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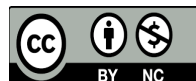
**REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY THROUGH CHINA
PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR: CHALLENGES AND
PROSPECTS**

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a project that aims to connect China and Pakistan. Subsequently, this corridor will integrate other regional countries for a larger regional integration and connectivity. Overall, this connectivity and integration will be beneficial for the economic benefits to create a win-win situation for all regional states. Apart from regional connectivity and integration, domestically it will create a linkage between all provinces including provision of connectivity between developed and underdeveloped regions of Pakistan. Whereas this connectivity enables all regional states to benefit from each other economically, the corridor will enhance stakes for all regional states. With all these prospects, CPEC is facing some serious challenges, posed by geopolitical interests of regional and extra-regional states. Resolving the challenges without creating an alarm and conflicting situation is most needed aspect of CPEC. This research is aimed to analyse three aspects; a) the regional integration and connectivity through CPEC, b) the challenges in the timely and successful completion of CPEC, c) how to overcome the challenges for accruing the maximum benefits of CPEC bilaterally, regionally and domestically within Pakistan.

Key Words: China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan, China, Region, connectivity, integration, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

1. Introduction

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the result of decades of all-weather engagement between Pakistan and China. Both states are

dedicated friends in good times and bad, and their friendship is weather-proof. Pakistan-China friendship began in the 1950s with remote chances and has since evolved into an outstanding possibility to link several Asian regions through the CPEC. CPEC is a symbol of shared interests and ambitions for both countries' growth. This gigantic project of CPEC is primarily intended to develop a practical cooperative mechanism by both friendly states. The areas of cooperation include; development and operationalization Gwadar Port, infrastructural development, industrial cooperation and trade and energy carriage. The benefits of all these would reach over to both states at three level; the people, states and connectivity between underdeveloped and developed regions. Besides, CPEC would provide the infrastructural facilities to all adjoining regions.

The primary theory of CPEC is promotion of regionalism in the age of globalization. The term globalization is defined as interconnectedness; achieved through connectivity and integration of various regions. This connectivity can best be achieved through the development of communication network; CPEC being the classic example. Interconnectedness is at the heart of globalisation, which is achieved through globalisation., "Broadening, deepening and speeding up of communication" (Servaes, J. (Ed.). 2007).

The CPEC was developed in the early twenty-first century, but it was only codified in 2014 as a treaty. In his classic article, "The Geographical Pivot of History," British geographer Halford John Mackinder discussed the heartlands and geographic pivots (Mackinder, H. J. 1904). Pakistan's geopolitical position is that of a geographic pivot, politically and

economically connecting various parts of Asia. The CPEC, eventually completed, will link all regional states, including India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and West Asia, as part of China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiative, which was later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Other Southeast Asian countries will profit directly and indirectly from CPEC once India has been integrated. These countries' economies would be intertwined with the economics of the rest of Asia and even the world. This is a well-known truth in India, but it is the country's animosity and rivalry with Pakistan and China that drives its opposition to the CPEC project.

The CPEC is indeed, continuation of the Karakorum Highway (KKH), developed through most difficult terrain over the twenty years' time from 1960s to 1980s. It was a just effort of Pakistani and Chinese engineers who made this difficult project a reality. The existing KKH highway is being extended and expanded to make it passable for the heavy transport as corridor through mountainous region. The people of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) have a need and a right to develop their lands economically by establishing links through all available channels. This corridor will provide them opportunities for the economic and socio-political development of their region which remained backward for a long time. No state has the right to keep a community underdeveloped nor should any external power like India be allowed to create hurdles in the development of this region. Indian is already in illegal occupation of huge area of the state of Jammu and Kashmir ever since 1947 and desire that, areas, being administered by Pakistan remain under-developed. Indeed, India has

violated the UN resolutions and constitution of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) while annexing the occupied parts of the state in August 2019.

Besides economic cooperation CPEC will greatly contribute towards peace and stability in South and Central Asia. It is in fact a win-win situation for all regional states; Pakistan and China will be the chief beneficiaries of the project. Being part of the BRI, CPEC offers lot of opportunities for all adjoining regions and states. It will boost the regional economies through integration. India should opt to cooperate with Pakistan and China for the optimal utilization of the advantages of CPEC. It has been influencing Pakistan for the transit trade route for its trade and economic linkages with Central Asia and Afghanistan through Pakistani geopolitics. Moreover, it is part of TAPI gas pipeline along with Pakistan, thus, there should be no logical reason to oppose the CPEC. The offensive political statements and sponsoring terrorism by India to stop the construction of CPEC has really posed lot of challenges for Pakistan and China.

