

# DETERMINANTS OF SUCCESSFUL INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION OF CONSTRUCTION CONTRACTING FIRMS: A CASE STUDY OF PAKISTANI FIRMS

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International Business (IB) has generally examined international expansion of manufacturing firms, whereas services particularly the construction service sector has received little attention. This study has examined the firm-specific determinants (FSDs) and home country-specific determinants (HSDs) of Pakistani international construction contracting firms (CCFs). This study utilizes the mixed method approach i.e. integrating quantitative and qualitative methods. The data has been collected through the questionnaire survey, one-on-one interviews and company reports. The findings of the study show that an extensive harmony was found between the investigated firms' firm-specific determinants (FSDs) and the past studies. Investigated firms gave high competitive value to FSDs whereas they gave low competitive value to home country-specific determinants (HSDs). The findings of the study failed to support the HSD view of previous models as providing support to Pakistani international CCFs.

Keywords: competitive advantage, contracting, determinants, emerging economies, international expansion.

## INTRODUCTION

Emerging economies' entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) has sped up the process of liberalization, privatization and institutional reforms, thus pushing many firms from the developing world to internationalize in order to counter the intense competition at domestic and regional markets (Gammeltoft *et al.*, 2010). In the wake of globalization, firms are now exposed to newer challenges as they have to compete within ever changing and expanding marketplaces (Lavan and Murphy, 2007). These challenges bring new opportunities for the firms to reorient their business strategies and raise their competitive advantages.

Pakistan has been ranked as the top reformer in the ASIAN region and among the top ten reformers worldwide by the World Bank in year 2005. It is included in the Next Eleven (N-11) most important emerging markets. Construction sector is considered as one of the largest sectors in the development of Pakistan's economy. A number of Pakistani construction contracting firms (CCFs) are successfully providing services in the international markets and increasingly expanding their overseas operations though they have not received any academic attention yet (Maqsoom *et al.*, 2013). Constructors Association of Pakistan (CAP)'s record shows that around 126 Pakistani CCFs have been working in several regions including Middle East, Asia, America and

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Africa. The presence of Pakistani construction firms in such diverse regional markets show the potential which can be harnessed by building upon firm's own competitive strengths as well by increasing support of the home country. Therefore, this research examines the significance of firm's internal as well as the country level determinants in the expansion of Pakistani CCFs in worldwide markets.

Some studies like Dikmen and Birgonul (2003), Tseng and Kuo (2008) and Lee *et al* (2011) have looked at different aspects of multinational corporations from Asian developing countries, but ignored their competitive advantages which act as determinants. Hence, it is important to understand the relevant determinants within a firm and home country that formulate the competitive advantage of a firm and enable the firm to expand in to overseas markets successfully. The aim of the current study is to analyze the firm-specific determinants (FSDs) and home country-specific determinants (HSDs) that enable the Pakistani CCFs to expand internationally.

Further, the current research has used a combination of various relevant theoretical models that concentrate on the determinants for the international expansion of firms, instead of utilizing a single model approach as used by previous scholars (Seymour, 1987; Oz, 2001; Curevo and Low, 2003) to observe multinational construction firms of specific nationalities.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to expand in overseas, a firm needs to possess certain firm and home country related advantages in order to compete against the rivals in overseas markets (Kaleka, 2002). The earlier ones are advantages promoted within the firm whereas the latter are gained by fact of being a nationality of a specific country.

### Firm-specific determinants (FSDs)

Firm-specific determinants (FSDs) are incorporated by the Resource-Based View and Eclectic Paradigm in their models under the cover of "*resources*" and "*firm-specific ownership advantages*" separately. The Resource-Based View model states that firm-specific resources which are non-substitutable, inimitable, rare and valuable are the sources for competitive assets (Barney, 1991). Sharma and Erramilli (2004) stated that firms can accomplish long-term goals and get competitive advantage over its rivals, if they contain an adequate amount of valuable resources such as assets and capabilities and use them efficiently. Hall (1993) states that firms' unique assortments of assets (e.g. land, technological equipment, reputation) and individuals that possess skills (e.g. managing people, marketing, communication) are source of competitive advantages in the global markets. Dunning (1977) recognized some of possible firm-specific ownership advantages as firm's technology and knowledge, proficient staff, physical assets and equipments, large financial capital and experience (both domestic and foreign). Hillebrandt *et al.* (1995) highlighted that the overseas reputation is vital for those firms which rely on repetitive business in an already defined market. Seymour (1987) by using Eclectic Paradigm realized that management expertise, technical knowledge, reputation and experience of foreign operations were British contractors' firm-specific ownership advantages. In examination of Singaporean firms, Cuervo and Low (2003) also used the Eclectic Paradigm and concluded that technology and knowledge, networks and reputation were their firm-specific ownership advantages.

