

CPEC: time to reflect

M. Saeed Khalid
The News International (Rawalpindi)
January 9, 2016

Rigging has come down several notches in the PTI's list of charges against the PML-N. But there is never a dull moment in the country's politics, and Imran Khan has just found something to hit the Sharif dispensation with – the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

The PTI's chairman and its chief minister in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are not critical of the concept of the CPEC but the way it is being implemented. They have grabbed the issue as another manner of denying the provinces - above all KP - benefits from the infrastructure and energy projects lumped under the project.

The mounting reservations from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's political figures including those in the PML-N are directed against low priority being assigned to the western route to link China to Gwadar that would open up many backward areas to a burst of economic activity. The second concern focuses on the prospects of Punjab taking the lion's share of energy projects to be set up by Chinese companies.

While the prime minister and members of his government as well as the Punjab chief minister never tire of recounting the virtues of the CPEC, Imran Khan has attacked it, saying it is leading to a great sense of deprivation in KP and Balochistan.

Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal who had joined the chorus of CPEC eulogists is called upon almost daily to soothe the dissenting voices from KP. He seems to be on the defensive while explaining that only \$6 billion of a total \$46 billion investment planned under the corridor would be spent on infrastructure while the remaining amount would go into energy and other projects to be undertaken by Chinese companies. Remember, it was Iqbal who once announced that the corridor would benefit three billion people across three continents – bringing connectivity, commerce and prosperity.

Imran and his associates in KP are complaining that the western route is being reduced to a national highway rather than a motorway which will reduce its utility and relevance in the China-Gwadar transit route. Iqbal is not forthcoming on the technical details of the western route which is increasing frustration in KP, resulting in a letter from Chief Minister Khattak to the federation. Iqbal has stressed that the government could not force the Chinese investors to initiate projects at sites of its choice.

So where does the truth lie between these opposing narratives on the CPEC? The federation has come up with a new mantra to assuage discontent in KP. It says that the CPEC is not yet all sewn up and there is room to add projects with the concurrence of all concerned parties. Secondly, the project will be implemented in phases over a long period of time.

Pervaiz Khattak, normally a rather gentle protestor, seems to be all worked up. His latest demand is that KP must benefit from the road, railway, pipeline and fibre-optic projects under the CPEC. He is adding 'maltreatment' to earlier grievances about the province not getting a fair share of hydropower and gas supplies.

The planning minister, never short of hyperbole when praising the CPEC, has found it hard to convince KP leaders that the ‘fate-changer’ CPEC will bring equal benefit to their province. So this week, he made a dash to Peshawar, meeting political chiefs and the media, reassuring them that no change has been made in the western route. His visit took place on the eve of an all parties’ conference convened by the JUI leader, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, in Peshawar to forge a joint stand on the province’s demands about projects under CPEC.

It was unwise to present the CPEC as a great game-changer without looking at its likely impact on all the provinces. The more Balochistan and KP leaders look at the likely benefits of the corridor, the greater is their discontent. CM KP Khattak has spoken up about Punjab and the centre usurping the rights of smaller provinces. He claims that as against its share of 13 percent, KP is getting only two percent of the corridor projects.

Islamabad had to come down from its high pedestal, and the first major step was taken with the planning minister spending a day in Peshawar, trying to convince the KP leaders and the media that no changes are being made in the original CPEC plan. Earlier, the prime minister had inaugurated work on the Quetta-Zhob road which would link up with D I Khan and onwards.

Imran has taken the position that a road is not good enough and a proper western route should be built to take the China-Gawadar transit traffic. The federal government would do well by not issuing any more high-sounding promises about the CPEC. It should instead figure out whether the road being built between Gwadar, Quetta and D I Khan is of requisite specifications. If not, a course correction is needed – and soon.

Punjab is destined to take most of the energy projects envisaged under the CPEC. It is, therefore, desirable for China’s transit to the Arabian Sea to take place via a more direct and shorter route. Chinese trucks travelling down to Punjab and then to Gwadar via a longer route do not make sense. Over to you, Professor Ahsan Iqbal.

Source: <http://www.thenews.com.pk/print/88984-CPEC-time-to-reflect>