

REVISITING THE DETERMINANTS AND CHALLENGES OF CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (CPEC) THROUGH THE LENS OF PUBLIC OPINION

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ABSTRACT

The world has witnessed the establishment of regional and global strategic environment and the 21st century is no exception. It helps encouraging geo-economical and geostrategic partnership among countries. The Belt and Road initiative (BRI) of which China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project is a major developmental project. The CPEC, undeniably, presents ample opportunities and to both China and Pakistan, it is not a smooth sailing ship as it is jolted by high winds and thrashing waves from all sides. It has invited discontent from inside and criticism from the outside from the very beginning. These voices of discontent especially from the ethnic groups living in close proximity of CPEC projects occasionally have resulted into creating an impression that this project would be doomed. This paper is an attempt to revisit the determinants and challenges that Islamabad is facing both from inside and the outside to implement this mega project. More specifically, it analyses the internal discontent that is reflected through protests by various ethnic groups that feel deprived of the promised economic fruits of this project. It further seeks to evaluate the challenges that exist in the form of public support and public concerns about the promised benefits of CPEC projects. This study is qualitative in nature that utilizes both primary and secondary sources of data collection. Significantly high level of awareness is found among masses about CPEC but public support and concerns are posing serious challenges for the government. Analyzing both the internal and external challenges, a strong resolve have been demonstrated by both Pakistan and China to counter these threats pragmatically. The internal discontent of the various ethnic groups poses a serious challenge, so it is imperative to address the grievances of these aggrieved groups on practical grounds.

Keywords: Strategic partnership; Determinants; Challenges; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; Belt and Road Initiative; Discontent; Criticism; Ethnic groups etc.

1. INTRODUCTION

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is treated as the most comprehensive of all the six proposed land routes of BRI. This mega project has the capacity to transform the dynamics of the whole world. It is dubbed as a ‘game changer’ for the whole region it covers (Ahmad, Riaz & Mi, 2017). Its aim is to further strengthen the bilateral relationship between China and Pakistan along with promoting regional connectivity (Rafialqtadar Mirza, Kiran Azeem, Nudrat Waheed, 2017). For Pakistan, it is conceived as “the harbinger of a new era of connectivity and integration” (Mehdi, 2020) that will not only altogether change the economic dynamics of the region but also the fate of the masses of Pakistan. To achieve this objective, it is imperative to ensure the support of local communities (ethnic groups especially Baloch and Pushtuns residing along CPEC routes) for CPEC projects that is associated with their conceived benefits in the form of business/economic opportunities (Kanwal, S., Pitafi, A. H., Malik, M. Y., Khan, N. A. & M., 2020). It has been observed by Saad et al. that CPEC projects have helped transformed the local’s perception, especially about improvement in life-style, job opportunities and poverty alleviation (Saad, A., Xiping, G., & Ijaz, 2019). Likewise for China, it not only

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offers an alternate short trade route but also an easy access to the Middle East, Africa and Europe. This multi-pronged project, nevertheless, offers numerous benefits including: short and easy access to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Roy, 2019)(Safdar, M. T., & Zabin, 2020); connectivity and integration of regional economies and markets (Faisal, 2020)(Hussain, 2020)(Khan, Z., Changgang, G., & Afzaal, 2020)(Mirza, F. M., Fatima, N., & Ullah, 2019)(Yu, C., Zhang, R., An, L., & Yu, 2020); reducing vulnerability of trade supplies in case of conflict in the South China Sea (Gordon, D., Tong, H., & Anderson, 2020)(Hali, S. M., Shukui, T., & Iqbal, 2014); and ensuring Pakistan's role as a major stakeholder in the BRI. So, the success of CPEC will result into changing the economic profile of Pakistan besides transforming the geopolitical dynamics of the region. For instance, it is intended to help lifting 1.1 million people out of poverty and expected to generate seven million jobs with a GDP growth rate of 2.5% (Dawn, 2020). Pakistan, being a capital deficient country, has less sustainable opportunities for eradicating poverty and this multi-billion dollar project presents Pakistan with a great opportunity to change its destiny (Ramay, 2020).

The CPEC is undeniably a multi-pronged project having long-lasting socio-economic, political and environmental impacts. It is imperative to improve capability in planning and implementation for such a massive project as it progresses. In addition, it is also mandatory for the policy makers to single out both the external and internal challenges that it faces. It has been observed that this project faces a variety of external (geostrategic competition) and internal challenges (discontent, ownership, public support and attachment among the local communities) that need to be addressed on pragmatic grounds in timely manner. This paper is an attempt to identify and explore the potential threats in the way of CPEC and their impact on the local communities.

