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China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Significance and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

CPEC is a part of Chinese mega project namely “Belt and Road Initiative” and a bilateral project between Pakistan and China. This project demonstrates the all-weather and time tested friendship between China and Pakistan. CPEC will be helpful not only to change the fate of whole South Asian region but it will also facilitate other regions like Middle East, Europe and African nations. Connected through the railways, highways and pipelines, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is about 3000 Kilometers long that will connect China’s western region of Xinjiang to rest of the world through Gwadar Port of Pakistan.

CPEC Project can be seen through three aspects, i.e. economic, political & strategic. Regarding economic considerations, which are indeed with primary focus, poses the issue of Pakistan’s fiscal and balance of payment issue, which does mean to justify the full – scale version of its financial viability. This project also has Political significance, it is initially considered a Project of Pakistan Muslim League (N) and was not rooted in a broader national consensus. There were however, many reservations from the part of military establishment along with opposition political parties, business community. This project also enjoys strategic significance, India is critical toward this project because of its disputed territorial border issue of Gilgit – Baltistan as well as Dokhlam crisis in 2017 with China. In this perspective, CPEC has been trapped in geo political controversies between India – China. The role of America is also not positive regarding this project. The result of all these controversies can be seen in slowing down the pace of project.

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Introduction

This study urges that CPEC has significant and a game changer impacts on regional state trade as well as energy security. This project has potential to create various economic opportunities for Pakistan. This project will provide a very good opportunity for China to utilize Pakistan’s geo-strategic location to have an easy access explore oil and gas resources from Persian – Gulf region. This project was

initiated in April 2015, when Chinese President Xi Jinping paid a visit to Pakistan and declared the CPEC project, which was initially estimated \$46 billion (<http://www.sciencedirect.com>), and now it is expected to even cross the \$100 billion commitment to build the multifaceted network of road, railway's, bridges etc. (as of 2020, the value was estimated \$ 87 billion). A significant aspect of CPEC is that it can further strengthen trade and economic cooperation in regional states of Central Asia. And this is due to the wonderful geo-strategic location of Pakistan, which provides opportunities simultaneously to Western Asia through Arabian Sea to the Central Asia through Afghanistan. It is very important for China to see a stable Afghanistan after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. China has a significant role to play now. The completion of project can serve as a primary gate way for trade between China and Africa (Javed & Ismail, 2021).

CPEC Project has potential to create economic opportunities not only for the people of Pakistan but also for the people of China. This project will enhance already existing cooperation between China and Pakistan. This project will create trade connectivity between China, Africa and Middle East. It would change geo- strategic and economic situation in the region in general and make Pakistan an economic and a trade hub. Therefore, this project perfectly can be termed as a game changer for Pakistan.

Government would be able to initiate various developmental projects for the welfare of the oppressed segments of the society. This corridor will help to boost up economy of Pakistan in multidimensional ways. It will help to eliminate poverty from Pakistan, eliminate or lessen the terrorism and extremism, increase in foreign direct investment, improve the infrastructural, agricultural, economic sector, increase in imports and exports and it will bring equalization among the provinces by providing equal opportunities of development.

Background of the Proposed Research

Pakistan is under a heavy debt and this multibillion-dollar project is expected to boost country's GDP growth rate to 7.5 percent during the period of 2018 to 2030. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com>) Positive indicators would be observed in the industrial sector with the completion of CPEC project. The government of Pakistan through CPEC will take initiatives to overcome the energy crisis; increase the power generation capacity and fulfill the electricity needs of the country. Thus CPEC project will create immense opportunities to tackle the energy shortage necessities of Pakistan. (<http://www.sciencedirect.com>) The government of Pakistan has planned to establish special economic zones for enhancing economic and trade activities. All the provinces of Pakistan will benefit from infrastructure and energy projects. The confidence of investors will improve that may result in a large amount of foreign investment in infrastructure industries. Under CPEC project a well-organized road infrastructure has been initiated in Pakistan including Karachi to Lahore Motorway; Karachi-Peshawar main railway line and Karakum Highway from Rawalpindi to Khunjrab. Thus CPEC will help Pakistan to improve its infrastructures. CPEC project will generate a number of employment opportunities which would help to address the grievances of unemployed youth. The contribution of Tourism sector in country is at a minimum level. Particularly tourism will increase in Gilgit-Baltistan. Thus CPEC will create positive impact on tourism as well.

