



RESEARCH PAPER

**Role of Pak-China Economic Corridors (CPEC) in promoting
Interregional Connectivity between South Asia and Central Asia**

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ABSTRACT

CPEC is expected to improve bilateral relations, logistics, infrastructure and connectivity among people of the whole region. Major objective of this paper to explore how CPEC will transform the regions of Central Asia and Southern Asia by doing systematic literature review of available literature in the form of books, journals and research reports etc. Study finds that CPEC will remove trade barriers, improve regional infrastructure and telecommunication networks across the region resulting in financial stability, cultural exchange and government level relationship. However, there are certain reservations of political parties and people about route and benefits of CPEC. Moreover, Iran and India considers it an unacceptable project because India is investing in Iranian port of Chahbahar and emergence of Gwadar as a new trade network will threaten its strategic importance. Study recommends that there is a need to address all the concerns to avoid any hindrance in completion of CPEC.

Keywords: Cultural Exchange, Economic Growth, Financial Stability, Regional Stability, Strategic Significance

Introduction

China Pakistan Economic Corridor is bringing \$46 billion dollars investment of China to Pakistan for infrastructure development, network of roads and railways, oil and gas pipelines and especially for the development of Gwadar port in Baluchistan (Ahmed, 2015). Because of that national and international media, political scientists, international relations experts, academicians and India (old rival of Pakistan) believes this Corridor will strategically address trade and developmental requirements of Pakistan. Pakistan is a developing country and its' economy will be uplifted by this sort of project but because of strategic significance of this project, many controversies are generated making it difficult for all the stakeholders to execute it properly (Ramay, 2016; Yaseen, Afridi, & Muzaffar, 2017)

Among them one of highly considerable is that Pakistan will become too dependent on China that may damage its sovereignty in near future. Some of the experts are on the viewpoint that Pakistan will have to pay the price of this economic uplifting because this project is more than political collaboration merely. Pakistan will have to align with Beijing in terms of its decision making regarding South Asia and Central Asia ultimately making it a Chinese state (Wolf, 2016). But this viewpoint is neither encouraged nor appreciated by both the governments as they consider it a series of projects merely intended to assist needs of Pakistan in this phase of economic stagnation. There is nothing wrong in strengthening bilateral relations by linking various economic hubs into a sequence for economic uplifting (Malik, 2017).

This is so because proper execution of this project is equally important for China that wants to restore its lost glory since Mao's times. Moreover, throughout the history China has been neutral in international affairs and its focus was its economic development only. It won't try to damage sovereignty of Pakistan as it wants to counter US influence in the region (Ramay, 2016). Because after the disintegration of USSR, world has become unipolar as power resides in hands of America that is considered a superpower. CPEC will help China in achieving her goals of countering US hegemony in Asia. This is why many of the experts strongly believe that CPEC is something more than an economic project for China as it will not only boost up trade and economic activities but it will ultimately result in expansion of role played by China in international politics (Wang, 2015). Proponents of this viewpoint quote Asian Infrastructure and Development Bank as an example of Chinese aims of challenging existing financial set up that is strengthening US hegemony in the international financial scenario (Xu, 2015).

Moreover, along with economic development, China may also counter the separatist movement in her Muslim majority province of Xinjiang by developing it socio-economically with the help Of CPEC (Zumra, 2015). Although China has been trying to crush the movement of Uyghurs by severe crackdowns but by this project socio-economic development will address their major issues like poverty and unemployment. This may result in decreased dissatisfaction in Uyghur community in Xinxiang. Most probably, China has realized the importance of promoting trade and commerce activities as a highly effective mean of tackling ethnic tension (Falak, 2015).

But here it is important to mention this project is not only facilitating China and Pakistan only instead it is a mega project intended to modernize ancient silk routes for the facilitation of trade and business. This is an attractive trade route as it saves time and money for many states that want to facilitate their imports and exports through a shorter and cheaper route. Many Central Asian states may get benefit from port of Gwadar to connect to far away countries like that of Australia making Pakistan a central point for that marine network (Fahad).

CPEC is ambitious to develop a network of roads and railways and offshoots, so it is expected to bring prosperity to all the neighboring states. President Jinping said that its layout and infrastructure will cover not only Pakistan but its fruits will spread to other neighboring states as well (Khalid & Anam, 2015). He further added that CPEC is a joint venture that will eventually drive cooperation in trade, commerce, economic activities, socio-cultural and industrial development, recreational activities along with serious concerns of military and trade (Jinping, 2015).

