

Will the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Bring Peace to Balochistan?

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The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is set to bring peace and prosperity to the long-neglected province.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been making waves in the regional and international media. This project, an ambitious joint infrastructure project between Beijing and Islamabad, aims to give energy-hungry China an alternative route to the resource-rich Middle East. When completed, it will connect western China with the strategically important port of Gwadar, as well as cement Pakistan's position as a strategically viable country in the region. With Russia set to benefit and Iran's possible inclusion in the deal, no doubt remains that the project holds great promise for all stakeholders involved.

This might be especially true for the province at the heart of the project—Baluchistan. Situated in the southwestern region of the Pakistan, Baluchistan, a region rich in gas, gold and copper as well as untapped reserves of oil and uranium, has been rife with economic instability and political turmoil. The underdeveloped province's problems stem from unfair state policies that largely ignored the region while continuing to exploit its natural resources. This neglect purportedly gave birth to Baloch nationalists and militants who have been waging a low-level insurgency against the Federal Government in Islamabad.

The province has been experiencing a Catch-22. The people of the province blame the government for not undertaking policies that would boost the development of the province; the government argues that the worsening security situation have made potential investors reluctant to invest in the area.

China has a long standing interest in the region. It eyes the port of Gwadar as a potential shipping hub, which could potentially alleviate its reliance on long shipping lanes in the Indian littoral and the vulnerable choke-point in the Malacca Straits. However, countless terrorist attacks and abduction incidents by Baloch insurgents have spooked Chinese investors. Progress on the CPEC initiative has so far been successful mainly because of the on-going Pakistani military operation, Zarb-e-Azb, carried out against militants and Islamist extremist groups.

However, despite initial misgivings, the \$46 billion project is off to a positive start. Officials say that the project has official entered its implementation stage. For starters, Pakistan has signed a 40-year contract with a Chinese company to develop a huge special economic zone. Furthermore, China's largest explosives maker, Beijing Auxin Chemical Technology Limited, has signed an MoU with Biaofo Industries Limited, a local emulsion explosive manufacturer to establish a joint-venture company in Pakistan for the production of emulsion explosives. To ensure security at the port city, the government has decided to deploy special security force of 10,000 to 25,000 trained personnel.

This might be good news for Baluchistan. For a change all parties involved, the Federal Government along with Baluchistan's government and people, are slowly realizing the importance of working together; the results of which are evident. Apart from the improved security situation, the province will be directly linked to China's autonomous region of Xinjiang thus granting it a vital place in the CPEC.

Considering its important position, all governments involved have an interest in a stable and prosperous Baluchistan. These developments will make way for a multitude of economic opportunities, which will not only attract foreign investments but could also result in real estate becoming an increasingly valuable asset.

As per a report published on the property market e-portal Zameen.com; “The real estate market in Gwadar is looking at a glimmering future. As development on CPEC continues unabated, the city hopes to become one of the most sought after realty market in all of Asia. Land here could soon be selling by the square foot, rather than the acres that it currently is.”

The government needs to focus on winning the goodwill of the local population. The first step towards achieving this will be to restore the original CPEC western route. Moreover, the locals should be trained and well-equipped to deal with the countless job opportunities that will soon be knocking on their doors.

Baluchistan might finally achieve stability and peace.

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