Objectives of the Research

The major objective of the research is to highlight significance of the CPEC for Pakistan and China and rest of the world. This research will highlight that how and in what way this mega project will create economic opportunities for Pakistan. This mega project will enhance interdependence between Pakistan and China. This research will open a new door of thinking for policy makers of Pakistan. This research will also highlight various challenges which will be there in the way of Pakistan for securing different objectives through this CPEC project.

Research Questions

1. Will this mega project enhance interdependence between China and Pakistan?
2. Does this project provide Pakistan maximum opportunities to make its economy better?
3. Will this project increase existing hostility between Pakistan and India?
4. Will this project helpful for China to enhance its influence in Indian Ocean?

Research Methodology

Research is the process of systematically acquiring data to solve the problem. The main point in the research is the selection of the topic and identification of the research problem. In this research descriptive and analytical method has been applied by the researcher. Data has been collected through secondary sources. This research will help policy makers to evolve more strong strategy for securing maximum benefits from this mega project.

The importance of CPEC for China and Pakistan

This project was intended to reduce the passage from the Middle East. As for as Pakistan is concerned, it is supposed to get a number of employment opportunities and a positive increase in gross domestic product (GDP) (Prasso, 2020). The Gawadar port was first conceived by China when it built the Gawadar port between 2002-2006, Dawn, 2013). Besides Gawadar, the previous statistics presented a sheer picture of promises, which were never fulfilled and the projects that were remained undelivered. However, during different time period between 2001-2011, Chinese government had announced \$66 billion but only 6% of which translated practically (Wolf, Wang and Warner 2013). Pakistan did try to convince China for years to initiate various economic and strategic projects but China was reluctant deeply only vague and theoretical talk on different strategic gains which can be secured from energy pipeline and connectivity through railway ran up against rough and stubborn terrain and geographic facts (Small, 2020).

The connectivity through land between the two countries through the Karakorum Highway, which was mainly constructed in the decade of 1960s and 1970s. When there was no sign of visible priority regarding regional economic planning at the top leadership level of Chinese Communist Party (Khalid, 2009). But it did not prove a serious consideration for cross border trade, which was almost going on through Sea. However, there are different issues of insecurity, particularly in the province of Balochistan has potential to undermine the working and benefit of that route (Small, 2020). On the other hand, Pakistani leadership continued to hammer the plan for transport and energy corridor, while China was reluctant and showed its doubts.

Change of Heart by Beijing

One of the key elements that changed geo political priorities in the region was change of civilian leadership in Islamabad. The past record of Muslim League (N) and Nawaz Sharif in 1990s showed of pulling off major infrastructure projects, as well as China had developed good working relationship with Shabaz Sharif, the younger brother of Nawaz Sarif the then Chief Minister of Punjab comparing to previous people's party government, when it came to Chinese leadership asking for a bail. In this connection, the PML (N) took different initiative and reached to China with senior foreign and economic policy makers to explain about the significance of CPEC project, rather than assistance and bailout package like people's party, it wanted investment and would deliver on them, where the people's party was failed (Small 2020). However, the deal was negotiated by Nawaz Sharif, started to take its actual shape by 2020. This project has been considered as a mega project, a model for Belt & Road countries around the world (Prasso, 2020).

There are different geo strategic interests of CPEC Project for China and Pakistan. One of the major interests between both the partners, apart from geo-economic expansion, China wanted to see a strong, well equipped and compatible Pakistan in South Asian region against India. This has become particularly more significant for both countries, when US-India strategic partnership is hitting sky high in the context of Indo – Pacific Quad, which is usually assumed the alliance to contain China's rise in South China Sea and South Asian region. This Indo – Pacific Quad alliance seemingly based on nonmilitary initiative but also the four members of the alliance including the US, India, Japan and Australia are joining to combat China strategically. In this perspective, the Gawader port as well as overall CPEC is so essential for China. A weak Pakistan would not be able to respond effectively to various internal and external security threats. Different militant groups within the boundary of Pakistan have potential to make targets to Chinese, who are busy to perform different responsibilities at Gawadar Port.