Evaluating the role of CPEC for Central Asian States

CPEC is an ambitious project not only for two countries but for the whole region as it is expected to change the economy of whole region by boosting up the trade ultimately impacting the lives of people of Asia in a positive manner. Especially it is expected to change the fate of landlocked states of Central Asia by facilitating their trade and business through enhancing transportation facilities ultimately bringing it closer to South Asia and East Asia (Brohi, 2016). A broader perspective on completion and proper functioning of Gwadar Port reflects the influence of this project on the whole continent of Asia by improving its geo-economy and trade to Africa and Europe (Iqbal, 2015).

Central Asian states have never been explored by Pakistan as its foreign policy has focused more on West as compared to Central Asia. These republics are formed by collapse of Soviet Union and carry enormous economic opportunities. Pakistan is located so close to these states geographically that they share many common interests and these interests may be utilized by any project in order to enhance trade and transportation between all of them. Pakistan is facing the problem of energy crisis and all of these states are rich in natural

energy reserves and any project like CPEC may help Pakistan in resolving this sort of issues (Brohi, 2016).

Because of strategic significance of this project, states of Central Asia have expressed their deepest desire to connect to it. Prime Minister of Pakistan visited Kazakhstan in 2015 and during his meeting with his Kazakh counterpart; he was assured by him that Kazakhstan is interested in linking to this network of roads (Kazakhstan shows willingness to join CPEC project, 2015; Shah, Muzaffar, & Yaseen, 2020). Pakistani Prime Minister was on the point that Pakistan is also eager to connect to Central Asian states through network of roads and railways. There are multiple economic opportunities in both the countries for each other in energy, infrastructure, textile and pharmaceutical sector but still trade is below that point where it should be. This issue may be settled by softening visa policy to facilitate Kazakhstan in having access to Indian Ocean (Arif, 2015).

Not only Kazakh but Tajik government is also interested in becoming a part of this project and this desire was expressed by President of Tajikistan on his visit to Pakistan in Nov, 2015. He forwarded a request to become a part of Quadrilateral Agreement on Traffic in Transit which is signed between Pakistan, China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Bhutta, 2015). He was on the point of view that Tajikistan is interested in using CPEC as a route for importing and exporting its goods by avoiding Afghanistan. His request met strong support from Prime Minister of Pakistan Mr. Nawaz Sharif. Both the leaders agreed on the worth of this project as an important trade and economic network not only for South Asia and Central Asia. To improve regional connectivity, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif offered his Tajik counterpart to facilitate her trade and transportation of goods to be imported or exported by using seaports of Pakistan, if it wants a shortest and comparatively cheaper route for that. On the other hand, Tajikistan is the only state in Central Asia which is eager to share energy and trade route with Pakistan (Bhutta, 2015).

Not only Tajikistan is rich in natural resources but the whole region is blessed with that. If the project of CPEC especially Gwadar Port is completed successfully, it will facilitate Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline (TAPI) that is going to deliver natural gas from Central Asian State of Turkmenistan to various parts of Pakistan. Connecting that pipeline with Gwadar port will facilitate access of Pakistan to energy rich states of Central Asia (Naveed, 2015). Pakistan is quite keen to include Turkmenistan in CPEC in order to improve regional connectivity and has ensured Turkmenistan's government this sort of economic and trade opportunities appear in decades (Muhammad, 2016).

It is assumed that decision of including Turkmenistan in CPEC will bring two brethren Muslim countries closer in terms of regional peace and development. Her inclusion will enhance bilateral trade as there is a huge potential for that but is neither explored nor exploited by any of the country (Trade: Business community supports govt. decision to include Turkmenistan in CPEC, 2016). This vision of Pakistan is appreciated and supported by govt. of Turkmenistan and it also has shown concern in investing in some parts of Gwadar port (CPEC: Pakistan, Turkmenistan discusses regional connectivity projects, 2016).

Like other Central Asian states, Uzbekistan has also shown agreement on fostering regional connectivity and ensuring peace and security in the region by taking effective measures or countering terrorism. Both the countries are on the point of view this sort of projects will improve overall economic and developmental concerns of the whole region. There is a need to make coordinated efforts to handle the challenges faced by the region. Uzbek President considers Pakistan a shortest route to sea port which may be utilized by her for import and export of goods (Pakistan, Uzbekistan agree to enhance trade ties, regional connectivity, 2015).

