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Issue Brief

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor And The Western Route

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In 1978, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping started Grand Economic Development project namely Western Development Strategy to bring western part of China on par with the eastern part in development. It was pursued with consistency by the successors of Deng Xiaoping to connect western China with sea port cities of eastern China. Massive construction of highways and railway lines were done. Special exemption in taxes was given to investors from eastern China to establish industries in western China. As a result, skilled people started moving to western China. Today the western part of China is developing fast to catch up with the rest of the country.

In the recent past establishment of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) road link between Kashghar to Gawadar was first mentioned by Chinese premier Li Keqiang during his visit to Pakistan in May 2013. *“Our two sides should focus on carrying out priority projects in connectivity, energy development and power generation,”* Li said at the time. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor will connect the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. It is, therefore, projected as a flagship project of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

The CPEC will shorten the route for China's energy imports from the Middle East by about 12,000 kms as well as link China's relatively underdeveloped western region to Pakistan's Gwadar deep sea port on the Arabian Sea through a network of roads, railway, industrial zones, energy schemes and pipelines. Some \$15.5bn worth of coal, wind, solar and hydro energy projects will come online by 2018 and add 10,400 megawatts of energy to Pakistan's national grid. A \$44m optical fiber cable between the two countries will also be built. As soon as the CPEC was announced, it attracted attention of major powers.

The US initially had reservations about the growing influence of China in the region but now it has given signals that it could support the project. India, on the other hand, has publicly opposed CPEC on the flimsy grounds that it passes through Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The real reason that India is not comfortable with the economic progress that this mega-project would bring to Pakistan.

It must be borne in mind that the CPEC is not only confined to a single route or a few roads or highways. It is rather an entire system of roads, railways, airports, industrial zones, energy and development projects. Both the CPEC and Chinese presence at Gwadar port would elevate already existing geo-strategic strength of Pakistan.

The CPEC also brought forth conflicting points view within Pakistan. The most controversial dissension was on the three routes to be built: eastern, central and western. The priority to the construction of each route had to be determined.

After President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan 21-22 April this year, political parties alleged that the priority was not being given to the western route passing through Balochistan, as agreed with the Chinese officials originally. With the passage of time, the differences on the routes became serious and got the attention of mainstream media. To respond to this challenge, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif convened two All Parties Conference in order to build consensus. The All Parties Conference on 28th of May, 2015 agreed that the western route of the corridor should be given priority. This would start from Gwadar and would pass through Turbat, Panjgur, Nag, Basima, Sorab, Qalat, Quetta, Qilla Saifullah and Zhob in Balochistan to reach Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and then would head towards Hassan Abdal before reaching Islamabad. A second route, referred to by the federal government as the 'eastern route' is stipulated to start from Gwadar and pass through Turbat, Panjgur, Khuzdar, Ratodero, Kashmore, Rajanpur, Dera Ghazi Khan, Multan, Faisalabad, Pindi Bhatian, Rawalpindi, Hasanabdul and onwards.

The good news is that the western route/highway is on a fast track because Pakistan's leading road builder Frontier Works Organization is constructing it at a fast pace. It has already built long stretches of roads along with the bridges and tunnels. While speaking at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad on public talk on 21 October 2015, Director General Frontier Works Organization Maj. Gen. Muhammad Afzal said that FWO has already completed 556 kilometers of the 870 kilometers road network in Balochistan as part of the western route of CPEC and by 2016 it will be completed.