

CPEC reservations

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On January 15, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called another APC to allay the fears and reservations over the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

As a result of the day-long deliberations, during which the prime minister and Minister for Planning Ahsan Iqbal explained different aspects of the implementation of the CPEC and exhaustively dealt with the misgivings expressed by different political parties, it was decided that the western route would be built on a priority basis and completed by the end of 2018. It was also decided that industrial zones along the route would be developed in consultation with the provinces, a cell would be formed in the planning ministry for coordination and information-sharing with the provinces and an eleven-member steering committee headed by the prime minister would be formed to oversee the implementation of the CPEC.

A welcome outcome of the meeting was that all leaders reaffirmed their unqualified support to the CPEC and expressed the view that the new institutional framework would adequately deal with regional concerns and remove any bottlenecks.

The decisions taken in the APC were almost identical to those taken previously except for the formation of a steering committee to oversee the projects. The concerns and misgivings expressed by leaders from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan actually stemmed from a lack of understanding of the decision-making process on projects falling under the CPEC.

The government has already initiated work on the western route in Balochistan where almost 870 kms of roads have been constructed. The government had also made it clear that the Special Economic Zones along the corridor routes would be established on the recommendations of the provinces. A parliamentary committee comprising members from all political parties represented in parliament has already been constituted. The committee members visited the western route in Balochistan and expressed satisfaction over the pace of road construction in the province.

With the formation of the steering committee, the process has been further strengthened. In view of the importance of the CPEC initiative and the sensitivities attached to it, the political leadership of Pakistan needs to show a greater sense of responsibility. They should avoid controversies publicly and use the appropriate forums set up by the federal government to have their concerns addressed.

There is absolutely no doubt about the fact that both China and Pakistan have high stakes in the successful implementation of the CPEC. Therefore it was imperative for the government not only to remove any misgivings and controversies regarding this mega-project internally but also to satisfy the Chinese government about the national ownership of the CPEC.

For China, the CPEC is the pivot of the 'Belt And Road' initiative also known as the new Silk Route in terms of its viability, dependability, early harvesting potential and safety as compared to other components of the envisioned revival of the Old Silk Route. The access to the Mediterranean through the

Central Asian States, notwithstanding recent agreements of the states with China, does not promise an early take-off in view of the prevailing security situation in the region and strained relations between Russia and Nato.

The prospect of the maritime route becoming operative also does not look very bright due to China-Japan relations, particularly after the passage of security bills by the Japanese Diet that could see Japanese troops fighting abroad for the first time in 70 years. The move has the nod of the US which wanted Japan to play an enhanced role in the ensuing rivalry in the South China Sea between the US and China as well as in view of mounting tensions between Japan and China. This is indeed an ominous development.

The Philippines, another ally of the US, has also welcomed the Japanese initiative. There is strong likelihood that in the event of a military confrontation, the US and its allies could block the sea lanes and obstruct Chinese access to Africa and Europe.

Another development that has also become a worry for China is the change of government in Sri Lanka and its emergence as one of the most strategically contested regions. During the last six years China has invested heavily in infrastructure facilities, including an international airport in Hambantota. Sri Lanka sits in the centre of the Indian Ocean and is one of the destinations on China's envisaged maritime route. It is also half way between China and its energy sources in the Middle-East.

With the installation of a pro-US and pro-India regime in Sri Lanka and defeat of Rajapaksa in the recent parliamentary elections, the work on the port has been stopped. The likelihood of relations between Sri Lanka and China getting back to the previous level now look quite remote. Sri Lanka will remain embroiled in global power dynamics, which for now seems to be favouring the US.

India is being propped up by the US and its western allies as a regional superpower to counter the rising influence of China in the region and beyond and therefore would continue feeling obliged for the Western support for its candidacy for a permanent seat in the UNSC and the provision of civilian nuclear technology. India will also stand with the US and other forces hostile to China in times of crisis; and even in peace times India will continue to undermine and scuttle Chinese initiatives to expand its commercial and military interests.

The foregoing factors make the CPEC as the most important component of the Chinese plan. Pakistan and China are dependable friends. Pakistan – facing a burgeoning energy crisis – should go the extra mile to capitalise on this historic opportunity and convert it into a success story.

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