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Revisiting CPEC: A Corridor of Opportunities

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Abstract

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a "game-changer" mega project that offers colossal developmental changes at all levels in Pakistan. It is not just an economic project but has many dimensions to add to the cultural, political and societal landscape of the two countries. The geo-economics of CPEC remains crucial for the realization of 21st century as "the century belonging to Asia". Pakistan and China, have a history of close state-to-state relations at various bilateral and multilateral forums. The flagship project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides the same for a people to people and society interaction, which can allow Pakistan to learn from the best practices of the 'Chinese Dream'. The paper examines primary and secondary literature from a qualitative approach to study the 'trickle down effects' of CPEC in various branches of public and private sectors of Pakistan.

Keywords: Trade Corridors, CPEC, Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese Dream

Introduction

The landmark developmental project known as the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (CPEC) to link Pakistan's seaport of Gwadar with the Chinese city of Kashgar under the overarching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was signed on April 20, 2015 (Irshad, 2015). The BRI, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) came into the limelight with the 13th Five Year Plan proposed by the Central Committee of Communist Party of China (CCP) endorsing China to "open up to the East and the West" under the new institutional framework set in the wake of international and regional development. CPEC is defined by the Government of Pakistan as "the growth axis and development belt featuring complementary advantage, collaboration, mutual benefits and common prosperity" (Syed, 2020). This joint venture of \$62 billion remains a flagship project to resuscitate the ancient Silk Road via an ambitious grid of rail, road and maritime networks involving more than 150 states across the continent (Huang, 2016). The grandeur nature of the project allows considerable opportunities for local and international investors to participate in developing Pakistan's competitive market largely untapped and laden with tremendous growth opportunities.

The project brings immense advantages to Pakistan, a country that has an enormous populace at its dispersal and has liberally been bestowed with resources (in material and human). CPEC can provide Pakistan access to previously untapped markets in Central Asia and Europe. The geostrategic location of Pakistan in this way would certainly be revamped into a hub of the economic activity. The resulting economic growth is likely to open new skylines of advancement, harmony and thriving for all areas and provinces of Pakistan, also providing

positive ramifications for South Asia at large. The joint-venture is also focused in providing new economic opportunities that can tackle poverty and relative deprivation of the population. A number of studies have been previously undertaken, on outlining the economic, strategic and security concept of the project (Cai, 2017). However, the literature on CPEC as "a destiny changer for the masses of Pakistan" and its multiplier effects on various sectors of Pakistan remains scanty. It is for this purpose that this study has been undertaken to visit those opportunities in culture, society, language, and tourism that have for some reason or another remained apart from the limelight regarding flagship project of BRI.

Literature Review

An "economic corridor" is defined as a territorial or sea-based transportation grid used for the moving goods, services and people for facilitating economic activity (Askari, 2014). CPEC, one of its kind corridor initiative undertaken by government of China and Pakistan would improve socio-economic development of Pakistan. The venture project provides necessary impetus for trade across the region, serving as catalyst of regional prosperity and stability (Bhattacharjee, 2015). Pundits are of the view that investment by China in Pakistan has been more successful than their American counterparts. CPEC project is focused on development of almost all sectors, whereas the Americans have been attentive to the security subjects due to their vested interests. (Latif, 2017). The stark contrasts between the "Kerry Lugar Berman Act" which provided a mere \$5 billion in comparison to almost \$62 billion Chinese investment in diversified infrastructural projects that pass through all provinces of Pakistan, is considerably more likely to benefit the common man in Pakistan. The country's largest and mineral-rich province, Balochistan is central to the CPEC project (Jamil, 2015). Gwadar port has begun operationalization to Gulf countries and to Central Asian states. Energy shortage issues in the province are addressed by power projects planted under CPEC.