As China's deep concern with Pakistan is the rising military and security gap between India and Pakistan, India has largest population as compare to Pakistan but Pakistan has potential to compete India on economic front with productive economic growth rate. The government of Pakistan has to take certain initiatives to stable its economic position as well as military position in South Asian region. Through CPEC, China wants to see a strong Pakistan so it can face internal and external challenges in more comprehensive way. In this connection, a Chinese analysis put this situation in 2015 as saying that, China wants to see a Pakistan which can create a balance with India economically, culturally and socially in the region of south Asia. (Small, 2020).

As Pakistan accepted the CPEC as a game changer not economically only, but also in term of its strategic interests, Pakistan also has provided an opportunity to China through CPEC to create a perception to show different countries of the world that China has ability to provide benefits to her friendly states. As long as China's foot prints grow, there will be dire need of easy access its need for overseas military facilities, this process can be more secure if China has more friendly states and can use their logistical and military facilities (Zhang, 2012) when CPEC was started in 2013, Pakistan was one of the few countries that already having good relations with china and given various facilities to China. Pakistan and china enjoy different

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benefits from each other. Pakistan has strong economic ties with China and whenever Pakistan is suffering from economic crisis, China as a good friend come up to help Pakistan. (Zongyi, 2015).

Challenges:

After analyzing the significance of CPEC project it is deemed necessary to mention here those challenges which are associated with the CPEC project. In this regard the study will examine the two main challenges i.e. external challenges and internal challenges in detail.

In the first place for successful implementation of CPEC, Pakistan social and political governance is vital. Political decision making has ability to influence the functional aspect of various institutions. In the beginning of 2017, one good thing which was observed that almost all of Pakistan's political parties as well as different provincial governments showed a political consensus in support of CPEC. With the CPEC project a huge amount of foreign investment is expected. This foreign investment can work in the best interest of Pakistan only when there would be fare and efficient allocation of development benefits. The government of Pakistan can perform this function positively while using its political and social governance capabilities accurately because political stability in Pakistan is highly significant for the success of CPEC. For insuring political stability, it is necessary that various institutions may work within their specific domain. For successful completion and implementation of CPEC project, government should make a transparent mechanism related to CPEC so that it will open a door for maximum local and foreign investment. Security regarding CPEC project will remain a major challenge for government. There is also dire need to evolve mechanism to speed up the process of building infrastructure and to safeguard affectively the entire route of this corridor from Gwadar to Khunjab. Different militant organizations are trying to distrust the construction of CPEC. For example, the TTP; Islamic State ISIS; and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have been at the front to sabotage the CPEC. The government of Pakistan has launched different operations to curb the activities of different terrorist groups. The government of Pakistan along with military institutions has arranged more than ten thousand security personals for the protection of people and infrastructure related to CPEC. There is a dire need to formulate a long term and sustainable security mechanism. This security mechanism will help to secure the desired result related to CPEC project. Under CPEC Gwadar Port would be a greater source to bring tremendous opportunities to Balochistan. However, an irritant in the way of implementation of CPEC project is long standing insurgency in Balochistan. Trade corridor between Pakistan and China can only be secured when actual grievances of the people of Baluchistan would be addressed in the real sense by the federal government. Gwadar port is one of the mega projects related to CEPC.

The benefits of this port can be enjoyed by Pakistan and China with peaceful environment in Balochistan. The people of Balochistan have certain doubts in their mind regarding CPEC Projects. They should be taken into confidence. They should be integrated into political process of Pakistan. Government should not let them play into hands of external elements. Pakistan has some external challenges on CPEC from various countries like Afghanistan, India, Iran, Japan and USA. Pakistan has offered Afghanistan to join CPEC; however, the long lasting insurgency in Afghanistan has been a hurdle to peace and security in this region. Pakistan should

take effective measures in context of increasing influence of India in Afghanistan. Indian leadership perceives CEPEC as an unacceptable project for India. India wrongly perceives that through Gwadar port China will get access to Indian Ocean and pose threat to Indian Maritime force.

