

CPEC: A BALOCH PERSPECTIVE

M. Usman A. Siddiqi *
Hanif Ullah Sajid **

***Abstract:** China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a multibillion dollar project – has undoubtedly heralded a new strategic partnership between Pakistan and China – the countries that already have progressively cultivated an all-weather alliance of fraternity since their inceptions and have always apprehended and shouldered each other's core interests. CPEC aims to connect economic agents along the proposed territory through railroads, highways, and ports, envisioning specialized institutions and structures, treaties, laws, and trade and visa agreements to govern trade in the area. While the project is meant to serve economic purposes, it also entails political, strategic, and even social implications for the region. Where economic, political, and strategic meta-narratives – accounting for global, regional, and national perspectives on the CPEC – are significant, the popular perspective is no less important, if not more. Gwader, Balochistan, is the most important point along the CPEC, because it is the point to which CPEC aims to connect other areas and the very reason CPEC has been envisioned. The paper, therefore, aims at exploring the the popular perspective of the people of Balochistan. The paper is a qualitative inquiry through iterative thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews of the participants.*

Keywords: CPEC, Baloch perspectives, meta-narratives, provincial harmony, political perspective of CPEC

Introduction

Deteriorated centre-province relation, stagnated developmental, and disintegrated internal situation of Baluchistan has been in limelight since the inception of Pakistan. However, with the recent initiation of China Pakistan Economic Corridor, – a flagship project of Chian's 'One Belt, One Road Policy'– once again Baluchistan is making headlines regarding the ex ante estimates of success of the said project within the broader context of an overall law and order situation in the province, federal government's simultaneous wink and nod and or stepping back policy statements (regarding the routes and sub-projects of CPEC), and the success ratio of past projects initiated in and for Balochistan.

In general, in Pakistan, there is a popular perception that the CPEC project is going to be a game changer not only for the settled and developed areas of Pakistan, but it is also going to connect and bring forth the backward areas especially that of Baluchistan into the mainstream economic and developmental activities. Now, the question of concern is that how the people of Baluchistan perceive this project. Do they perceive it as project like its predecessor projects that initiated with great zeal and zest and lost its success tune with the passage of time without achieving the expected outcomes? What are their reservations about the project and the route of the project? Do they have any reservations about the projects? If yes, then according to them how these reservations could be addressed? What prospects and Challenges do they anticipate in the completion of the project? Do they have any suggestions for the project to materialize and deliver? These are the main questions which this paper will try to answer and explain.

Methodology

As the study deals with current and an ongoing project, therefore, iterative strategy of inquiry is used in this research. Semi-structured interviews (telephonic and face to face) and dual moderator focus group have been used a mode of data collection. To make the research reliable and valid, while collecting data, the following considerations were taken into account.

- ✓ Conducting the interviews in comfort places
- ✓ Tape recording the interviews with informed consent and prior permission
- ✓ In order to keep originality of the themes and meanings, providing copies of transcribed interviews to participants before running the analysis.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Super-ordinate Themes	Themes
Overall Perception about CPEC	Positive Overall
	Experiences of the Past Projects: Doubts and Fears
Reservations	Route Controversy

* Deputy Director, Centre of Excellence China Studies, and Faculty, Department of Political Science, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan (Email: usmansiddiqi@gcu.edu.pk).

** Visiting Faculty, Department of Political Science, GC University, Lahore, Pakistan.

	Other (Demographic) Concerns
Effects of CPEC Project on Balochistan	Cultural Exchange
	No Excuse for Conflicts
SUGGESTIONS:	Route Controversy and Information Dissemination
	Setting Priorities
	Maintaining Law and Order Situation
	Discourage <i>Sardari Nizam</i>
	Borders with Afghanistan should be sealed

Overall Perception about CPEC

Positive: Overall the project is perceived as an omen of peace and prosperity. The people of Balochistan think that as the central point i.e., Gwader is located in Balochitan, therefore, it goes without saying that the project will bring development and peace to the land, and happiness to a common person. The use of the positive collocates such as symbol of happiness and hope during the interview and focus group is a testimony to the fact. As a resident of Chaghi says, "CPEC is a great step towards progress and development. We have high hopes attached to it because the ultimate beneficiaries of the project are going to be the local people of Balochistan."¹ In a short, all else equal, the project in itself is perceived positively by the locales of Balochistan.

