

Discord over CPEC & selfish motives

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The raging discord over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) symbolises one of the many symptoms of the disease that our political economy suffers from — an arbitrary, non-inclusive, narrow and selfish vision of national development. Even sadder is the intervention by the Chinese embassy in Islamabad on January 10: “China hopes that the relevant parties in Pakistan could strengthen communication and coordination on the CPEC to create favourable conditions for the project.”

This amounted to a direct rebuke of the province-centred “development visions” of Asif Ali Zardari and the Sharifs. For these leaders, initiating the CPEC meant concentrating development in their home provinces. The embassy statement, in fact, resonated similar concerns that Chinese interlocutors had been expressing earlier.

One had expected that following the agreement at the All-Parties Conference (APC) on May 28, 2015, the western alignment of the CPEC — from Attock to DI Khan in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) and to Zhob, Qilla Saifullah, Pishin and Quetta in Balochistan — would take precedence and thus allay reservations of the two provinces. But this turned out to be a misplaced expectation.

Now we see the K-P chief minister threatening revolt against the CPEC plans and accusing the Sharif government of being unmindful of the problems of conflict-affected regions such as Balochistan and K-P. The political parties of the two provinces are demanding the construction of motorways, economic and industrial zones, oil and gas pipelines and fibre optic lines through their respective provinces. The issue has roots in the history of mistrust between the Centre and the smaller provinces.

Even the Pakhtun nationalist Awami National Party has reservations, but it understands that opposition to the CPEC may jeopardise the project. The PPP, too, alleges that most CPEC projects are concentrated in Punjab. The party even plans an APC in Gilgit to press for the inclusion of Gilgit-Baltistan in the CPEC plans. It plans to approach the Supreme Appellate Court against the federal government for neglecting the area as far as its due share in the project is concerned.

Clearly, there is no disagreement over the utility of the project, but all that major parties are demanding is due deference to the needs of smaller regions. Most of the complaints could have been avoided had the federal government thought through its plans. This chorus of protest from the west and the south should have rung alarm bells long ago and the sooner the federal government moves for consensus, the better it would be for the federation because this discord has also unnerved the Chinese government and its officials in Islamabad. They complain of deficient coordination and consensus-building by the federal government. We are not going to wait for consensus to develop within Pakistan. If it doesn't come about, we will move on. Time and opportunities are limited.

The Sharifs are either mistaken, ill-informed, or deliberately ignoring a basic fact: they must first secure the vicinity around land-locked Punjab if they want to create a haven of peace and prosperity. Ignoring key links such as Balochistan and K-P — both of which are battered by conflict and begging for urgent prioritised attention — will not only inflate existing disparities, it may also scare the Chinese away, who

will probably opt for longer and costlier corridors rather than remaining hostage to the selfish and squabbling ruling elite of Pakistan.

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