

CPEC: A Zipper of Civilizations

By Muhammad Taimur Fahad Khan



Regional connectivity has always been the necessitated goal of Pakistan's foreign policy. Pakistan-China ties have played a significant role in particular. Over the years, this relationship has grown and strengthened ever since 1951 when their friendship initially began. China has always been a key component of Pakistan's

foreign policy, to the point where Pakistan played a vital role in arranging Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1970. Nevertheless, with the constant moral and strategic support of China, Pakistan has gained significant importance internationally.

Therefore, as a move to further solidify their friendship, President Xi Jinping, proposed an economic initiative. The Silk Road

Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road or collectively referred to as the One Belt- One-Road (OBOR) or the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) was introduced in 2013. BRI aims to promote common development through win-win cooperation between stakeholder countries, and common progress of member countries through closer international cooperation. More than 100 countries, as well

as international organizations, have joined this initiative.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, otherwise known as CPEC, is a flagship project of the BRI initiative. It is a massive bilateral developmental project and is expected to be a 'game-changer' in the geopolitics of South Asia. CPEC entails more substantial and appreciable trade linkages between both Pakistan and China through a network of roads, railways, fibre-optic cables, energy pipelines and power generation projects. Various projects under CPEC range from the short term (2020), medium-term (2025) and the long term (2030) are in the process of completion. The Early Harvest Projects of 2017/18, which constitutes of energy and infrastructure, have already begun bearing fruits. Another major area of focus of CPEC is Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which are proposed to be constructed all over Pakistan.

Pakistan's key priority is to rejuvenate the national economy by focusing on growth and regional connectivity, which is highlighted in its Vision for the year 2025. Enhanced connectivity with China, Central Asia and South Asia via CPEC will expand and bring about further bilateral and regional trade, promote economic integration and foster economic development. The variety of energy projects under the CPEC agreement would improve the energy crisis in Pakistan to a great extent; these projects would not only add capacity to the national grid but diversify Pakistan's energy mix through investments within the country's hydro, wind, solar and hydro-carbon energy sectors. The establishment of SEZs, along the length of the Corridor,

would spur growth and economic opportunities for the entire region.

The CPEC project provided Pakistan with an opportunity to build as well as operationalize its Gwadar Port. The completion of the port not only makes it the economic hub of Pakistan in particular but for the entire region as well. It would construct a strategic nexus between Pakistan, China and Central Asia, generating billions in revenue and provide shorter land routes. It would effectively establish links from the Caspian Sea to the Strait of Hormuz and would enable Gwadar to compete with the Persian Gulf ports.

The CPEC infrastructure would play a significant role in inter-provincial integration. It is expected that it would also bring unprecedented economic rewards for the agricultural sector of Pakistan

CPEC aims to connect Kashgar (Xinjiang - China) with Pakistan's Gwadar port (Balochistan), through a vast and complex network of roads measuring up to 3,000 kilometres as well as other infrastructure projects. China will save millions of dollars every year by shortening its route for energy imports from the Middle East by about 12,000 kilometres and also gain greater access to the Indian Ocean. However, on the other hand, Pakistan expects infrastructural enhancement and would address its severe energy crisis.

According to the reports, China's ship-borne trade is currently amounting to \$5 trillion, and it may triple over a decade, much of which will be passing through

the Gwadar-Kashgar trade route. CPEC, intended to be completed by (2030), is a win-win cooperation for both countries. The successful implementation of the CPEC would provide Pakistan with access to the Central Asian states - Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan - the Russian Federation and Europe, through China. The trucking and logistics industry of Pakistan would have an immense opportunity to grow. Certainly, this unprecedented road link would have far-reaching positive geo-economic dividends for the people of Pakistan.

Pakistan should use CPEC as a springboard for encouraging a dialogue about the potential convergence of civilizations across its territory through 'Gwadar dialogue.' Conceptually, CPEC can be equated to the jugular vein of Afro-Eurasian integration, and it is expected to be a vital driving force of the emerging Multi-Polar World Order.

