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### **The CPEC: Connector or Divider**

#### **Abstract**

*The CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) is a mega economic project approved by the joint efforts of Pakistan and China in 2015. The project entails, (initially \$46 billion) and now \$ 62 billion and is expected that it would raise to almost \$100 billion before its long-term project could be completed as far as by 2030. The projects consist of early harvest projects, the majority of which have been completed, medium-term project, which are to be completed by 2015 and long-term projects which are to be completed by 2030. The project is the part and parcel of China-led (OBOR) One Built One Road initiative, which is aimed to connect the Chinese economy to the rest of the world through the series of various roads, highways and motorways network and by reviving the old Silk road. CPEC as the part of OBOR would connect, at large, both countries and the two restive western provinces of both countries. The project has been dubbed as the game changer and will bring a win-win situation for both countries in terms of economic development and strategic importance. The initiation of CPEC shows Chinese resolves to invest in Pakistan, in the time when other countries are pulling out of the country for their supposed claims fragile security situations in the country. But before the project could be completed, many reservations have been voiced, both at the international and national levels. Where on one hand if some have dubbed it as the connector factor in the age of globalization at the international level, then on another hand the project has been branded as the initiative showing the rising power of China and through which china aspires to become a world power by aligning countries through entrapping them through debt diplomacy. Similarly, at the domestic level many regional parties, Nationalist politicians and even some economists have raised their reservations. Some sections of people have also gone to an extent to call CPEC as the China Punjab corridor based on their claim of CPEC benefiting only the province of Punjab. Therefore, this study aimed to highlight those who consider it as the connector factor and divider factor both at the international and domestic level with their respective arguments.*

**Keywords:** OBOR, CPEC, Sino-Pak Relations, Zipper, CARs, South Asia

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## **China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**

The current age of globalization where the global system has become so integrated through the larger trade cooperation between various countries, diminishing trade barriers, and easy flow of cultural ideas and smooth flow of capital and goods has become much easier than never before. The age of globalization is characterized by the voluntarily opening of the domestic markets by one country to another, which is a contrast with the colonialism where an imperial power either by force, subterfuge or other machination captured the domestic markets of other states for selling their products and exploiting the natural resources of the domestic country. Many international organizations like the WTO, the GATT, and the World Bank have been established for the same purpose of furthering the spirit of globalization. Many agreements like preferential trade agreements, and various projects at regional projects at the regional level Like Eurasian economic projects and CPEC, etc. step in the same direction (Husain).

Projects like the CPEC which are the part of the China-led “OBOR” were conceived in 2015 by the Government of Pakistan and China. Through OBOR, China cherishes of connecting their economy with the rest of the world, particularly, Central Asian and European countries, through a series of railways, highways, and motorways networks. The completions of OBOR would help and will go a long way to China enhancing its strategic position in the world by spreading its tentacles too far off countries. It would also help china gaining major concessions from the countries through which OBOR passes enhancing its economic positions. So far many various OBOR summits have been arranged to highlight the importance of the OBOR and making outlines for the future (Vats, 2016).

CPEC, which passes through Pakistan and would connect the two restive of provinces, Baluchistan and Xingjian of Pakistan and China respectively through a series of road networks, railways and highways, and optical fibers networks. It would help in the long run to contain violence in both provinces by enhancing their economic positions. The routes of CPEC consist of Eastern, Middle, and western routes passing through various provinces making the process of integrations in Pakistan highly possible (Baz & Saeed, 2017).

Initially, \$46 billion of dollars were earmarked for the safe project but the project has been enhanced to 62 billion dollars and expected to be raised to \$ 100 billion in the years to come.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the flagship mega-project initiated by the government of China and Pakistan in 2015 to connect the developing and restive provinces of Baluchistan and Xinjiang through the series of railways, highways, motorways and optical fiber networks. The overall purpose of CPEC is to bring prosperity to the region and improve and elevate the living standard of the people of both countries by bringing a win-win situation for the countries. CPEC is envisaged for sole aim to bring economic prosperity to the region by reviving the old Silk Road, developing Gwadar port on modern lines by the establishment of the International airport in Gwadar (Hughes, 2017). CPEC announced during the Chinese president XI JINPING’S (April 20-21 2015) visit to Pakistan. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a framework of regional connectivity. CPEC will not only benefit China and Pakistan

but will have a positive impact on Iran, Afghanistan, India, the Central Asian Republic, and the region (Small, 2015).