1.1. The Geography of CPEC

The CPEC is a mega investment project launched by China that includes: communication infrastructure; sea ports; special economic zones; energy projects; and vocational training institutes etc. Hence, it tempts investors from almost all the sectors capable of playing a great role in the overall development of the area (Khan, Z., Changgang, G., & Afzaal, 2020). The communication infrastructure, one of the major aspects of CPEC, is meant not only to enhance connectivity but also to improve upon the economic standing of less developed cities in the whole country (Khan, Z., Changgang, G., & Afzaal, 2020).

To achieve the objective of regional connectivity through communication infrastructure, four land routes have been proposed in Pakistan including: eastern; central; western and northern. The eastern alignment, though the longest in all four, is considered the most feasible to start with owing to the already existing infrastructure and comparatively better security setup. This eastern alignment spreads from Gilgit-Baltistan to Punjab and then to Balochistan ultimately connecting Gwadar deep-sea port which is deemed to be the channel connecting "China's Silk Road Economic Belt" with the "Chinese Maritime Silk Road." The second proposed alignment, the central route, is planned to link central Punjab with Quetta and finally connecting Gwadar. This route is comparatively less developed and requires massive scale of investment and relatively long time to be completed. The third alignment, the western route, shorter than Eastern and Western routes, connects Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with Quetta and then to Gwadar port in Balochistan. The northern alignment is linked with all these three routes and traverses from Gilgit-Baltistan to China's borders. The originally planned western route, however, was not initiated first because of various reasons including: security threats; undulating terrains; and Afghanistan border etc. This caused discontent among the local communities of Balochistan and Pashtuns of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and opened the doors to politicize this project among mainstream regional political parties and provinces. The voices of discontent were raised by the Baloch and Pashtun communities of Balochistan and KPK and demands were placed to initiate the original route first that promised development and improvement in quality of life for neglected areas. Among all the provinces of Pakistan, Balochistan, though highly enriched in natural resources, is the least developed. Basic necessities of life such as education, health and infrastructure are almost non-existing there. Above all this, it is highly prone to local insurgencies. The militant groups operating in Balochistan enjoy external support from India, Iran and Afghanistan to disrupt CPEC projects by attacking officials. In order to mitigate these threats, it is imperative to accommodate the local communities into the benefits of these projects by providing them with better education, health and job opportunities. So, these routes would

ultimately link Balochistan, the least developed administrative unit of the country, to the future economic hub in South Asia, where the warm-water port of Gwadar will play a decisive role (Rehman, 2019).

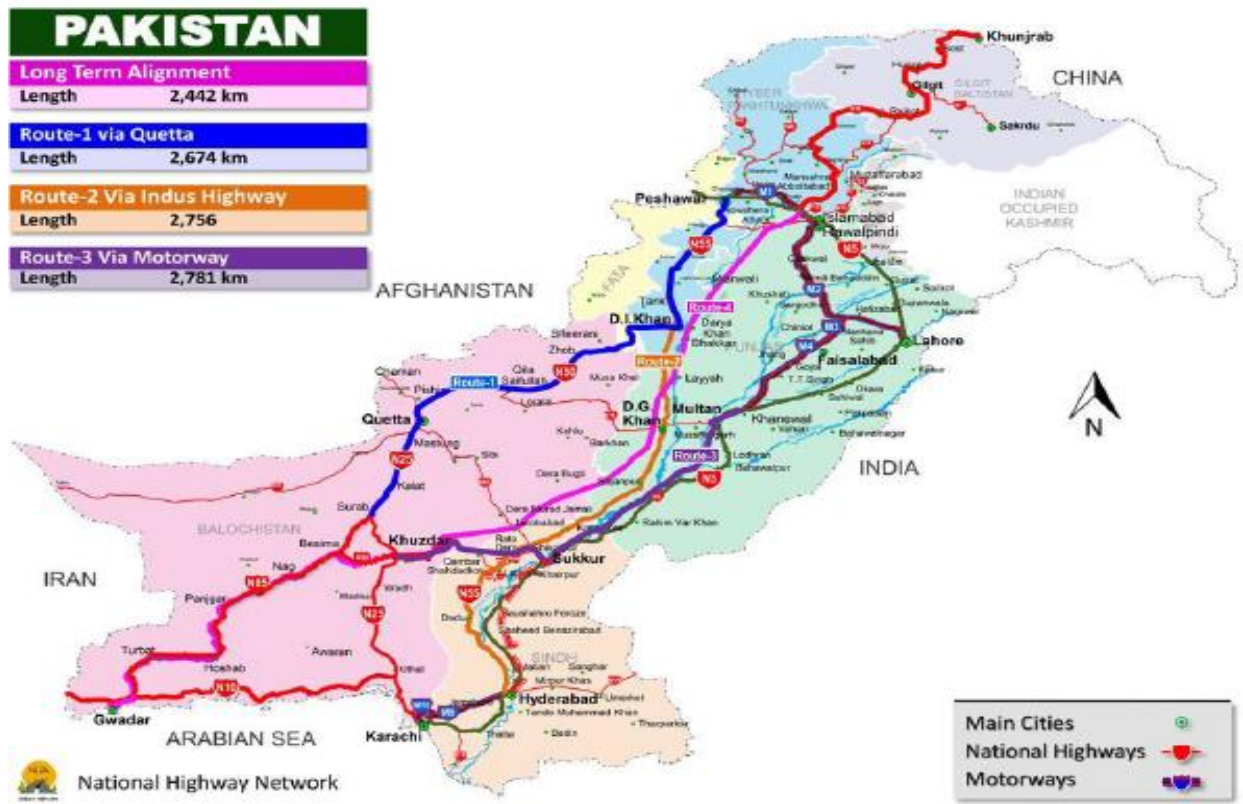
Map 1: Official Map of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor(Esteban, 2016)

