

CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR: ADDRESSABLE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT: *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project of China's global investment strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is a game changer and creates strategic balance of power between the US and China. The project is providing economic growth and development path to the fragile economy of Pakistan and increasing its gesture on the regional and the world stage, which is obnoxious to its adversaries. In South Asia, only Muslim nuclear power with improving economic situation after CPEC is a nightmare for some countries, thus they are trying to exploit internal and external loopholes to roll back this initiative. The project faces ample security challenges from domestic and external players and the project's success depends upon how Pakistan and China deal with those threats. Opportunity brings challenges, so Pakistan had to look closely at its rival's moves and should strengthen its political and security institutions to secure CPEC.*

Keywords: BRI, Baluchistan, CPEC, Security, TTP.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the world noticed an abrupt increase in China's power and tried to increase its influence through its development strategy. It launched connectivity projects worldwide under BRI to improve connectivity and interdependence among countries for mutual benefits. CPEC is a key project in the initiative, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched in 2015 on a visit to Pakistan to improve the economic situation of Pakistan and the Chinese Western region. Under the project, China is putting a fate-changing investment of \$62 billion in Pakistan in different projects like energy, infrastructure, and communication for its capacity building. Mainly, it's a 3000 km connectivity enhancement project through road and railway between Kashgar, a city in the western province of China, to Gwadar deep seaport of Pakistan. The project will enhance Chinese influence in the world and stability to the stumbling economy of Pakistan, so it is a win-win project for both countries and the entire region. The project might shift the status quo in the region and several powers are trying to pose serious threats to the progress and sustainability of the venture. External powers are exploiting Pakistan's domestic diversities and weak economic situations to destroy the project; therefore, CPEC faces domestic and external security threats. The paper's main objective is to underline loopholes in the Pakistani system, which provides space for external forces to curb CPEC and how to fix them. The paper will help highlight domestic and external security challenges to CPEC, what measures Pakistan should take to handle those and tell local people how they can play their part in securing and strengthening the national project for their prosperous future.

Internal Security Threats

Internal threat refers to the risk inside a country that could exploit the system to damage the country. This kind of threat is troubling as these are difficult to find and curb and demand a positive approach to solve them. CPEC is crucial for the success of the region and the world, so its successful completion is not an easy task. Some domestic factors played a major role in creating a problem for CPEC despite external factors. Hostile agencies are now working to spread

sectarianism by supporting proxies in the province to create unrest and undermine CPEC[1].

Security Threat to CPEC in Gilgit Baltistan

Gilgit Baltistan (GB) is a strategically located area of Pakistan bordering India, Afghanistan and China, and it has many mineral resources, the Indus River and the gateway to Central Asian Republics. It had also remained important in history during a great game in the 1880s between Russia and Great Britain. Another great game is being played between America and China on CPEC and BRI projects in the current era. The passage of CPEC through GB has increased its importance for Pakistan and China. The sectarian issue in GB is the main problem that has been present here since 1988, so a small event can trigger a clash in this area which can be exploited by the foreign agencies. Sunni extremists had carried out major attacks on Shia local population in GB. Burning of girls' schools by a terrorist organisation is another major issue in the area as in 2004, 2009 and 2010, the schools were burned as they considered girls education as un-Islamic [2]. Several incidents occurred when bus passengers were killed after identifying according to their religious sect and killing of a session judge, and attacks on police posts in Chilas city. The people of Chilas are not happy with the current situation, so they gather and protest against this prevailing security situation. All these terrorist activities are focused on damaging CPEC as almost 150 km of Karakoram Highway passes through district Chilas which connects Pakistan with China. The hostile agencies will not miss any opportunity to damage the CPEC, so the GB government must take serious measures to improve the security of the CPEC route and the region.