### **Home country-specific determinants (HSDs)**

Porter (1990) illustrates home country-specific determinants (HSDs) in detail by conceptualizing the assets using different categories in his Diamond Model. These categories include related and supportive industries (e.g. facilitation of executive and technical employees, cluster formation, sharing of activities and network setting), factor conditions (e.g. natural resources, labour, infrastructure, arable land and capital), the demand conditions (e.g. size, composition, pattern and growth) and environment for competition and firm strategy (e.g. home competition and organizational and managerial behaviour). Furthermore, Porter realizes that the international expansion of the businesses can be affected by two external factors i.e. the role played by government (e.g. to offer educational support, to make policy for capital markets, to create standards and to generate demands and services) and chance events (e.g. variations in exchange rates and production factors, wars and new creations). Rasiah *et al* (2010) stated that the support from the home government is a key factor which aids the international expansion of domestic firms. Oz (2001) with the help of Diamond Model realized that the international expansion of the Turkish construction firms was supported by the rapid growth of its markets. A group of competitive supplementary sectors, for example the construction materials industry, also promote internationalization. Political leadership and a multicultural workforce were identified as additional variables in Porter's Diamond Model by Abdul-Aziz and Wong (2010) in their study of international Malaysian housing developers. Dunning (1977) terms HSDs in his Eclectic Paradigm as "*home country-specific ownership advantages*". The Eclectic Paradigm states that the size and structure of the home industry may be included in the home country-specific determinants, which help to produce market knowledge, trained workforce and management expertise. Seymour (1987) identified consultants, domestic markets characteristics (e.g. size, growth) and support from the home government as home country-specific determinants of British contractors. While on the other side, according to findings of Cuervo and Low (2003), the potential to get sufficient supply of trained work force and financial funding were key home country-specific determinants of Singaporean construction firms.

## **RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

### *Mixed method approach*

A mixed method approach has been used for this research. This approach allows the researchers to combine the results of quantitative research (i.e., questionnaire survey) with qualitative (i.e. one-on-one interviews) to get more differentiable findings. The mixed method approach is supported for its potential to capture new comings, control inborn biases in the individual approaches and harmonize strengths (Maxwell and Loomis, 2003).

Construction Association of Pakistan (CAP) provided the mailing list of 126 Pakistani international CCFs. Also the chairman of CAP certified the research by way of a cover letter signed by him, thus providing the legitimacy to the study. The response rate in this study is 66.7 % as total 126 questionnaires were sent to the CCFs who have operated overseas and out of which 84 complete responses were returned.

### *Quantitative method – postal questionnaire survey*

Keeping in view the research questions above a structured questionnaire was developed considering the factors as identified in the preceding discourse on firm-specific and home country-specific determinants. In order to ensure validity of the questionnaire, a combination of items developed and used by previous researchers on

internationalization of construction firms were adopted. Further, the questionnaire was pre-tested with the Chief Operating Officer of CAP and four executives responsible for business development in different international construction contracting firms in Pakistan. The structured questionnaire was then posted to the sample firms.

Questionnaire was divided into five parts and 27 questions. The first part included 3 questions related to the profile of the respondents. Four questions were asked related to the background of the firm which made the second part of the questionnaire. In the third part, two questions related to the international operations were asked. Open ended and multiple choice questions were designed to record the responses for these three parts of the questionnaire survey. The fourth part of the questionnaire included 9 items to get responses related to the firm-specific determinants. Finally, home country-specific determinants were observed through 10 different items. For the last two parts of the questionnaire, 5 point Likert response format was used with 1 representing strong disagreement to 5 representing strong agreement.

The data so collected was then analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). With respect to internal consistency of the survey instrument, each factor's Cronbach alpha was greater than 0.7, corroborating the reliability of the items. Later, the responses were extrapolated based on the scale: 4.5-5.0 = very important, 3.5-4.49 = important, 2.5-3.49 = moderately important, 1.5-2.49 = less important, and less than 1.49 = unimportant (Kirby and Lebude, 1998; Abdul-Aziz and Wong, 2010).