CPEC travels towards financial regionalization in the globalized world. It established peace improvement and a win-win show for every one of them. China Pakistan Economic Corridor the module of China's Belt and Road project which runs through Pakistan, is the leading infrastructure development project in the history of Pakistan. Of the \$55 billion budget projected for CPEC, \$35 billion is earmarked for energy projects while \$20 billion is for industrial zones, mass transit and infrastructure. CPEC is predictable raise Pakistan's GDP and advance communications extensively by growing the national power network by an additional 5900 megawatts, mounting the Gwadar Port as well as adding \$10 billion worth of an international airport, railway projects, and fiber optical cable running from China to Islamabad. China will advantage by streamlining its supply lines, thereby radically declining shipping time and distance, as well as connecting China with the Middle East. Along the route, China plans to build free trade zones which are meant to help enhance the economies of both countries (Bal Krishan Sharma & Nivedita Das Kundu, 2016).

CPEC will link Kashgar in northwest China's XI JINPING Uygur Sovereign Region and southwest Pakistan's Gwadar Port in its Baluchistan Province. It would shorten the current route from China to the Persian Gulf by more than 10,000 kilometers and instead of 45 days; it would take China ten days to get its imports and exports. It would also help in eluding any possibly contested Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia (near Taiwan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and India), and ultimately depressing shipping costs. It is providing China access to the Arabian Sea just about 600 kilometers from the narrow Strait of Hormuz to the west through which passes about 35% of the world's oil shipments. The CPEC saw as a vital bridge in the "all-weather" China-Pakistan relationship. It is opening up new doors to economic opportunities in the region. This 3,000 km megaproject will have important implications that can change the dynamics of global politics. While primary plans used for the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC) predate those of the OBOR have to be given renewed thrust under it and has an approach to be described as a flagship OBOR plan. Along with the India-Bangladesh China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, the CPEC receives explicit reveal in the state progress and development Commission's 2015 OBOR Vision and Action document. The corridor, which involves a sequence of infrastructure, projects connecting two countries, runs for 3,000 kilometers from Kashgar in western China to Gwadar port in Pakistan. Along the corridor have massive communications projects, as well as railways, roads and power plants, and an optical fiber cables network, are also being built or considered to be built which are mostly funded by Chinese investment and loans. The value of the corridor is currently estimated to be the US \$62 billion. CPEC is the chain of energy and transportation projects, some of which attach China's Uighur independent Region of Xinjiang to Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Initiated in mid-2013 and officially launch in April 2015, CPEC is usually described as a \$46 billion package of Chinese assist to invest in Pakistan, however, Pakistani officials declare the sum had reached \$62 billion by April 2017. CPEC is the first significant challenge to reinforce economic ties between Beijing and Islamabad after decades of strong political and military relations (Khan, 2019). During the 1950s, relationships between two countries were frigid, given Pakistan's alliance with the West during the Cold War and China's clinch

of India. During this era, Pakistan becomes the first Muslim country to recognize China. The CPEC can facilitate fortify Pakistan's economy and improve its position within the region. For China, CPEC can open new routes to the oil-rich Near East via the Arabian Sea. It will maintenance regional ties and empower the region to stand on its own with the least confidence in the Western world (Vats, 2016).

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is an immense infrastructure that contains railways, roads, pipelines, and those will pass through the entire length of Pakistan which includes Baluchistan, KPK, Azad Kashmir (POK) and Punjab. CPEC will shrink the distance for Chinese goods certain for Europe, Africa, and the whole western hemisphere, extensively by almost 3000 km/13,000 km and vice versa. Goods trade by CPEC will not only provide a safe route but also escape the risky Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia by many km. CPEC has global trade consequences, for example, if the Chinese ships were to be unloaded at New York rather than California, it would travel less by two thousand miles through the Suez Canal route. There is also an existence of expectation that when the CPEC is accomplished, a reduction in the passage of merchandise from the western hemisphere may also become the same distance route and compete with the Panama Canal (Husain).