Baluchistan Issue

Baluchistan province is a linchpin in the CPEC due to Gwadar Port; after completing the CPEC project, Gwadar will transform the country into an economic hub, but historically, it is the least developed province of Pakistan. The main reasons for its backwardness were domestic factors and the incapability of its local leaders to work for their betterment. Baluchistan is a hub in CPEC, so enemies exploit people's deprivations to create hindrances and problems in the project. Baluchistan has had a history of insurgency since

1947; still, its leaders did not adopt the rational approach and tried to curb the insurgency through force as they killed Nawab Akbar Bugti when he joined the military insurgent groups. The leaders did not adopt a developmental method to handle the issue in the province. The leaders might adopt good policies, focus on education, social welfare and elimination of unemployment to finish the Baloch insurgency, but their bad decisions put Pakistan in a problems. Although some political leaders took development measures like Aghaz-E-Haqq Baluchistan (AEHB) and National Finance Commission (NFC) corruption and ignorant policies could not eliminate their issues. Local people could not get jobs because of low literacy and fewer educational opportunities, which adds insult to injury. Baloch people are against CPEC because they view that it will not change their fate but will only benefit the Chinese. That is why many nationalist organisations are acting against CPEC openly. Some moderate critics of CPEC express their disconcert over media, but some hardcore are using guns to stop CPEC with foreign aid. They have a view that CPEC will make them a minority in their own province[3]. The opponents are motivating Baloch youth to act against CPEC. The governments; both provincial and capital should strengthen the institutions, civil societies and non-government organisations to work for the betterment of Baluchistan people. Under CPEC, there are many connectivity, energy, education, industrial and socio-economic projects that will change the province's fate and create equality with other provinces of the country.

Security of Chinese Workers

In Pakistan, many Chinese workers and engineers are doing their jobs with full devotion to completing CPEC in the due time frame. The main reason behind more Chinese workers on Pakistani soil is that they have more expertise than anyone else in construction on such a big scale. In Pakistan, many events have occurred where several Chinese workers and engineers were murdered and kidnapped by different groups. On 24 May 2021, two Chinese nationals were abducted from Quetta and responsibility for this action was claimed by Islamic State (IS). On 14 July 2021, terrorists exploded a bus carrying Chinese workers for construction on the Dasu hydropower project site in which 10 Chinese engineers were killed. According to the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, the attack was conducted by Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). After the attack, Chinese workers and engineers left the Dasu hydropower project site and returned to their country, and China also cancelled the 10th Joint Coordination Committee meeting. The work started after a few days when Pakistan promised to pay compensation to the Chinese worker. Pakistan will pay \$11.6 million in compensation to 36 Chinese victims of the attack in a goodwill gesture. On 28 July 2021, there was an attack by a gunman on two Chinese workers in Karachi, a port city in Pakistan. The two Chinese workers were seriously wounded and were sent to a hospital [4]. Chinese workers are crucial to the success of CPEC as they have the expertise required for the construction on such a large scale, so terrorists are exploiting this situation and making regular attacks on them.

Nationalist Movement in Baluchistan

Nationalist movements in Baluchistan have become a major security threat for CPEC. Few Baloch people are against CPEC and question the transparency and fruitfulness of the project for Indigenous people. Some Baloch organisations that demand separatism and independence from Pakistan are making terrorist attacks to derail the CPEC project. In this way, Brahamdagh Bugti, a banned Baloch Republican Party (BRP) leader, criticised CPEC and the Gwadar Port project and called for a UN-sponsored referendum in Baluchistan to decide its future. Similarly, BLF head Dr Allah Nazar Baloch mainly holds the southern coastal Makran belt though it functions across Baluchistan. Lashkar-e-Baluchistan (LB), led by Javed Mengal, is focused on the southwestern districts of Baluchistan. Jaleel Few people have claimed that the Pakistani government is exploiting their resources and not disseminating the benefits to the locals, so they conduct attacks on different projects and workers. In 2019, BalochRaajiAajoi Sangar (BRAS), an alliance of ethnic Baloch militant armed groups conducted an attack on security personnel travelling on Makran coastal highway. In 2019, the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) attacked Chinese investors at Pearl Continental Hotel in Gwadar to create uncertainty in their minds and stop investing.

Terrorism

CPEC is a multi-billion dollar investment project funded by China, the main investor in the project. It is a mega project, but it raised an enormous question of how Pakistan will be able to guarantee a secure and stable environment for the development of CPEC. China's main concern is its project and workers' timely completion and safety. Terrorism has remained a big problem for Pakistan for the last two decades; therefore, it poses the most pertinent security threat to CPEC. Many insurgent groups are present in Pakistan like TTP, BLA, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF). These organisations block the progress of CPEC through the devastation of the physical infrastructure and the onslaught of Chinese labour. Active Talibanization in the former Federal Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) and the western part of the country is the main security threat to CPEC as provinces like Baluchistan lack comprehensive security arrangements against these forces[5]. These organizations are taking an active role in creating problems in the completion of CPEC. Therefore, to counter those groups and get the proper benefits of the project, Pakistan should make a national policy with the support of all the stakeholders.