#### *Qualitative method – One-on-one interviews*

In the questionnaire, the participant firms were requested for the interviews which were planned to start after the completion of questionnaire survey stage. Five firms' executives showed their consent to participate in one-on-one interviews. The use of one-to-one interviews allowed the researchers to pose follow-up questions, attain immediate feedback from the respondents and collect the additional information. Interviews were conducted in English language, however where the participants faced difficulty, local language was used for their comfort. Respondents were assured regarding keeping the respondent's and firm's identity confidential. Interviews were tape-recorded and the findings were later confirmed with the participants.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The detail of the participating CCFs has been provided in Table 1. Seventy six of the surveyed firms (90%) were private CCFs whereas the rest eight firms (10%) were publicly listed. Primarily, Pakistani construction industry is dominated by the private sector. The surveyed CCFs were having specialization in multiple fields including building and civil, electrical and mechanical and petrochemical. Though 60% of the firms were having age more than 20 years, their year of establishment ranged from 1947 (since establishment of Pakistan) to 2007. Based on age of the firms, it can be found that these firms have been active in the construction industry of Pakistan for an average of nearly three decades (Range 5-64 years). It is to be noted here that the information provided below in Table 1 is until year 2012, as the survey was performed during 17 April 2012 to 11 July 2012.

Table 1: Profile of the surveyed CCFs

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Respondent's designation</b>		
Top management	64	76
Middle management	20	24
<b>Firm's legal status</b>		
Public listed	8	10
Private limited	76	90
<b>Experience in the industry</b>		
≤10 years old	12	14
11-20 years old	22	26
>20 years old	50	60
<b>International experience</b>		
≤5 years	40	47
6-10 years	13	16
11-15 years	13	16
>15 years	18	21

Source: Postal questionnaire survey

### Firm-specific determinants (FSDs)

The statistical results mentioned in Table 2 reveal the level of importance attached to different firm-specific determinants (FSDs) by Pakistani CCFs. The lowest standard deviation exists in the top four ranked variables, proving the least difference of opinion among the respondents.

Interestingly, the variable to top the list is “*good reputation at domestic level*”. The frequency of domestic projects undertaken by majority of the Pakistani firms is often higher as compared to the international projects done. Hence, domestic repute of Pakistani firms matters a lot to the international clients to know their professional competency and efficiency at home. Interestingly, “*good reputation at international level*”, though still considered important, stood on the third lowest number during ranking. Many CCFs believed that their good domestic reputation when showcased to the foreign clients was appreciated and helped them win the overseas projects. During the interviews conducted to understand the ranking behaviour of FSDs, interviewees duly seconded this ranking and confirmed the higher importance of domestic reputation. In the words of one interviewee “*the first and foremost access in the international construction corridor is through contractor's reputation in the domestic market which travels in the international market paving the way for the contractor to internationalize its business*”. Another interviewee explained the importance of this variable in more meaningful way by saying “*domestic reputation comes from success history of contractor which in turn gives the contractor a confidence to take up the challenge of venturing in international market, after all moving a business in another country is not only costly but also riskier. Any contractor lacking the said confidence will lack the will of taking challenge in the international competitive market*”. The ranking of this variable at the top is the manifestation of the fact that those Pakistani

CCFs which prove their mettle at home have high chances to earn their fortune in international construction market.

Table 2: Firm-specific determinants (FSDs) of surveyed Pakistani CCFs

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Rank	Remarks <sup>1</sup>
Good reputation at domestic level	84	4.62	.582	3	5	1	Very important
Experienced and capable workforce	84	4.57	.590	3	5	2	Very important
Good contacts and networks in overseas	84	4.50	.634	3	5	3	Very important
Physical assets and equipment	84	4.36	.692	3	5	4	Important
Good contacts and networks in Pakistan	84	4.29	.742	3	5	5	Important
Advance technology and wide range of services	84	3.93	.867	2	5	6	Important
Good reputation at international level	84	3.83	.824	2	5	7	Important
Internationally experienced management	84	3.81	1.131	2	5	8	Important
Large financial capital	84	3.29	1.043	2	5	9	Moderately important

Note: <sup>1</sup>Means <1.49 = unimportant; 1.5-2.49 = less important; 2.5-3.49 = moderately important; 3.5-4.49 = important; 4.5-5.0 = very important

The second highest ranked FSD was “*experienced and capable workforce*”.