BRI, the overarching project of CPEC has been compared with the Marshall Plan. The former has been dubbed as "21st century's unique and game changing plan" (White, 2017). In order to realize the affluences of CPEC, a capacity-building framework requires to be devised to develop indigenous human resources and development of labour force. (Khan, 2015). CPEC is analyzed as China's strategic approach to apprehend economic challenges and passivity's in the years ahead. Xi Jinping, considering the volatility of international markets in the long-term, realized need for 'a productive commitment' in the region to make the "Chinese Dream" sustainable. It was these underlying factors that arranged the groundwork for CPEC (Ramay, 2016). The role of the venture is multifold for regional integration and peace, furthering the element of interdependence, a rational element to dissuade potential adversaries from undertaking hostile actions. In order to strategically market CPEC, Pakistan needs professional, well-experienced businessman, engineers and other professionals. (Farooq, 2020).

CPEC cannot be fully operational until both countries develop contacts on local, national, regional and international. It should be supported with cultural exchange programs in order to bring understanding between the people of both nations. People of both countries need to understand one another's customs and traditions. Joint think tanks and public policy institutes are required to be developed to bring the positive aspects of the projects. These will generate vital discourse for the policy circles in the promotion of the project for investments and infrastructure (Khalid, 2015).

Cultural Development and Trade Routes

Trade routes have contributed a major share in developing centers of culture, ideas and new techniques by providing contact linkages between individuals from a diverse set of regions, culture, religious and skill-set since immemorial times. They served as the main 'arteries of contact' among the realms of the ancient world (Finamore, 2004). The historic Silk Road connecting China with the West through Central Asia, Iran and Mesopotamia, and the Spice Routes running among West and South Asia are two noticeable instances to be called precursors of modern economic corridors of land and sea. As this trade node grew with the passage of time, there developed rich and prospering urban centers. These urban settlements not only obliged to the need of

commercial centers and service providers for the merchants and voyagers but they also developed into gathering spots for the individuals with various social and cultural backgrounds, diverse origins and languages (Vaisierre, 2012).

Trade routes have a history of serving as 'highways of communication,' which facilitated the movement of commodities, and most importantly exchange of new ideas, knowledge about new inventions, innovative business practices, social customs, languages and religious beliefs. The people travelling primarily for directing business along these courses were the disseminator of 'new ideas and facilitators of social trades'. In this way, a trade route, which by definition is a passage by land or ocean utilized by merchants and caravans for economic purpose which has the potential to aid in upward mobility in the society and politics at large (Seland, 2013). For CPEC, there are important implications and lessons to be learnt from the ancient trade corridors. However, lot has changed in the political economy with the unprecedented revolutions in transportation and communication. The world has become interdependent to levels scarcely experienced previously. Internet and media have provided real-time communication facility which can be used to foster closer ties and address the challenges encountered in culminating the project (Iqbal, 2017).

The improvement in the transportation network is to further help in boosting collaboration and correspondence among the inhabitants of the two nations. The social part of CPEC is particularly addressing the needs of people in the Pakistan province of Balochistan, home to port of Gwadar (Saleem, 2017). A number of youth development programs have been started for their education and capacity building. The indigenous fishermen community of Balochistan are regularly provided with modern equipment and training by the Chinese embassy under CPEC. In the near future, exchange visits of Pakistani fishermen to China and vice versa will also be carried for mutual education and knowledge of each other's practices (Godfrey, 2019) Such similar undertakings are regularly being carried in multiple sectors, which are steps to increase understanding of inhabitants in China and Pakistan. Thus, significance of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), as a propelled venture working towards improving daily lives of the people cannot be denied. Such participation by the people from each country would give an opportunity of better instruction and improve the everyday comforts of the individuals of Pakistan.

People to People Contact under CPEC

Traditionally, interaction between Pakistan and China has to a great extent been in the form of visit exchanges at official levels, including those by the respected heads of state, military professionals, authorities in various ministries working in tandem with those of their counterparts and business delegations from the traders' communities. These contacts date back from the 1950s and were solidified with the agreement on airspace and land border in the 1960s. From that point forward, there hardly been a Pakistani or Chinese head of the government that did not visit each other in their respected state. The emphasis on expanding trade ties has added to the development of monetary and exchange relations, accentuated by advancing social binds and individuals to-individuals contacts as "a key component of the strategic relationship between the two nations" (Khan, 2014).

