

The CPEC controversy

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Conceptually speaking, the characterisation of the CPEC as a game-changer, a catalyst to an economic revolution in Pakistan and an engine to propel shared regional economic prosperity is decidedly beyond reproach. No person in his right mind can dare contest these claims on any rational basis.

For a resource-constrained Pakistan, direct foreign investment of \$46 billion in the CPEC projects presents the best chance to nullify the effects of the missed opportunities of the past – to embark on the path of a sustained economic growth and change the economic profile of the country geared to equitable sharing of the gains by all the federating units and the masses. For China too the CPEC is a pivot of its strategy to revive the old Silk Route and gain easy access to the Arabian Sea to expand its commercial interests globally. The corridor certainly promises a win-win situation for both the countries as well as the entire region.

In the wake of the signing of agreements and MOUs, the government rightly made it a point to give this mega-undertaking national ownership by taking all the political entities on board and enlisting their across the board support. Minister for Planning and Development Ahsan Iqbal made an exhaustive presentation to the entire political leadership regarding the projects under the CPEC, clarifying that the corridor would be a network of roads that would connect Gwadar and Kashgar passing through all the four provinces. He also explained that the immediate focus of the two countries was on launching the early harvest projects, especially in the energy sector. And that the working groups formed by China and Pakistan would decide on the exact locations of the economic zones along the corridor and the areas through which this network of roads would pass after considering their technical aspects and feasibility.

However, soon a controversy was fomented regarding the change of route of the CPEC by political parties. An NNI report published in the newspapers quoted Chinese officials as having said that no change in route of the corridor had been undertaken.

These officials reportedly said: “The debate should come to an end for the fundamental interest of Pakistan. All circles in Pakistan are expected to understand and support the construction of [the] CPEC and work together to build a friendly environment of public opinion. ... The current alignment has been finalized after thorough and in-depth feasibility studies and will bring about great benefits to Pakistan. That is why both sides decided to start with KKH Phase II Highway between Multan and Sukkur and some energy projects”.

The controversy finally died down when the three routes of the corridor were finalised and made public. The western route, originating from Gwadar, would pass through Turbat, Panjgur, Nag, Basima, Sorab, Qalat Quetta, Qilla Saifullah, Zhob and D I Khan before leading towards Islamabad. The central route, beginning from Gwadar, would lead to D I Khan through Basima, Khuzdar, Sukkur, Rajanpur, Layyah, Muzaffargarh and Bakkar. The eastern route, starting from Gwadar, would traverse through Basima, Khuzdar, Sukkur, Rahimyar Khan, Bahawalpur, Multan, Lahore and Faisalabad and Islamabad. An

incisive look at these proposed routes reveals that no province of the country has been neglected and it is not exclusively beneficial to a particular province as is being perceived and alleged.

Now the PTI is trying to generate another controversy about the CPEC. Imran Khan and Chief Minister Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pervez Khattak have shown intense aversion to giving priority to the construction of the eastern route, maintaining that it would deprive Balochistan and KP of the benefits of the CPEC. They are insisting on work being started on the western route first. Some voices from Balochistan have also been added to this rhetoric.

Pervez Khattak has also accused the federal government of dishonesty and deception in fulfilling its promises regarding KP's share in CPEC projects, and announced an agitation against the federal government's decision to construct the eastern route first saying that the KP government would withdraw its cooperation with the government on implementation of CPEC projects and also stop the acquisition of land for the purpose if the western route was not given priority.

The position taken by the PTI lacks rationality and seems rooted in its obsession to embarrass the PML-N government rather than its understanding of the process of decision-making in respect of the projects under the CPEC. It is a misconception on the part of the PTI government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to assume that the government of Pakistan is solely responsible for deciding which project and route would be implemented first.

The alignment of the corridor, its routes and the prioritisation of the projects have been decided by the working groups formed by the two countries keeping in view the technical aspects and their feasibility as clearly indicated by the planning minister in his briefing to politicians. China, being the investor, understandably has a greater say in deciding the implementation of the projects with a view to ensure that money is productively spent to serve the interests of both the countries. This fact needs to be understood and accepted ungrudgingly. Work on other routes and projects will start in due course of time as the CPEC has a time-span of 15 years to be implemented in totality. The CPEC ultimately will benefit all the provinces.

The launch of the eastern route, which passes through Punjab and Sindh, has been made in view of the immediate feasibility of the route as the existing network of roads and railway infrastructure in these provinces can help with its early completion and provide a good base to both the countries for working on other projects. The most important factor in this respect is that China wanted to start work on this route first in view of its early harvest potential and immediate feasibility. The move is in consonance with the understanding between the two countries on the prioritisation of the projects and routes.

Making the CPEC controversial like the Kalabagh Dam would send the wrong signals to the Chinese government and could also prove inimical to our national interests. Therefore, further politicking on the CPEC must be avoided. The nation expects rational behaviour from its politicians.

Source: <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/79681-the-cpec-controversy>