Situation is somehow different for Russia as it has long ruled over the region and after its disintegration, these states got liberation but still they were under the influence of

Russia for so long. It is difficult for her to accept influence of any other power in the region but because of certain economic sanctions and her declining economy, it is looking towards China ignoring its history in which cooperation between both the countries have been difficult (Zimmerman, 2015). So, Russia is welcoming this initiative because it considers this Chinese investment in the region in apposite and beneficial manner.

But now both the countries have mutual interests that may bring them close to each other like in terms of defense and military, Russia is far ahead but in terms of economy, it is lagging behind. China wants to fulfill her energy needs by accessing Central Asian states and coordinating with Russia. Moreover, after the disintegration of USSR, world has become unipolar and it is not in favor of any emerging economy like China. By taking certain joint moves, they may counter America whenever their interests will be in danger. In this situation, geographic location of Pakistan has made it of worth importance for both the countries by giving them access to Arabian Sea. In turn, Pakistan may satisfy both her energy and military needs (Amicus, 2015).

Exploring Afghan angle on CPEC

CPEC project is expected to positively affect transportation time and cost between Pakistan and city of Kashgar in Western China ultimately reducing transit time between Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan. China is already working to improve already existing network of roads and railways between Kashgar, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (Hashim, 2015). Ancient silk routes are in mind of China most probably as they are being modernized by her master plan in order to improve investments and trade across borders (Pantucci, 2016). The crossings utilized by China will completely bypass Afghanistan as security threats has been a major concern for all the nations. Afghanistan has been into a phase of civil war since 1970s and cannot ensure a safer route for trade between Central Asia and Southern Asia. So, Pakistan and China has decided to connect to each other by circumventing Afghanistan (Ghumman, 2016).

Pakistan wants to develop strong ties with Afghanistan as both the countries are immediate neighbors sharing longest borders with each other but the problem is inclination of Afghanistan towards India. In comparison to Pakistan's Gwadar port, Afghanistan has supported Iranian project of Chabahar port supported by India that will facilitate three way trades of goods between India, Iran and Afghanistan (Iran, India, Afghanistan sign transit accord on Chabahar port, 2016). According to this accord, Indian goods will be transported to Iran and further to Afghanistan and other states of Central Asia (Nongrum, 2016). This agreement is claimed to be a countering mechanism for CPEC by Indian media (Gupta, 2016) but it is argued that Indian media has overestimated this project as its significance is quite less than the project of CPEC (Thomson, 2016).

So, Pakistan has signaled in 2016 finally that it wants to give access to Central Asian states to its deep sea ports through Kashgar in order to avoid their reliance on Afghanistan where political stability and security is a major concern. Here it is important to mention that there were reports about willingness of Afghanistan to give access to Pakistan to Tajikistan (Afghanistan ready to grant Pakistan access to Central Asia, 2016).

Pakistan's concerns are on one side, China also has many concerns over the possible political, social and economic role of Afghanistan in the region (Zimmerman, 2015) but still it is not like that Afghanistan is completely ignored in this project. In terms of both eastern and western alignments, Afghanistan is a part of this road network which is planned by China in order to overcome transportation bottlenecks (Munir, 2015; Muzaffar, Shah, & Yaseen, 2018). Pax Sinica in Asia: Chinas Emergent Geopolitics of Economic Corridors and Dream of Leadership. *Global Political Review*, III(I), 101-109). This is because of geo-strategic importance of Afghanistan as it is located at the border of South Asia and Central Asia. Moreover, it is rich in mineral and petroleum resources and if its oil and natural gas reserves

are explored, they can activate a huge economic activity and to facilitate that activity, Afghanistan will also like to have access to Pakistan's deep sea water port (Naveed, 2015).

Strategic Significance of CPEC for South Asia

South Asia is an exceptional region in a sense that all the states have many internal and external problems. Major actors in this region are Pakistan and India as both of them are atomic powers and have a long history of rivalry (Rahim, Khan, & Muzaffar, 2018; Ayaz & Idrees, 2015). Throughout the history, their issues have been peculiar in nature. Where Pakistan is a pivotal part of CPEC, India is one of the major opponents of that. India believes this project is planned without taking her into confidence. So, its concerns towards this project are justified (China dispels Indian apprehensions about CPEC, 2017).

