

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Challenges for Pakistan

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Abstract

The article aims at exploring the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with reference to opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. CPEC was announced in April 2015 in order to improve the livelihood of the natives of Pakistan and China by building up an economic corridor, boosting up bilateral linkages, opening up new avenues for trade & investment, encouraging people-to-people relations and framing regional connectivity. Despite knowing the fact that CPEC is an expedient solution to Pakistan's major economic troubles, this corridor is criticized nationally and internationally because of miscellaneous issues. In order to explore the expected chances and challenges, the paper attempts to address certain questions, for instances: What are the infrastructural benefits of CPEC for Pakistan? How CPEC can be beneficial for the energy sector of Pakistan? What chances it offers in the fields of science and technology? What will be the significant economic achievement of CPEC for Pakistan? What are major CPEC based national and international challenges to Pakistan and how Pakistan can counter them? Answers to these questions will help to understand the significance and achievements of CPEC for Pakistan.

Key Words: CPEC, Chabahar port and Gwadar port, infrastructure, economic development, energy sector

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Introduction

The strategic location of Pakistan and its proximity with warm waters makes Pakistan relatively important for China as compared to any other state in the region. In order to access the warm waters and ensure the delivery of its products to international market in time, Pakistan is the most suitable state for China. Due to the geostrategic location of Pakistan, which provides a gateway to China to access warm waters, China concluded the \$ 46 billion agreement with Pakistan on April 20th, 2015. The agreement is known as 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor'. It is the biggest investment of a state on a foreign territory (Afridi & Khalid, 2016). This agreement has not only strengthened Pakistan-China ties but also opened the doors of opportunities for both of the countries. CPEC brings infrastructure developments and job opportunities in Pakistan while it helps China to access warm waters for the delivery of its products.

CPEC would bring many job and investment opportunities for Pakistan (Ali, Mi, Shah, Rafiq & Ibrar, 2016). In addition, CPEC would develop infrastructural and economic sector of Pakistan. More importantly, there would emerge a highly developed network of roads, which connects the small cities/towns of Pakistan with metropolitans. In order to boost the national trade and promote the national products, many infrastructural networks amounting to approximately worth \$11 billion are under construction through CPEC (Hurley, Morris & Portelance, 2019). It is to be noted that the said projects are being financed by concessionary loans with approximately 1.6% interest rate (Mehar, 2017). Under the CPEC, both Pakistan and China will promote the pace of agriculture and industries in Pakistan, which would open job opportunities for the local population.

No doubt, CPEC would bring multiple jobs and investment opportunities in Pakistan, but it would not be easy for Pakistan and China to implement the project without any regional disturbance.

There is a debate in academic and scholarly circles in Pakistan that CPEC would be countered by India, Iran and the US in the region. India believes that once the Gwadar Port is fully operated and the delivery of Chinese products is ensured, China would dominate the region, which would ultimately reduce the strategic importance of the Indian Ports. Therefore, India declared that it would invest \$500 million on the Port of Chabahar for its extension and development (Bajpae, 2005). Nobody can deny the fact that the Indian activeness and involvement in construction of Chabahar Port aimed at deterring China in Gwadar Port. Therefore, it is argued that any sort of advancement of relations amongst Iran, Afghanistan, India and US may disturb CPEC (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of CPEC and a way out for Pakistan to remain cautious in dealing with the issues related to CPEC.

CPEC-Based Opportunities for Pakistan

CPEC is termed as the ever-largest investment of any foreign country on the territory of Pakistan with the prospects of established infrastructures, economic development, political stability and security. It has been generally believed that CPEC would connect Pakistan with the rest of world and boost the importance of Gwadar Port in many folds. It would help to build roads and railway tracks. Under the said project, the construction of Orange Line Metro worth 1.6 billion dollars has been launched in Lahore. The very commercial project, 27.1km long, is believed to bring prosperity in Lahore (Mehar, 2017).