Key Factors Determining the Fate of Megaprojects

Megaprojects are usually considered the harbinger of change, especially social and economic change and the CPEC is no exception. Therefore, it requires an investigation to find out that what are the factors that can potentially convert an opportunity into a nightmare? In order to promote the expected change successfully, it is imperative to involve or ensure the support of all the stakeholders in the project besides sticking to the quality parameters and technical benchmarks (Mišić, S., & Radujković, 2015). A general perception is that the developers are the major stakeholders of the megaprojects; though, in relation to the potential influence of these megaprojects on the local, political, and environment dynamics, that view is thoroughly unfounded. So, the stakeholder’s backing is important to amplify the prospects of the megaprojects’ success (Caldas, C., & Gupta, 2017).

On the contrary, the megaprojects’ positive impacts are applauded while their negative outcomes are usually confronted by the locals in their areas of influence. So, a comprehensive study that is aimed at focusing on the local’s perception is mandatory for determining the actual impact assessment of megaprojects. Furthermore, it is crucial that the elements like intangible gains in the shape of sense of belonging and national pride and tangible gains in the form of employment and development of

Map 1. Official map of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor



Source: Planning Commission of Pakistan.

infrastructure from the megaprojects, are worthy to be thoroughly investigated (Delphine, P. W., & Spit, 2019). In addition, megaprojects in the third world face challenges of social, political, economic, organizational, and eco-system nature (Mackhaphonh, N., & Jia, 2017). Out of these challenges, some are countervailing and others are of confronted at institutional level in the form of power contests among various stakeholders to enhance their zone of influence both in political and territorial domains (Fox, 2020)

by elite capture. Some conceived benefits from the projects are left to the exploitation of powerful and mighty principals distinguished by higher studies and higher salaries (Herrold-Menzies, 2006).

Summarizing this discussion, megaprojects like CPEC are capable of driving forces of socio-economic transformations in a region or country. However, it is imperative to have in-depth understanding of forces capable of determining the projects' success and failure to assess their true potential for protecting the well-being of local community.