Iran and Afghanistan both has shown their interest and it is hope that they will join the mega project CPEC. China already inked an agreement of \$400 billion with Iran and after Taliban takeover of Afghanistan; there are more opportunities for both to become part of CPEC. (Fassihi, F., & Myers, S. L. 2021). The huge deposits of Iranian oil and gas have their ultimate utility for countries like China and other industrial states. The already proposed Iran-Pakistan (IP) gas pipeline has potentials to be further stretched to China for its best utilization. CPEC provides a greater

possibility for this IP project which can be named as Iran-Pakistan China (IPC) gas pipeline.

2. Changing Regional Landscape through CPEC

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was conceived after Beijing officials carefully considered the changing regional and global scene in the twenty-first century. Similarly, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as the flagship project of the BRI, was widely seen as China's major international effort. This massive undertaking was viewed as a synthesis of advances on three levels: domestic, bilateral, and regional. Furthermore, the project has worldwide repercussions, given to the Sino-US battle for dominance. Because CPEC is the BRI's first project, it is both regional and global in scope, and its prompt completion will help the BRI's other corridors. The initiative will link several Asian regions, paving the possibility for connectivity outside the region. When completed, it will link Pakistan to Iran via land and the Middle East (Arab world) via the Arabian Sea, with the possibility of expanding to the European and African continents.

China and Pakistan are two important Asian countries with geographical proximity and a long history of all-weather relations. Indeed, China has the vision and resources, and Pakistan has the location as a crossroads to carry out the mutually beneficial project. The timely implementation and smart use of the CPEC will tremendously benefit the two nations for centuries to come. In fact, how well the leaders of both countries can use this amazing facility to promote bilateral trade and rational and reasonable

people-to-people communication will be put to the test. Innovative policies for the optimum use of CPEC in whatever future scenario have enormous potential.

At the regional level, the changing international and regional scene needs more cooperation among regional nations in order to facilitate regional collaboration. Domestically, CPEC connects all of Pakistan's provinces, which is a huge step forward in removing the misunderstanding that arose initially due to the corridor's route decision. Various areas of the provinces, including Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, are connected to the main CPEC via lateral roads. This will allow Pakistan's undeveloped areas to link with its developed areas, ensuring that everyone has equal access to economic development and wealth at all levels.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was envisioned as a project that would revolutionise Pakistan economically, integrate it politically, and reinforce it strategically both at home and abroad. The implementation of Chinese development philosophy with the major subject of people-centric development gives a chance for better learning for the Pakistani government and people in this initiative. Following such a strategy will set Pakistan on a development track with a bright future. Adopting such a strategy would allow Pakistan to build a moderately affluent society in which people's welfare and the right to equal participation and development would be guaranteed.

CPEC has the ability to engage Pakistan's professional labour and educated young for the best possible use of their potential skills. It also

raises the stakes for all Pakistani provinces and people. The benefits of this gigantic undertaking can only be realised once the Pakistani people are united in their understanding and harmony. Indeed, any nation's youth are the driving force behind its economic prosperity and socio-political peace. Because it provides consistent and assured facilities for all, CPEC will increase the stakes of regional countries and global participants once it is completed.

"The global economic landscape has changed tremendously," says Professor Ahsan Iqbal (Fan & Qianlin, 2017). Connectivity through infrastructural development and technological advancement are essential areas for socio-political integration and economic prosperity in today's changing global economic scene. CPEC is a vehicle that provides the necessary connectivity and opportunity for optimal technology advancements through a forward-thinking strategy.

3. CPEC and Regional Constraints

The CPEC has been endangered by the security situation in Afghanistan from its inception in 2015. Although the situation has altered since the Taliban took control in August 2021, there has been no evidence of any favourable signals from Kabul. During the Ashraf Ghani administration, Pakistan and China made efforts to bring the Afghan government on board so that they might benefit from this massive project as well. The Afghan government may not have had an issue at the time, but those in charge of the Kabul administration at the time, the US and India, pressured Kabul not to endorse CPEC since it was against their strategic interests. RAW,

the Indian intelligence network, has been utilising Afghan land to promote terrorist and subversive activities in Pakistan, including damaging the CPEC. It was also disclosed by Kulbhushan Jadhav, an arrested Indian spy master. According to his claims, RAW set up a specific branch with the sole purpose of undermining and destroying the CPEC.