Experiences of the Past Projects: Doubts and Fears: Although the people of Balochistan at most seem positive about success of the project and the hopes connected to it, but experiences in the past regarding projects of development and prosperity such Reko Diq and Saindak Copper Gold project which they think yielded no fruits for the Baloch people haunt and fell them into somewhat suspicion about success of the CPEC project as well. As a resident of Chaghi says, "I belong to Chaghi where there is Reko Diq and Saindak Copper Gold project. Living in Changi, we have not got any benefit from these projects yet. Then how we can expect that CPEC would benefit the people of Balochistan?"²

But the feelings and fears are somewhat mixed; most of the people think that as this time the project is of strategic, economic and political importance not only for Pakistan but for the region as whole and especially for China and that the army and political leadership of Pakistan seems to be on one page regarding the project and some vigorous steps have been taken to appease the Baloch people and negotiations made with Baloch separatists, hence, the project seems and can be a success story.

Reservations

Though the project is perceived as a 'game changer' and 'fate changer' for Balochistan, but still the people have some reservations about the project and interestingly these reservations are traced back to the controversial and confused policy statements regarding the project issued by the ruling party i.e., Pakistan Muslim League (N) from time to time. Some of these reservations are discussed here.

Route Controversy: Route controversy has made the headlines for the last one year the day memorandum of understanding was signed between the Prime Minister of Pakistan and Chinese Premier in Islamabad on April 23, 2015. The people of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa claim that the original route of CPEC was western route that for most of its portion passes through the underdeveloped areas of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but later on that route was manipulated by the ruling party – PML (N) – and was planned to be changed with the eastern route that passes through Punjab for most of its portion. So the policies of PML (N) seem Punjab centered rather than that of national integration. If the Eastern route is chosen, then it will benefit Punjab, and if the Eastern route is opted then it will bring forth the underdeveloped of Balochistan and KPK into the mainstream economic activities and infrastructural development. Therefore, any change in the original route may cause severe anti-centre sentiments which may increase the social unrest in Balochistan and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa. As a resident of Dera Murad Jamali says, "I fear that somewhere in the middle of constructing China-Pakistan Economic Corridor we may not divide and disintegrate the nation."³

Similarly, the people of Balochistan are of the opinion that the bad law and order situation along the western route is coined as a reason for changing the route. If it is so, then what the government is doing. Isn't it duty of the government to establish its writ through maintaining law and order situation? As a resident of Ziarat says, "Before CPEC, the government duty is to maintain law and order. If the government herself is unable to make peace, then to whom the people of Balochistan should make a plea for peace."⁴

Other Concerns: As the people living in vicinity of Gwader port do not have enough capital to invest in business. Obviously, to investment in various projects in Gwader, people from other parts of country will rush into Gwader. This influx of people from outside into Gwader will push the locals into a subaltern rank making it difficult for them to live and compete. Ultimately, the locals will face economic frustration and unconsciously a sense of deprivation will be created.

Effects of CPEC Project on Balochistan

Cultural Exchange: The more the people get to know cultures of each other the more it becomes easier for them to live in a peaceful way. The CPEC project is a great project in sense that it will expose the rich culture of Balochistan to the people from outside of the province and county and provide a chance for the locals to know the cultures of other people. Hence, apart from economic and strategic gains, the project will bring Baluchistan's rich culture and traditions into the limelight. As a resident of Chaghi says, "CPEC is not a small project, it is an international project, and many great international actors are involved in it. So there are good and greater chances that the traditions and cultures of Baluchistan may expose to the world."⁵

Similarly, apart from cultural exchange, the people to people contact can be a great source for bridging the gap of misunderstandings between the people of Balochistan and other parts of Pakistan. Hence, the CPEC can be a great project in promoting national integrity.

