

CPEC for Punjab or Pakistan: Myth and reality

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The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is once again in the spotlight causing damage to the project by making it controversial. The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad has taken an unusual step of releasing a statement asking the Pakistani government to resolve the controversy. This just goes to show the gravity of the issue, which needs to be addressed on a war footing. Before going into the concerns of the smaller provinces of Pakistan, let us briefly look at the significance of the multibillion-dollar project.

Can Gwadar port become Dubai or Singapore?

The multi-faceted China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project has been aptly described as a game-changer or a turning point in the history of Pakistan. Pumping of \$46 billion by China would usher in an era of economic growth realising the dream of “Asian Tiger”.

This is almost five times more than the aid we got from US since 9/11. Due to its unique geographic location, Pakistan has always had the strategic advantage to cash in on. As Robert D Kaplan, a well-known international scholar on geopolitics, after his visit to Gwadar wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2009, “If we can think of great place- names of the past – Carthage, Thebes, Troy, Samarkand, Angkor Wat, and of the present Dubai, Singapore, Tehran, Beijing, Washington – then Gwadar would qualify as a great place-name of the future.”

Besides the strategic value for both China and Pakistan, CPEC has the potential to generate new employment opportunities, reduce endemic poverty and attract much-needed foreign investment in the country. Some of the projects under CPEC are nearing implementation and commissioning stage.

However, recent furor over CPEC created in the smaller provinces of Khyber-Pakhtukhwa (K-P) and Balochistan suggests the gigantic hurdles in the way of execution of the project. Despite briefings, consultations and all parties conferences (APCs) by Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Reform Ahsan Iqbal (his ministry is the focal ministry for the CPEC project), some political figures in the country continue to show tooth and nail opposition to the project. Let us review the charges of the opposing parties against the centre one-by-one over the multibillion-dollar project.

Western or eastern route controversy

The primary concern of the smaller provinces as reflected in the resolution of the K-P assembly that the western alignment is not on the priority list of the centre. This claim is wildly being repeated without any evidence to back it up. In fact, the work is underway on the western and eastern routes simultaneously. The Frontier Works Organisation is working to complete the missing 400km link between Gwadar and Surab passing through Quetta, Zhob, Dera Ismail Khan and Peshawar.

In order to make Gwadar operational in the shortest possible time, the eastern alignment linking Karakoram Highway to existing motorways is the best bet. Given high traffic volume, thriving

industries and security on the eastern route, it is much more feasible to kick-start the project. With work in progress on the central, western and eastern alignments simultaneously – linking Gwadar, Pakistan to Kashgar, China within 15 years under the CPEC – there is no reason to make the whole project controversial by mere speculations.

Is motorway prerequisite for the corridor?

Some in the provinces are demanding Zhob-Mughal Kot (N-50) or Qila Saifullah-Wagum (N-70) on the western route be constructed six lanes on the pattern of Karachi-Lahore Motorway. It makes no sense because of negligible traffic at the moment on the route. Of course, this route would have to be expanded with the passage of time as the traffic volume increases with the economic activity along the corridor. Without going into the technical nitty-gritty, it suffices to say that the same size lane is being constructed across the border on Chinese side. So, motorway is not needed at this time on the western route.

Economic zones: K-P on top

Another major concern of the smaller provinces is the alleged shifting of the industrial parks along the original western route to the eastern route thus denying the dividends of the project to the people of K-P and Balochistan. Some fact checking reveals that Board of Investment (BoI) has identified 27 economic zones out of which eight fall in K-P. The committee of BoI tasked to identify the potential sites for economic zones has worked in consultation with the provinces. However, it's subject to approval by the joint working groups of China and Pakistan.

CPEC energy goes into national grid

Some have questioned the criteria for the allocation of the energy projects to the provinces. As a matter of fact, the energy generated by the projects under CPEC would be added to the national grid for nationwide distribution regardless of its installation point. So, the location of the power plant does not really matter. Most of the energy projects are located either close to the source or the load centre.

Contrary to all the noise, benefits to the largest province Balochistan are also enormous. Once developed, Gwadar would serve as a game-changer not only for the country but also for the entire region. Preliminarily, seven industrial parks have been marked in the province, making it the second highest number after K-P. It would open new jobs for the locals, uplifting them from extreme destitution.

Who gets the lion's share?

Here arises a question: who will benefit the most from the CPEC once executed as envisioned by its authors? It will benefit the whole of Pakistan given the presence of various projects under CPEC spread across the length and breadth of the country. All the provinces stand to benefit from the project as all the provincial capitals – including Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Quetta – would be the major nodes of the project.

Making CPEC controversial is a great disservice to the country at a time when it is about to take off. This is not the project of any one's political party or government. All political parties in the country would have to show maturity, seriousness and ownership instead of engaging in point scoring on such an important matter of the national concern. As Robert D Kaplan pointed out in *The Atlantic*, "If Gwadar remains just a charming fishing port, it will be yet more evidence of Pakistan's failure as a nation."

The Planning Commission of Pakistan, which is the focal ministry for the multibillion-dollar project, has made some half-hearted attempts to assuage the concerns of the smaller provinces. But it would have to do more to realise Pakistani dream of “Asian Tiger”. Participation of provincial representatives in the Joint Working Group and Joint Coordination Committee of the Planning Commission should be made more meaningful to achieve consensus on this all-important project. The framework of the agreement should be made public to ensure more transparency in the project.

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