

Impact of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) on Human Security and the Role of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)

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Abstract

Recent history of international relations suggests that economic interdependence largely contributes to the mitigation of the major political conflicts in the world. CPEC, a flagship mega development project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has not only initiated massive development projects in Pakistan, which will eventually help in socio-economic development of Pakistan but it will also ensure regional integration. Development of Pakistan through CPEC is desirably focused on a people centric growth model that primarily seeks to resolve the issues of human security. This paper seeks to establish the relationship between economic interdependence and regional integration with human security. Furthermore, this study looks into the role of Gilgit-Baltistan, a geographical lynchpin region, in making CPEC a successful developmental project. Findings of the study suggest that the viability and success of this mega project is highly dependent on the inclusiveness of projects in terms of engaging all stakeholders and ensuring human security in the region. The fruits of this mega project are expected to be positive. This is only possible if all the different dimensions of national security, i.e. social cohesion, economic development, and political stability are ensured by the state.

Key Words:

CPEC,
Economic
Interdependence,
Regional
Integration,
Human
Security,
Gilgit-Baltistan

Introduction

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is the gateway and lynchpin of the flagship project of one of the most ambitious geo-economic development initiatives in modern history. Geographically, GB is nestled between the border region that acts as a nexus between South Asia, South East Asia and Central Asia. GB, as the fulcrum point, acts as a land bridge between the East and the West, which might eventually help in forging future economic and political integration between the two ends. In this regard, geopolitical significance of GB is further enhanced as a result of China's

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giant economic regional integration project envisioned under President Xi Jinping's leadership. To understand this geo-economic initiative, it is important to know that China has for the last few years embarked on a grand program that envisages connecting Asia, Africa and Europe for greater market access and investment opportunities.

China's, *Yídài Yìlù* (One Belt, One Road) or as it is now known, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a series of projects linking new land and maritime trade routes with a vision of sharing the fruits of peace and development under its concept of a *Community of Common Destiny* (Zhang, 2018). BRI is an evolving process that is engaged in constructing a macro level imagined-community in search of common destiny and highly depends upon increase of economic interdependence and regional integration. This paper seeks to answer how the rise of economic interdependence under CPEC, a flagship project of BRI, contributes to resolving issues of human security in Pakistan and beyond. And, what will be the role of Gilgit-Baltistan a geographical lynchpin region in the transition stages of CPEC from actualization to realization. To explore the answers, this paper engaged in an in-depth review of literature on CPEC, government level multilateral talks and agreements between China-Pakistan and Central Asian republics. Significantly, this research review paper provides a road map to develop a research design for a more empirical research.

Belt and Road Initiative: Integrating World Economies in Asian Century

China is the second largest economy in the world and along with the other rising economies of Asia is set to overtake the West by the middle of this century (MacDonald & Lemco, 2011). A majority of economic and political analysts alike are of the view that the present century will be defined by the rise of Asia spurred on by the ascendancy of China. In addition, countries like South Korea, Burma, Japan, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam and others in the region are instrumental in soon turning Asia into the hub of global economy with China at the center. The twenty first century is thus being referred to as the *Asian Century*. A natural consequence of Asia's economic rise is that the region would need to engage in global governance issues more proactively (Asian Development Bank, 2011).

As the Chinese President Xi Jinping asserted at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2017, "Mankind has become a community of common destiny that one is inseparable from the other, and their interest is highly inter-mingled and inter-dependent" (Zhang, 2018). There is a growing realization amongst the more developed economies in the region that to achieve stability and prosperity there needs to be global peace and security. Security entails providing equal opportunities for the socio-economic and political development of the people. Inclusive growth would not only ensure the viability of development but

also the social and political tensions would be minimized which if left unchecked might threaten economic growth (ADB, 2011). As a development strategy, the BRI would give an opportunity to the less developed regions to integrate into the international economy. The major goals of BRI that have been identified are promoting coordination on policy; connectivity including infrastructure, transport, logistics, communications and energy interdependence; unconstrained trade i.e. areas of free trade, cooperation in customs etc.; financial integration comprised of establishing new development banks, internationalization of Reminbi; and people-to-people bonds like student exchange programs and tourism.

