

The politics of CPEC

Khurshid Akhtar Khan
Pakistan Today (Islamabad)
January 22, 2016

It is for Pakistan and its people

Any fool can know. The point is to understand. It is not that I am so smart. I stay with the questions much longer. –Albert Einstein

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a mega project of \$46 billion is at the risk of turning into just such a muddle. Everyone knows but very few want to understand. The Chinese President signed the agreement for this ambitious infrastructural development plan during his state visit to Islamabad in April 2015. In the month of May same year, the Prime Minister managed to achieve a political consensus during an all parties conference. The spirit of unity, sadly, was short-lived.

As the tenure of the current elected administrations crosses half term, all political eyes are set on 2018. The campaigns in the next general election will be run either on the basis of performance and continuity or on the basis of ‘change’ (ideology doesn’t figure anywhere). Since each of the three political parties with a claim to be a major mainstream party has a finger in the pie – PML-N at the centre and Punjab, PPP in Sindh and PTI in KP — all of them will have to showcase their achievements of the previous five years. It is quite understandable, therefore, that the KP chief minister suddenly woke up to a realisation that his province has been short-changed. Others grabbed the opportunity to join his bandwagon for a free ride.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has been a troubled province for decades due to the Afghan influx and terrorism. Many of its areas have remained deprived of much progress. The official literacy rate stands at 53% (43% in Balochistan). Two-third of females in this province are totally illiterate. Conservative cultural values prevent a bulk of the female population to move out of homes for education to get employment or to participate in civic affairs. The ANP government did very little during its five-year term to enhance the capacity of provincial administrative machinery or to undertake development and people welfare projects. It cited preoccupation with combating terrorism as the reason for inaction. ANP was routed in the 2013 general election and the people brought PTI into power on the slogan of ‘change’.

Since taking over, the PTI government struggled to come to terms with the complexities of governing a province with more problems than resources. It could not demonstrate the spark, drive, vision, imagination or administrative skills expected from a political party of the literate and dynamic young people intent on bringing a revolutionary change in the lives of ordinary people. Its administration exhibited lack of expertise or any interest in planning, developing and launching major projects in the province under its control. Politically, the party diverted its energies towards Punjab and got engaged in a hostile campaign against PML-N, spearheaded by its chairman.

The faculties of the PTI got bogged down in *dharnas*, agitation, infighting and its dream of toppling the central government, derailing the existing system and grabbing power at the centre in some miraculous manner. During all this time, the Punjab chief minister was aggressively negotiating with the Chinese (and other governments and agencies) to execute grand projects such as the Orange Line in Lahore and

energy projects all over Punjab. No doubt, he had the singular advantage of his brother being the prime minister. PTI had the singular disadvantage of being an adversary.

PML-N is a political party elected to govern at the centre and in the Punjab. It has an established well organised party structure and it has the people's mandate. At the same time, the central government is the guardian of the federation. It must appear to be even handed in the distribution of resources and endeavoring to bring all areas of the country at equitable levels. That has not happened.

The Punjab chief minister has proven credentials of being a go-getter, who could cut red tape and get on with the job at record speed. KP chief minister felt politically isolated and shunned by the centre in an atmosphere of intense political rivalry. Its party wasted precious time in frivolous politics that led to a dead end. There is still time for the PTI to work within the system to improve it and to lay a claim to its due share in a mature and amicable manner.

The order of priorities for various components of the project had been under active negotiation by working groups for almost two years since Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited China in 2013. The primary interest of the Chinese is its earliest access to the Gwadar port from its autonomous northwestern region of Xinjiang by a network of highways and railroad. The eastern route of road works already exists and is being improved speedily to upgrade it to required specifications. The Western route is also an integral component of the scheme that needs extensive work. The government has been negligent in disclosing all options and taking all concerned on board. Hopefully, the formation of a high level committee will redress the suspicions.

An 1,100 km long motorway between Karachi and Lahore is under construction to connect with the existing M2 Motorway. In addition, the scheme includes LNG pipelines and several energy projects. The Exim Bank of China will lend our government approximately \$11 billion at an interest rate of 1.6%. This money has been made available to any government or private party that can present bankable feasible projects.

If all goes according to plan, Pakistan will surmount a bulk of the energy shortages. Industrial parks can be set up along the new routes. New areas for development will emerge in Sindh, Balochistan and KP that had so far been backward as they were inaccessible. Gwadar can become a booming and vibrant center for commerce and trade. China will gain access to warm waters and a shorter route for its exports to the Middle East and further, with its 21st century Silk Route initiative. Win-Win for both nations.

For Pakistan that lags behind all other nations in the region economically, speed is the essence for the execution of these projects on ground. Our country can develop and create opportunities that have eluded us this far. The political parties can claim credit in the next general elections. The people will be a little better off when duration of gas and electric load shedding can be minimised. Our industrial potential can be revived. Deprived and far flung areas can be brought closer to civilisation. These are the prospects offered by this programme.

According to a *Firstpost* report, this is the biggest overseas investment by China announced yet and the corridor is expected to be operational in three years. It will be a strategic game changer in the region that would go a long way in making our country a richer and stronger entity than ever before. This opportunity must not be made controversial or sacrificed at the altar of bickering, petty politics and regionalism. Investment in any corner of the country is for the entire nation. It is for Pakistan and its people.

Source: <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2016/01/21/comment/the-politics-of-cpec/>