Subsequently, CPEC has global trade implications, and even if Northwestern Indian states use the port of Gwadar to do business, it would be cheaper and faster through the corridor. You never know, it could be possible because precedency exists for the use of Fazilka-Amruka-Bahawalpur route was known as "The Golden Route" before 1947.

Whereas, there are irrefutable facts that, there are some other geopolitical deliberations with multiple competing political interests relating to CPEC. About 120 km west of Gwadar, the Iranian port of Chahbahar was built by Pakistan's rival India to bypass Pakistan to reach its interests in Afghanistan in the early nineties (Afridi, Bibi, & Muhammad, 2016). Even though US and EU pressure, India conducts a trade of about 15 billion dollars with Iran and imports about 15% of its oil needs from Iran as India is the world's fourth-largest buyer of petroleum. Furthermore, India is constructing the railway links from Chahbahar to connect to the Iranian Railway to tap mineral-rich Afghanistan and to spread the Central Asian markets. While these regional dynamics seem to have threatened Indians as if the Chinese were encompassing them. Pakistan also feels delimited by India, while Indians are ranging the Iranian railway into mineral-rich Afghanistan. India also hopes to increase its commercial and strategic interests in the former Soviet Central Asian Republics (CARs) through Afghanistan.

While troublesome for a few, many countries perceive the CPEC with interest. Recently, Pakistan's President welcomed the wish of Central Asian states to join CPEC. Even Russia, which has had a cooled relationship with Pakistan, is now warming up and has shown interest in the economic corridor, besides building Karachi to Lahore gas pipeline. With the probable presence of these new states in the deal, the opportunity of CPEC becomes more tangible and resilient (Afridi, Khan, & Jamil, 2017). However, for Pakistan, Iran's annexation in the deal will increase and multiply the corridor's advantages. For this reason, Islamabad extended an invitation to Tehran, which Iran has decided to deliberate.

Nearly three years have conceded subsequently the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was officially launched. Several plans have come online, and a grave mass of electric power and infrastructure projects will be functioning within the next 12 to 18 months (Rehman, Muhammad, Iqbal, & Malik, 2017). Now, more than midway through the first of CPEC's three five-year phases is a favorable moment to measure how Islamabad and Beijing have managed so far in pushing forward the immense, fifteen-year connectivity project, esteemed at uphill of \$62 billion.

### **International Aspects of Being Connector or Divider**

How the CPEC project is connector or divider is more conspicuous at the international level. In this regard, the following things are important.

#### **1. The Role of the USA**

The USA has criticized the project the time it was envisaged. The CPEC project is the part and parcel of the mega-project known as "One belt, one road" (OBOR) initiative which is meant to integrate the economy of China to various European and Central Asian countries. The project will bolster China's geostrategic position viz-a-viz the USA. Hence, the CPEC project will bring about the differences between China and the USA into sharp focus. Gone are the days, when there was détente between the USA and China. The CPEC project, therefore, has received criticism from the USA. Alice Wells has dubbed the project as nothing more than a debt trap for Pakistan. Hence, the CPEC project is a divider in terms of further polarizing world politics involving both China and the USA. The trade war between the two countries hastened after the project was launched. The trade war, therefore, evinces the fact that it will divide world politics in an enormous manner (Ehteshami & Horesh, 2018).

Likewise, India also has some reservations regarding the CPEC project. India is investing in the Chabahar project in Iran as a rival to the Gawadar port (Ishfaq, 2017). Such developments do not portend well for the project itself and the regional politics involving India, Pakistan, and China. Therefore, the CPEC project will bring to light the differences between the USA, India, and china into sharp focus (Hafeez Ullah Khan, Ijaz Khalid, 2018). Any hope of détente will dim shortly. Both countries also have criticized the project based on debt-trap diplomacy ( Kari Lindberg & Tripti Lahiri, 2018).