1.2. Problem Statement

CPEC, a flagship project of the BRI, is not smooth sailing ship as it is jolted by high waves from all sides. The megaproject of CPEC is subjected to challenges both from the inside and outside of the country (Khan, 2018). CPEC, without any doubt, not only carries a huge weight in the strategic schemes of both China and Pakistan but also the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) of China in Pakistan (Mengsheng, 2015)(Mirza R. I., Azem, K., Waheed, N., and Zehra, 2017). Deling & Diren (Deling, H. & Diren, 2015) have highlighted various concerns raised by Chinese investors regarding security in Pakistan. There is panoply of concerns about CPEC such as political aggrandizement, degradation of environment, elite capture, adverse outcomes, discontent from local communities etc. The attacks on Chinese individuals working on CPEC-related projects in the country and acceptance of the responsibility of such attacks by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is a glaring example of the discontent of the local Balochis over the promised benefits of CPEC (Wolf, 2016). Additional similar concerns include: the fear of local communities of being deprived of their (forefathers') lands, fear of losing lands and employment opportunities, fear of social alienation, and their cultural impoverishment etc. (Ahsan, 2016)(Cernea, 2004). The exclusion of local communities, Balochis in particular, from the promised benefits of CPEC in the form of better employment opportunities, infrastructure development, improved living standards etc. would definitely retard successful implementation of the CPEC in the long run. Therefore, positive opinion and support for the CPEC among the locals living in close proximities of CPEC route is necessary for reaping the benefits of CPEC and other related megaprojects (Ahsan, 2016)(Cernea, 2004)(Deling, H. & Diren, 2015)(Kanwal, S., Pitafi, A. H., Malik, M. Y., Khan, N. A. & M., 2020)(Siddiqi, M. U. A., & Sajid, 2016). The stakeholder's concerns, contrary to this, cannot only negatively influence the local's support for the CPEC but also affects its progress (Kovrig, 2018). If the situation gets worse, the element of hatred among the locals can lead to possible sabotage by enemies (Forouhar, A., & Hasankhani, 2018)(Iqbal, 2018).

1.3. Relevance and Significance of the Study

This study is aimed at identifying the issues and challenges that pose barriers in the way of CPEC. A range of barriers have been identified by the researchers but most of the studies lack primary research on the topic, hence, highlighting the need of grass root level study identifying the issues and challenges obstructing the successful completion of CPEC (Hadi, N. U., Batool, S., & Mustafa, 2018).

Thus, the key objective of this research is to identify the major hurdles that retard development of CPEC through the lens of public opinion of those people living around or in close vicinity of CPEC routes. Deling and Diren (Deling, H. & Diren, 2015) are of this belief that public opinion should be emphasized for collecting data as it is usually given preference by the policy-makers to ensure sustainability in practice. There is a need to devise some criteria by the policy-makers to cross check the information with public reaction, particularly when it is required to pay serious attention to problems related to CPEC and its materialization (Khan, 2018) to avoid the factors that help generating negative perception in locals (Deng, A., & Li, 2017).

This study is of immense significance for policy-makers and technocrats equally for analyzing the opinions of the primary stakeholders of CPEC. This study might provide the officials with the understanding of the factors that are perceived as major barriers by the stakeholders. Moreover, this research is also of immense significance as it presents new ideas for further research on this topic that would emphasize evidence more than opinions. This study might also be used by researchers around the globe to develop extensive constructs for economic collation of states for fostering research activities and benefitting stakeholders at large.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to adopt theoretical framework for this study, works of different writers have been reviewed encapsulating the debate around theoretical paradigm for megaprojects like CPEC and the challenges they confront in their successful implementation. Abid and Ashfaq (Abid, M., & Ashfaq, 2015) works reflect on various factors that affect the progress of CPEC, for example, the societal violence, ethnic cleansing and political instability are some challenges that come from within the country. There are some external factors as well like India and Iran considering CPEC a threat to their regional superiority creating hurdles for CPEC. Beside this, China also has reservations over matters related with tax and tariffs. Ali (Ali, A., 2015) also pointed out the similar hurdles e.g. security concerns, ethnic cleansing, the corrupt bureaucracy, unskilled labor force and external factors like India.

The study of Ali et al. (Ali, R., Ali, W., Ali, M., Raza, B. and Niazi, A. A. K., 2018) mostly focused economic opportunities associated with CPEC to the economy and people of Pakistan besides pointing out the internal and external factors that could pose a threat to the CPEC to hinder this multi-dimensional project. Ahmad and Hong (Ahmad, Riaz & Mi, 2017) highlighted the same challenges, for example, the political and economic uncertainty, unskilled labor, the law and order situation, and ethnic based violence.

The literature review reveals that there is already a lot of work that has been done in the field of research which focus on challenges and obstacles to the CPEC. Additionally, the studies of Javaid (Javaid, 2016) pointed out possible threats while Abbas, Shouping, Sidra and Sharif ((Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018), Khan (Khan, 2018) and Shah (Shah, 2018) pointed out some new areas of potential threats that are never discussed in prior researches. Therefore, the research model has been developed to anticipate the factors curtailing the progress of CPEC keeping in view the challenging factors both internally and externally.

The research model is only additive with one variable i.e the Indian external influence. The Chinese concerns and Iran's role in countering CPEC has not been included. The Chinese concerns are purely internal.

2.1. Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been proposed for this study:

H1: A range of factors such as political insecurity, ethnic separation, internal insecurity, corruption in bureaucratic set-up, and unskilled labor force etc. influence and retard the progress of CPEC at large.