Resultantly, Gwadar has been witnessing new development projects. Pakistan has decided to construct a mega oil city at Gwadar on 80,000 acres under the Corridor. It will be for transportation of imported oil through the Gwadar port to China. Moreover, recently Prime Minister Imran Khan has also laid the foundation of a grand international airport at Gwadar.

The provincial and federal government in Balochistan and Islamabad should further focus on Gwadar to host regular trade fairs and socio-cultural events which could culminate in a big-ticket yearly meeting akin in esteemed importance to the Shangri-La Dialogue, except focusing on participation from each of the aforementioned regional actors most likely to partake in CPEC.

Apart from addressing the burgeoning energy requirements of Pakistan, CPEC is expected to bring industrialization and investment to Pakistan with carry-over effects for immediate neighbouring countries. The CPEC infrastructure would play a significant role in inter-provincial integration. It is expected that it would also bring unprecedented economic rewards for the agricultural sector of Pakistan.

Pakistan should use CPEC as a springboard for encouraging a dialogue about the potential convergence of civilizations across its territory through 'Gwadar dialogue'

With the ever-burgeoning of strategic partnership between United States and India, sabotage and terrorist activities are anticipated to be brought into play along the Northern, Western and Eastern CPEC routes, as a last ditch effort to fail CPEC projects. India, along with some other hostile states, has launched a malicious campaign aimed at discrediting CPEC, linking it with the Indo-Pak Kashmir dispute. One can already notice a sudden upsurge in the acts of terror in the three restive regions, and activation of certain NGOs and think-tanks, all trying to air misgivings and creating a fear psychosis.

CPEC has fully exposed Indo-US convergence of the interest to contain China in the region. Anti-CPEC propaganda is a combined effort of both. Since China's position in South Asia is likely to become unassailable for both India and the US after

success of CPEC, therefore, the Indian and US temptation is becoming irresistible to create hurdles and destabilization in Pakistan, China and Afghanistan through deliberated security quagmires in Balochistan, KPK, Gilgit-Baltistan and other parts of the region.

In reality, CPEC is stuck down India's throat. It refuses to reconcile to the advent of CPEC because it knows that once the mega project is complete, Pakistan's economy is likely to spiral upwards. India's Foreign Secretary and Indian Army Chief General Bipin Rawat, are propagating that CPEC is part of a military initiative of China, and it is a threat to India's sovereignty.

Countries having nefarious designs attempted to fan the politics of regionalism to generate controversies about this mega project. These countries even devised plans to spread anarchy in Balochistan and other parts of the country by accentuating the perception about economic neglect of the said provinces over the years and making the route controversial and politically unviable. Chinese presence in Pakistan is being targeted to create aspersions and affect the fostering bilateral relations. Attack on the Chinese Consulate in Karachi (23rd Nov 2018), the killing of LEAs on the Coastal Highway Balochistan and several other such sabotage attempts are surely and undeniably the part of the same strategy.

In the contemporary times where the world is going through a paradigm shift, major global powers need to adopt more

inclusive and participatory policy orientation on regional and global levels rather than exclusive and divisive ones. Currently, the US is slowly divorcing from its policy of multilateralism which in turn is increasing the surge of regionalism and isolationism which is ultimately leading to different kinds of negative competitions such as arms races, proxy wars, nuclear proliferation and violent conflicts throughout the world. China on the other hand is acting as an anti-dote to such dangerous developments by executing mega connectivity projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which involves all the countries this project is touching.

In the contemporary times where the world is going through a paradigm shift, major global powers need to adopt more inclusive and participatory policy orientation on regional and global levels rather than exclusive and divisive ones

Projects like CPEC, will not only open new vistas of cooperation in the economic and political spheres of different regions such as Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa and beyond but it will ultimately lead to social and cultural connectivity between different regions because of improved connectivity besides having mutually shared economic and political interests as well ■



The writer is Research Associate and Media Officer at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.