India has been involved to disrupt peace process in Pakistan generally and particularly the peace of the province of Baluchistan. Iran initially, also perceived Gwadar port as rival to its Chahbahar Port which lies just 70 km from Gwadar port; however, due to effective policy measures the government of Pakistan has taken into confidence Iran on CPEC. Japan and India has recently signed to develop a sea corridor with the name of "Asia Africa Growth Corridor". Japan also sees CEPEC a source to provide China a close connectivity towards African, Middle Eastern, Central Asian and European Markets and that may diminish the value of exports of Japanese goods. Americans perceive CEPEC will be a source to give a way for China to emerge as an economic super power in the world as well as it may play effective role at regional level. In the presence of all these issues, CPEC is very important project for the future role of Pakistan in the region as well as in the world.

Two main challenges:

External Challenges to CPEC: Skepticisms on China's Regional Hegemonic ambitions

The external challenge to CPEC does mean that as soon as project was launched, it has worsened tension in South Asia region and intensified dynamics of competition between China, US, India and Pakistan. China has posed the undeniably threat to India and the US with new and more active role in South Asia. Since CPEC was announced, various geopolitical and geo strategic researches started to observe the changing geo political land scape of the region. This change in geo strategic regional order led to arise questions that how would China's grand schemes work? This also has taken part to redefine US pivotal role in Asia's balance of power calculus. Seemingly, the projects of CPEC and belt & Road initiative posed primary questions that what is China actually doing and what does it ultimately trying to achieve? In this regard the answers were vague and mixed. At one end, there was a picture with few propagandists was presented (Jones, 2016), that propagated China's actions driven as purely economic in nature that would present win opportunities for China and other regions. In this respect, the corridor was primarily a massive development scheme (The Express, 2015). This was propagated that this scheme of infrastructure development could simultaneously; serve its own economic agenda (Rahman & Shurong, 2017) as well as, that of Pakistan without any differentiation and understanding. (Malik, 2016).

The interests of other Different states have various interest's s in the South Asian region (Bagu, 2017). While on the other end of the spectrum, China tends to play its own power projection capabilities, to enhance its regional geo political influence (Prakash, 2017), through this development, the observers have the opinion that China's ultimate aim is to challenge the United States in Asia as well as at world level. They built the logic on this ground that China's main objective in Pakistan is to get the control over Gwadar port through that China and would get the strong foothold in the Arabian Sea (Feldman, 2017). This project will ultimately lead to connecting roads, railways and even pipelines that would make China enable to escape its "Malacca Dilemma" (CMSEC,2016) through building a new overland

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route from energy rich Persian Gulf directly to China's western provinces (Markey, 2017).

This view point actually refers to the logic that China's ultimate intension in deeper and long terms aspirations for regional hegemony and global supremacy (Reddy, 2017). However, and so far, China has some vogue ambitions, but was bold initiative for South Asia and probably, it likes to cross by feeling the stones" as Deng Xiaoping's famous saying in context of his own reforms (Markey, 2017)

What Pakistan Play CPEC?

Another debate in this regard is what Pakistan play and tries to achieve out of CPEC? It is same gain as optimistic picture above was printed as an economic agenda (Rolland, 2017) of promoting economic growth, while on the other hand, a strategically oriented agenda, that is in search of using China as an external balance as Pakistan assumes to fit it in its core strategic goal regarding resistance against India (Rajagopalan, 2017). To this strategic argument, Pakistan has the view that it faces a specific need for extra external assistance and cooperation, because it ties with the once generous friend, the US are fading rapidly (Abdullah, 2017).

India's Response toward CPEC

It is another aspect of the issue with the question of how India is going to respond to CPEC? Though, India's response to the CPEC is negative in a narrowly diplomatic context and sense (Miglani, 2017). India has great concerns regarding China's involvement in disputed territories of Gilgit – Baltistan through this project. (The Times of India, 2017). In the eyes of India, CPEC project is having twofold problem. First, China's encroachment in what India perceives its traditional sphere of influence, while second is about the China's policy to pursue even more anti-India tactics, by cross border attacks by militant proxies and becoming a source to escalate tension into crisis. (Markey, 2017).