H2: The external factors in the form of Indian influence affect the progress of CPEC significantly and hefting the project through insurgencies and terror financing to different ethnic groups that caused political instability and infringed internal security.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study by Deling & Diren (Deling, H. & Diren, 2015) posits a question that how Pakistan will compete with different challenges like religious and ethnic extremism, foreign pressure especially from the West and political instability to foster CPEC? It will be more difficult for a country that is developing and less advanced in high-tech (Deng, A., & Li, 2017). Therefore, the investors from China are canonical to be concerned with the progress of CPEC. Hence, Deng & Li believe that the above mentioned issues impact negatively on Pakistani nationals and ultimately cause trust deficit that might affect Pak-China relationship. Analyzing the above mentioned arguments, the following section will provide a thorough review of the relevant variables related with the point of interest.

3.1. Political Instability

There is an agreement among scholars that to reap the benefits of CPEC, political stability is the prerequisite. This argument is supported Imtiaz Salman, Kamal Shamraiz, and Al Hnai ((Imtiaz, Salman, Kamal, 2016). Abbas et al. ((Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018) indicates the same sort of arguments that there should be a consensus among all the stakeholders and political powers to cultivate the benefits associated with CPEC. Khan (Khan, 2018) is of the view that it is the unstable political environment that is the dominant reason behind the diminishing economy. Idrees Shapiee Ahmad and Hanwei (Idrees, R. Q., Shapiee, R., Ahamat, H., & Hanwei, 2018) are in agreement with Khan that the instability in Political environment, external and internal interventions might cause the cancellation of CPEC project. The study

indicates that any cancellation or abolition due to local political quandaries or governance would constitute a breach of international commitments. Thus, in order to keep CPEC intact, it is imperative to express concerns about the establishment of political stability ((Khan, 2018).

3.2. Ethnic Separation

A significant factor impeding the implementation of CPEC is internal political conflict and opposition to CPEC by different ethnic groups (Ahmad, R., & Hong, 2017). These discrepancies result from political economy, where the distribution of resources has historically been accompanied by political unrest (Ali, 2015). According to Mirza et al. ((RafiaIqtadar Mirza, Kiran Azeem, Nudrat Waheed, 2017) the writers and academicians influenced by Baloch nationalistic approach are against the CPEC, believing that Punjab will grab the due share of Baluchistan. Hamid Khan (Hamid, M., Khan, H. S., Khaliq, A. & Ajmal, 2017) also argues that, CPEC, a purely economic initiative, is now turned into political agenda by different interest groups within political parties and media. These interest groups within ruling political parties and in opposition always raise concerns against every CPEC project. Ahmad and Hong believe that this ethnic rift is causing delays in the implementation of CPEC projects ((Hadi, N. U., Batool, S., & Mustafa, 2018).

3.3. Internal Security

The Chinese have always been concerned about the security of their individuals working in Pakistan. This very aspect has been highlighted in the works of Abbas et al. (Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018). The increasing insurgencies in Baluchistan by Baloch nationalists backed by India are a major security concern (Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018). Baluchistan is the largest beneficiary of this project as it connects Gawadar to Kashgar. The rote cause of this misperception is propagated false information about the project and Indian backed militants who want to dismantle the project. Same is the situation for Gilgit-Baltistan where the security concerns are also present. The security is a major and most burning issue for the project (Shah, 2018). Though the armed forces are determined to resolve this security issue but a lot of work is needed to be done to resolve this issue permanently (RafiaIqtadar Mirza, Kiran Azeem, Nudrat Waheed, 2017). The provincial and central governments should build a consensus over the issue and use their forces to counter these insurgencies (Shah, 2018).

3.4. Corrupt Bureaucracy

The national economy was bestowed with corruption since the independence of Pakistan in 1947 (Javaid, 2010). Though it has its roots years before partition under the British colonial era, where they allocated lands and titles only to those who showed loyalty to the Britishers (Awan, 2004). This practice of unfair distribution of awards was also practiced in 1970 under the phenomenon of nationalization and resulted into the climax of corruption in business religious cycle (Javaid, 2010). Therefore, study of Ahmer (Ahmar, 2014) believes that corruption is also one of the major obstacles in implementation of CPEC in a diatonic way. Similarly, Ali (Ali, 2015) asks for transparency in all the projects while ministries always are reluctant to give access to information. The corrupt bureaucracy in Pakistan is a major hindrance in the smooth functioning of CPEC and this barrier has been indicated by Deng and Li (Deng, A., & Li, 2017) in their recent study.