Apart from infrastructural development, CPEC would suffice the energy needs of Pakistan (Raza, Mohiuddin, Zaidi & Osama, 2018). Under the CPEC agreement since it is expected that a project of \$33 billion would be projected on energy sector (Malik, 2015). It has been decided that under the CPEC agreement private independent power companies would work on the energy generation sector. These

private independent companies would be helped financially by the Exim Bank of China at the interest rate of 5 to 6 % and ultimately the government of Pakistan would be bound to buy the energy from these private independent companies at appropriate rates (Leung, 2011). CPEC is a long-term programme, which is intended to bring infrastructure developments and economic growth in Pakistan. However, many projects are still in process and they will be probably accomplished in near future with an impact on socio-economic sectors of Pakistan.

CPEC brings socio-economic prosperity for Pakistan as China along with its companies has initiated many projects and investments. The Zenergy Company of China is constructing the Solar Power Plant near Bahawalpur. The said plant, which is located on 6500 acre, is being termed the largest plant of the world. It is estimated that the power plant has the capacity to generate 1000 Megawatts electricity (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). Many more projects related to energy sector are under negotiation with the prospects to end the energy crisis in Pakistan. The SukiKinari Hydropower project, which is expected to generate 870 Megawatts electricity, is being constructed in Kaghan Valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The Exim Bank of China would help SukiKinari Hydro financially. It is estimated that \$1.8 billion would be spent on this project (Raza, Mohiuddin, Zaidi & Osama, 2018).

Coal energy is also part of CPEC-Early Harvest-projects. It is estimated that 5.8 billion dollars' worth coal-related projects would be completed in 2019. Amongst these projects, two power plants would generate 660 Megawatts energy; these projects would be constructed by Shanghai Electric Company. These coal plants would be the part of Thar-1 project in Sindh (Kousar, Rehman, Zafar, Ali & Nasir, 2018). The Chinese Electric Power Equipment and Technology Company would construct the Matiari to Lahore transmission electric line under the CPEC agreement, which would cost \$2.1 billion (Kousar et al., 2018). Besides, Sindh, Punjab and

Baluchistan Provinces also enjoy many projects under CPEC. One of them is Sahiwal Coal Power project, which is being constructed by two Chinese companies named Huaneng Shandong Company and Shandong Ruyi Company. This project will generate approximately 1320 megawatts electricity worth of \$1.8 billion (Naseeb, 2018). The coal power plant of Gaddani, would be constructed by the Chinese Power Investment Company and the Hub Power Company, Pakistan. This power plant is estimated to generate 660 megawatts electricity in the country. The Chinese government also helps Pakistan to construct a coal power plant in Gwadar without any interest rate (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015).

Apart from the cooperation in the generation of electricity in Pakistan, China has also committed to ensure the availability of natural gas in Pakistan. The Chinese government has announced that from Gwadar to Nawabshah, a 711 km distance pipeline would be stretched for the flow of natural gas (Irshad, 2015). It has to be noted that the gas pipeline is the part of Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project. Iran had already completed the pipeline construction, but Pakistan had shown lethargic response to IP due to two solid reasons. First, Pakistan was under the extreme pressure of the US and Saudi Arabia since these countries never want Pakistan to finalize the IP agreement with Iran (Munir, Ahsan & Zulfqar, 2013). Second, Pakistan faced financial problems to complete the pipeline project with Iran. However, right after the conclusion of CPEC agreement, China not only strengthened the stance of Pakistan over IP project but also announced to help Pakistan financially to construct the pipeline project from Gwadar to Nawabshah with the approximate cost of \$2.5 billion. The Chinese Government assigned the task to China Petroleum Pipeline Bureau, a state-owned Company of China to construct the pipeline from Gwadar to Nawabshah (Ranjan, 2015). This project would probably deliver 1 billion cubic feet natural gas to Pakistan daily (Munir et al., 2013).