Experienced and capable workforce is an attribute of an organization which determines its professionalism and efficiency significantly. One of the interviewees interpreted the result as “*organization itself is only a name if experienced and capable workforce is subtracted from it. From the very first stage of technical and financial proposals up to the award of international contract, the rich human capital of the company act as an engine which drives the company’s vehicle of success. In international perspective these two dimensions become more critical as many countries try to bring their best at such international ventures making the competition tough and highly professional leaving a place only for those who are skilled, knowledgeable and able enough to convince their paymasters about the worthiness of their technical and financial proposals*”. One-on-one interviews brought forth that not all the investigated firms appointed their Pakistani executives for the foreign assignments. In some cases, only important technical managerial staffs along with two or three executives from the administration of firm were appointed in order to reduce the cost. The remaining construction workforce consisted of Pakistani and other low wage workers. In few countries of Middle East like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman, firms had to appoint and rely on the local workforce as it was the requirement of these countries.

“*Good contacts and networks in overseas*” was ranked at third highest position among the FSDs. Overseas contacts and networks reflect the technical, social, formal and informal networks (with host government, clients and other multinational firms) which helped in international expansion of Pakistani CCFs. It was identified that healthy networking and contacts across the construction supply chain are essential to make the business moves of the contractors financially viable. One of the investigated firms made its bid competitive by putting the comparatively low rates of concreting items which was made possible by the special rate quoted to contractor by the

concrete supplier because of an already existing network and relationship between the two companies. General Manager of an investigated organization reported that “*a Brazilian firm working in Qatar directly contacted the head of the business development department of his organization and expressed his willingness to make his organization part of the construction project. The business talk was initiated based upon Head business development’s prior contacts which ultimately led to the signing of the contract*”. General Manager of an investigated firm which had prior working experience with Japanese company asserted that “*possession of business contacts makes it possible to penetrate into the market facilitating the sustainability and further growth of the company; he further categorized the business contacts of the company as intangible assets and the absence of which could jeopardize the successful future of the company*”.

Five other variables were regarded as important by the investigated CCFs. These variables included physical asset and equipment, good contacts and networks in Pakistan, advance technology and wide range of services, good reputation at international level and internationally experienced management. “*Large financial capital*” was the only moderately important FSD ranked at the bottom. Some executives mentioned that to venture abroad large financial capital was needed, but others disagreed with this idea. This variable received the second highest standard deviation among the FSDs. One of the interviewee revealed that “*the importance of this variable floats as that of index point in securities’ market. It mainly depends on the project delivery system being used, mode of payment, advance payment by the client, the cash flow of an organization and also the severity of time schedule of the project, directly affecting the manpower and machine deployment requiring huge financials in short time*”. One of the firms got a contract which was partially on EPC basis and partially on traditional contracting requiring contractor to pull significant sum of money from its financial pool. Had it not enough money in its financial pool it would have lost the opportunity in spite of its technical expertise and experienced personnel. Two of the executives mentioned that they enter the markets through ‘agents’ and ‘brokers’ with minimal financial capital. Thus in their case, large financial capital was not needed as they only needed internally sound and reliable financial capital to operate overseas.

### **Home country-specific determinants (HSDs)**

Regarding the home country-specific determinants (HSDs), respondents considered only two of the variables as important, while the remaining were regarded as moderately important and less important (Table 3).

“*Sufficient supply of trained workforce*” was regarded as the highest and important among the home country-specific determinants (HSDs). The manpower including both skilled and unskilled, required for typical construction projects is readily available and can be engaged in overseas projects. Pakistani workforce has a history of contribution to construction industry of Middle Eastern countries especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, UAE and Bahrain, where thousands of craftsman and engineers have rendered their services. One of the interviewee informed that “*his firm hired its own country personnel in the head offices in Pakistan and mobilized the same individuals to serve at the regional offices in foreign countries along with hiring of other Pakistani nationals at overseas to work at operational levels*”. Further, it was identified from the interviews that sufficient supply of workforce from home country enabled CCFs to estimate precisely for salary expenses of the work force which is very important if

firm wants its cost estimates to be realistic. Deficiency of work force pushes firm to rely on work force of other countries on higher wages ultimately increasing actual expenses much more than planned. Therefore, more the domestic hiring more is the saving on expenses.

