

A national commission on the CPEC?

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We have recently seen meetings, official statements, and loads of government-generated news stories that have all tried to rescue the Planning Commission from criticism over the ill-planning – rather discriminatory planning – of Pakistan’s flagship ‘game-changer’, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project.

However, most of these stories have no substantive evidence or basis to convince the people of the agitating provinces. For example, the Planning Commission has added some dead projects and imaginary figures to convince its critics in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The long-shelved Gaddani Coal-based power projects have been added in press statements and discussed in TV talk shows to blatantly fool people, including the media.

Indeed, such false and exaggerated claims will lead to complications, not a national consensus.

In addition, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held a consultative meeting on January 15, 2016 with leading political figures and decided to form a steering committee – headed by the prime minister – to oversee the implementation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Though the mandate, composition and terms of reference of the steering committee have not yet been disclosed, it is evident that the committee will be a drawing-room kind advisory group to provide ‘guidance’, with no decision-making powers.

I believe this is just eyewash and another blatant effort to gain time to operationalise projects that have been agreed to in the Joint Coordination Committee (JCC).

A project of such massive and national nature needs greater transparency. There is a need for an inclusive, credible and equally representative national body to address the concerns of all stakeholders including KP and Balochistan.

Even in such a confusing environment of distrust, the Council of Common Interests, due to its composition, cannot address all relevant matters and pave the way for a smooth implementation of the project.

The concerns raised over the CPEC project are very pertinent and have a long-term impact on the social, economic and political structure of the federation. The way the CPEC is structured enhances the political and economic structure of Punjab to a level where the role of the rest of the provinces in policymaking and political sphere of federation will slowly and gradually diminish.

For a national consensus on CPEC-related matters a high-power National Commission on CPEC could be an ideal institution.

The PM’s proposed steering committee will have no power, mandate and know-how to achieve a national consensus on matters and concerns that are related to the route of the corridor or prioritisation on the basis of economic zones and related facilities, security arrangements, revenue sharing, employment, and demographic concerns including budgetary control, quality control and environmental issues.

Two major federating units, Balochistan and KP, have raised a bundle of constitutional and planning concerns, raising fears that their downtrodden populations have been bypassed in the planning.

KP's concerns are mainly about pushing the 'economic corridor' – also known as 'route' – eastward that completely bypasses their land. KP has also raised concerns over the unfair distribution of projects that are considered key economic and employment boosters for the war-ravaged province.

However, Balochistan's concerns are entirely different in nature. The province's nationalist parties and their cadre is not only concerned about the unfair distribution of economy, revenue and employment generating projects but have also raised valid apprehensions on the handing over of the Gwadar Port for fifty years to China without a legitimate and transparent process.

Despite the mess that has been created by Pakistan's prime planning institution, the Planning Commission of Pakistan, there is still room to fix things and address the concerns of all stakeholders in a transparent and politically acceptable manner.

Fake and ill-prepared speeches and news stories are going to exacerbate the situation and will lead to more confrontation among the provinces.

The Planning Commission's role, partiality and ambiguity in the overall execution of the CPEC project makes the institution controversial. To enhance stakeholders' trust in the project there is a need to establish a national body such as a 'National Commission on the CPEC' which should be equally represented by the provincial governments and opposition parties.

The 'national commission' must be headed by a representative of a province that is a major contributor in terms of land, sea and environment in the CPEC process.

The commission should include the chief ministers of the constitutionally-recognised federating units – Balochistan, KP, Sindh and Punjab. In addition, there must be four expert members, one from each province, to represent the opposition parties of the concerned provinces.

Moreover, to provide legal safeguards to the commission's mandate and decision, it must be embedded in the constitution.

PM Nawaz Sharif must look back to October 1999 when Musharraf used centre-province conflict as the main allegation against the PML-N, and overthrew his government. Today the situation is more fragile. Balochistan is still a burning kiln; and the heat is on in KP as well on the way the province is treated.

Mr Prime Minister, there is still time to take serious and corrective measures. Corrosive tactics, advised by your ill-planned advisers, will lead to self-damaging consequences.

The writer is a former senator from Balochistan.

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