

**RESEARCH PAPER****The Ever-haunting Political Instability in Pakistan and the Future of CPEC: A Contextual Perspective****¹Dr. Sharaf Ali* and ²Dr. Ghulam Shabbir**

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Corresponding Author shaarif.ali@uog.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

This study mainly aimed to analyze the future prospects for the CPEC project via providing a critical and contextual overview of the ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan. The study has provided an overview of the significant political developments indicating the political instability in Pakistan i.e. which resulted to create hurdles in the smooth implementation of the of the CPEC. Further, this study has also discussed the future prospects for the CPEC i.e. in the light of the ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan. This study signified that the ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan has resulted has resulted to create some undesirable delaying conditions and multiple challenges for the smooth implementation of the CPEC. Although, Pakistan and China have managed to achieve almost all of the major targets of the Phase-I of the CPEC i.e. through mutual cooperation but the conditions of political instability are still persistent in Pakistan. This study concluded that it is in the high interest of both counterparts of the CPEC i.e. China and Pakistan to successfully complete the CPEC project. Further for achieving the aforesaid purpose, Pakistan has to take serious steps for the overcoming the root causes of the ever-haunting political instability otherwise Pakistan would simply be unable to complete the remaining projects of the CPEC i.e. in the timely and smooth manner, hitherto, the consistently unstable political environment may also lead to create undue strains in the Pak-China relations.

Keywords: BRI, Challenges for the CPEC, CPEC, Economy of Pakistan, Future of the CPEC, OBOR, Pak-China Relations, Political Instability in Pakistan

Introduction

The President Xi of China started the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) Initiative' in 2014, which mainly aimed to foster economic growth in China through creating new international trade routes for the Chinese economy by connecting it with the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. From the very beginning of the OBOR, China decided to integrated Pakistan with the OBOR through her offer to build the 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) i.e. as part of the OBOR (Saud, 2018). The idea of CPEC was initially shared by the Chinese Prime Minister to his Pakistani counterpart in 2013 (Jawad, 2013). Later, the Chinese President during his state visit to Pakistan in 2015 formally inaugurated the CPEC by inking the 51 agreements and memoranda promising an investment of 46 billion dollars i.e. under the umbrella of the CPEC (Ali, 2017). The CPEC comprised macro level projects mainly related with development of highways, railway lines, transmission lines, electrical energy, specialized economic zones. Further, the CPEC is ought to be completed in three phases; the Short Term Phase (2015-2020), the Medium Term Phase (2021-2025) and the Long Term Phase (2026-2030).

Since the commencement of the CPEC, it has faced much controversy and difficulties due to which the progress over the CPEC projects slowed down and the first phase of the CPEC could not get completed within its due time frame i.e. up till today. Despite of lacking in the full completion of the first Phase of the CPEC (which was ought to be completed in

2020), the state authorities of China has formally verged onto move forward for starting the second phase of the CPEC in 2023 (Khan, 2023). The successful completion of the CPEC is vitally crucial for China as the CPEC is supposed to serve the multiple geo-strategic and geo-economic interests of China. The route once completed would help China to boost her economy i.e. by marginally reducing both the cost and distance for the delivery of her imports/exports. Additionally, the CPEC would provide China an alternate and comparatively more safe route for creating trade links i.e. between the Eurasian region and the South Asian & South East Asian regions (Alam et. Al., 2023). On the other hand, the CPEC offers Pakistan a huge amount of foreign direct investment which would help to boost her economy both in the short and long run (Qureshi, 2015). Further, the project would help to bring the China and Pakistan for securing their strategic security interests against India i.e. in the Indian Ocean Region (Nurmuhammadov, 2017; Hussain & Jamali, 2019). Additionally, the CPEC projects also aims to serve some vital economic and security concerns of Pakistan and China, hitherto, the CPEC is being perceived as a challenge for the economic and security interests of their respective regional/global rivals i.e. India and USA (Lashari, 2016).

