

CPEC, Iran-Saudi Arabia, and the PM

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Let's consider the big challenges for Pakistan: this is a country that needs to grow at 10 percent a year. It is a country that needs to educate and find jobs for the almost 100 million people below the age of twenty-five. It is a country that needs to find a way back to the pluralism that defined the vision of the Quaid and his fellow founding fathers. It is a country that needs to find a fair and mutually beneficial relationship with India – including ensuring that the defences of the country are sound. It isn't easy to be Pakistan.

Sometimes, it may be useful to reflect on just how difficult it really is to be Pakistan. Pakistan's geography, its majority-Muslim character, and its relationship with countries like China, Saudi Arabia and Iran are all supposed to be tools that can be used to manage and moderate complexity. Sometimes, however, it is this very geography and these relationships that deepen the complexity.

The beginning of 2016 is one of those times. This past weekend was a rough reminder of the swiftness with which Pakistan's geographic, historic and religious advantages can turn into liabilities.

There is little debate about the epochal nature of the geo-strategic and economic opportunity that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) represents, and yet it seems we have managed somehow to problematise the CPEC. Every political discontent, perhaps lacking other issues to latch onto successfully, seems to be able to smell blood. Could the CPEC be the domestic issue on which a viable opposition can be mobilised?

Beyond our borders, the unstable and dangerous dynamic between Iran and Saudi Arabia has spun so far out of control that the debate is now being played out between irresponsible Pakistani groups that are taking sides based on preconceived positions having nothing to do with the specific questions at stake at this moment in January 2016. Could the quarrels between Saudi Arabia and Iran be the international issue that contaminates the national discourse with the poison of sectarianism, making all future governance a nightmarish exercise in the unceasing defensive pursuit of social equilibrium?

The question of what routes the CPEC is adopting through the country, and the question of how Pakistan should react to the pressures being put on it due to Iran and Saudi Arabia's quarrels are big questions. The only way to manage and respond to these questions is through adroit, timely and proactive political engagement.

The worst possible way to manage and respond to these questions is for the hordes of officials involved in the affairs of the state to be making statements and stating positions that are incongruent, intemperate or reflecting the personal biases and choices of the individuals involved.

In short, the only way to prevent the CPEC discussion from spinning out of control and becoming a divisive national pursuit, is by making sure that PM Sharif does not keep doing what critics of the CPEC are accusing him of doing (which is: ignoring them).

Concurrently (and not unrelatedly), the only way to prevent the Iran-Saudi Arabia dynamic from permanently contaminating the national discourse is by making sure that PM Sharif articulates unity and

national coherence boldly and without the nervous hand-wringing that has placed the seed of doubt among many of his critics in the first place.

The connection between how the CPEC is being handled and how the Iran - Saudi Arabia issue is being handled is intimate and real. There is no escaping it. In both instances, the prime minister is being let down by his hesitation to engage robustly with the full range of instruments of governance available to him, including parliament, the national press, the religious scholars' community, and the business community.

In the case of the CPEC, there is little excuse for the government to be unprepared for domestic friction. If the CPEC is truly transformational, then it will require a lot more effort than your regular motorway or metro line. Some of this friction may come from the schemings of Pakistan's enemies too – why would any enemy want to allow Pakistan to build a destiny-altering set of highways or power plants without molestation? However, most of the friction the government will experience in building CPEC is its own lack of preparation, its own lack of empathy for smaller provinces, and its own unforgivable lack of imagination.

Does the PML-N not know that Pakhtun nationalists, who suffered a heavy defeat at the ballot box in 2013, are desperately seeking opportunities for political relevance? Does it not know that the wars in Afghanistan and Fata over the last decade have heightened and deepened the sense of deprivation among many Pakhtuns? Does it not know that mischievous regional actors will always seek to take advantage of the seeds of discontent in Pakistan?

If the PML-N government and the prime minister are unaware of these facts, then they have been unforgivably absent. If they are aware of them, then they are unforgivably unprepared to deal with these facts. Both ways, it does not reflect well that a third-time prime minister can't find people who can speak with kindness and empathy to Pakhtuns, or Baloch, or Sindhi nationalists about the collective advantages that the CPEC will offer to all linguistic, ethnic and political groups in the country. Aggressively countering objections to the proposed routes for the CPEC with accusations of enmity against progress or development is exactly how Pakistan's mainstream has been stymied from real progress before. It is unforgivable that this process has not been managed better. Sadly, the allergy that the PML-N has to parliament and parliamentary processes goes a long way to explaining why we are where we are on the CPEC today.

All is not lost. The PM is a skilful reconciler. He is the one who will have to pick up the phone, and cajole and convince all political leaders of the wisdom of how he is doing things – and he is the one who will have to concede things, where things need to be conceded.

The Iran-Saudi Arabia situation is even more urgent than the CPEC. While the CPEC can build Pakistan, the Iran-funded, and Saudi-funded bitterness within the hearts of Pakistani brothers can destroy it. Inoculating Pakistan from this bitterness requires proactive leadership from the prime minister. If there are issues he doesn't think politicians should discuss openly, then having proxies say this on prime time TV is a poor way of communicating. Once again, a few phone calls – probably no more than a dozen – would have assured the mainstream political class of the actual plan that has been agreed between the PM and the chief of army staff.

Clearly, Pakistan is not sending troops anywhere, anytime soon. Yet the nervousness about what Pakistan is promising Saudi Arabia, and what risks it is exposing itself to vis-a-vis Iran, if it does so, is palpable. It isn't good enough to complain about the anti-democratic, or anti-PML-N bias in responding to such nervousness. The PM is the elected leader of the country. It is his job to offer assurance and comfort to a country that is forever on the edge because of the terrible decisions of the past that have put us in the situation that we are in.

Winning elections and being in-charge is more work than losing elections and leading protest dharnas. Pakistan is lucky to be located where it is, and it is lucky to be as diverse as it is. Most of all, it is lucky to be a democracy. No one knows the value of this democracy better than Prime Minister Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif. Sustaining, nurturing and strengthening this democracy is hard work. The CPEC and the Iran-Saudi situation are challenges only for those that fear hard work. For the prime minister, they are an opportunity to lead.

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