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An Assessment Of Economic-Security Of CPEC Project: Risk Factors And Strategic Advantages

Dr. Maryam Azam^{1*}, Dr. Sadia Mahmood Falki²

^{1*}Assistant Professor in the department of International Relations, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore

²Assistant Professor in the department of Political Science, Lahore College for Women University, Lahore

Abstract

This study frames that connectivity has always been a symbol of prosperity and development. States seek networking to achieve socio-economic, political and strategic objectives. Pakistan is situated at the pivot of Asia which provides main choke point of connecting states through land and maritime corridor. In this context, China-Pakistan economic corridor is a flagship project in transforming Pakistan's economic conditions and her placement in the geopolitics of the region. Therefore, CPEC project has economic, security and political implications for Pakistan. In the contemporary debates, the concept of security has a wider scope which incorporates the traditional defense related issues along with political, economic, human and environmental domains. This qualitative research intends to develop a risk and cost benefit analysis by analyzing CPEC project in the framework of economic security.

Key Words: CPEC, Pakistan, Economic nexus, national security, China

Introduction: A Contextual Analysis of Economic Security

Economy is an integral part of national security domain. In the contemporary debates of political and international relations studies, the economic element within the security framework of the state has taken a center stage because of its direct relationship with development, defense, communications, energy, transport and the overall status of the society and the power of the state (Munteanub, 2015). In addition, the concept of economic security is mostly defined in relation to the state for which it is defined, the objectives of the state and the geographical location. For instance, European Union defines economic security with reference to unification with the global economic system, United States refers economic security as an act of consolidating financial and global economic rules and China defines economic security in terms of outsourcing their massive domestic production and creating connectivity of China across regions. Moreover, strategic, global economic and political trends also contribute in a multifaceted relationship between economy and security (Lucia Retter, 2020). Therefore, economy has an associated relationship with security and acts as an essential component of state craft and national security. (Mihail Nikolaevich Dudin, 2018) explained that economic security acts as a system as it provides a direction to development in the state and its global competitiveness. Therefore, economic security is mostly measured through availability of funds and the capacity to generate funds from external sources, a stable institutional and structural foundations within the state, a viable mechanism to foster economic relations with other states, development of industry, trade and commercial activities along with increasing avenues of job and financial opportunities. (ANDRUSEAC, 2015) has explained economic security through the lens of international relations paradigm which provides an insight that economic security has taken a central position in realist, liberalist, neoliberalist and rationalist traditions. Realist have acknowledged the power of economic control and its relevance in inter-state relations whereas liberalist focused on interdependence and globalist perspective to avoid any coercion between the states. In addition, rationalist focused on a radical economic change across the world. These perspectives comprehend the significance of economy within the state apparatus and across the inter-state relations. Another concept which emphasized on economic security is globalization. Liberalist supports intense globalization unlike the mercantilist perspective who support less globalization to attain economic security. In this context, Chinese strategy has been unique since the post-cold war era in a sense that China has opted a liberalist posture in its foreign policy by reviving the concept of old silk route by materializing it in the form of Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) whereas taking a state controlled posture at the domestic level. Consequently, CPEC is one of the major projects within BRI through which China intends to create a corridor of connectivity and interdependence across regions. Within this framework Barry Buzan's rethinking security strategy explains a wider security approach that incorporates military domain of the security with all sectors of the state including human, political, economic, societal and environmental security. In addition, it also highlights that states shift their priorities and resources to deal with an essential issue (Buzan, 1997). In this context, economic security is one such domain where China has prioritized its policy focus particularly by expanding her economic activities across the Indo-Pacific region. In this perspective, CPEC provides immense geopolitical and economic benefit to China and Pakistan as well. China has securitized the CPEC project within BRI which provides an insight that Gwadar and the CPEC route is a main pearl in Chinese geopolitical strategy. Besides this, within the realm of security, economic risk factors are also linked with the sensitivities of national security, particularly due to globalization issues pertaining to critical sectors, infrastructure, communications and strategic priorities can threaten the national security. In this context, Rand corporation explained the notion of risk vectors which illustrates the relationship of economic variable and security which mainly includes dependence on supplier, socio-economic inequalities,