The scholars of political economy rate Pakistan as a state having tremendous resources and a state whose economy is constantly plagued by the ever-haunting political instability. The ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan has resulted has resulted to create some undesirable delaying conditions and multiple challenges for the smooth implementation of the CPEC. Many scholars claimed that Pakistan possesses some systemic inconsistencies owing to weak democratic culture i.e. in which most of the political stake holders paly their role not to favor the state but to favor their own self-interest (Taha, 2012). The CPEC can be treated as a classical case study for examining the aforesaid theoretical notion i.e. about the nature of political economy in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Rehman (2012), and Khan (2012) elaborated the various contemporary challenging scenarios i.e. in the recent past, during which the China and Pakistan unhasitantly supported each other. They also gave a special mention to the Sino-Pak cooperation against the various militant organizations operating in China i.e. ETIM and Ughurs..

Rakistis (2012) discussed the history of Pak-China relations to establish this fact that the relationship between China and Pakistan is quite anomalous as there existed a very wide gap in the national ideologies of both the states. He provided that the China follows the 'Communism' as her basic political ideology, whereas, Pakistan follows 'Islam' as her core political ideology and both of the aforesaid political ideologies are hardly compatible with each other. He maintained that the basic reason of the ever-growing cooperation between the China and Pakistan is the convergence of their respective national interests, especially, for dealing with the threats from India.

Abid and Ashfaq (2015) maintained that the relationship between China and Pakistan are quite marvelous and unshakeable. They provided that both the states have further solidified their mutual relationship through joining their hands through the initiation of the CPEC. Further, they also highlighted the potential threats and opportunities of the CPEC for Pakistan.

Sial (2014) provided that the China and Pakistan had a longstanding friendly relationship, and CPEC is a new product of their ever-existing mutually supportive relations. The CPEC would provide an opportunity to China for further consolidating her eminent position in the global economy, hitherto, it would to build Pakistan's weakening economy i.e. though providing the much needed FDI and basic economic infrastructure. His research also maintained that the aforesaid opportunities are not without the related threats. He pointed many a challenges that Pakistan would have to address for reaping the full benefits of the CPEC, the major challenges for Pakistan included the deepening economic crises, instable political system, militancy, and the turbulent center-province relations.

Ramay (2016) maintained that a big dream of China has come true through the initiation of the CPEC project i.e. as being part of the OBOR and BRI. He also provided an overview of the Chinese economy to highlight the fact that the economy of China has become the second largest economy of the world. He also maintained that the CPEC is the most important segment of the BRI and it is equally beneficial for Pakistan.

Khan and Kasi (2017) provided a detailed overview of the Pak-China relations. He maintained that China has always extended her full cooperation with Pakistan since after the establishment of the diplomatic relations with Pakistan and Pakistan had also fully supported the China in her very testing period of the diplomatic isolation. He also provided an extensive review of the various areas of cooperation which have been developed between Pakistan and China i.e. the areas of defense, economy, energy, nuclear technology, diplomatic etc. His research highlighted both the historical context and the future prospects for the growing value of the relationship i.e. between the China and Pakistan.

Mustafa and Zafar (2017), and Ali (2023) reviewed the policy of Pakistan to take part in the US led global war against terrorism and its adverse impacts on the economy of Pakistan. They provided that Pakistan took hefty loans for funding an unnecessary war and then had to repay that loan which in turn badly affected the supply of finance to the economy of Pakistan. In the wake of the aforesaid war against terrorism, Pakistan had to bear a big loss in terms of the money and human lives. The study provided that the terrorism is still persistent in Pakistan and it poses a serious threat to the CPEC projects, because the many routs included in the CPEC have to pass through the regions which are severely affected by the terrorism i.e. Baluchistan and KPK provinces of Pakistan.

Material and Methods

This study mainly aimed to analyze the future prospects for the CPEC project via providing a critical and contextual overview of the ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan. Keeping view of the nature and objectives of the study, this study has employed case study research methods. For achieving the purpose of this research the researcher has primarily used the secondary data sources, and accordingly, the researchers have conducted a systematic literature review of the relevant published material i.e. Books, published reports of the various think tanks, periodicals, research journals, news reports etc. After collecting the relevant data i.e. through conducting an extensive and systematic literature review, the relevant facts/data have been presented in the form of results/discussion and conclusion i.e. by adjusting those facts/data according to the scope of this research.