Sectarian Strife

Sectarian strife in Pakistan is also a big reason for creating challenges to CPEC. In Pakistan, almost 85-90% of the population belongs to the Sunni sect, and 10-15% are Shias, making it the largest Shia community outside Iran. There is strife between both these sects in Pakistan which has roots in Saudi-Iran rivalry, so both countries funded and sponsored proxies for their purpose. The intensity of sectarianism could be understood from the event that in 2014, a bus of Shia pilgrims was attacked in which 22 people lost their lives [6]. In this context, CPEC also passes through this sectarian fault

line, so opponents exploit this sentiment to derail it. In January 2021, Islamic State Khorasan (ISIS-K) killed 11 Shia Hazara coal miners in Baluchistan to create a rift between the Sunnis and Shias in Pakistan.

Corruption and Lack of Transparency

Deep-rooted corruption and lack of transparency in Pakistan were reasons for its failure since independence. In 2019, it ranked 120th out of 180 countries in Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International. After the completion of CPEC, when a lot of foreign direct investment will arrive in Pakistan, corruption could create a problem. There is a perception that several CPEC projects have been delayed, and their cost has been increased due to corruption and lack of transparency in Pakistan [7]. In 2017, CPEC-related projects faced huge criticism regarding corruption and China stopped funding three road connectivity projects in Pakistan [8]. CPEC is a dream project and there is already propaganda going on at the international level by rival countries about the transparency of the project so in this situation, corruption and lack of transparency in Pakistan is a major threat to the success of the project.

Low Level of Development

Pakistan lacks the level of development at both provincial and capital levels, which is the main reason for its backwardness. There has been no work in this area for a too long period because of the lack of interest of the previous governments. If the situation did not change then Pakistan would not be able to get the actual benefits of the CPEC. Pakistan should upgrade its level with Chinese aid, assistance and investment.

Political Unrest

Pakistan is a democratic country, but since its independence, none of the governments has completed its tenure of five years which portrays a clear picture of the political situation in Pakistan. In 2015, CPEC was signed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif and the President of China Xi Jinping to increase connectivity and interdependence between both states. However, Political unrest and division of provinces and capital had remained a hurdle to the success of the project. The same point was highlighted by Ahsan Iqbal when Nawaz Sharif's government was toppled 'Political events in Pakistan have sent China in a watching mood' [9]. Some provinces claim they are not getting a proper share of CPEC, and others have more. It is the norm in Pakistan to exploit any situation for political gains. Political stability is the main requirement for business, but in Pakistan, unity is always a missing link which could cause a problem for the timely achievement and success of the project. Political parties need to showcase maturity, remove division and work to create unity on the national issues for the fulfilment of the mega project which could become a lifeline for the economy of Pakistan.

External Security Threats

CPEC can change the economic situation of Pakistan in the region and benefit China to strengthen its position at the world level, therefore, some foreign forces had the plan to sabotage it. The actions of foreign countries to derail the project are well documented as they perceive it as a threat.

Afghanistan Problem

Since 1947, Pakistan has faced many problems due to Afghanistan which later voted against Pakistan's admission to the United Nations (UN) and then supported the separatist movements in Pakistan because it was dissatisfied with Durand Line. Since 1979, Afghanistan has been facing instability and chaos, first due to the Russian invasion and then the American war on terror. Pakistan being its neighbour, is a big victim of this instability. For the last four decades, Afghanistan has remained home to many terrorist organisations that operate domestically and internationally on the wishes of foreign powers. The situation created instability in Afghanistan, and Pakistan's economy has been bearing the burden of Afghanistan refugees since 1979, indicating that Afghanistan's situation has always impacted Pakistan. The current deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan is again impacting Pakistan. With foreign aid, the terrorist organisations in Afghanistan, like TTP, are planting terrorist attacks in different parts of Pakistan to sabotage CPEC. In April 2021, the organisation detonated a bomb at a luxury hotel in Quetta, which killed five people and wounded twelve. The initial press report suggested that the target of the bomb was the Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Nong Rong, which indicates TTP's intention to dent Pak-China relations and CPEC. There is a big porous border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and millions of Afghan refugees are staying in Pakistan, so they use these facilities to destabilise Pakistan and CPEC. Although Pakistan's military forces have pushed TTP in Afghanistan through operations, it is still conducting attacks on Pakistan's CPEC projects by using Afghanistan soil [10].