The two projects North-South Pipeline Gas project and Tajikistan,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) gas project would help Pakistan to overcome the energy crisis. However, in current time it is very difficult for Pakistan to continue with TAPI since the Indian presence in Afghanistan is intended to encounter any economic activities by Pakistan. However, it is a long-term programme, which will help Pakistan to meet up its energy needs. It is ought to be noted that the construction for TAPI project was launched from Turkmenistan on December 13, 2015 where work in Afghanistan and Pakistan was planned to start in February 2018 and December 2018 respectively. However, no process has been made yet.

CPEC agreement is seemed to bring revolutionary reforms in Pakistan not only in socio-economic and infrastructural fields but also brings advancement and development in scientific and technological sectors. Pakistan would be able to use modern technologies and machineries to advance its hospitals, markets, park, educational institutions and offices. It is ought to be noted that both countries agreed to construct a Research Centre jointly named China-Pakistan Joint Marine Research Centre (Rizvi, 2015). Moreover, both countries also agreed to setup a Park near Islamabad, which will be known as 'Pak-China Science, Technology, Commerce and Logistic Park' (Ali, Rasheed, Muhammad & Yousaf, 2018). The Park would be financed by the government of China. In order to further advance, the cooperation in Science and Technology, Pakistan and China concluded that they would setup 'China-Pakistan Joint Cotton Bio-Tech Labouratory in Pakistan' (Qazi, 2019).

It is generally agreed that CPEC would double the pace of economic growth in Pakistan (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). The Chinese government and firms' investment in Pakistan would make Pakistan an economic hub for entire Asian states. The Chairperson of Chinese Overseas Port Holding Company, Mr. Zhang Baozhong declared that he would further spend \$4.5 billion on infrastructures including the construction and establishment of roads, hotels, bridges, power

plants and international airport for Gwadar region, which would bring economic reforms in Pakistan. Nobody can deny the fact that Pakistan has been under extreme energy crisis for the last one decade. The load shedding is not only affecting common people in Pakistan, but it has also negative impacts on industrial production. This energy crisis and weak infrastructures had also discouraged the foreign firms to invest in Pakistan. The Chinese investment in Pakistan, the relief from energy crisis, the strong infrastructures, and the assurance of security would attract the other foreign firms to launch their investments in Pakistan (Shah, 2016).

The industries are considered the backbone of development of economy of a country since it is one of the strongest pillars of the growth of economy. Nevertheless, unfortunately, due to energy crisis, the industries of Pakistan were badly affected. Amongst the industries of Pakistan, mostly the large textile industries and factories especially in Faisalabad were badly affected due to long hours of load shedding (Zameer & Wang, 2018).

However, CPEC has been termed as the most possible agreement to end the energy crisis and let the collapsed industries of Pakistan to be restored, which ultimately would boost the economy of Pakistan. Moreover, national economic gain from CPEC, Pakistan would enjoy the economic benefits from CPEC internationally because CPEC connects Pakistan with the East Asian and Central Asian states. The CPEC agreement would not only build up the infrastructure of Pakistan, but also makes Pakistan a strategic partner of China and a gateway to the Central Asian Republics. Since the Asian Development Bank said, that CPEC would integrate big economic powers of the world on a defined territory of Pakistan (Khwaja 2015).

Infrastructure is the main pillar of economic development since it improves the means of communication. Moreover, infrastructure includes the construction and development of roads, railway tracks,

bridges, highways, motorways, schools, hospitals, ports, airports, plants etc. Infrastructure has been termed as the second pillar of the economy of a state by the World Economic Forum. WEF (2016) believes that no nation would be successful until it develops its means of transportations and communication. It has been observed that infrastructural development would skyrocket the pace of economic development because human resources would be utilized properly, the land would be valuable and delivery of materials and goods would take place faster and sooner. Such infrastructural development would be helpful for socialization, political mobilization and social integration in Pakistan.

Balochistan is believed to be the most backward and poverty-hit province of Pakistan. CPEC is expected to bring economic and investment activities in Balochistan where more job opportunities would be created. Moreover, people of Balochistan would easily access the mega cities of Pakistan to fulfill their needs. It must be noted that besides bridging the communication gap through networks of roads, CPEC would also provide opportunities to the local people of Balochistan to launch their own business. More vocational institutions would be established to train the local people so that they can start their own business. In order to technically educate the local people of Balochistan and make them useful human resources for the country, the government of Pakistan has announced to establish universities and colleges in big cities of Balochistan (Tai, 2017).