#### **2. CPEC Project as Connector**

China asserts that the project is not aimed to play down any country rather it is meant to drive the global economy for the larger benefit of both developed and developing countries. Time and again, China wants to show that the project is meant for economic purposes rather than for any geostrategic purposes, which albeit has been a false promise. China has strived to compel various countries to join the project. Various countries have shown their interest to join the project. Hence, at the global level, the project will bring about cooperation between various countries. The project has further cemented the relation between China and Pakistan. The project, if complemented, the various regional organization like the SCO, SAARC, etc., based in this region, will bring about an era of prosperity (Bal Krishan Sharma & Nivedita Das Kundu, 2016).

## **Domestic Aspects of Being Connector or Divider**

CPEC short term projects have already been completed and the whole projects are to be completed by 2030. From the very beginning, CPEC has been heralded as the game-changer which would usher an era of economic prosperity for the economically crippled country and the whole region at large. PML (N) boasts of having started a project which would benefit the whole of the country. Consisting of various energy and infrastructural projects, CPEC would go a long way in consolidating Pakistan's fledgling economic position by making Pakistan economic hub (Yaseen, Afridi, & Muzaffar, 2017).

### **As a Connector**

If looked from the perspective and as provided by mainstream policymakers, the CPEC would prove quite beneficial for the country in terms of economic opportunities it would accrue, making Pakistan an economic hub and strengthening relations with China on more firm grounds. It has been dubbed as the first-ever mega project undertaken by China in any country. How CPEC could prove to be a connector for a country could be discerned from the following advantages it would accrue to the country (Niazi).

#### **1) Integrating the Provinces**

As stated above CPEC conceives the networks of routes, consisting of highways and motorways, connecting the four provinces and Gilgit Baltistan. The infrastructural connectivity between the provinces augurs well for a country like Pakistan, which history is fraught with provincial bickering (Khan & Khalid, 2018). It would also go a long way in strengthening the federation of Pakistan which since inception has been fraught with provincial bickering and the whole system skewed in favor of a single province of Punjab. It would also appease the reservations of the smaller process, particularly Baluchistan and KPK by enhancing its economic positions by the establishment of special economic zones in these provinces. The passage of routes as conceives under CPEC would provide equal opportunities to all province, large or small, alike (Zhang).

#### **2) Enhancing Employment Opportunities**

CPEC would prove equally beneficial in integrating a large number of youth. Pakistan is home a large number of teeming youth population which in the current scenario presents both challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. These challenges can take the form of estrangement from the political system which can put them on a sociopath. However, these challenges can be transmuted into opportunity by providing the youth with employment opportunities, a decent way of life, providing economic independence. CPEC presents a sublime opportunity in meeting all these goals by providing them employment opportunities. It will help assuage their estrangement from the Centre which they supposed to have been exploitative (Kazmi, 2018).

By mainstreaming them through employment in the labor sector would go a long way in helping them improving their living standard and enhancing their socio-economic prospect of life.

#### **3) Meeting Energy Needs**

The history of Pakistan is the history of a tussle over scarce resources like water, electricity, coals, etc. which in many ways has led to severe estrangement among the provinces and the Centre and on many instances Centre resorted to highhandedness by clamping on provinces. The history of the Pakistan energy sector has been characterized by the presence of various power centers, where the need for energy has been exacerbated by the increase in population and a burgeoning industrial base. According to the latest Population census of 2017, the population of Pakistan stands at 220 million. Such a huge population means an increase in consumerism and the resultant increase in demand for more energy. Given that Pakistan has always faced the issue of the shortfall, its energy sectors could not meet the needs of people which resulted in their various socio-economic problems. Secondly, the industrial base, though in stagnated terms, has been on the rise. It could be said that it is the same deficiencies in the energy sectors which caused the contraction of the industrial sector (Aziz, 2018). The contraction of industries in the country can result in various socio-economic problems like unemployment, capital flight, brain-drain, and many others. Such a scenario never bode well for the social and political landscape of the country. Once the energy potential is met, it will lead to meeting up the demands of people as well will drive the industries (DOWNS, 2017). The result would be: Pakistan will become socio-economically prosperous which will lead to tranquility in the country. The increase in energy potential will lead to a boost in the trust of people regarding their government. It will connect people to the government. In a country like Pakistan where there is yawning trust deficit and where the system is characterized by dissonance such as scenario will bridge up that gap (Ansari, 2018).