Indian Factor

Pakistan and India have never been in good relations since independence. India always tried to sabotage peace and progress in Pakistan. CPEC is the lifeline for Pakistan, but India, on the wishes of status quo powers, is trying to derail this project to become a regional hegemon. Indian distaste for CPEC is due to two reasons. First, CPEC's success will bolster China's position as the regional hegemon and propel it to superpower status. Second, if CPEC works, Pakistan will become a stronger and more stable regional actor, which is not acceptable to India as the former is their historical enemy.[11] It is financing terrorism and supporting separatist movements in Pakistan to sabotage the implementation of projects like the BLA as revealed by the European Union disinfo lab and the confession of Indian spy Kul Bhushan Yadav. India has created a special cell headquarters in New Delhi in its intelligence agency Research Analysis Wing (RAW) to undermine CPEC, and the plan is executed through Afghanistan. India has two frontal strategies to counter CPEC. On the Chinese front, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is raising concerns to Chinese President Xi Jinping in his meetings to halt the project and create insecurity in the minds of Chinese engineers and investors through terrorist attacks, killing and kidnapping. On the Pakistani front, it is using every illicit measure to stop the completion of the project by creating domestic instability and division among the provinces and politicians. India uses weak links in the country and exploits them to stand against CPEC and the country. Whenever the Pakistan government tried to unite all

the stakeholders of the country on the project, India took every measure to divide them. Similarly, it sponsored the massacre of the Ismaili community in Karachi in 2015.

RAW is sponsoring insurgency in Baluchistan and cross-border terrorism using Afghanistan territory. There is a network of RAW, TTP and Afghanistan intelligence agencies to sabotage CPEC and its development in Pakistan. RAW also established training camps for the terrorists on Afghanistan soil to work against CPEC and destabilize Baluchistan, home of Gwadar Port [12]. The number of terrorist attacks in Pakistan has increased after CPEC moved towards the completion phase. RAW is taking every measure to destabilise Pakistan economically and militarily through supporting terror attacks on different installations in Pakistan like Mehran Naval Base, Radar installation Sui pipeline attack and different attacks on civilians. RAW allocated a budget of \$500 million in 2015 to impair CPEC.

The U.S. Factor

The main beneficiary of sabotaging CPEC is the US as it fears that the success of CPEC and BRI will bring China to such a level to become a superpower and replace its hegemony. CPEC is a flagship project of BRI, and both are part of China's global strategy to enhance its influence on the world, so the US has a special focus on sabotaging CPEC to counter China's abrupt rise. The US is funding indirectly to create instability in Baluchistan, the hub of CPEC, to curb China from completing these projects. The most important example is, in 2016 when the US put Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (JuA) on the terrorist list, it shifted the organisation out of the tribal region into areas that were crucial to CPEC and started attacking these projects. The US-made drone attacks to kill TTP leader Akhtar Mohammad Mansour. The organisation fled from Afghanistan to Baluchistan and started operations there, creating a disturbance in Pakistan. Americans deliberately attacked TTP-JuA to push them into Baluchistan to create disturbance for Chinese projects [13].

The US understands that China's success is its economic clout, and CPEC and BRI are increasing its connectivity vis-à-vis influence in most of the world. So, the US is trying to derail the projects through every means available to it. The US has started a false campaign against BRI and CPEC, to create uncertainty in the minds of people and make them against China.[14] They portray Chinese investment as a debt trap to force countries away from China. The lease of the Hambantota Port of Sri Lanka is portrayed to justify their wrong narrative. The US propaganda on media and its actions to sabotage CPEC with the help of its ally India is well known to all nations. The main reason for the US actions against CPEC is its inability to provide support at such low rates to any country for development. Recently, America has been trying to launch its version of the connectivity project, Build Back Better World (B3W), under the Group of Seven (G7) framework to rival BRI. The project is only to lure small countries out of BRI as there is nothing concrete under this project until this time [15].