ownership and governance-related issues. In case of Pakistan, this proposition is relevant due to the fact that CPEC has an economic as well as security compulsions for Pakistan. Consequently, risk analysis can be an appropriate calculus to comprehend the political, economic, strategic and security related sensitivities associated with the CPEC project for Pakistan. Political risk refers to the political consequences on some specific firm, organization or any project resulting in the change in investment and expected profits (Fitzpatrick, 1983, p. 249). Political risk analysis includes internal actions of the government along with environmental factors that can be an impediment in the foreign investment and activities of the state (Vitale, 2014, p. 3). Therefore, risk embodies uncertainty within and around the system which may affect the intended outcomes of a particular issue or project. In case of CPEC project, the notion of risk incorporates a set of socio-political, local, economic and geostrategic risks which needs to be addressed by the government at the internal and external level.

Objectives of the Study

1. To epitomize the connection between economic security and strategic engagement under CPEC.
2. To evaluate the global and regional restraints for peripheral state to preserve economic security.
3. To examine the political implications of CPEC for Pakistan

In this perspective, following research questions address the main benefits and risks to Pakistan associated with CPEC within the framework of economic security.

- Why did economic security reciprocate strategic engagements under CPEC?
- How were the interests of peripheral state to seek economic security under CPEC undermined by global and regional constraints?
- How did CPEC create new sources of political conflict while advancing politics of infrastructure and regionalism in Pakistan?

Discussion and Results

• Economic and Strategic Engagement in CPEC

The bilateral nature of CPEC under BRI emerged as shifting economic dynamics of Asia with increased competition among global and regional powers. The rising economic power of China in post-cold war era claimed constructive engagements with Eurasian and African regions pursuing non-interventionism and territorial integrity. Particularly, Xi Jinping's grand strategy of global outreach signifies that connectivity corridors have been a main element to practically manifest Chinese power. The series of projects under CPEC were envisioned to connect strong industrialized Pakistan with China through strategic trans-national economic corridor. In this connection approximately, more than \$40 billion were invested in numerous projects related to energy and transportation. Pakistan could enhance the capacity of energy sector for the promotion of cluster industries. Apart from skilled labor force, strategic partnership between both the states facilitated an opportunity to boost endogenous economic growth in Pakistan based on the phenomenon of R&D for accelerating research and development (Rehman, 2018).

Technological advancement has been a significant element in Pakistan China cooperation. For example, Pakistan-China joint ventures for JF Thunder 17 fighter planes. Only capital investments were not sufficient rather more technological innovation was necessary for sustainable economic growth. Then spill-over effects could augment the potential of national firms. In order to ensure long-standing joint collaborations, Pakistan provided eight thousand guards for the safety of Chinese engineers working under various projects in different areas. Mutual coordination between Chinese and Pakistani engineers also contributed to infrastructural development in Pakistan to extend digital technology in naval warships, fiber optics and satellites. Furthermore, Chinese leadership reiterated that globalization was an irreversible process based on the paradigm of global connectivity. Shared economic interests would consolidate the states for peaceful coexistence. As during last decade Asia's share in global GDP increased from 23 percent to 39 percent. The fruits of BRI trickled down to regional level manifesting Chinese inclusive approach largely for developing states. All CPEC projects in energy and transportation sectors are a win-win situation for both the states principally for Pakistan to generate knowledge-based industrial development. Projects¹ related to transportation included various railway tracks and motorways. Moreover, during the last six years the growth increased four percent to 5.8 percent in Pakistan before Covid-19. Henceforth the establishment of 'Special Economic Zones' would be the next benchmark for Pakistan to connect with Central Asia (Rahman, 2018). On the other hand, Pakistan could also get technical assistance for telecommunication through (AI) artificial intelligence, water security and modern irrigation. Similarly, cooperation in the generation of solar energy would reduce the cost of production as compared to hydro power generation during upcoming years.