Challenges to Pakistan in terms of CPEC

Apart from the opportunities of CPEC for Pakistan and China, they would also face certain internal and external challenges since India never wants Pak-Chinese friendly economic ties. Therefore, Pak-Chinese economic ties would never be acceptable to India. On the other hand, Indo-Pak ties have never witnessed amicable and friendly era. The abrogation of Article 370 of Indian Constitution has

further disturbed Indo-Pak relations. India being a traditional rival of China and Pakistan would never allow CPEC to be operational. Most possibly India would interfere in the internal politics of Pakistan. Moreover, it would increase its covert activities within Pakistan using the Afghan territory.

In view of these issues, implementation of CPEC would not be free of risks and challenges because this agreement will increase strategic and geographic significance of Pakistan in the region. No doubt, such commitment of Pakistan would strengthen Pak-Sino relations in many folds but would surely provoke the opponents like, the US and India to further barrel in Balochistan. Contrarily, the government of Pakistan has to avoid from such commitment and has to believe the capability of its own naval forces. As per agreement, the oil of Gulf States would import their oil to East Asia generally and China specifically using the transit route of Pakistan from Gwadar to Kashgar. Alongside oil, other goods may be imported to different countries through this route. Such a huge number of goods import and export from Gwadar to Kashgar would boost up the importance of this Port (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015).

On the other hand, the growing importance of Gwadar Port would reduce the geo-strategic status of India and Iran. Instead of using Chabahar Port and Indian Ports, the big economic powers would give preference to Gwadar Port since it would cost them cheaper and easier. Historically, India has been enjoying the unconditional benefits from warm waters since long time; therefore, it would be challenge for her to lose its strategic importance, which will certainly be countered (Mazhar, Javaid & Goraya, 2012).

Furthermore, in order to disturb the CPEC agreement, India is exploiting the ongoing disturbed situation of Balochistan. It must be noted that the insurgency and the separatist groups of Balochistan have already targeted many newly constructed projects of CPEC. India is alleged for backing and supporting the insurgency in

Balochistan so that CPEC project would face the fiasco. India is alleged for using the Afghan territory to train and equip the Baloch fighters with modern weapons. RAW is accused of exploiting the situation in Balochistan where the construction work from Gwadar to Hoshab has been highly guarded by security personnel, which are termed to be an extra expenditure, which could be spent on the construction of schools and hospital in Balochistan (Pattanaik, 2012).

India has also allied itself with Iran to possibly disturb the CPEC. It ought to be noted that the successful implementation of CPEC would boost the importance of Gwadar Port and Iran fears that the Port of Chabahar may lose its importance because the Chabahar Port is located at the distance of 72 km from Gwadar Port. The close distance of both Ports is only six hours drive due to which they act as competitors. Furthermore, Indo-US Alliance in Indian Ocean surely aims to deter the successful operation of Gwadar Port due to Chinese factor (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2008).

India had convinced Iran that the successful operation of Gwadar Port would reduce the importance of Chabahar Port while the US never wants the Chinese products to capture the international market. The identical interests of the US, Iran and India against China-Pakistan Economic Corridor have driven them to compromise on their bilateral and domestic issues and work collectively against CPEC. Iran's involvement in the group of the US and India aims to maintain the importance of Chabahar Port which it fears that right after the successful operation of Gwadar Port, Chabahar might not be that much effective. It must be noted that the leaders of Pakistan expressed on many occasions that the purpose of Gwadar Port is not to compete the Chabahar Port. Therefore, Iran had joined the group despite having serious grievances against the US.

