarchy led to friction. Chinese employees placed importance on working quickly, putting in overtime, and achieving strict accuracy, whereas Pakistanis favoured flexibility and working towards a consensus. “Chinese expected urgent completion; Pakistani colleagues took more time,” one interviewee commented (C-4). Such differences can be explained by the cultural differences of time orientation, uncertainty avoidance, and the tolerance of ambiguity (Adeniran et al., 2024; Terblanche-Greeff, 2023).

Theme 4: HR and Policy Conflicts

Human resource policies became a site of contention. “There were arguments around the maternity leave benefits of local employees. Chinese HR policies did not meet the Pakistani standard of long maternity leaves,” (Participant B-3). Increased discontent was reported around the 21/7 rotation schedule, particularly the 7 days of rest clause (Participant C-1). Imposed financial constraints around interest-laden loans also contributed to the discontent. Differing compensation frameworks caused strain; Pakistani employees preferred fixed, guaranteed long-term security and increments, while Chinese managers estimated compensation based on performance (Participant C-1; Participant C-2). Such friction is hardly unexpected and follows global patterns in HRM where lack of localisation is identified as a critical failure (Garai-Fodor et al., 2023).

Theme 5: Operational and Safety Incidents

Operational risk was described as a failure of communication in an overtly technical environment. “In 2021, while working with Chinese colleagues on site, we encountered a communication gap that led to a critical mistake during system isolation... it caused an unexpected flow of oil” (Participant A-5). These incidents clearly illustrate the risks lack of clarity brings in technical teams that operate in multiple languages. Deficiencies have been rectified to some extent by the organisational policy of bilingual staff and well-structured task instructions (Participant A-10). Safety documentation standardisation and explicit instructions have been proven to mitigate risks in multicultural projects (Girling, 2022; Hayati & Sinha, 2024).

Figure 3

Word Cloud Highlighting Sources of Cross-Cultural Conflicts and Resolutions



This visualization emphasizes the central role of communication, language, and compliance issues in cross-cultural misunderstandings. It also reflects how technical errors, religious practices, and policy mismatches led to conflicts that were resolved through strategies like bilingual communication and process improvements.

Impact of Cross-Cultural Dynamics on Project Outcomes

Table 4
Thematic Analysis on the Impact of Cross-Cultural Dynamics on Project Outcomes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Impact on Project Performance	Positive Impacts
	Negative Impacts
2. Integration and Collaboration	Effective Integration Outcomes
	Poor Integration Outcomes
3. Communication and Language Influence	Positive Role
	Negative Role
4. Knowledge and Skill Complementarity	Combined Strengths
5. HR and Cultural Expectations	Policy and Incentive Differences

Theme 1: Impact on Project Performance

Cultural integration influences the efficiency of a project, the quality of the decisions made, and the morale of the people involved. When teams are symbiotic, they become innovative and flexible. One manager stated, "Better integration improves morale and execution" (Participant A-1), and another said, "Good integration improves morale, execution, and retention" (Participant A-2). Research shows collaborative efforts across different strata of an organization improve synergy, foster innovation, and minimize mistakes (Menon, 2024; Oluleye & Mayowa, 2025). Poor integration, on the other hand,

boosts relative isolation and the loss of trust in a system in place (A-2). Coordinated urgency also prolonged the timeline (Participant A-7). According to the literature, a lack of communication and trust reduces operational effectiveness and increases costs (Eyieyien et al., 2024; Galvin et al., 2021).

Theme 2: Integration and Collaboration

Unity and integration improve work processes, while a lack of cooperation results in the disintegration of a group. One of the participants said, "Unity and shared goals improve execution" (Participant B-1). There are also cost savings to be had by supplementing local skills with the expertise of a Chinese counterpart (Participant A-10). Integrated teams improve adaptability and regulatory compliance (Attah et al., 2024; Grass et al., 2020). In contrast, "Poor integration breeds distrust and internal division" (Participant B-1). Research indicates that an absence of integration artwork introduces the need for specialized culturally aligned HR and integration programmers to be implemented (Groenewald et al., 2024; Swami & Atitkar, 2025).

Theme 3: Communication and Language Influence

The practices surrounding communication impact the success of projects. Bilingual mediation and hybrid frameworks promote understanding: "Bilingual intervention resolved issues within seconds" (Participant B-6). Coordinating by "using the hybrid model (email + WeChat) improved coordination" (Participant A-3) illustrates effective practices, whereby integrated approaches lessen uncertainty and promote inclusiveness (Babazade, 2024). The obstacles to communication and the reporting of delays: "Poor communication delays invoice issuance" (Participant C-2) and the interpretation issues with regulatory hearings (Participant B-2). Weak communication impedes negotiation and delays execution, which is likely the case for the other regulatory contexts described (Gerull, 2025).

Theme 4: Knowledge and Skill Complementarity

There are positive impacts on order compliance and execution as a result of the growing employee diversity, especially those of Chinese and Pakistani descent. "Chinese technical expertise combined with Pakistani knowledge helped achieve financial closure," documented (Participant B-4). This was cited as an example of diversity's contribution to value. However, another participant stated, "Chinese contribute discipline; Pakistanis bring regulatory insights and networks." (Participant B-5). Collaboration is indeed an advantage, as it integrates the analytical with the contextual in significant ways to enhance the adaptability of the systems (As'ad et al., 2024; Erfan, 2024).

