OPEN PEER REVIEW

Pathology of the Structural and Institutional Barriers to Converting Cultural Diplomacy Capacities into Sustainable Economic Presence: A Qualitative Study of Iran–Pakistan Relations

Ali. Alidousti[1], Mansour. Sharifi[2*], Habibollah. Karimian[2]

[1] Ph.D. Student, Department of Sociology, Ga.C., Islamic Azad University, Garmsar, Iran
[2] Department of Sociology, Ga.C., Islamic Azad University, Garmsar, Iran

*** Corresponding author email address**: Sharifim@ut.ac.ir

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EDITOR:
Ghasem Eftekhari
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: eftekhari@ut.ac.ir
REVIEWER 1:
Kaushalya Koralage
Assistant Lecturer in Sociology
REVIEWER 2:
Asghar Jafari
Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Kashan University, Iran. Email: as_jafari@sbu.ac.ir

1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the paragraph beginning “From a theoretical perspective, cultural and social capital can generate economic consequences when they are converted into active networks and resources accessible to actors,” the manuscript draws on Bourdieu and Coleman but does not sufficiently differentiate their conceptualizations of social capital. Bourdieu emphasizes access to resources through durable networks and the reproduction of capital, whereas Coleman focuses more strongly on the functional properties of social structures that facilitate action. The authors should avoid treating these formulations as interchangeable and explain which dimensions of social capital are operationally relevant to the interview data. Specifically, the manuscript should clarify whether elite networks, ethnic ties, academic relations, and commercial relationships are conceptualized as network resources, trust-based relational mechanisms, or channels of information.

In Section 2.1, the sentence “From an economic perspective, cultural activities can facilitate commercial activity by reducing cognitive distance, increasing awareness of the characteristics of the target market, and creating communication networks” is theoretically plausible but needs greater conceptual precision. The authors should define “cognitive distance” and distinguish it from cultural distance, information asymmetry, reputational uncertainty, and market unfamiliarity. These concepts currently appear to overlap throughout the article. A clearer terminology would help demonstrate exactly which mechanisms cultural diplomacy can influence. The manuscript would benefit from specifying whether cultural diplomacy affects information search costs, partner-identification costs, reputational uncertainty, negotiation costs, or all of these through distinct pathways.

In the paragraph describing the interview guide, the authors state that it contained “12 main questions” covering cultural activities, academic exchanges, religious and cultural communication, economic presence, trust, transaction costs, perceptions,

and trade barriers. The manuscript should provide either the complete interview guide in an appendix or a representative list of the principal questions and probes. This is especially important because the article relies on secondary qualitative analysis, and readers need to assess whether the original questions were sufficiently aligned with the present focus on structural, institutional, and cognitive barriers. The authors should also indicate whether all participants were asked identical core questions and whether questions differed across diplomats, merchants, and academics.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In Section 2.2, the paragraph distinguishing interpersonal from institutional trust is one of the strongest conceptual parts of the manuscript, but the sentence “Thus, social trust can initiate interaction, while institutional trust constitutes an important condition for its continuity” should be developed into an explicit analytical proposition. The authors should specify how these two forms of trust were identified in the interviews and how coding decisions differentiated them. For example, statements concerning personal reliability, kinship, ethnic familiarity, or prior commercial experience could represent interpersonal trust, whereas confidence in banks, customs authorities, regulatory stability, dispute resolution, and contract enforcement could represent institutional trust. Providing such operational distinctions would significantly strengthen the connection between theory and qualitative coding.

In Section 2.3, the discussion of transaction costs should be refined because the manuscript currently treats “banking, insurance, security, and infrastructural costs” alongside information and negotiation costs under the broad category of transaction costs. While this may be defensible in an expansive analytical sense, it is not fully consistent with the narrower transaction-cost economics tradition. The authors should distinguish transaction costs from direct production, transportation, logistics, financing, and security costs, or explicitly justify their broader usage. Without this clarification, the later claim that cultural diplomacy can reduce “some transaction costs” but not banking or infrastructural costs may become conceptually ambiguous.

In Section 2.4, the distinction between “structural barriers” and “institutional barriers” requires sharper theoretical boundaries. For example, banking restrictions, regulatory instability, customs practices, and border governance may simultaneously have structural and institutional characteristics. The current classification places banking restrictions under structural barriers and regulatory instability under institutional barriers, but the criteria underlying this distinction are not explained. The authors should provide explicit classification rules, preferably before presenting the findings, indicating why certain barriers are treated as macro-structural conditions and others as institutional governance deficiencies. This would reduce the appearance that categories were formed descriptively rather than analytically.

In Section 2.6, the research background is informative but overly descriptive. For instance, the passage reviewing Saavedra and Spilde, Faucher and Zhu, Ghaith and Wagner, Grincheva, Franco and Maggioni, Lien et al., and Guiso et al. summarizes each study sequentially but does not systematically synthesize their theoretical or methodological differences. The authors should reorganize this paragraph around identifiable research streams—for example, cultural proximity and trade, cultural institutions and economic outcomes, trust and transaction costs, and networked cultural diplomacy—and then specify exactly what each stream leaves unresolved. The research gap should emerge through synthesis rather than through a concluding assertion that more context-sensitive investigation is needed.

In the first paragraph of the Methodology section, the sentence “This article is based on a reanalysis of previously collected qualitative data, with the analytical focus shifting from explaining the general model of the effect of cultural diplomacy on economic presence toward identifying and analyzing structural and institutional barriers” raises important methodological questions that must be addressed more explicitly. The authors should explain the original purpose for which the interviews were collected, whether the present research questions were formulated before or after the initial coding, and how the secondary qualitative analysis was conducted. Because reanalysis can create risks of conceptual mismatch between original data collection

and later research questions, the authors should demonstrate that the interview material contained sufficient depth and relevance to support the current analytical focus.

In the paragraph describing the sample, the manuscript states that "a total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted" and that data collection continued "until theoretical saturation was reached." The use of the term "theoretical saturation" should be justified more carefully because the study does not appear to follow a fully developed grounded theory design despite using open, axial, and selective coding. The authors should specify how saturation was assessed, at what interview new categories ceased to emerge, whether code saturation and meaning saturation were distinguished, and whether saturation was evaluated across all three participant groups or only at the aggregate level. Without such evidence, the claim of theoretical saturation appears insufficiently substantiated.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor's decision: Accepted.
Editor in Chief's decision: Accepted.