Ostensibly, China-Pakistan increasing economic cooperation in terms of the construction of Gwadar Port became more pronounced to explore new avenues of trade in the region. It is the largest deep-water sea port in the world that became functional this year. Gwadar port is directly linked with the economic and maritime security of Pakistan for a number of reasons. It is the nerve center of China Pakistan economic corridor project which would act as a transit corridor for Chinese cargos as it connects Baluchistan with the Xinjiang's region of China. In addition, Gwadar is just 609 km away from strait of Hormuz where worth 17 billion barrels of crude oil passes daily (www.thenews.com.pk, 2015). Moreover, Gwadar and Karachi port can act as an economic gateway for Central Asian States and Afghanistan as it can provide a shortest route to international

¹ Greater Peshawar Mass Transit Project, 82 kilometers long Swat Expressway, Karachi Port Development Project, 105 kilometers long Thar-Chor Railway Line, 22 kilometers Karachi Railway Line, Ketu Bandar Port Development Project and Karachi-Quetta-Chaman Motorway.

sea lanes. Moreover, trading from Gwadar will reduce 50 percent of her overall distance as compared to its distance from Iran. From the past few years, Pakistan's bilateral engagements with CARs state have been significantly increased which can further have strengthened economic and strategic partnership of Pakistan and CAR states. Following table illustrates the distance of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with Pakistani ports as compared to Iran, which signifies the role of CPEC and its connection with CARs (Syed, 2020, pp. 73-76).

Table I: A comparison of CAR and Afghanistan distance from Karachi, Gwadar and Iran

Central Asian States	Distance from Karachi	Distance from Gwadar	Distance from Iran
Uzbekistan	2000 km	2598 km	4800 km
Tajikistan	1607 km	1732 km	1738 km
Afghanistan	1011 km	1099 km	1314 km

Source: (www.hellenicshippingnews.com, 2021)

Strategic partnership ranged from the sale of weapons to the modern aircrafts enhanced the military capability against India which has been the traditional rival to Pakistan's security and stability. Simultaneously India, seeking her hegemonic designs in South Asian region had a long history of bitter relations and border clashes with China. Recently the clash over Ladakh between China and India in June 2020 reinforced the need for broad-based military cooperation between Pakistan and China in future. In addition to it CPEC was viewed as alternating to US financial and military assistance to Pakistan. Along with huge investments, China also facilitated for Afghan Peace Process in order to make the benefits of CPEC to Afghan region. China remained concerned about the continuity of stable political government in Pakistan to maintain the momentum of CPEC projects. As far as the strategic alignment between Pakistan and China was concerned, the Chinese leadership envisaged Pakistan as a 'model friend' to magnify China's global image (Schwemlein, 2019). In a similar way Pakistan perceived to enhance its economic potential for countervailing security threats from neighboring states largely India. CPEC also reflects China's 'Blue Ocean Strategy' which made Pakistan to move towards well-equipped naval force, industrial agglomerations and economies of scales. In January 2020, Pakistan and China conducted its sixth bilateral naval drill in the north Arabian sea, code-named as Sea Guardian 2020 (www.nation.com.pk, 2020), that not only symbolizes the tactical and operational capabilities of both the states in maritime security but also symbolizes the geopolitical placement of China and Pakistan in the Indian Ocean region.

• Global and Regional Constraints

Peripheral states like Pakistan faced challenges to continue with CPEC due to competing interests of major powers in the international arena. Pakistan's pro-US policy since the very beginning remained a stumbling block to smoothly carry on CPEC projects. As US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during 2018 expressed, "There was no reason for US to support an IMF bailout package to Pakistan for paying off Chinese loans." Though civil and military leadership in Pakistan determined that CPEC was key factor to their vision but economic vulnerabilities and frontline role in war on terror pressurized them to put distance with China. The IMF report 2018 shared statistics about the growth for 5.6% but Pakistan's economy became import-driven and she needed a lot more finances to fulfill her IMF obligations. This situation would lead to increase in debt-servicing up-to \$45billions in next five years. According to IMF's assessments BRI projects would make Pakistan a satellite state to China. Moreover, US could use influence not only in international financial institutions but also other global forums like Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to disrupt CPEC projects.