### **The CPEC: As a Divider**

Though the CPEC project has been projected as a connector in terms of integrating the four provinces of Pakistan in terms of economic, political, and cultural integration. However, there is no uniformity of views regarding such a stance as there are elements that do not view the project through such a perspective (Rifaat & Maini, 2016). In such a situation a dispassionate analysis of the project reveals that there are following factors based on which the CPEC project has been viewed as a divider in the country.

#### **1) Making One Province Stronger**

From the get-go, there have been discrepancies as to how the CPEC project could be considered as a connector when it comes to the cost of leading to the development of a single province in the country. The CPEC project was set in motion the time when the PML (N) government was in power. Various elements in the smaller province view that the CPEC project benefits only the province of Punjab (Amanullah, 2017). If we contexture the political landscape of the Punjab province, one thing comes to fore and that is: the dominancy of the Punjab province has been resented by the smaller province like Sindh, Baluchistan, and KPK. The situation is no less severe in the case of the CPEC project where these smaller provinces are complaining that the project has been arrogated by the province of Punjab (Jamal, Pakistan Reels With Internal Unease Regarding CPEC Implementation, 2016).

#### **2) Affecting the Local Businesses**

The project the like of which Pakistan has never seen in its entire history must be executed prudently. The project is supposed to bring about the needed conducive environment for the growth of local industries. However, many

elements in the country complain that the CPEC project will impact the growth of local industries in Pakistan. They complain that the project will pave a way for the Chinese industries to be set up most easily. The government of Pakistan is also giving tax relief to the Chinese industries. In such kind of situation, the Chinese industries will dominate the industrial landscape of Pakistan.

### **3) Concerns of the Local Businessmen**

The local businessmen in the countries also complain that the project is never likely to bring about the needed stability and economic prosperity to the country. Once the Chinese industries are set up in the country, it will capture the domestic market in which case the casualty would be local businessmen. According to the local businessmen, a lion's share of the project has been reserved for the Chinese investor which in the long run would elbow out them out of the economic landscape of the country. They also contend that major concessions have been given to Chinese investors at the expense of Pakistani investors. They also term the project as non-participatory and are driven by a non-democratic approach.

### **4) Regional and Nationalist Political Parties**

Regional and various nationalist parties in the country are at the forefront to castigate the CPEC project to portray it the project which benefits only a single province in the country. In this regard, the resentment exhibited by the regional parties based in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In the case of Baluchistan, the regional political parties' complaint that the Gwadar port is at the forefront of the CPEC project, but despite that, the people of Gwadar are lacking access to the freshwater (Allauddin & Muhammadi, 2017). Similarly, they also complain that the CPEC project in the long run to be used to funnel the natural resources of Baluchistan to the other parts of the country. Such feelings on the part of the smaller provinces of the projects do not bode well for the proper execution of the project (Sial, 2018). The lack of a supportive environment has created also security risk for those working on the projects. Similar, feelings also exist in the province of KPK. Hence, the regional and nationalist political parties based in the smaller province view the project as nothing more than benefiting a single province in the country (Shahid, 2018). Such kind of feeling instead of promoting the spirit of national integration in the country is fueling the spirit of national disintegration in the country. If we contextualize the process of national integration in Pakistan, we come across the startling fact that the process of national integration has never been on an even keel. Various issues that compelled Pakistan and exacerbate is national integration (Rehman).

In the present context, it is the mega project of CPEC which is creating the process of national integration in the country difficult. How Pakistan comes out successful in the process to deal with those issues is to be determined by the contours of how it responds to addressing the genuine concerns of the smaller provinces in the prudent manner.

