

CPEC controversy...army's failure

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It was a 'game-changer', we all gushed, destined to change the face of Pakistan. No one could mention the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor without breaking into superlatives. Actual details were hard to come by but the rhetoric was intoxicating.

This was before our genius for statesmanship kicked in. When it did we are finding out that instead of reaching for the stars we are managing to dig ourselves into another hole. The controversy over the CPEC is spiralling in such a manner that the Chinese embassy has taken the unprecedented step of issuing a statement urging all parties to "strengthen communication...and resolve differences properly."

Our Chinese friends can be forgiven for feeling miffed. Here they are holding out the prospect of all these roads, highways and power projects and we are speaking in different tongues. Seeing our performance they are likely to dwell in their minds on the merits of a one-party state.

The main charge against the Sharifs is that they have hidden everything behind a veil of secrecy and are not being open about maps and finances. Every now and then the Punjab chief minister makes another thunderous announcement about game-changing. Press him for details or ask him to show the actual maps and the highway/motorway alignments and the industrial zones and beyond his wagging finger, and eyes aflame with passion, there is little to see.

I can bet that if parliamentarians and corps commanders are subjected to a test about what the CPEC is about nine out of ten will flunk it. When the State Bank governor confesses to not knowing anything about the money and the loans, terms and conditions and repayment schedules, we get an idea of the mess the federal government has managed to create around this issue...which is supposed to alter the alignment of the stars in our favour.

But we should be honest with ourselves. Was any of this unexpected? Was anyone really expecting that the Sharifs, the two of them who are running the civilian half of this country, would transcend their limitations and turn overnight into a Bismarck couple on the CPEC?

Here were elected leaders who couldn't get the threat of terrorism right. They had not the heart to take on the Pakistani Taliban. They could take no decision on Karachi. It was the army which knocked sense into them and the army, on its own, which declared war on terrorism – both of the religious variety as in Fata, and the 'secular' variety as in Karachi. When the army had taken the decision, the civilians hurriedly clambered aboard the terrorism bandwagon. It is another matter that they now give the impression that the resolve all along was theirs.

Given this record on what grounds was anyone expecting that coming to the 'game-changer' the same civilians, the same leadership class would become statesmen: bring all the provinces together and get everyone to sing from the same score?

The army is managing the internal security front and overseeing foreign policy. Visiting foreign high-ups invariably call on the army chief because everyone understands where the locus of real power rests. The army is providing security for the CPEC and raising an entire division headed by a two-star general (from

our own resources) for this purpose. Without this guarantee there would be no corridor and no Chinese money coming in.

So how come, when the army has its finger in every pie, when it is spread all over, when it is handling all key issues, when it came to this supreme ‘game-changer’, this khan of khans, this king of kings, it left everything to the higher wisdom and statesmanship of the Sharifs? It doesn’t add up, doesn’t make sense.

Let us not be hard on Heavy-mandate PM and whiz-kid Punjab CM. They are doing nothing unusual. This is how they have been conducting business and politics – it being hard to make out where the one ends and the other begins – for the last 30 years. When they look at the map of Pakistan they see Punjab. When they look at Punjab they see Lahore. When they see Lahore what rivets their attention the most are the roads leading to Raiwind.

Being industrialists and businessmen, that too on an industrial scale, when they conduct state business with other countries it is but natural, given their background, that one eye is fastened on their own interests. With both the PPP leadership and the PML-N leadership the lines between public and private interest are blurred. It was not always like this. Once upon a time politics and commerce used to run on separate lines. Alas, not any more. Perhaps as a country we are atoning for sins unexplained.

I am not making any of this up. All reasonably well-informed Pakistanis know all this. But to return to the mother of all questions: how come in our holy of holies, the Vatican we call the General Headquarters, was the CPEC, this supposed definer of our future, left to the tender mercies of the Sharifs?

Give the Sharifs credit at least for being consistent. They are treating the CPEC as if it was one of their sugar mills, a karkhana of the Ittefaq Group. Again they are hardly to blame. They are just being true to form. Only in this case the army decided not to exercise the system of ‘checks-and-balances’ it not only exercises in other fields but thinks it its birthright to do so. Why?

Why intrusive interference in every other corner, every other aspect of national life? Why benign neglect and masterly inactivity, leaving the present leadership to its devices, regarding the ‘game-changer’? Or are we to think the unthinkable, what should hardly be put into words, that the Punjab-centrism of the Sharif approach strikes a chord with the larger Punjabi-ism of what euphemistically, when we want to take cover, we refer to as the ‘establishment’?

The CPEC was supposed to bring Pakistan together...tie up its constituent units, the four provinces and Gilgit-Baltistan, in a tighter framework of communication and economic integration. The Raiwind approach to the CPEC is fanning the flames of inter-provincial discord. The Chinese are not at fault. They know their history of the Long March and the subtleties of Mao Zedong Thought. In what institute of Marxism-Leninism could they have learned the subtleties of Raiwind thought?

The politicians can’t clear up this mess. They could forge no consensus on terrorism. The army did it for them. The Sharifs are in the driving seat...they cannot resolve the growing controversy regarding the CPEC. The differences are too wide, the suspicions too deep, civilian incapacity too glaring. It is a particular gift of PML-N ministers that whenever any of them speaks on this issue he manages to fan the flames of suspicion higher.

It’s the army which has to take the lead, behind the scenes, discreetly...but firmly, knocking sense into the political leadership, the way it did over terrorism.

Let us host Saudi princes and read out soothing words to them. But let us understand that the CPEC controversy is more important for us than the row between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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