

## **AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Final Report**

Project Title: Public Diplomacy and Public Opinion: Measuring the Impact of Information and News Dissemination by the Chinese State in Pakistan

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Location: Islamabad and Lahore

### 1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

With an increasing presence of China in Pakistan, as another major aid donor, scholarly enquiry should start investigating this emergent phenomenon. My project attempts to examine the informational/propaganda aspect of the Chinese development assistance in Pakistan, which tries to establish a sophisticated and systematic mechanism of spreading pro-China information and news that eventually would change the public and elite opinions of China and its development assistance in Pakistan and the global South in general. With the short-term research grant by AIPS, I was able to conduct in-depth focused group discussions in Islamabad and Lahore on people's knowledge and opinions on China and its projects along with other major donors, like the US and the World Bank. The key findings enable me to frame better questions for a large survey experiment that will take place hopefully next year.

### 2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

#### *Key outcomes:*

Social media is the main source from which the participants get information regarding development projects and foreign aid. Almost daily the participants get aid information. They are regularly fed aid information, especially big projects funded by China. People, in general, have a very low trust on the government and don't believe they can change how foreign aid and development projects are implemented. However, they think social media could be a platform on which they can make the government as well as aid donors accountable for any mistake.

China, as a foreign aid donor, was most mentioned by the participants, and the Chinese projects were most well-known among the participants compared to the US and World Bank projects. This finding exists among both the male and female participants. There was an overwhelmingly positive view of the motorway projects funded by China. Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was very much known to all participants.

People were less aware of the "debt trap" narrative around various Chinese projects, which has been often mentioned by Western media. People were also less aware of the controversies around the Gwadar project in Baluchistan. Since the participants were all from Punjab, there could be a regional bias. However, it may also imply that negative information around Chinese projects has been regulated.

There These findings allude to the fact that information regarding Chinese aid has been regularly fed to people more successfully compared to aid by other donors, and the information has been regulated to some extent.

Nobody could name any specific aid project by the WB or the US, even though the WB and the US have had a much longer history of giving aid to Pakistan than China. Many participants held strong negative attitudes towards the US and its projects, which is related to the strong anti-US (and anti-West in general) sentiment in Pakistan. There are other possible reasons. First, the WB and the US have not put consistent effort into advertising their projects. Second, the WB and the US projects are relatively less visible and small compared to the Chinese ones.

Some participants did express their preference for aid from other Muslim countries, like Saudi Arabia, which implies that a sense of universal Muslim brother/sisterhood also exists when it comes to international development.

*Deliverables:*

Some of the key findings are integrated into my current project on how donors affect Pakistani elites' rhetoric on donors, which is going to be finished and presented in Sep 2024 at a department-level event.

The results will be written into a short research note for a South Asian journal.