According to the Chinese government Action Plan of March 2015, it is envisioned that the BRI would connect more than 65 countries including ‘Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean’ (Pantucci & Lain, 2016). In a number of countries along the BRI the number of people living in poverty is still high (PovcalNet, 2018; Ruta, 2018). The success of the BRI will help the populations in these countries develop economically and bring more people out of poverty. Trade opportunities in these and other countries are severely curtailed due to inadequate infrastructure amongst other issues (Ruta, 2018). It will connect six different regions through economic corridors out of which the CPEC and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) are the most significant projects, as these are expected to supply energy to the provinces of Xinjiang and Yunnan respectively. Domestically, through this initiative, China seeks to address its interregional economic imbalances. It is also linked to China’s foreign policy refocus on its peripheral countries in the West or what is called the *Euroasian pivot* (Pantucci & Lain, 2016). One of the key findings of the IFF China Report (2018) surveying central banks of participating countries shows that 92 percent of the respondents are hopeful that the BRI would boost domestic growth in the next five years (Jizhong & Jeffery, 2018). Even leaders around the world agree that the Chinese initiative has been successful in changing the global economic as well as the political dynamics (Jincui & Haoyuan, 2018).

Human Security a Modern Concept of National Security and Pakistan

The focus of national security is being gradually expanded from the traditional state-centric concept to a more people centric approach referred to as human security (Newman, 2010; Tsai, 2009). Still being one the most important actors in international politics, the nation state and the protection of its territory and the existence and maintenance of its national sovereignty is an important element of security. Yet, in an increasingly globalized world, the threats to the state and its citizens call for the adoption of a more people centric security concept. Thus,

national security encompasses human security as well, which includes the protection of people from the threats of *disease, hunger, unemployment, political repression and environmental degradation* (Newman, 2010; Tsai, 2009). The concept of modern security, therefore, is more complex and comprises of the development of the various aspects of social life including the *economy, politics, health, education, culture, ecology*, and *military affairs* of a state (Grizold, 1994; Sorensen, 1990; Tsai, 2009).

There is a growing realization globally, as well as in Pakistan that, in the rapidly changing dynamics of global politics, the aspects of national security and political economy are diametrically interwoven. Even the Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa, is of the view that owing to its weak economic conditions, Pakistan has had to allow concession on its foreign policy which in turn eventually impacts the national security as well (Abi-Habib, 2018; APP, 2017). Pakistan needs a resilient economy to ensure its national security in the true sense. The strength of the country's political stability, economic efficiency and social harmony in addition to its military prowess will help it prosper in an increasingly globalized world (Krepon & Stolar, 2007).

CPEC, Pakistan and GB

As mentioned earlier, GB is the gateway of CPEC which will open a sea passage for Xinjiang, a western province of China through the Gwadar port located at the Indian Ocean in the south of Pakistan. China wants to promote economic development, and social and political stability in South Xinjiang which is lagging behind the more developed provinces in the East. This will not only benefit China but will help Pakistan overcome economic and other developmental challenges currently facing the country. CPEC is the point where the notion of revival of ancient silk route germinates. CPEC is also a connecting knot of major programs of the BRI, which portrays a broader image of the Silk Road Economic Belt vis-à-vis the 21st century Maritime Silk Road which converge here. The concept of CPEC developed in 2013 with the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Pakistan. He proposed to strengthen cooperation between China and Pakistan in various dimensions including infrastructure development and energy. The deal initially signed was worth US \$46 billion in 2015 which has now reached the worth of US \$62 billion.

According to Perroux, the pioneer of the Growth Pole Theory which is a regional development theory, "The bitter truth is this: growth does not appear everywhere at the same time: it becomes manifest at points or poles of growth, with variable intensity; it spreads through different channels, with variable terminal effects on the whole of the economy" (Wojnicka-Sycz, 2013). The same study also notes that in 1958 Albert Hirschman suggested that "an economy to lift itself to higher income levels should first develop within itself one or several

regional centers of economic strength.” The rationale behind dividing CPEC into core and radiation areas thus follows this logic. The areas in both China and Pakistan along the proposed route have been divided into cores and other nodes to develop poles of growth that will help the other regions grow.

It is expected that the CPEC would usher in the era of economic prosperity that has been eluding Pakistan for a long time now. Chronic energy shortages for the last several years coupled with inefficient institutions, corrupt governance practices, and the deteriorated security situation have had a negative impact on the economy and socio-political stability in the country. Although this is in general true for the whole country, Gilgit-Baltistan, in particular, has suffered greatly due to these factors. Being a highly rugged terrain with one of the tallest mountain ranges in the world the topographic features and environmental conditions alone do not make life easy for the inhabitants. This fact combined with the problems identified earlier have resulted in GB lagging behind the rest of the country in terms of economic prosperity with poverty levels of more than 29 percent compared to the country levels at 24 percent (World Bank, 2011). The multidimensional poverty index (MPI) of Pakistan incorporating a more comprehensive definition of poverty with nearly 15 indicators estimates the poverty levels in GB to be around 43.2 percent while the country averages are around 38.8 percent (Bari, 2017; UNDP Pakistan, 2016a, 2016b).