Pakistan is well aware that the international opponents of CPEC would use either the territory of Afghanistan or Iran to disturb the

agreement. The government of Pakistan also met Iranian officials and discussed the Indian involvement in Balochistan using the Iranian territory. Moreover; it is believed that any exploitation of religious factor would equally disturb Iran. Such behaviour of Pakistan shows that Pakistan wants regional stability and peace. Therefore, Iran needs to understand the true intention of India and the US towards the region (Khan, 2012).

Apart from external challenges, Pakistan also faces internal challenges for the proper implementation of CPEC since the KPK and Balochistan raised deep concerns over the agreement. It is discussed above that Balochistan plays an essential role in CPEC. A politically destabilized Balochistan, economically poverty-stricken and internationally exploited province would not be an easy task for government of Pakistan and China to successfully implement the agreement. It must be noted that the nationalist parties of Balochistan, as Balochistan National Party raised deep concerns that Balochistan would be marginalized. They further believe that the CPEC would bring demographic changes and outsiders would replace the local population. The Baloch insurgents who have gone underground, have been targeting the labourers, officers, governmental installations and officials since they believe that success of CPEC would lose the identity of Baloch. Such efforts of Baloch insurgents would not only disturb the construction of CPEC, but would also make room for the international opponents of CPEC to butt in. Therefore, before the situation gets out of control, the government of Pakistan would need to deal the nationalist leaders of Balochistan with logical and reasonable approaches. The government ought to take the Balochistan issue seriously and need to make them believe that Balochistan would also economically enjoy a large share of CPEC. Schools, colleges, universities, hospitals and basic facilities would need to be ensured in the province so that the sense of deprivation of local people could end. Policies related to domicile of other provinces must be formulated so that the people of

other provinces may not occupy the jobs of local people (Bashir, Arshad & Barech, 2019).

Like Balochistan, KPK also has some serious reservations related to the routes of CPEC against the federal government of Pakistan. Like Balochistan, the Nationalist Parties of KPK believe that the federal government is trying to convert the original route of CPEC from KPK to Punjab so that the economic and infrastructural benefits ought to be accessible to Punjab. The Western route, known as original route is the shortest route for China from Khunjerab to Gwadar, which connects Balochistan, KPK and Western Punjab. The objection raised by the nationalist leaders of KPK is that they believe that the change of original route is injustice with the province. They further believe that any diversion in the original route would widen the gulf between the governments of KPK and Centre. The terrorism-hit-Province justifies the logic that the original route of CPEC would connect the far and flung areas of Province, which would benefit them economically through CPEC. The reservations of the national parties of KPK seem to be valid since poverty and terrorism would only be eradicated if the people from grass-root were brought into mainstream. CPEC is the best chance to connect the poverty-hit areas of province with business related activities so that they enjoy the economic benefits (Kasi, 2015).

Conclusion

CPEC is beneficial for both the parties (China & Pakistan). This corridor retains vitality to convert the land route of China from 12000 to 3000 through which it can access warm water within few days. In order to deliver, the products to international market, CPEC provides the shortest and more secure route to China as compared to the Yellow Sea through Strait of Malacca. Thereby, China becomes the biggest economic giant of international community within the shortest period. On the other hand, CPEC opens the door for Pakistan to enjoy the economic benefits not only through the

routes of CPEC agreement, but also through the other projects of Pakistan, which are being financed by China through the said agreement.

Government of Pakistan is confident to see this corridor as an employment corridor for the youth of Pakistan. Similarly, there are prospects that in the course of 2020-2030 CPEC will grow upward economy of Pakistan with addition to 2 to 2.5 percent point per annum. This exceptional economic sector will be accomplished in three phases. This first phase will be concluded in 2020. The second will be fulfilled by 2025. It is envisaged that during this phase a number of processing and manufacturing industries will be developed by 2025. The third phase of the zone will be accomplished in 2030 with the expansion of development tasks. Furthermore, this corridor carries along certain challenges for Pakistan on national as well as international level. Pakistani political parties need to resolve difference over these projects through negotiations. In addition, Pakistan needs to counter international challenges by building confidence and creating coexistence on regional and international level.

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