Results and Discussion

After winning the general elections held in May 2013 and amid the election rigging allegations leveled by the major opposition parties, the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif formed the federal government in Pakistan for next five years (Hussain & Bari, 2018). Right after the formation of government, the newly formed government of the PML(N) showed a serious interest in joining the BRI initiative of the Chinese president Xi Jinping i.e. by formally signing the CPEC agreements with China in July 2013 (Abid & Ashfaq, 2015). Accordingly, upon the formal invitation of the federal government President Xi consented to schedule a state visit to Pakistan in September 2014 i.e. for signing the CPEC agreements. But the CPEC received the first severe blow when under the garb of the election rigging charges against the PML(N), a major opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) staged a 'sit-in' during the same time period which in turn resulted the postponement of the aforesaid visit of President Xi for seven months and the formal launching of the CPEC was delayed up till April 2015 (Malik, 2017).

Eventually, The CPEC was formally launched after the historic visit of the President Xi's visit in April 2015. Although the federal government of the PML(N) was fully satisfied with the CPEC oriented investment but the other opposition parties ruling in different provinces tried to create various controversies. For example, the nationalist parties claimed that CPEC funding is unduly routed to Punjab by taking away the due share of the Khyber Pukhtukhwa (KPK) and Baluchistan province (Daily Times, 2015; Clarke, 2017). Further, the major political parties from the Sind and Gilgit-Baltistan had also showed their resentment about the distribution of funds and projects of the CPEC which not only resulted to make the CPEC projects controversial but caused some unnecessary delay also (Wolf, 2016). Additionally, there existed a sort of institutional disharmony and disorientation among the various state institutions of Pakistan which eventually lead to the timely completion of various CPEC projects. For example, the proceedings in the Lahore High Court resulted unnecessary delay in the timely completion of the orange line train project in Lahore (Tanveer & Shaukat, 2016). The PML(N) government successfully managed the aforesaid controversies by promptly taking the relevant administrative and political steps (Haider, 2015).

During the whole period of the PML(N) regime, the PTI kept on alleging the government with the charges of corruption, especially, regarding the CPEC projects. Later, the overall electoral campaign of the PTI for the next election (which were to be held in 2018) was based on the anti-corruption narrative. The PTI after winning the general elections 2018 formed a coalition government in the center and provinces of Punjab and KPK. From the very beginning, the PTI government started fueling controversies over the CPEC projects by revealing her plan to suspend the developments over the CPEC for at least a complete year (Financial Times, 2018). Further for bracketing his political opposition, especially the leadership of the PML(N), the PTI regime carelessly used the propaganda means i.e. the international press and social media for developing (even without any verifiable evidence) an unholy link between the corruption of PML(N) leadership and the CPEC projects in general. The aforesaid immature policy of the PTI regime resulted to implicate both the CPEC in general and the Pak-China strategic relationship (Hussain, 2019). Further, the controversial statements issued by some responsible elements of the PTI regime also lead to fuel the international anti-CPEC and anti-BRI propaganda (Times of India, 2018). In the light of the aforesaid facts, it is quite evident that the PTI regime has maltreated with the CPEC just for the achieving of her naïve political interests which essentially impacted the timely completion of the CPEC projects.

The other constant reasons behind the ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan are the violent insurgencies along with the whole western route of the CPEC, especially, in the areas located in the Baluchistan province where the insurgents have continuously harmed both the CPEC and the state interest of Pakistan in general (Shakil, 2021). The CPEC mainly connects the Gawadar city (which is a coastal city of the Baluchistan Province of Pakistan) with the western China. Baluchistan is minerally very rich province of Pakistan which has been facing insurgency since a long ago i.e. before the inception of the CPEC. The Baluch nationalists alleged that the federal government has been involved in pursuing some manipulative political and economic policies to essentially disfavor the local population of the province (Bansal, 2008). Further, the separatist elements in the Baluchistan apprehended that the employment opportunities created by the CPEC projects would be used as means to colonize the local population and exploitation of their mineral resources. The aforesaid factors resulted to exacerbate the already disturbed law and order security conditions in the province and, the security of the Chinese technical and support staff i.e. working on the CPEC projects has constantly remained under serious threats (Bansal, 2008). Due to the poor law and order security conditions in the Baluchistan, for most of the times the provision of the logistic facilities i.e. gas, electricity, water and internet has not been smooth enough to meet the due standard requirements. For impeding the ongoing development under various CPEC projects in the province, various separatist elements have