Table 3: Home country-specific determinants (HSDs) of surveyed Pakistani CCFs

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Rank	Remarks <sup>1</sup>
Sufficient supply of trained workforce	84	4.19	.804	3	5	1	Important
Good related and supportive industries	84	4.07	.808	2	5	2	Important
Multicultural workforce	84	3.45	.803	2	5	3	Moderately important
Respond to foreign competitors who came to Pakistan	84	3.33	1.052	2	5	4	Moderately important
Rapid economic development	84	3.24	.958	1	5	5	Moderately important
Small and sporadic market condition	84	3.19	1.018	1	5	6	Moderately important
Respond to Pakistani competitors who went abroad	84	3.12	1.152	1	5	7	Moderately important
Ease to get financial funding from local banks or government institutions	84	2.71	.944	1	5	8	Moderately important
Support from the home government	84	2.57	.966	1	5	9	Moderately important
Good political leadership	84	2.07	.677	1	3	10	Less important

Note: <sup>1</sup>Means <1.49 = unimportant; 1.5-2.49 = less important; 2.5-3.49 = moderately important; 3.5-4.49 = important; 4.5-5.0 = very important

The second highest ranked HSD was “good related and supportive industries” and was regarded as important by the respondents. The outputs of many industries served as a fuel for the CCFs venturing overseas. These supportive industries included mining, manufacturing, transportation, energy, banking, insurance and so forth. The interviewees of the investigated firms opined that the importance of the infrastructure which refers to “good related and supportive industries” is undeniable in the context of construction; and international construction being a subset of larger construction industry at home is strongly influenced due to these supportive industries. The growth of supportive industries helps construction industry to get nurtured professionally and to take on larger projects. One of the interviewees elaborated that “with the passage of time, the enrichment of the technical pool of firm reaches the stage where the contractors are capable enough to venture abroad. Supportive industries have grown with time to support mega projects which have been executed in Pakistan including dams, motorways, high rise towers and real estate projects; the experience gained over the years has raised the level of Pakistani contractors enough to internationalize and compete in foreign market”.

Seven variables were regarded as moderately important determinants for international expansion of Pakistani CCFs. These variables included multicultural workforce, respond to foreign competitors who came to Pakistan, rapid economic development, small and sporadic market condition, respond to Pakistani competitors who went abroad, ease to get financial funding from local banks or government institutions and support from the home government. The lowest ranked variable was “good political



*leadership*” with lowest standard deviation among all the HSDs. It was rated as the less important variable. Pakistan is one of those countries where politics and democracy are still in their infancies and will take great deal of time to be stable and mature. Broadly, all the firms’ executives agreed that political leadership and government support didn’t contribute in promoting their construction business globally. Due to frequent toppling of democratic governments and disruption of political process, the political leadership has to go a long way to groom itself and stabilize the political institutions. Thus, it is easily comprehensible that “*good political leadership*” is not a significant determinant when it comes to Pakistani construction industry.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study has tested the determinants of Pakistani international CCFs at firm level vis-à-vis at the home-country level and analyzed how they influence their process of international expansion. Pakistani CCFs rely more on their indigenous firm based advantages than the home-country level advantages. Due to instable political conditions, uncertainty in macro-economic indicators, lack of access to reliable credits from the financial institution of country and variations in government’s overseas employment policies, firms focus more on their own strengths. They develop their own domestic repute which helps them earn good name overseas. Pakistani CCFs develop their own professional ties across the border and enhance their professional capacity of their teams to make place in the internationally competitive construction markets. In the light of these findings it can be safely said that Pakistani international CCFs depend more on their own firm-specific advantages and keep building upon them according to international best practices learnt from global experiences. They rely little on the home country-specific advantages due to risks and uncertainties involved. Therefore, the theoretical framework for the home country-specific determinants (HSDs) argument is not validated by the current research, thus challenging the Eclectic Paradigm (Dunning, 1977) and Diamond Model (Porter, 1990).

There is limitation for this study that the nature of data collected through questionnaire is based on self-judgment of the respondents and the results may differ with reality. The obtained findings of this research should have managerial implications for international CCFs from Asian developing economies (like India, Iran and Bangladesh) who share the same profile in terms of economic development, geographical proximity and construction market structure. The useful insights of the research would provide practical assistance for the CCFs in order to enhance their competitive advantages and succeed in the global markets. The current findings would further enable the Government of Pakistan to provide a more stable political and macro-economic environment and supportive policies regarding labour, credit availability and liberal export so as to improve the international expansion of Pakistani CCFs.

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