Although there are no easily accessible figures available regarding the unemployment rate in GB, figures from 2005 shows that the rate of unemployment amongst the youth ranging from ages 15 to 24 was 8.4 percent while the average rate in Pakistan as a whole during the same period was 7.4 percent (World Bank, 2011). More recent figures show this number to have increased from 7.4 to 10.8 percent (UNDP Pakistan, 2017). Based on these figures one can safely assume that the rate of unemployment in GB has also increased. This report (UNDP Pakistan, 2017) also forecasts that if more employment opportunities are not generated more than 43 million people in the country would be unemployed by the middle of this century. The situation becomes alarming as a lack of equal economic opportunities may lead to social instability and conflict in the region.

The World Bank (2011), reporting on the economic opportunities in Gilgit-Baltistan, identifies the strategic importance and potential of the GB corridor for expansion of trade and economic growth of entire region within and beyond. The report recognizes the capacity to strengthen the economy of the region by upgrading the Karakoram Highway (KKH) and the communication infrastructure in addition to other measures like better trade facilitation etc. between China and Pakistan. The improvement in transportation and communication infrastructure will also improve tourism which is another major economic opportunity in GB. The investments done by China in Pakistan in the

context of CPEC is an effort to address the structural problems caused by the lack of infrastructure, energy and communication in the country.

Due to China’s insatiable need for energy, this corridor will in the future assume even more importance. As it is expected that energy pipelines from Middle East and Central Asia will transport oil and gas directly to Western China. Pakistan has natural trade routes with India and Afghanistan which can generate a lot of economic activity if relations are normalized (Krepon & Stolar, 2007). It is envisioned that CPEC would enhance connectivity between India, Iran, Afghanistan, the CARs and China (Derudder, Liu & Kunaka, 2018). Pakistan, hence, has the potential to become a regional economic hub and a major international transit route with connections to the markets in South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia. Special emphasis is being paid to the construction of new and up-gradation of existing transport networks under CPEC. The KKH will be reconstructed and overhauled. The KKH is in an advantageous position as it can easily develop linkages with the highways in the neighboring countries like China and Tajikistan and further on to the CARs (*see Map 1*) for regional integration and connectivity.



Source: Kreutzmann, 2011

Map 1: Linkages of KKH with highways in China and Tajikistan.

Being landlocked states, the CARs are interested in accessing the seaports in Pakistan. GB can gain access to the CARs through the Khunjerab-Kalasu (Kolma pass)-Murghab route (“Various road projects,” 2015) which would connect the

KKH to Tajikistan through China bypassing the Wakhan corridor (*see Maps 1 & 2 for a more visually clear understanding of the routes identified in the paper*). This highlights the importance of GB under the CPEC and its goals of connectivity and regional integration. The third interim report on the Senate's Special Committee on CPEC (Butt & Hussain, 2016) has also proposed the modification of Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) so that a gas pipeline may be built from Tajikistan to GB. This will address the shortages of energy in the region as GB relies on the LPG cylinders brought in through the KKH for cooking and heating purposes. Other recommendations that concern the land routes in GB for greater connectivity include the following:

1. A two lane highway to be constructed on the opposite bank of KKH
 2. The construction of new bridges on KKH
 3. The construction of Ghizer Express, from Gahkuch to Chitral, as the Northern alternate route (which will connect Pakistan with CARs through the Wakhan corridor)
 4. The PROPOSAL to build the Yarkand-Skardu road, and
 5. The construction of an international airport near Gilgit.
- To address the shortfall in electricity supply in GB, which becomes very acute during the winters, the report proposes the following steps:
1. Inclusion of identified Hydroelectric Power Projects (HPP) in CPEC,
 2. The construction of a regional high voltage grid connecting all generation points and supplying electricity to all parts of GB, and
 3. The regional grid to be connected with the national electricity grid.



Source: Google Maps, 2018

Map 2. Kulma Pass, Karakoram Highway, Ghizer Express, Yarkant-Skardu, Wakhan Corridor

Geographers have long studied the transformational impact of roads on economic activities, tourism, and social organization in a particular region (Butz & Cook,

2011, Kreutzmann, 1991, 1995). Development of physical infrastructure like roads lead to regions becoming more integrated with domestic and regional economies (Hussain, Fisher & Espiner, 2017). There are, however, negative consequences as well which include the unsustainable exploitation of the natural resources and ecological and environmental degradation (Butz & Cook, 2011). Kreutzmann (1991, 1995) argues that the KKH, which was constructed as a result of the bilateral Pak China Border Treaty of 1963, has intensified social changes as well as shortened the *economic distances* between GB and the rest of the country. This has helped GB overcome the rising food shortages in the region and provided opportunities to a greater number of people for education and employment since its construction (Kreutzmann, 1995).