Over the years, India's significant participation in Afghanistan's governmental issues, bureaucracy, politics, society, and, above all, its educational system has instilled enmity in Afghans. Indeed, India is 'killing two birds with one stone' by instilling anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghan culture and the educational system, as well as steering Afghans away from traditional Islamic beliefs. The Pakistani people and government continue to accommodate approximately three million Afghan refugees. Apart from Pakistan, China has emphasised the importance of the Afghan government joining the CPEC. There have been rounds of discussions in this regard from the China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Foreign Ministers' Dialogue forum through 2021. Because the Taliban government in Afghanistan is still in charge of the country's external affairs, Pakistan and China are waiting for a response. Kabul's membership in CPEC will open the road for Afghanistan's economic development after the project is completed.

CPEC is a regional project that benefits all neighbouring countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, and India. As a result, regional states must become partners by participating. Taliban must show flexibility towards the demands of international community with respect to women rights, women education and a broad based ethnic representation of all groups in

the interim government. This interim government must be legitimised through an election process with a fair chance to all political groups for a broad based all-inclusive government, failure to which they may not be recognized by any state. Nevertheless, Taliban are seems to be more inclined towards China which is an optimistic gesture for CPEC.

4. CPEC: A Corridor of Energy Security

The theory underlying China's Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the number of corridors; economic corridors, have been effectively highlighted by Siegfried O. Wolf. According to the author of *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context, and Assessment*, the main goal of the BRI's economic corridors is to connect China with its neighbours and all those states that can contribute raw materials and energy resources to Beijing. (O. Wolf, 2020). These two essentials are essentially needed by China for the sustenance of its economic progress and to support the massive industrial base. The massive industrial base of China is indeed of proportionate energy resources which are being imported from Middle East, Africa and Central Asian region. Chinese domestic energy resources are scarce, thus unable to meet the energy requirements.

China's energy imports from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa now account for more than 70% of its overall energy consumption. Imports of Chinese energy resources from the Middle East and Africa pass through the Indian Ocean until they reach the South China Sea. In a future regional and global security environment, the Strait of Malacca is a critical

site in the Indian Ocean that might limit Chinese imports significantly. The Malacca Strait is a narrow waterway that connects the Indonesian island of Sumatra to the Malay Peninsula. India is securing the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) with direct US assistance.

This is China's strategic vulnerability, dubbed the 'Malacca Dilemma' by Beijing in 2003. Since then, China has worked out substitutes for its imports, particularly in the area of energy. If the Malacca Strait becomes clogged, China will have fewer options for ensuring the smooth flow of its goods. The closest alternative for maintaining trade is the 'Sunda Strait,' however it is small and shallow, making it incompatible with the weight of contemporary ships and high traffic. China believes the Straits of Lombok and Makassar to be more expensive for its imports. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is China's sole remaining option, as it can guarantee the uninterrupted flow of Chinese energy and trade. For Chinese trade and energy imports, it is a more secure and cost-effective choice. It's a project that China has hoped for for years, following extensive discussion.

CPEC is the most important aspect of BRI from the Chinese standpoint. The early completion of CPEC will support the completion of the BRI's other projects and corridors. President Xi Jinping's aim of global connection is heavily reliant on the realisation of CPEC, which he derived from two motivations: one, restoring China to its former status as a great power, which it held prior to 1839, and two, realising Deng Xiaoping's vision of Chinese modernisation. It should be emphasised that until the 18th century, China was the world's leading force.

China's primary objectives for pursuing CPEC are primarily economic and commercial in nature. China wants a continuous supply of energy resources from the Middle East and Africa through the deep sea port of Gwadar. The expansion of CPEC, the BRI's most important artery, would allow for the true presentation and utilisation of this deep sea port.

In an ever-changing regional and global context, Pakistan holds the key to China's economic progress by providing a secure energy corridor. Following the completion and operationalization of Gwader Port, the timely completion of the CPEC is critical, as it faces many hurdles. Pakistan has already formed and operationalized two security divisions under the Pakistan Army to address security concerns. They would ensure that the CPEC route is physically secure within Pakistani territory. All conflicts between provinces surrounding CPEC were settled amicably and with accord at the national level.

5. Dispelling the Misperceptions over CPEC

In September 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Pakistani Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa met in Beijing for an extra-ordinary high-level meeting. General Bajwa was invited exclusively to the meeting by the Chinese President to discuss the issues that CPEC and its projects face. 2018 (Anderlini, Sender, & Bokhari). Pakistan had no intention of abandoning or delaying the project indefinitely; any such alternative would be detrimental to Pakistan's national interests.

