

CPEC and doubts over development

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A collaborative effort

Augmenting trade and economic cooperation with China is highly desirable as China has not only experienced remarkable growth progress in the past few decades but has also made incredible progress in poverty alleviation. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is seeking to invest billions of dollars on infrastructure, energy projects, transport, special economic zones in Pakistan and particularly Balochistan. The Chinese Ambassador has recently also expressed the desire to extend the fields of CPEC to finance, science and technology, education, poverty alleviation and social development in the near future. Pakistan certainly needs foreign direct investment, especially to support the power sector that has been mired with energy shortages and infrastructure to improve connectivity in a difficult terrain like Balochistan.

Pakistan must utilise the potential of the abundant natural and mineral resources and improve economic prospects for common citizens. Hence such a massive investment from the Chinese government must be viewed as a boon to the economy. However, some political stakeholders and nationalist leaders have raised concerns on the redistributive impact of CPEC on smaller provinces. Particularly, ANP leaders have demanded completion of Western routes at an earlier stage. Development projects can help in mitigating extremism and terrorist activities from underdeveloped regions of FATA and Balochistan.

Largely there is disorientation rather than opposition on the costs, distribution of benefits, and impact on local employment opportunities and investment. The most serious concern by parliamentarians of Balochistan was regarding demographic change in their province in the backdrop of the mega project. Some have equated the CPEC's significance to that of Pakistan's nuclear programme. It is a laudable outlook of attaching high significance to projects on economic development and regional prosperity. The democratic capital in Pakistan is slowly building up but expectation after several years of autocratic rule are usually set too high.

Democratic governments need to be responsive to the aspirations of the people and uphold their inalienable rights. Economists like Nobel Prize winning Angus Deaton and NYU Professor William Easterly have described poverty as a political problem and suggested to champion rights of poor and their full participation in the democratic state. The federal government needs to understand that mere investment of billions of dollars cannot automatically turn around things in backward regions. Backwardness and years of deprivation is a direct consequence of lack of rights rather than lack of resources. Hence both the federal and provincial governments must ensure that investment made through the CPEC enriches the lives of indigenous people and provide them with employment opportunities. Creation of special economic zones and export promotion can certainly provide lucrative prospects. Skill enhancing and training opportunities must also be provided to people to truly benefit from the opportunities arising.

The government must also improve health and education facilities, uplift socio-economic strata and eradicate human rights violations. Development initiatives and exorbitant investments can provide long

run development only if fundamental rights of people are safeguarded. Economic opportunities and improving living standards will consolidate the efforts for restoring peace and stability in the region. A conducive environment can be created through mutual trust and cooperation between governments and people. Development policies must be inclusive and not repressive and must enhance political and economic freedoms in the impoverished regions.

Balochistan has had a turbulent history and is currently struggling with health, education and climate change issues. Sectarian attacks pose constant threat to peace and security as well. Balochistan has been afflicted with cataclysmic anti-state insurgencies, sectarian attacks and poor law and order situation. During the present government peace has been somewhat restored through improved governance and peace building efforts.

Growth initiatives have to be broad based and the government must put in place a natural resource management policy. Economic development must alleviate human development and augment social capital. The government must ensure that people are integrated in the process of development, curb human rights abuses, enhance political and economic rights of people.

The government must also not run away from accountability and be transparent about the projects and investments being made under the CPEC and open it up to public scrutiny. A province as rich as Balochistan in terms of natural and mineral resource can benefit tremendously from higher freedom, openness, investment and export promotion. However, exorbitant investments of this kind in conflict zones and fragile societies can only be sustainable if they enhance individual human rights and freedom and aren't exploitative. In order to sustain and support current peace building efforts we need more transparency and inclusive decision making. It is also important to note that the role of provincial governments will be extremely crucial in addressing the concerns and setting up incentives.

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