conducted several attacks on the Chinese workers working at various CPEC project sites (Dhar, 2022). Various organized separatist i.e. the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Baluchistan Liberation Front (BLF) and the Baluch Nationalist Army (BNA) has been frequently reported for accepting the responsibility of attacking the state infrastructure and the law enforcement agencies i.e. stationed in the Baluchistan and other parts of the country (Baluch, 2022). The following table presents the data about a few of the major insurgent attacks over the CPEC oriented installations/workers located in the Baluchistan province.

In addition to the above noted volatile politico-economic conditions, the terrorism has also been an essential ingredient of the political stability in Pakistan i.e. which proved to be a stumbling block in smooth implementation of the CPEC projects (Hussain, 2019). Pakistan has played a role of the 'front line' state in the US led international war against terrorism and accordingly the state and society in Pakistan has been paying the cost i.e. in the political and economic terms (Ali, 2023). During the last two decade Pakistan has faced multiple traditional and traditional security threats i.e. in the form of violent extremism, militancy and extremism which resulted to an estimated direct loss of 78 billion dollars. Further, the experts have claimed that the indirect loss in the long run i.e. in the war against terrorism can be ten to twenty times more than the aforesaid direct loss. During the aforesaid period, various terrorist organizations have frequently tried to disrupt the various development projects i.e. CPEC through attacking their respective communication and transportation networks (Malik & Jamil, 2023).

Along with the challenge of separatist militancy in the Baluchistan province, the terrorism rampant in the whole state has resulted to halt the smooth materialization of the CPEC projects (Akhtar et al., 2017). Right from the beginning of the CPEC, the security situation in Pakistan became more degraded due to the extreme upsurge in the terrorist incidents which seriously threatened the Pak-China relations (Puri, 2017). Up till the start of 2016, various Chinese companies working in Pakistan (i.e. including the CPEC projects) had reported more than three hundred security breaches threatening to the Chinese workers (Goh, Martina & Shepherd, 2017). During the first two only, 44 workers working for the various CPEC projects were killed and more than a hundred were reported to be injured (Reuters, 2016). The aforesaid aggravated security situation in Pakistan lead the Chinese authorities to halt the CPEC funding in 2017 by issuing an advisory against the terrorist threats for her citizens working in Pakistan (European Foundation for South Asian Studies, 2017). Following figure presents the post CPEC data related to the annual terrorist incidents in Pakistan.