Then Indian factor in the South Asian region impeded CPEC as both Pakistan and India have the history of bitter relations. However, American policy to enlarge the role of India in Afghan issue and more considerably to contain China under Quad (alliance of four states including US, India, Australia and Japan) became detrimental for economic interest of Pakistan. Although the current situation led Pakistan to revitalize diplomatic ties with Russia, Turkey and Iran but simultaneously India aggravated the problems for both Pakistan and China. India took the position that CPEC crossed "disputed territory" which would be condemned by international community. Extensively Indian-centric US policy did not contribute to "Afghan Peace Process". It caused destabilization in this region. Above and beyond, "Indo-Pacific Strategy"² by US to show resistance for Chinese stakeholders in this region has far reaching implications for Pakistan. There is a huge investment by US (approximately \$940billion) in Indo-Pacific states which could challenge Chinese corporate interests. Then Iran's Chabahar corridor could make Iran as a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asian states. It's an important concern for Pakistan government due to increasing Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (\$600 billion) in Iran. In fact, global antagonism between US and China and regional dynamics of neighboring states remained problematic for Pakistan (Tariq, 2019).

There is another perception about CPEC that Chinese companies would have been extending their influence in business sector to gain their imperial interests. The report of China Development Bank 2017 was leaked by some Pakistani private media to highlight the long term planning of Chinese enterprises to establish their stake in all industrial and agricultural sectors. Moreover, the induction of Chinese workers in different institutions also frustrated the indigenous people. As few years back the abduction of Chinese massage workers in Pakistan and trafficking of Pakistani women by Chinese nationals created a clash between the governments of both the states.

Furthermore, mistrust among the political forces and institutions inside Pakistan also posed challenges to CPEC projects. In 2015 the governor State Bank Ashraf Mohammad Wathra showed his concerns over debt implications under these projects.

² Strategy expressed under Trump administration in 2018 as "an ironclad and enduring commitment" by US for economy, governance and security in Pacific region and Indian continent.

Then civil-military strife largely during Nawaz government 2013 onwards generated various controversies. It led military to show its formal presence in all CPEC related negotiations with Chinese government. In addition to it some of the projects were also criticized like coal-power plants in Sahiwal and Port-Qasim due to their possible outcomes in future. It was highlighted that coal-power generation was an outdated technology and it could dangerously affect the under-ground water table in these areas. Side by side the local population in Balochistan remained apprehensive about the demographic disequilibrium in the province which has already been a victim of ethnic discord between Balochis and Pashtuns. After CPEC projects their fears about the influx of outsiders including Chinese were intensified (Small, 2020).

• **Politics of infrastructure and regionalism in Pakistan**

The CPEC projects have two dimensions for Pakistani state; first is the strategic aspect which as per 'Path dependence paradigm' needs more centralized planning and incorporation of Central state thesis and national security state discourses. The second facet is federal consensus over CPEC and economic sharing which requires devolution of power to the provinces and affirmation of provincial autonomy while viewing constituent units as stake holders of Pakistani federation. These both processes and relevant mechanisms inevitably advance towards opposite directions. The key political challenge for Pakistani state is to build federal consensus over the strategic, administrative, political and economic aspects of these projects as world views of people at the helm of affair at federal level and indigenous population of smaller provinces like Balochistan and KPK are quite divergent. Moreover, there is lack of transparency on the part of federal government regarding crucial details of projects as no vital policy document has been public so far. Secondly, handling of CPEC project by Pakistani government led to shrink the spaces for political dissent as under its defensive strategy, debate and apprehensions are generally suppressed by repeated assertion that 'an enemy of CPEC is enemy of Pakistan' (Dawn, July 14, 2017).