By most Indian analysts, China's support to Pakistan is more likely to encourage Pakistan than to restrain it. In this regard, the analysts argue that Pakistan intends to change the status quo both in territorial sense, through Kashmir issue and in term of overall balance of power that steadily in favor of India. However, both China and Pakistan could adopt more restrained approach, both in term of how they manage a potential crisis with India and the approach they frame their emerging alliance (Jayadeav 2016).

Internal Challenges: Issues of willingness, capability and corruption

The political battle in Pakistan began with the beginning of the project in 2015 among major political parties and establishment. China has also faced several waves of criticism from some segments of society on Pakistan side, that some were having genuine concerns, while mostly there were misperceptions. On Pakistan's end, there were however significant difference on certain points such as the capacity, willingness and lack of transparency and corruption to implement the project. The general problem that was observed in the first phase was that PML-N government did not want to share the credit with other political parties of Pakistan although, it was a project of whole Pakistan. This however, influenced the military establishment view on CPEC too, through that it was further down the line (Small, 2020). Chinese on the other hand viewed that the share could be enhanced toward

on for everyone. All involving segments of society of Pakistan would be able to secure their due share out of this project. (Chinese official, 2016).

But the biggest problem was posed by Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf (PTI) party; criticism by PTI was a surprise to China, Chinese were not expecting such a criticism from any political party of Pakistan. As a rising new political force, that PTI has not yet come to terms (Ghumman, 2017). The issue before Chinese officials was not just the people's criticism regarding the routes of the infrastructure and unfair distribution of benefits among political parties, but that PTI's officials which ruled one of the most important provinces and that was Khyber Pakthon Khwa (KPK), where its critical view of CPEC played a negative role toward project. Usually in private meetings the Chinese used to say that PTI "did not get it", but failed to appreciate that how resources could be assembled and be arranged for their political priorities too (Interviews by small, 2016-17). Governor of Central Bank of Pakistan Ashraf Muhammad also expressed his concerns regarding implications of debts and a number of other issues has been raised by the governor. (Hourelid, 2015).

There are different technical issues related to CPEC project. Some estimates are available and clear but many points are not clear yet. of CPEC. Despite political disputes and infightings various criticism, the first two years of the project saw more satisfactory progress and the volume of Project under negotiation was enhanced from \$ 42 billion to \$62 billion with the addition of new power projects. (Siddiqui, 2017). However, it is now clear that on every front of the project, there was immense resistance including external and internal fronts, but the important point is that both China and Pakistan have been trying to secure their involving national interests. It is not main interest and top priority of china to see and address various challenges and issues which are being faced by Pakistan through CPEC project. It is also a difficult task for China to alter the prevailing perceptions in Pakistan regarding different issues. Both China and Pakistan can take various initiatives to improve the internal security strategies of Pakistan. China can provide technical, professional and economic assistance to Pakistan for managing different issues in an organized way. Actually this is the responsibility of policy makers of Pakistan to evolve such a mechanism with the help of China to address the real issues of Pakistan through the CPEC project. It is not the responsibility of China to identify and address all issues of Pakistan. (Small, 2020).

Conclusion

To conclude CPEC will mend the lives of the people of this Sino-Pak region because it is a path to progress and prosperity for them. When CPEC will be operational it will put the economy of both nations of China and Pakistan into a right direction especially CPEC will be a tremendous opportunity to boost up the economy of Pakistan and it's all areas will get benefit from it. CPEC project has potential to shift power and economic paradigms from West to the East. CPEC is a game changer in the real sense. This game changer project can help Pakistan to play a significant role in the region as well as in the world. Pakistan has various potential resources to make progress economically but in the absence of different technical facilities it remains difficult for Pakistan to secure the desired results. In the presence of this mega project Pakistan can higher technical assistance from china to extract and utilize various economic resources. This project has potential to create many chances of development for all involving actors. This project by increasing

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interdependence between China and Pakistan can provide a lot of opportunities to the government of Pakistan to initiate various developmental projects in different sectors. Social capital of Pakistan can have a chance to utilize their potential for the progress of their country. Poverty reduction strategies can also be initiated by the government of Pakistan. Pakistan has to be very careful regarding its sovereignty and independence

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