Keeping in mind India's traditional stance of protesting against any project that includes Pakistan, there are two options in front of her which may be availed. One of them is to continue with its conventional way of complaining and lodging protests and create hurdles in execution of CPEC. But changing circumstances and increased support of various nations of South Asia and Central Asia, it is assumed that it won't be able to stop this project in spite of all its efforts to sabotage it. Other option for India is to adopt a constructive attitude, putting aside all of its grudges and rivalries for the sake of elimination of poverty and progress of the nation, of becoming a part of this project and develop cordial relations with Pakistan and China both (Ranjan, 2015). India has availed the first option and registered its protest to China against this project by considering it a plan to counter Indian strategy of blocking Malacca Strait in Indian Ocean. This will exert defense pressure on India from North and it will have to strengthen her position by designing new naval strategies (Syed, 2016)

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has cleared his stance that CPEC as a project is highly unacceptable to India because India has many strong reservations on it. Although there are many indications given by China to express its desire for India to be a part of this project that will promote interregional connectivity between China and Southern Asia. Gao Zhenting who is Counselor, Dept. of International Economic Affairs of Chinese Foreign Ministry has clearly conveyed China's desire of India's becoming a key player in One-Belt and One-Road initiative. While talking to Indian Reporters he said that China considers India as one of its inevitable partner for this project (Krishnan, 2014).

But situation is different on Indian side. According to Sushma Sawaraj, the route of CPEC is passing through that part of Kashmir which is occupied by Pakistan. The route is basically passing through Gilgit-Baltistan. India makes claim over this territory and believes that Pakistan has consolidated her territory since 1947. India has registered her protest back in the history when Karakoram highway was under construction and Pakistan offered Shaksgam valley for that to China in 1963 (Ramchandran, 2015). This is why, during his visit to China, Mr. Modi has taken a firm and clear stance that India will not accept this project because of strong objection on its route (China-Pakistan corridor "unacceptable", Modi tells, 2015). This route through a disputed territory poses serious threats to Indian integrity in case of any tension between India and Pakistan because if China decides to help Islamabad, this route will provide a direct way of exchange of military and goods (Ramchandran, 2015).

India also has a concern on Chinese project of "String of Pearls" under which China is developing a network of sea ports from its eastern coast to west Asia (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 2015). India has reservations on this project of China by considering it a military strategy. It fears that China is developing ports for commercial purposes but it may turn them into naval bases anytime for the sake of containing India. Especially, Gwadar port is located very near to Straits of Hormuz which are basic point of oil imports of India. India wants to avoid maritime competition in the Indian Ocean because of securing her oil imports (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 2015). India claims that this policy of China is to keep

refueling stations throughout the world and to get free of energy tension anytime (Bhatia, 2009).

But still if India looks towards benefits, it is a promising project for not only China and Pakistan but for India too. Because China is increasing its influence in the region by making sure not only its' commercial presence but military presence too throughout the region. Indian Ocean is witnessing increased Chinese presence in form of "String of Pearls." China is surrounding India by having its presence in Somalia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Burma (Khurana, 2008).

Along with security reasons, economic reasons are there too that may attract India towards this project. India may make best use of its unique geographic position and may use CPEC for increasing its access to CARS and Middle Eastern countries. Geo-political and financial support may be gathered for the project of Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline by becoming a part of CPEC. India's other initiatives like that of Digital India may also get benefit, if India decides to become a part of this project (Khan, et al., n.d.). Moreover, if India starts with this project, it will be in a better position of availing a passage to Afghanistan. It will make India realize its dream of accessing markets of Central Asia true. Central Asian states are rich in energy and mineral resources and it is a cherished desire of India to access this region (Shri, 2012).

But the problem is at the end of Pakistan too which is reluctant to have India in this project in order to curtail her influence in the region (Ramchandran, 2015). Although Prime Minister of Pakistan Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif has also carefully expressed his desire for India to be a part of this project during his visit to China by projecting Gwadar-Kashgar Corridor as an opportunity that will benefit India too along with whole region (Bi, 2013), but still Pakistan is having its reservations on inclusion of India into CPEC.

Pakistan and India have never been on the relation of trust and mutual cooperation but their history is filled with the incidences of rivalry. India has established a special cell of RAW to disrupt the effective working of CPEC. A special fund of \$300 million is allocated for that cell to sabotage this project (Abid & Ashfaq). So, reservations of Pakistan are quite justified on inclusion of India in this project as RAW's blatant activities in the region are going to disturb this project and it is argued that it will also facilitate US concerns in the region (Kamran, 2016).