One of China's goal under the BRI is to increase people to people contacts, including student exchange programs. A growing number of students from Pakistan have been going to China on scholarships for a few years now. With the CPEC this number is growing exponentially. Chinese Confucius Centers have been established with a view of projecting China's soft power through its culture and language. The number of Pakistanis learning Chinese has grown in the last few years providing them with a wider range of employment opportunities. Students and businessmen alike have been enrolling in Chinese language classes offered at the Confucius Set at Karakoram International University (KIU) in Gilgit amongst other institutions. It is also offered as a compulsory course at the Bachelors level at KIU. Realizing the significance of learning Chinese in addition to English in schools and colleges, even early childhood development centers in GB are offering to teach Chinese language to infants and toddlers. (*see Fig.1*).



Source: Author 1 (Photo taken November 2018)

Fig 1: Growing Market for Chinese Language

The CPEC projects also include the development of Information and communication technologies via cross border optical fiber cables between Pakistan and China; and allow the expansion of optical fiber networks across

Pakistan. A look at China's opening up and economic reforms shows the role Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have played in making China the economic giant it is today. Establishing SEZs in different parts of Pakistan is an important component of CPEC. One such SEZ will be built in Maqpoondas in GB, while three others have also been announced (Ahmed, 2018). Another aspect of connectivity between the two countries include the extension of Pakistan's railway network into China and Southern Xinjiang Railway in Kashgar. These developments as discussed earlier would help GB generate significant revenue from its natural resources and tourism related activities (Hussain, 2018). The Long Term Plan (LTP) CPEC 2017, envisages the potential benefits of developing tourism resources across the regions along the CPEC, particularly the China-Pakistan border areas and together both sides can contribute in the development and construction of cross-border tourist routes.

GB is naturally endowed with minerals, precious and semi-precious stones and water resources. The mountains themselves are immensely popular with foreign and local tourists alike making tourism one of the major industries in the region (Hussain, 2018). The problem, however, is that due to multiple challenges, GB has been unable to develop economically despite having great potential. These problems range from political, economic, to social and religious issues. Constitutionally not being a part of Pakistan has meant that the people of GB have been partially empowered and centrally administered by the federal government in Islamabad. This has led to a negative impact on development in the region (Hussain, 2018). Another factor that has a negative impact in developmental initiatives is the energy crisis facing the majority of people in GB. These problems have led to a number of grievances against the central government, which have provided the space for the rise of sub-nationalist groups and other anti-Pakistan elements intent on advancing their agenda (Bouzas, 2017; Khan, 2017). As Khan (2017) argues hostile forces manipulate this situation and sub-nationalist groups are gaining a foothold even amongst the more pro-Pakistan elements that are increasingly becoming disillusioned with the economic and political disenfranchisement. This development might create instability and can have negative consequences for peace in the region. The government can mitigate this problem by addressing the concerns of the people particularly the economic and political ones. The restructuring of the power equation in the region, the development of infrastructure (Zain, 2010) and connectivity between the core areas along the CPEC is the key to addressing the issues creating problems.

Conclusion

While CPEC has generally been welcomed it has also given rise to some major concerns in GB. Chief amongst them is that GB does not directly benefit from

the CPEC as no major projects have initially been proposed here. Another main apprehension is related to the detrimental impact on the environment by the vehicle-based pollution produced by the cargo carrying trucks coming to and from China. The government can address these anxieties by taking the locals of GB into confidence. As discussed earlier, GB is plagued by economic problems with higher levels of poverty and unemployment than the rest of the country. The whole country is eagerly anticipating good things from CPEC. This is equally true for the people of GB. The federal government in Islamabad must make sure that the human security concerns of the people of GB are met.

CPEC has the potential to transform the economy of Pakistan, in general, and GB, in particular. Most of the people in Gilgit-Baltistan are well educated, socially active, and have a grasp of and interest in the socio-political-economic issues that concern them directly and indirectly. A vibrant civil society can play a positive role by being politically, socially and economically active. It has to realize and judiciously grab the window of opportunity offered by this development. By proactively addressing the concerns particularly those related to human security, the state can ensure that the important elements of national security – social cohesion, economic development, and political stability – can be achieved.

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