3.5. Violence

Violence has always been a major issue for the governments in Pakistan and Pakistan's role as non-Nato ally of the US in War against Terrorism (WAT) has aggravated the security situation in Pakistan. The work of Hadi et al (Hadi, N. U., Batool, S., & Mustafa, 2018) reflects on the impacts of Pakistan's role as non-Nato ally for CPEC. The terrorist network that stretched across the country now needs to be dismantled for successful completion of CPEC. This argument has been substantiated by Javaid (Javaid, 2016). It is imperative to uproot this network to overcome the outsider's influence on the working of CPEC (Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018). In addition to this, Gwadar port's location and the perception of its misuse also magnify the challenges of insurgency. The situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) is not much different where terrorism is not only disturbing locals but also affecting economic progress (Javaid, 2016).

3.6. Lack of Properly Trained Workforce

Human resource is vital for any country's development but skilled labor force is invaluable. The megaprojects like CPEC require highly skilled human resource and this aspect has been highlighted by Ali

(Ali, 2015). He further reiterates that though Pakistan is enlisted in top 10 nations in human resource but it lacks properly trained workforce. A highly skilled workforce is imperative for successful and timely completion of CPEC (Ahmad, Riaz & Mi, 2017). This idea has been supported by Deng and Li (Deng, A., & Li, 2017) who emphasized the significance of skilled labor force and identified the plight of non-skilled labor force incapable of meeting international standards.

3.7. External Influence

As far as the external interference is concerned, study of Abbas et al (Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018) confirms that CPEC has invited considerable external threats both from the regional and global players and the development of CPEC is significantly impacted by these factors. Khan (Khan, 2018) has identified multiple players but finds Indian involvement at its extreme. Khan's argument has been seconded by Javaid (Javaid, 2016) who substantiates his argument by the response from Indian Prime Minister who openly criticized CPEC on his recent tour to China. In addition, India is not happy with Chinese involvement in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Javaid also pointed out that the network of RAW has not been denied by Indian Prime Minister in Balochistan. Through the study of Shah (Shah, 2018), it has been identified that India and Afghanistan are behind insurgent activities against the projects of CPEC and their involvement is high in Baluchistan (Javaid, 2016).

4. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

It is beyond any doubt that CPEC both in the BRI and Sino-Pakistan bilateral ties represents a phenomenal opportunity. This megaproject of CPEC is deemed a catalyst to transform the society of Pakistan both socially and economically and also provides much needed stimulus to their strategic ties. Pakistan, owing to its location, assumes a great role within the region and beyond and this project of CPEC is meant to trigger regional connectivity in which Pakistan plays a crucial role.

Megaprojects such as CPEC require profound efficiency in planning and its implementation as the project progresses. A project of such massive magnitude is not free from challenges both from within and outside the country, thus making it highly imperative for the policy makers not only to identify these challenges but also to overcome these challenges with pragmatic policies.

4.1. External Challenges

There are numerous reasons behind the criticism and opposition that is placed against CPEC including global and regional geopolitical realities. On the one hand, a competition for supremacy and influence is going on between the US and China while a tug of war is going on between China and India on the other hand. Since the beginning of strategic ties of the US with India, Pakistan finds itself in the crosshairs of this tug of war. While the US seems interested to see Pakistan getting stable economically and politically, it prefers that Pakistan keep following its line on Afghanistan and also catering that nothing should impact India's interest.

The US conceived Sino-Pak economic ties first with ambivalence but later with overt criticism. The argument from the US over the investments made by China in Pakistan is centered on the relative advantage that these investments heavily favor Chinese interests because of the higher rates that would be offered by other states. But this argument seems unfounded as neither the US nor any other country or multinational corporations (MNCs) from the US have stepped in to outclass China. This US criticism is the reflection of an overall Western critique that is propagated by its media. The assistance and economic involvement of China is termed as exploitative especially in Africa and Asia. The assistance that is provided by China to the countries in Africa Asia in the past is also ignored. For example, good number of infrastructural projects in Africa would not have been completed without Chinese assistance such as Tanzam Railway that was completed in 1975. Most of the countries in Africa have been exploited by colonial powers. The Karakoram Highway spanning around 1300 km which has been built through joint venture is another such example.