In fact, China and Pakistan are “time-tested iron friend” (“Pakistan is our time-tested iron friend: Chinese President”, 2018). as it was said time and

again by President Xi Jinping. There have been strong linkages between political governments as well as the militaries of both friendly states. Chinese leadership highly regarded the role of Pakistani military which acted as a pivot in maintaining this ever-lasting connection. Besides military-to-military contacts, Pakistani military made its strategic engagements with political leadership of China. Both Beijing and Islamabad clearly understand that there are many hostile forces operating against the CPEC as well as Pak-China strategic relationship. These forces are all set to create misunderstandings between the two iron brothers.

6. Denouncing the Western Conspiracies over CPEC

A former US diplomat, Ms Alice Well once advised Pakistan to reconcile this gigantic project of CPEC since, it proved as a burden on the economy of Pakistan. She said, “CPEC might take a toll on Pakistan’s economy as it was not an aid but a form of financing that guaranteed profits for Chinese state-owned enterprises.” Nevertheless, Pakistan overruled this illogical statement since it considered this mammoth project as a great opportunity for linking together China and Pakistan and within Pakistan, it connects all provinces and developed and underdeveloped regions. A similar statement was issued from Chinese Foreign Ministry saying that, it is a “mere repetition of old slanders against China, the CPEC and the BRI.” (“China terms U.S. comments on CPEC as “mere repetition of old slanders against China, the CPEC and BRI” - Centreline”, 2019). Mr Yao Jing, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan also said that, “Pak-China relations are based on win-win cooperation and are mutually beneficial” (“China terms U.S. comments on CPEC as “mere repetition of old slanders against

China, the CPEC and BRI” - Centreline”, 2019). These statements are part of its animosity with the expanding power of China in the international politics. In fact, the “world has moved into a new and unsettling geopolitical phase” (“China terms U.S. comments on CPEC as “mere repetition of old slanders against China, the CPEC and BRI” - Centreline”, 2019). It is not just getting into a multi-polar mode, but indeed the multi-conceptual on academic front with emergence of multiple power centres.

'New cyber sources of hard and soft power, reconfiguring trade and investment links, proxy conflicts, changing alliance dynamics, and possible flashpoints relating to the global commons have all diversified and gone beyond traditional military build-ups.' Khan et al., 2019). Evaluating and minimising risks across all of these potential conflict zones necessitates in-depth research and a comprehensive strategy; this is the true meaning of globalisation. Indeed, globalisation is all about compressing time and space, which is best accomplished through state and regional interconnectedness. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which connects Asia with Europe and Africa via the Eurasian region, is the finest recipe for achieving a win-win situation for both East and West. The Belt and Road Initiative is a huge initiative aimed at boosting regional cooperation by improving connectivity between countries along the ancient Silk Road and beyond. It consists of two parts: the Silk Road Economic Belt on land and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road on the sea. (Khan, 2019)

Persuasively, in the shifting global and regional geopolitical landscape, BRI serves as a stepping stone toward much-needed global peace and

much-desired economic prosperity by constructing the long-awaited and crucial communication infrastructure. Both the industrialised and developing worlds require infrastructure development, as envisioned in the BRI. The BRI, on the other hand, has prioritised the developing globe, particularly the poorest nations. There are significant stakes in the BRI in the South and Central Asian regions. The Eurasian Heartland could gradually emerge from global isolation into the international mainstream thanks to the BRI. CPEC, the BRI's prize project, has opened up new avenues for economic development and regional collaboration. After it is completed in 2030, the CPEC's impact would be felt not only by Pakistan and China, but also by all regional states, including those that are obstructing it with ill-intentioned reasons and shaky foundations. Both countries are committed to completing this test case project ahead of schedule.

Pakistan is a geographical pivot uniting several parts of Asia, according to Halford John Mackinder's theoretic stance. While Pakistan has been gifted with this strategic location, several regional and global difficulties have hampered its ability to reap the full benefits of its geopolitical location. CPEC, on the other hand, would be more helpful in overcoming these obstacles. There is yet another facet of CPEC and BRI that has yet to be explored. These enormous initiatives would be a possible source of reducing militancy and radicalization in the broader Eurasian region, which is now regarded a militancy hotspot. BRI will play a key role in promoting peace and cooperation among communities, states, and regions

around the world in order to achieve "shared growth through discussion and collaboration" (Baijie, 2019).