Pakistani elite generally overlooks the fact that from Chinese world view, security and economic strategies are closely entangled which inevitably brings change into one area by advances in other sector. Chinese paradigm of security through economic development stresses the need to ensure certain level of internal stability in Pakistan which is expected to bring foreseeable stability in Western periphery of China while expanding its reach towards Central Asia and Middle East through an integrated South Asian infrastructure. Pakistani policy makers need to understand that China's investment in economic corridor is for the pursuance of clear strategic goals and economic pluses for Pakistan are not without conditions. Through CPEC projects, Pakistan will have to be part of that strategic design of China in the region which certainly is not without US's annoyance. Pakistan's ambiguous policy of balancing US and China and at once participating into their strategic designs for South Asia is making Pakistan's policy flawed where Pakistani elite is neither set to break its links from the baggage of past associations nor fully ready to head towards new strategic avenues. Moreover in past, some of the strategic and foreign policy decisions of Pakistani state like its involvement in proxy war in Afghanistan during Cold War and War on Terror brought consequences for KPK, FATA and Balochistan³. In a similar manner, China's strategic oriented investment can be conflicting to the ground realities of these provinces.

The majority of population of Pakistan has generally a favorable view of China⁴ however still there are concerns regarding China have alleged expansion through its investment in infrastructure. The Chinese economic ventures in Pakistan are part of its broader goal of constructing an integrated South Asian infrastructure to connect the interior areas of the China to Indian Ocean. In case of Pakistan from a historical perspective, development of infrastructure and nation building processes are closely tied as it led to establish the role of Pakistani state as central planning authority. Central governments in Pakistan through their infrastructure projects attempted to create national integrated space (Hameed, 2018: 4). The availability of large funds by International institutions like World Bank, aid and assistance by some of the countries primarily in reciprocity of Pakistan's strategic support to their foreign policy goals in South Asia expanded the 'infrastructural production of state space'⁵ (Akhter, 2015: 861). The nation building process by Central state was not viewed by regional elite and groups as an inclusive regime which led to shape alternative conceptualization of nationhood of various ethnic identities. The state centric development approach in Pakistan is one of the underlying reasons of the fact that projects of national importance (for instance Kalabagh Dam) become a source of contention rather than consensus. The CPEC projects are reiterating the legitimization of Central state thesis in Pakistan as it leads to encourage encroachment of federal government into provincial matters in the name of national development. Furthermore, under physical and institutional emerging infrastructure mechanisms under CPEC, flow of ideas, information, culture and people have been facilitated which somehow created concerns regarding hegemonic project of nation building of Pakistani state as well as potential ascendancy of China's narrative of development at the cost of local livelihood and ethos.⁶

The uneven economic development in the areas comprising Pakistani federation led to manifestation of regional inequalities while stimulating inter and intra-provincial discord. For most years of Pakistani federation, fiscal apprehensions and related issues manifested the direction of regional politics as economic disparities remained key driver of assertions of ethnic identities

³ The leader of Baloch Republican party (BRP), Barhamdagh Bugti while demanding a UN referendum for deciding the future of Balochistan alleged that funds & military equipment obtained by Pakistan from Western countries for combating terrorism are used against democratic struggle of Baloch people. For further details, see, (Pakistan & China: Dark Corridor, 2015)

⁴ Pew Research Centre reported that Pakistan is one of four countries (along with Russian, Ghana & Malaysia) who have favorable views regarding China. Additionally, 53 % of Pakistani believe that that China would eventually a leading power (Pew, 2015)