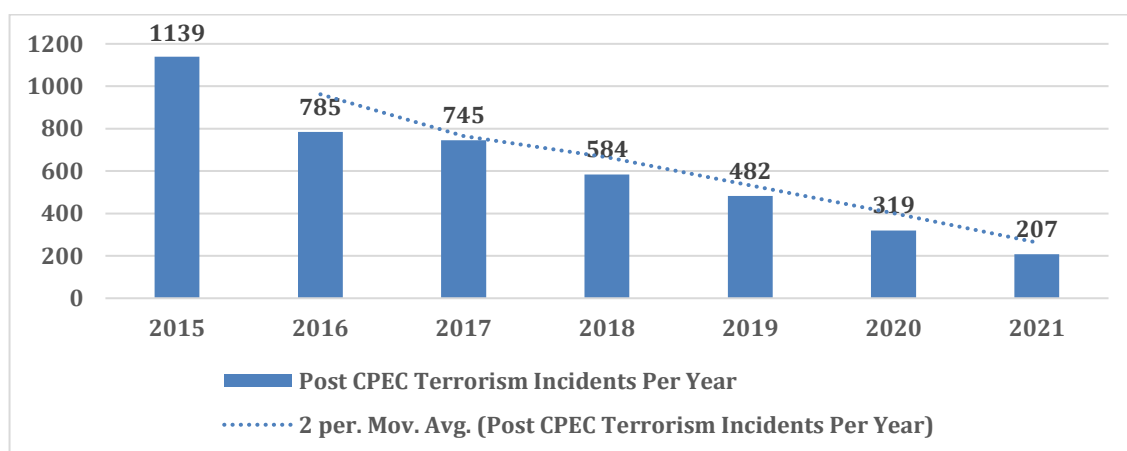


Figure: 01- Post CPEC annual terrorism incidents in Pakistan, Source: Adapted from Ali (2023)

Keeping view of the very clumsy law and order situation i.e. during the last decade, fighting the war against terrorism has become the top agenda of the state authorities in

Pakistan. Pakistan has managed to reduce the frequency of the terrorist incidents through implementing a comprehensive anti-terrorism policy but seemingly the roots of terrorism are still being found intact (Clarke, 2017; Afzal, 2021).

Conclusion

The successful completion of CPEC project is considered to be vital for the sustainable economic growth of both the China and Pakistan. The CPEC projects, once completed would help China to overcome her Malacca dilemma by providing her an alternate safe route for linking the Eurasian region with the South Asia and South East Asia. On the other hand, the CPEC project offers Pakistan a huge amount of foreign direct investment which would help to boost her economy both in the short and long run. Further, the CPEC project would help to bring the China and Pakistan closer than ever i.e. for securing their strategic security interests against India i.e. in the Indian Ocean Region.

Despite of realizing the fact that the smooth completion of the CPEC would offer various strategic benefits to both the counterparts, the first phase of the CPEC project has faced many challenges due to the presence of certain issues. The main domestic issues which created hurdles in the timely completion of the first phase of the CPEC included insurgency in Baluchistan province due to the politico-economic marginalization of the local Baloch population, political instability due to the extremely polarized political culture, severe climatic catastrophes because Pakistan is located in the high hitting zone for the global climate change effects, and organized terrorism due to participation in the US led global war against terrorism. However, the overall project has remained intact due to the strong political will and mutual cooperation of the both governments i.e. of China and Pakistan. Both the governments have taken effective security measures for dealing with the internal and external security challenges to the CPEC projects.

The results of this study signified that the ever-haunting political instability in Pakistan has resulted to create some undesirable delaying conditions and multiple challenges for the smooth implementation of the CPEC. Although, Pakistan and China have managed to achieve almost all of the major targets of the Phase-I of the CPEC i.e. through mutual cooperation but the conditions of political instability are still persistent in Pakistan. This study concluded that it is in the high interest of both counterparts of the CPEC i.e. China and Pakistan to successfully complete the CPEC project.

Recommendations

In light of the abovesaid facts, this study recommended that Pakistan has to take serious steps for the overcoming the root causes of the ever-haunting political instability otherwise Pakistan would simply be unable to complete the remaining projects of the CPEC i.e. in the timely and smooth manner, hitherto, the consistently unstable political environment may also lead to create undue strains in the Pak-China relations.

Further, It is a widely accepted political believe that it is not the development which brings peace, rather, it is the peace which leads to development. Accordingly, both the China and Pakistan would not be in a position to reap the benefits of the CPEC project unless they become successful to ensure peace in the region. For bringing the peace in country, this research strongly recommended that Pakistan has to take all the major complaining domestic stake holders i.e. marginalized groups of the Baluchistan and KPK province on board through adopting some viable institutional mechanism i.e. for resolving their genuine concerns about the CPEC projects. Any further delay or failure to address the justified concerns of the Baluch or Pakhtun marginalized groups would result to keep on impeding the smooth implementation of the CPEC projects i.e. during the upcoming phases too.

Additionally, Pakistan should take necessary steps for creating a broader political consensus among all the national level major political parties, especially, regarding the general structure and implementation of the CPEC projects. Any sort of unjustified or irresponsible criticism posed by the political leadership may result to hurt the interest of both the countries and it may also lead to temper the bilateral relations of China and Pakistan which in no way favors the strategic interest of Pakistan.

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