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) Factor

Gwadar, a strategically located port, provides access to China and Central Asian Republics (CARs) to the Middle East and Gulf region so that it will become the main sea gate for the

CARs. Abu Dhabi views the success of CPEC and Gwadar Port as a threat to its strategic influence in the region. It is a perception that the port will minimise the effectiveness of its Jabil Ali port, and the UAE will lose 70% of its business as it is home to over 5000 companies from almost 120 countries.[16] When Gwadar port is fully operational, it will provide a good alternative docking facility for fishing boats other than the ports of Dubai. Under these constraints, the UAE is supporting anti-Gwadar forces like India to undermine the port. India is the second-biggest trading partner of the UAE, so a decline in the importance of the Jabil Ali port will affect both countries economically because almost 788 Indian companies are trading from the Jabil Ali Free Zone. Therefore, both countries have the same objective of creating hindrances in the successful completion of Gwadar Port.

East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) Factor

It is a political movement in China that is a terrorist organisation according to China, the UN and several countries. The organisation demands independence and a separate homeland for the Uyghur people of East Turkestan from China. The organisation is conducting terrorist attacks on Chinese workers and projects in Pakistan and elsewhere. In 2016, an ETIM suicide bomber rammed a car into the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. In 2017, China wrote a letter to Pakistan's interior ministry that ETIM assassin Abdul Wali Khan had entered Pakistan on an assassination mission and raised concern over ETIM attacks on China's ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Jing.[17] ETIM was cooperating with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban for the liberation of Xinjiang from China and blamed Beijing for its bad treatment of Uyghurs. Few Uyghurs got their training in FATA and worked against Chinese interests in Pakistan. The connection between militant groups against CPEC creates a problem for China and Pakistan. Militant groups are running a campaign, 'Let's disturb China', in which they are directing all their resources to unsettle CPEC. The TTP leaders killed Chinese nationals in Pakistan when China took a hard stance against Uyghurs in their country.

Remedies for Internal Challenges

Internal security challenges to CPEC are complex and need a coordinated policy to handle. These challenges should be dealt with in two broad ways, first, elimination of existing threats and second, sojourn formation of new threats. In curbing existent threats, Pakistan should focus on terrorist and spare movements which are the main threat to CPEC. The elimination of terrorism could be done by dialogue with all the organisations to stop terrorism and join hands with the Pakistan government. In response, the government of Pakistan should ensure that their legal demands will be accepted on priority. The organisation which did not talk should be dealt with hard hands, and their outfits must be destroyed completely. Innocent indigenous people should be provided with full support to run their lives peacefully and honourably. The number of Security forces must increase for the CPEC project and Chinese workers in Pakistan. Indigenous people must be hired for projects in their provinces, and if some people are not efficient enough, then their capacity building should be enhanced on a priority basis.

On the second front, the Pakistan government should spread harmony in its society to eliminate extremism which guides individuals to join hands with terrorist organisations to take their interests. Extremist material should be eliminated from the curriculum of schools and universities in Pakistan, and preaching of Islam on peace and brotherhood should be added, which will spread harmony and peace in society. There should be no place for using Islam to attain political interests in the country. A quick and fair justice system must be applied so that no one has to pick a gun to get justice. Individuals must be briefed from a home level that they should adopt the peaceful, positive and polite way of gaining their objectives and should not create problems for others.

Remedies for External Challenges

Mostly external threats travel from abroad, which are developed on misunderstandings that CPEC and BRI are against any third country. Therefore, China and Pakistan should strengthen their diplomacy to convey that these projects believe in coordination and cooperation rather than fueling enmity against any country. However, both countries should, again and again, invite rivals to join CPEC and BRI to attain their benefits. These are economic projects, so it is always believed in win-win cooperation and avoiding a zero-sum game. Rival countries should join the projects and work for their people and humanity at large.

CONCLUSION

CPEC is a dream project and can change the region's destiny and the status quo in the world; therefore, several countries are trying to derail it. Hostile agencies have full concentration on CPEC and try to exploit every weak link between Pakistan and China to stop the project's progress. China and Pakistan should make a united effort to protect CPEC from derailing and work collectively to minimise the trust deficit. The people of Pakistan must understand that CPEC will change their fate and economic situation, so they must not join hands with foreign forces to disrupt this project. Both countries must spread their narrative to the world about the positive intentions of the project and solve the problem of indigenous people in Pakistan to gain their support. Without the support of the locals, completion of the project will not be easy.

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