The strengthening ties between China and Pakistan both economically and strategically are not welcomed by India and the CPEC is no exception and is treated as a threat by China to dominate South Asia. Keeping other neighboring countries in view, Iran conceives Gwadar as a threat to its Chabahar Port which is being developed with Indian collaboration. The CPEC has strong potential to benefit Afghanistan

as well from its offered enhanced trade route connectivity and Gwadar is more viable than Chabahar both economically and distance-wise. However, Pak-Afghan relationship has been very complex since the beginning of their diplomatic ties and India has used it to its advantage. The India-Pakistan power struggle in Afghanistan has further complicated the situation.

The Indian interference in Pakistan is an undeniable fact and Baluchistan insurgency is one such example. India has already shown strong reservations about CPEC and openly criticized it. The masses support, one of the key hypotheses of this study, is imperative for the successful and timely completion of CPEC projects. The CPEC presents Pakistan with a great opportunity to uplift the social and economic status of various ethnic groups living in close proximity of CPEC routes by providing them with employment opportunities. Better living standards and infrastructural development in the least developed areas of Pakistan would eventually help aggrieved masses reducing their grievances towards Islamabad. That would possibly reduce Indian interference in Pakistan. By making the process more inclusive both economically and politically, Indian interference can be effectively defanged in Baluchistan and CPEC is a vital opportunity to develop synergy to this process.

4.2. Internal Challenges

The CPEC is not immune from the challenges that come from within the country (Pakistan) and pose serious threats to its successful implementation. Keeping the long-term plan for CPEC in view, Pakistan is inclined to:

- Working on infrastructure improvement and removal of critical barriers which obstruct the developmental path of growth and modernization;
- Link vital areas of Pakistan's economy to mitigate gaps in regional economic development by connecting nodal cities;
- Improve the scale of development, especially at provincial level through collaboration with Chinese in both investment and high-tech;
- Upgrading investment ties with the Chinese for promoting its exports and services to the outside world especially China, to improve upon industry and employability, and to establish novel industry clusters for achieving sustainable growth ensuring food and energy securities, hence paving the way for better life standards of local communities and redressal of their grievances through high level of acceptability of CPEC projects.

Chinese scheme is to:

- Sharing their achievements and experiences with Pakistan in almost every walk of life for mutual development;
- Efforts to install long-lasting social stability in Pakistan;
- Speed up the progression of CPEC and its drive for development of its Western China (Usman Hyder, 2019).

Though there is significant similarity and complementarity in the long-term visions of China and Pakistan, yet implementation constitutes several barriers. There was overwhelming debate in Pakistan that whether a program strategy or a step-by-step strategy treatment regarding CPEC projects was preferable. After thorough deliberations by both the Chinese and Pakistani planners a step-by-step approach was adopted. Only one approach, though, was perhaps not exclusive of the other. Both stepped prioritization and targeted interventions are required for mega projects like CPEC. There is a significant difference between the systems of both China and Pakistan as there is centralized planning and decentralized implantation in Pakistan while in China it's the opposite. It is imperative to harmonize both these methods as the CPEC progresses.

In Pakistan there is a dearth of skilled labor force (human resource) and deficiency of requisite training mechanism. Initiatives have been taken in this regard and it is being imparted to the masses and some are even being sent to China for required training. Still there is much more needed to be done. Governance issues along with delivery capacity are other significant challenges. In the last twenty years Pakistan's record to implement projects is not quite good and there is deterioration in its capacity to successfully implement mega projects. It seems that if the CPEC projects are required to be completed in the least time and its economic fruits are to be delivered immediately, more skilled labor force is imperative

to be imported and utilized. This strengthens the perception and fear that only fewer from Pakistan might reap its economic benefits than expected. This proved the hypothesis of this study valid that public concerns and grievances, if not addressed, might turn this opportunity into a nightmare. The concerns have also been shown by Chinese multinationals operating in Pakistan that: the approval and processing time from bureaucracy required for launching projects is very slow; inconsistent approach of tax authorities; and security measures for Chinese nationals slow down the pace of work have resulted into aggravating challenges for successful and timely completion of CPEC projects.

It is equally imperative and significant consideration to foster balanced regional development and ensure equity. The acceptability of CPEC, a vital aspect of this study, will develop in part if there would be significant progress on CPEC projects in this direction. This will, in turn, secure public recognition which is imperative for successful completion of CPEC.

4.3. The Way Forward

As a way forward, it is imperative for Pakistan to consolidate itself internally and the prospects of CPEC timely completion will improve. The challenges from the outside have to be proactively met. As Sino-Pak ties strengthen, improving ties with the US in a fashion that serves Pakistan's interests is very vital. For the US, Kabul is the channel through which Pak-US relations can be reprimanded.