For Pakistan, it is a promising project as it will give an economic boost to it but it will have to ensure improvement in law-in-order situation of the country. China is one of the best friends of Pakistan in international community but it has concerns over security situation of Pakistan. China has raised the question of taking necessary action against Uyghur separatists of Xinjiang present in Pakistan (Hinlim, 2016). One of the aims of the project of CPEC is to give access to its landlocked province of Xinjiang to Gwadar sea port. Security is not only a major concern for Pakistan but success of this mega project is highly dependent upon stabilization of Afghanistan because peace and security in the region can only be ensured if extremist groups across borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan are eradicated completely (Hussain, 2015).

Development of Gwadar port will give access to China to markets of Africa, Europe and Asia. It may have an access to Indian Ocean and use it anytime in its military and defense strategies. On the other hand, Pakistan will get benefit in terms of fulfilling her energy needs and considerable outputs of the project in longer terms. Moreover, this project will boost up the economy of South Asia which is considered to have all the developing countries that are in need of economic initiatives (Raja, 2015).

So the expected gains from this project for Pakistan include eradication of poverty and unemployment from the deprived regions of Baluchistan leading to sustainable

development. Chinese investment in Pakistan has surpassed all the previous investments of other countries and it is expected to boost GDP of Pakistan by 15%. There is a possibility of overcoming the menace of terrorism that has paralyzed Pakistan to the extent of a failed state. Pakistan will also become capable of countering US influence somehow by managing good relationship with China. If it develops military and defense ties with China, it will be able to bridge the gap between her and Indian military potential. If CPEC becomes operational, it will attract foreign investment to Pakistan resulting in economic boost. This will also motivate other South Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal to be a part of this project as soon as possible (Raja, 2015).

Conclusion

Finally concluding the discussion, it may be argued that CPEC will turn the whole region into an economic hub as it will become a fiscal lifeline for all the countries involved (Ali, 2016). It will reduce tensions and promote regional harmony by making economic conglomerates significant actors for inter-regional connectivity. This is a transnational project, broader in scope, connecting many regions with each other by sea-links, road and railways. Inter-regional connectivity is need of hour as only those countries will be able to excel which are rich in terms of economy, trade and industry leaving behind those states which are rich in weaponry and military recourses. So, it will bring prosperity not only at external but at internal level too as internal conflicts will be resolved, stability will be achieved and positive attitude will be enhanced when hunger, poverty and unemployment will be defeated by increased economic activities (Rizvi, 2015).

Pakistan and India may get their relations streamlined or may try to overcome their long held opposition by becoming a part of this project. Both of them may access South East Asia as it is stated objective of foreign policy of Pakistan to envision South East Asia (DAWN, 2010; Joint statement by Pakistan and Thailand issued at the conclusion of the visit of Thailand Prime Minister, 2013). Moreover, China can only be successful in its project of Silk Road Economic Belt if it connects with all sub-regions of continents like Asia, Europe and Africa etc (Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, 2015; Muzaffar & Khan, 2021). In short, this initiative will provide an opportunity of developing peaceful co-existence, mutual understanding and synergy between South Asia and Central Asia.

But for its desired execution, there is a need to overcome domestic issues like security, terrorism and internal politics as in Pakistan many of the local and national parties have many reservations on this project. Concerns of provinces, if not dealt properly, will not let this project become functional. Similarly, China has to deal with the concerns of Uyghur community that is involved in separatist and extremist activities. Pakistan is trying to develop mutual consensus among parties through communication and to deal with extremism, army is being deployed in the terrorism affected areas (Ali, 2016).

This project is of worth importance for Central Asia and South Asia because of its geostrategic location. It is expected to uplift the conditions of people of the whole region by giving access to Central Asian states to deep sea port of Gwadar. Energy needs of Pakistan and China may be fulfilled by this visionary project by having access to Gulf countries and Iran. If India also becomes a part of this project, it will also be able to overcome its energy crisis. If security issues are settled, regional cohesion can be achieved by avoiding wars and border conflicts leading to achievement of ultimate peace in the region. By doing so, CPEC will become a real fate changer for countries of South Asia and States of Central Asia (Amin, 2016).

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