### **5) The Perspective of Politicians**

Not all politicians agree on the same consideration of the CPEC project. Various political leaders have denigrated the project from the get-go. One of the senators of Pakistan likened the CPEC project to the EAST India Company of 1600. The company got controlled by the Sub-continent by spreading its tentacles in the areas near to the sea. The

same, according to them, goes for the CPEC project. Such a breed of politicians views the project as the China-driven project to trap Pakistan into its debt-diplomacy. Hence, various leaders are viewing the project as something which will benefit china at the cost of Pakistan. Hence, they do not view the project as something which will integrate the country rather than it will lead to further fragmentation of the country (Akhter, 2018).

#### **6) The Views of the Economists**

In the same very manner, the economists do not agree on the same contours of the CPEC project. They are more concerned about the project and how they are to be financed. From the very beginning, the project is shrouded in mystery. They want all the details of the project to be brought to light. For them, transparency must be ensured in the CPEC project. Failing so would create resentment among the provinces as to how it could be executed (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks, 2018).

#### **Conclusion**

**The** CPEC project is the manifestation of the strong relations between China and Pakistan. Through thick and thin, China has supported Pakistan in different realms of state activities. The CPEC project is part of the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative to integrate the economies of the world with China as a pivot. The project has been the brainchild of Chinese present president Xi Jinping.

The CPEC project was launched in 2015. The project consists of a series of roads, highways, energy projects, building state of the art airport at Gawadar, fiber optics. The project will connect the province of Baluchistan to the Chinese eastern provinces. Besides geostrategic benefits for china, it will bring about economic benefits for China in terms of reduced cost and reduced distance to get access to the Middle Eastern countries. The scope of the project is being widened with each passing day. Initially, the project involved a project of \$46 billion. The project now has been elevated to \$62 billion. The project is to be completed by 2030. The lion’s share of the project will go to the energy areas. In this regard, Pakistan will be benefited a great deal.

The project has received mixed responses both at the global and domestic level in Pakistan. At a global level, the CPEC project has been an eyesore for both the USA and India. While the USA is castigating the project because once properly executed it will reduce the influence of the USA in the region. The project also envisages access to the Middle Eastern countries for energy needs. Hence, the project will reduce the influence of the USA in south Asia as well as in the Middle East. Likewise, India is also castigating the project. India is doing so due to a number of factors. First, India is in a geostrategic and geo-economics competition with china. The project will tilt such competition in favor of China. Secondly, India claims that the project is going through the disputed region in Pakistan. Hence, the CPEC project will bring about a sharp difference between china on hand and India and the USA on others.

However, the project will bring about cooperation among various countries. In this regard, the role of Pakistan and China is very important. Both countries have historically been in cordial relations. The project will cement the relationship between the two countries. Similarly, once other countries also join the project, it will bring about a win-win situation for various countries in terms of economic interests.

The situation at the domestic level in Pakistan are no less favorable to the project. From the very beginning, the project has acquired a mixed response. In this regard, the two views are reigning. One hand there is debated that the CPEC project is concert as it would bring about economic, political, and cultural integration among the various provinces. The project will also get involve the smaller province in mainstream politics. The project will generate employment opportunities in the country which in the long run will elevate the socio-economic status of the people. The project will also alleviate the alienation of the smaller province. The confluence of all these factors will provide a conducive environment for the spirit of national integration to move ahead without any hindrance.

On the other hand, there are views expressed from different quarters who view the project as something which will further fragment the already polarized society of Pakistan. Such a view found its expression in the views like that the project will benefit only a single province of Pakistan. Various nationalist and regional parties are also at the forefront to project such views. Hence, there is not a uniformity of views as to what could be the contours of the project for Pakistan in the long run.

The project has received mixed responses at a different level, but one thing is conspicuous: The project will bring about the win-win situation for each stakeholder once all the genuine concerns are eliminated and once it is properly executed. The major portion of the project pertains to the energy needs. Pakistan is an energy scarce country. The project will make Pakistan an economic hub; it will generate employment opportunities and will enhance Pakistan's infrastructure which in the long run will bode well for the economic development of the country. The project also to be elevated from the shroud of mystery and its details are to be shared with the public at large.

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