No Excuse for Conflicts: People in Balochistan who are involved in criminal or militant activities are mostly the ones who are jobless, uneducated and hardly find their living. The CPEC, if gets materialized, can provide better chances for engagement of these people in various projects in Gwader, hence, reducing the chances of getting involved in criminal and militant activities. As a resident of Ziarat is of the opinion, "There are areas where there is no government writ, unemployment is at its peak, and literacy rate is very low; hence, in the absence of any other positive activity, internal conflicts are inevitable to occur. So if the people are involved in CPEC projects, this portion of society can be grown into vigilant citizens and the will be left with no reason for conflicts and militant activities."⁶

SUGGESTIONS

In order to material the CPEC and to present it as a success model it is binding that the government and all other stake holders may take some of the following suggestion into consideration.

Route Controversy and Information Dissemination: The route controversy should be resolved as soon as possible either through All Parties Conferences (APCs) or any other mechanism. Even if there is no controversy as the ruling party PML (N) claims, the government should make all its plans, budget, and all other related information regarding CPEC public. Moreover, the government needs to be clear in its plans and stance.

Setting Priorities: The government needs to set its priorities regarding various projects of CPEC. The projects which are beneficial to a specific area at the cost of other important projects should not be listed first. In this regard a resident of Ziarat says, "Merit wise, the project Orange Lahore does not fall anywhere in CPEC however still it is made a top priority project of CPEC."⁷

Maintaining Law and Order Situation: In order to materialize the CPEC, the government law and order agencies should work actively and efficiently. Moreover, special dialogue series and other mechanisms should be adopted towards Baloch separatist movement. Without maintaining law and order and making peace in Balochistan, no single seems succeeded. Ali from Killa Saifullah explains, "If a person is not able to run his shop, how a big project like CPEC can be succeed then. In other words, if the inhabitants of Balochistan cannot do their business in this volatile situation, how it is possible for the outsiders to do business."⁸ Therefore, it is imperative for the government should to focus on bringing peace to Balochistan through maintaining law and order situation.

Discourage Sardari Nizam: *Sardai Nizam* is a main barrier between the governed in Balochistan and the government of Pakistan. Almost on every occasion the ruling party in the central government for its own vested interests has tried to appease the *Sardars* and have considered demands of the *Sardars* as demands of the common people of Balochistan which is reality are not. The fruits of almost all developmental projects are reaped by the *Sardars* and are barley are reached to the lower strata. Similarly, these *Sardars* also exploit the grievances of the common people and try that the grievances may remain intact and not be addressed properly, so that they may use it for their own vested interests. Therefore, for overall betterment in Balochistan it is imperative for the central government to discourage *Sardari Nizam*, address grievances of the common person and involve him/her in the political process to come forward and become a part of the development and source of integrity.

Borders with Afghanistan should be sealed: Most of criminal and insurgent activities find their roots form across the border with Afghanistan. In order to bring peace to Balochistan and the CPEC to succeed the borders with Afghanistan should be sealed.

Conclusion

Although the people of Balochistan have many reservations about the project but still they perceive the project, with great hope, as symbol of peace, prosperity and national integrity. As for as the success of CPEC in the terms of expected outcomes is concerned, the people of Balochistan think that it can be properly materialized provided the government address

grievances of the locals regarding route controversy etc. Similarly, it is mandatory that all information should be made public and transparent, special quota for the locals of Gwader and Balochistan should be adopted at different positions in various projects of Gwader. In order to further ameliorate the chances of success, the government of Pakistan should take some long term steps such as discouraging *Sardari Nizam*, actively involving the law enforcement agencies in maintaining peace, and sealing border with Afghanistan etc. Similarly, at a grass root level, mass campaign for educating the children and equipping the youngsters with skills related to projects in CPEC etc should be initiated. In a nutshell, the project overall can be a success story provided the grievances of local people addressed and some long term steps taken.

References

¹ Interview with Kaleem (Resident of Chaghi, Balochistan), November 11, 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Interview with Riaz (Resident of Dera Murad Jamali, Balochistan), November 16, 2015.

⁴ Interview with Nisar (Resident of Ziarat, Balochistan), November 20, 2015.

⁵ Interview with Kaleem.

⁶ Interview with Nisar.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with Ali (Resident of Killa Saifullah, Balochistan), November 21, 2015.