and centrifugal tendencies. The historical development of Baloch insurgency is attributed to the relative deprivation of Baloch ethnic group and underdevelopment in the Province. However, the recent feelings of Baloch resistance are primarily in response to Central state led massive developmental projects under CPEC. In the backdrop of previous ambitious extractive policy of Pakistani state leading to exploitation of natural resources of the province, Baloch nationalist forces used to look at these mega-projects with suspicion and outright rejected Central state led infrastructure development. The Baloch nationalists while looking at construction of Gwadar port as their key concern in this regard, are of the view that these projects are just another means of exploiting Baloch wealth. These developmental projects neither provided them their due share nor empowered indigenous population as stake holders of these agreements. The indigenous people are concerned about their declining control over the resources of their provinces due to influx to non-Baloch population and enhanced national interests of both China and Pakistan. Furthermore, the militant and extremist tendencies of Baloch nationalist and Islamist groups in Balochistan provide less room for execution of CPEC projects at operational level. Most of these projects are highly centralized and lack the provincial involvement which makes Balochistan government and elite less interested to address the issue of militant tendencies.

The apparent opposition to the CPEC projects from smaller provinces are due to the ambiguous approach of federal governments as it developed the impression that the design of these projects are tilted towards larger and comparatively developed provinces of Punjab and Sindh. The already existed Centre-provincial friction is augmented on the route controversy as maps of the itineraries are not officially disclosed yet. However, vague explanations and statements through press releases regarding the potential route lessened the prospects for federal consensus over the CPEC projects. Provincial elites especially from Balochistan are speculating that focus of federal government from original Western route has been shifted to Eastern route which mostly passes through Central Punjab. The regional elite alleged that Eastern route will bypass various districts of Balochistan while connecting Gwadar to Karachi, passing through interior Sindh, southern, central and northern part of Punjab.^{*7} The federal government tried to address the issue while providing that Eastern route is prioritized due to its pre-existing infrastructures and satisfactory security conditions (Mengal, 2016, pp.24-5). However, prioritization of Pakistani government Eastern route over Western route is often countered with certain facts by regional elite and academic in Balochistan^{*8}. There were originally three routes i.e. Western, Eastern & Central & it was provided that all three were built simultaneously however statistical data contradicted the earlier claims of federal government. As per the original plan, by constructing roads & railway links, Gwadar was supposed to be connected to Kashgar (Western China) while passing through several southern & western districts of Balochistan & certain part of South Punjab. However later, under various governments, Centre changed its position multiple times (Mengal, S., 2016).

Conclusion

CPEC, despite its vigorous projection as a game changer project for Pakistan to empower economically and strategically, is a hub of conflict and controversies. There are plenty of inter-connected external and internal dynamics driving these disagreements at various level of state decision making. The key challenge is operationally connectivity to secure economic and strategic advantages for Pakistani state in regional milieu and at the same time devolving these developmental pluses to sub-national governments and indigenous populations while taking them onboard. There is a need to comprehend that development and innovation begins at home as external investment can only aid it. The successful completion of CPEC projects depends upon internal cohesion of Pakistani state as well as careful examination of its diplomatic endeavors to obtain as much as possible support from regional scenario to counter anti-CPEC chronicles. In Pakistan mainly three actors are directly and indirectly involved in CPEC; political parties, indigenous population of provinces and military-led Establishment. These actors while having divergent stand views regarding CPEC led potential development proceed with their organizational, community and institutional interests. This affects CPEC design and related projects as partisan, ethnic, provincial and institutional interests overshadow the rationality of policies. Pakistani state needs to maintain balance between its strategic goals (largely focus on national security state thesis) and its federal certainties (primarily requires constitutionalism and devolution of powers especially in fiscal and administrative arena).

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^{*7} From Islamabad onwards, this route will connect to Haripur, Abbottabad, Mansehra districts & Hazara division of KPK. This part of route will proceed through Muzaffarabad; the capital of Azad Jammu & Kashmir & after passing through Diamer & Gilgit areas will reach to Hunjra. This route will be connected to Taxila via Peshawar & then Torkhum while connecting Eastern route to Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Regional connectivity will further enhanced by aligning Eastern route to India through Hyderabad-Mirpurkhas-Khokhrapar-Zero point & Wagha boarder Lahore. See for the Western route; Sial, Safdar. (2014). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: An Assessment of Potential Threats and Constraints. Conflict and Peace Studies, Vol.6, No.2, p. 24.

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