Theme 5: HR and Cultural Expectations

The most significant sources of discontent were regarding the equitability of HR practices and the discrepancies within the remuneration relations. With Asian employees under the American system receiving rapid promotions and salary adjustments and the Pakistani employees receiving promotions of a lower order, the

advancement issue and inequity of compensation drive discontent. ‘This drives talent attrition’ (Participant B-2). ‘Pakistani employees priorities family and traditions, requesting leave for personal events, which impacts operations’ (Participant A-3). The negative impacts of inequitable HR policies on retention and engagement have been substantiated (Opoku et al., 2024; Shinde, 2025a).

Figure 4

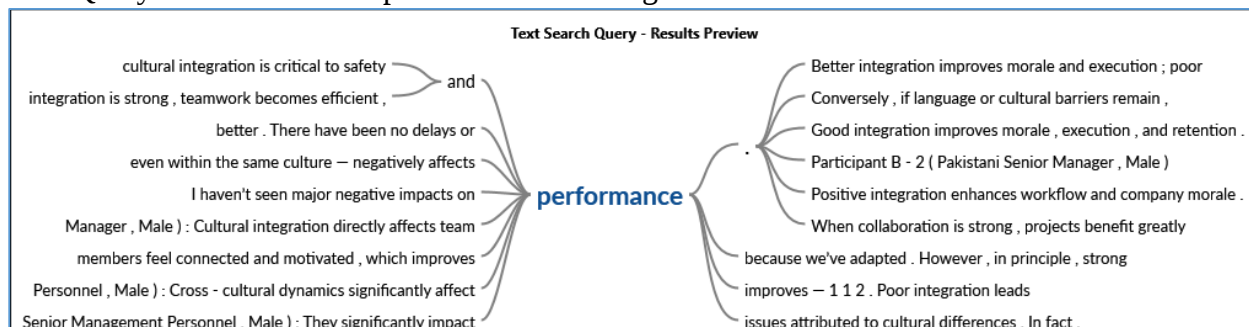
Word Cloud Illustrating the Impact of Cross-Cultural Dynamics on Project Outcomes



This graphic highlights integration, execution, and efficiency as central themes in cross-cultural project performance. Positive outcomes like improved morale and collaboration are contrasted with challenges such as delays and misunderstandings, emphasizing the dual impact of cultural dynamics.

Figure 5

Text Query Visualization: Impact of Cultural Integration on Performance



This diagram showcases how participants link cultural integration to project performance, emphasizing improvements in morale, execution, and workflow. It also

highlights the contrasting consequences of poor integration, including delays and reduced retention.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of multiculturalism on teamwork, communication, and the results of projects being carried out by Chinese-invested energy companies in Pakistan under the CPEC initiative. The study aimed to understand the obstacles present in cross-cultural management, evaluate some of the integration strategies employed, and examine the influences of varying cultures on the functioning of the organization. The study discovered that the structural mismatch of having Chinese employees in powerful strategic positions and their Pakistani counterparts holding managerial operational roles creates an imbalance that fosters functional role efficiency while fostering social and structural perceptions of inequity and fostering relationship division. Communication is the most difficult and least resolved problem, where misunderstandings are exacerbated by a language barrier, the Chinese preference for indirect communication, and the Pakistani precedence of direct communication, followed using an untrained translator. Differences are also present in the collaboration of leadership, time orientation, and human resource policies. Adaptation of practices positively impacts the integration of outsourced multicultural teams. Certain strategies, like respect for religious practices, localization practices, hybrid communicational practices, and culturally motivated CSR programmers, increase trust and performance. Cultural Chinese technical knowledge and the contextual knowledge of Pakistan were driving factors that enhanced innovation. More is required than just technical and financial resources to achieve properly integrated cross-cultural management on CPEC energy projects.

Policy Implications

For CPEC operations, it would be logical to priorities and streamline culturally aligned operations and advanced cross-cultural communication. To increase interaction and reduce the potential for conflict and misunderstandings, cross-cultural training for Chinese and Pakistani employees should be a staple focus for policy and decision makers. Employee satisfaction and retention can be enhanced by more localized and Pakistan-specific strategic HR initiatives that consider and incorporate the country's social values, religious practices, and labor laws. To augment coordination, retention, and bilingual communication frameworks, as well as hybrid digital solutions for synchronic and a synchronic coordination as proposed, will address communication and operational hurdles. Cultivating joint leadership mentoring systems to strengthen cultural adaptability will be a considerable asset. Lastly, embedding social initiatives alongside the CPEC projects within the formal CSR frameworks of the enterprises will promote social sustainability and social recognition and acceptance of focused CPEC initiatives.

Study Limitations

The data collection for the current study was limited to five Chinese-invested energy enterprises, which will likely limit the scope of the findings to the CPEC energy sector. For some of the interviews, there was a need to translate questions and answers between English, Urdu, and Mandarin, which may have led to some slight interpretation bias. A cross-sectional study design was selected, which limits the ability to study cultural adaptation over time. The lack of involvement of local communities and regulators as external stakeholders, despite being potentially influential in the outcomes, may also be considered a limitation. Finally, political and cultural sensitivities can impact the extent participants were open about the challenges experienced in the workplace.

Future Research Directions

The use of a longitudinal study design would be able to assess how cultural integration and adaptation are temporally dynamic. Cultural integration and adaptation would benefit from a comparative design looking across the transport, telecommunications, and logistics sectors. A culture assessment tool with performance, retention, and trust metrics would yield quantitative data on the effects of cultural integration on organizational performance. Engaging policymakers, contractors, and community members, along with organizational leaders, would provide additional contextual data for community-centered integration. Finally, cross-border projects would benefit from an assessment of the degree to which AI-enabled collaborative tools and translation software alleviate communicative and cultural tensions.

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