While keeping our defensive strong and impermeable, the desire to configure peaceful relations with India must be ensured. This is also quite significant and important for its prestige worldwide. A clear demonstration of this policy can be seen in the recent crisis between India and Pakistan. The Indian air attack on Pakistan, an aggressive escalation, was effectively and promptly responded by Pakistan by downing the Indian jets. As a country desiring peaceful and amicable relations, Pakistan returned the Indian pilot in a unilateral move. Leading on the path of peaceful relations with India, Kartarpur Corridor is a step towards this very direction.

CPEC is slowly but gradually transforming the economic landscape of Pakistan and we need to speed up this process. Several areas are to be additionally focused on including:

Firstly, there is a dire need to analyze projects launched under the umbrella of CPEC on pragmatic grounds and terms and conditions should be negotiated more diligently for attracting foreign direct investments (FDI). Secondly, for attracting huge sums of investments especially from China companies are advised to prefer equity rights in several projects not only to reduce our exposure but also to ensure better structure for eliminating the possibility of system gaming. Thirdly, there is a requirement not only to identify and engage Chinese enterprises in the sunset industries proactively but also to relocate these industries to Pakistan through Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Fourthly, there is immense potential in the Gwadar Port and its not just meant to be energy transshipment Centre but also has the capability to be a petrochemical complex. There is a strong possibility of it as Saudi Arabia has already shown its intent and interest to set up refineries there. Fifthly, the original plan needs to be revised to parallel Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline with a plan to link Gwadar through oil pipeline. Sixthly, as this world is based on knowledge and without high-tech development it is unthinkable to make real progress in the comity of states around the world. However, it is imperative speed up the process of accommodating software industries into the SEZs through collaboration with Chinese counterparts without wasting any time. For this objective to be achieved, less resources in money and material are required than bricks and mortar. Lastly, we have a readily available human resource but it needs to be educated and trained properly to meet international standards. This provides a solution for redressing the grievances of local populations that feel deprived of the economic fruits of CPEC. By developing the skills required to be employed in various projects of CPEC, a high level of employment by the locals will be ensured, hence resulting into high approval for the projects of CPEC.

It is highly advisable to attract investments from multiplicity of state actors in CPEC related projects to fend off concerns of major powers such as the US. Countries from around the globe are already showing increasing interest. A statement from the US diplomat recently agreeing that economics play a vital role in the contemporary world, and enhancing business ties between the US and Pakistan have far greater implications is a very welcoming and positive omen for Pak-US ties in the better direction. Similar

positive response has been received from Germany since operations have started in Pakistan regarding CPEC projects.

5. CONCLUSION

The results derived from the analysis aids in verifying all the proposed hypotheses to visualize the challenges of CPEC through the lens of public opinion. The study concludes that there are various challenges both from within and outside the country that are obstructing the smooth sailing of CPEC projects but internal issues are more threatening and impactful, hence require pragmatic response. A high level of awareness has been found among the masses especially the adults. Public (local people) concerns reflected through protests and violence activities against Chinese nationals working in Pakistan are alarming signs that this once in a lifetime opportunity in the shape of CPEC might turn into a nightmare if people (local people) concerns are not addressed properly and timely fashion. This study confirms the validity and arguments of almost all the authors enlisted in the literature review e.g. Abbas et al (Abbas, S., Shouping, L., Sidra, F., & Sharif, 2018), Ahmer (Ahmar, 2014), Ahmad and Hong (Ahmad, Riaz & Mi, 2017), Idrees et al (Idrees, R. Q., Shapiee, R., Ahamat, H., & Hanwei, 2018), Imtiaz et al (Imtiaz, Salman, Kamal, 2016) and Mirza et al (RafiaIqtadar Mirza, Kiran Azeem, Nudrat Waheed, 2017) etc. Therefore, the CPEC that is dubbed as a “Game Changer” is threatened both from the inside and outside. Challenges from outside confirms the role of India in obstructing the progress of CPEC and also amplifying the impact of other barriers in the way of CPEC. Regarding future research, this study offers new avenues by providing food for thought over several other related aspects of this study. Hence, presuming this study as a base line others might be enticed to conduct research on the challenges the CPEC is confronted with both internally and externally through secondary data. This study also recommends that timely and speedy completion of CPEC projects is mandatory and the simplest and the most effective remedy to get rid of the hurdles in the way of CPEC. Baluchistan, the least developed province of the country, is going through social and economic transformation and voices of discontent are a common feature of this process and speedy completion of the projects would help addressing the grievances of the local people, hence, eliminating the barriers to the successful completion of CPEC.

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