There are enormous international problems confronting this massive global enterprise in all domains, including economic, political, and, most importantly, strategic, arising from the weaknesses of big countries that see China as a possible danger and peer rival in world affairs. These obstacles are preventing BRI from being completed successfully. The massively funded BRI and CPEC are really knitting regional economies and societies together, a huge step forward in regional economic uplift and prosperity, a shift away from a narrow state-centric strategy to a larger regional and global one. The poverty-stricken regions of South and Central Asia, which have been impatiently awaiting a lasting peace and economic development in their areas, will be among the first to benefit.

7. The Broader Dimension of CPEC

In essence CPEC is a regional project; benefitting all regional states: "The CPEC is a broader initiative. China does not have any unilateral interest in it." Indeed, this is true that, Pakistan and China have initiated the project but, the beneficiaries would be many countries of the region and may be international community at the subsequent phases. Twenty-two early harvest projects of the CPEC were completed in the first phase with a total investment of \$ 18.9 billion. ("Latest Progress on the CPEC", 2018). These were early harvesting projects, aimed at facilitating the consequent projects besides resolving the bottlenecks, hindering economic development of Pakistan. These two projects are; transportation

infrastructure and energy shortage, both have significance in the completion of other projects. All these projects were funded by either Chinese Government or various entrepreneurs of China and Chinese banks.

It was also clarified by Chinese Embassy that, like international business and investment, these energy projects are also a sort of investment by various Chinese companies, which will be responsible for their own profits and losses and repayment of loans. There is no clause for the repayment by Pakistani government as loan. Another good point is that, Chinese Government has provided interest-free loans for Expressway East Bay in Gwadar. For the payment and construction of other projects at Gwadar, both countries are finding the possible way out with putting Pakistan into economic burden. During 8th JCC meeting of CPEC in It was promising that on December 20, 2018, both countries agreed to form a social-economic cooperative working committee under the CPEC. China has graciously agreed to assist programmes aimed at improving people's livelihoods, including education, agriculture, poverty alleviation, health care, and vocational training. Cooperation on the completion of industrial sectors and Special Economic Zones has been agreed upon. The CPEC has "entered a new era of broadening and expansion in the next 5 years" as a result of this. ("Latest Progress on the CPEC", 2018)

There is no doubt that, Pakistan is facing serious financial issues with respect to its financial crisis, payment of loan and managing its own budget deficits. Later, during the visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan, there was a reaffirmation and commitment of both sides for timely completion

of CPEC and its related projects. Both countries ‘decided to consult each other on various aspects of CPEC for its timely and successful completion. Owing to its economic issues, Pakistan is all set to complete it in time for attracting the regional states to benefit from CPEC and its connected facilities. Chinese President Mr Xi Jinping considered Pakistan as the ‘time-tested and iron friend’ of China. He also value the role of Pakistani Government and its people as well as Pak Army in maintaining this strong bondage and ever-lasting relationship.

The Way Forward

By decreasing their worries, CPEC, as part of BRI, aims to create enabling grounds for all countries to refurbish, redesign, and kick start their economies, as well as provide job openings to their jobless masses. It has the potentials to benefit all regional states without any deprivation and alienation. Some of the international powers and regional countries are opposite to it in the realm of power politics. Both Pakistan and China consider it a win-win project for both as well as for the regional states. It will offer new pathways of socio-economic growth for Pakistan, as well as connecting inactive areas with big cities, allowing everyone in Pakistan to benefit. The effective completion of CPEC will allow China to develop its underdeveloped western area while also providing the quickest feasible access to the Indian Ocean. Upon completion, it will provide an opening for Afghanistan, Central Asian region and even India for their promotion of their trade and commerce. Indeed, CPEC is a broader initiative; therefore, all regional countries should plan to benefit from it.

As a path forward, CPEC will offer up new chances for socioeconomic development by connecting inactive areas with big cities, allowing everyone in Pakistan to benefit. For China, the early completion of CPEC will allow for the development of the country's undeveloped western area, as well as direct access to the Indian Ocean. There can be no two ways regarding the completion of CPEC; it must be finished and operationalized at any costs and within the timeframe specified.

Despite global conspiracies, both countries must go forward while disregarding unfriendly groups' misinformation and tales. As part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, CPEC will connect China and Pakistan. It has the ability to connect Asia's many areas. It is, in fact, an initiative to begin the long-term regional integration of South and Central Asia. This can only be achievable if regional nations, particularly those with low energy and those with high energy, appropriately re-evaluate their future priorities. A well-planned and well-considered economic merger would open the way for greater regional peace, political integration, and economic prosperity for all member states.

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