The legacy of social trades between China those in the regions presently part of Pakistan has a rich history of more than two thousand years. The southern route of the Silk Road going through the north-western parts and Balochistan encouraged the development of merchandise as well as the individuals of India and China to one another's spaces. The visits of the Chinese voyagers, Fa Xian (B.C 400) and Xuanzang (B.C 630), are a testimony to the social linkages between earliest empires of China and India (Rahman, 2013). At the point when the People's Republic China was established in 1949, diplomatic relations were set up among Pakistan and China and the two nations have since the time kept up close and inviting relations in political, military and social fields. Pakistan and China with CPEC have enhanced their collaboration in the culture and individuals to-individuals contacts. The number of cultural delegations by senior officials of the two nations has also increased from the past six decades. In addition to that, the two sides are also collaborating in "art, literature, training, sports, youth affairs, cultural and social relics, health and women affairs" (Ali, 2020).

Media is considered an important 'pillar of the state,' more so in the era of fake news, disinformation and information explosion than ever before (Nam, 2012). CPEC, therefore, has been tapping in the potential of mass media to create awareness regarding the opportunity provided by the joint-venture. Advertisement relating to CPEC and those of brotherly relations between China and Pakistan are often featured on television. Lok Virsa, a cultural museum based in Islamabad frequently organizes Chinese theatre plays and films to promote the culture of neighboring states. In the years, since CPEC agreement, media houses, art and telecommunication companies have shown keen interest in Pakistan. Pakistan and China have centered programs particularly centered on youth for advancing social collaboration and individual-to-individual contacts. Furthermore, Chinese Government has increased the number of scholarships being offered to students of Pakistani origins. Due to these measures, students from Pakistan have grown considerably to undertake higher studies in various institutes based in China (Ahmad, 2020).

Pakistan is positioned third in the quantity of international students at present contemplating in China with 28,023 scholars, according to China's Ministry of Education. There was an increase in the statistics of international students from across the globe which has also expanded the aggregate number by 6.86 percent. Those pursuing doctorate and master's degrees have also notably increased by 12.28 percent to 85,062 of those scholars from across the world. The official information shows that China has become the top international destination for Pakistani scholars, majority of them have enrolled in Chinese universities and colleges, with 7,034 based on scholarship grants. The increase has been on account of a preferential policy of the Chinese government and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the year 2019, 6,156 Pakistani were pursuing Ph.D. degrees, 3,600 Masters Degrees, whereas 11,100 undertaking their Bachelor's degrees and 3,000 students taking Short Term Exchange Programs across China. Pakistani students generally concentrate on Chinese language, medical, software engineering and other different fields. Different grants are provided by the Chinese government to draw worldwide attention, to fully-funded research grants for BRI nations (Tribune, 2019).

Language initially served as a major barrier in advancing cultural collaboration and individuals-to-individuals contacts among Pakistan and China. The two nations under CPEC have taken joint measures to set up study centers of Chinese and Urdu languages. The National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, offers classes in Chinese language. Pakistan has set up China Study Centers and Confucius Institutes in different colleges of Pakistan. Karachi University and Faisalabad University have Confucius Institutes; while China Study Centers have been set up in Government College University (GCU), Lahore, and COMSATS, Islamabad. The Chinese language had just been presented as an optional subject in the curriculum of Pakistan (Syed, 2020).

Tourism

Tourism is one of the best strategic approaches to advance people-to-people contacts and earn valuable revenues. For the latter reason, it has emerged as a rapidly growing enterprise. According to World Tourism Organization (WTO), worldwide receipts from the travel industry in 2002 were as high as US\$474 billion, which increased to a magnificent US\$8.8 trillion in 2018 (WTO, 2018). Europe represents 50 percent of the world's visitors, followed by the Americas, whose share is 26 percent. Compared with this, the portion of the South Asia in worldwide the travel industry receipts is only a mere 1 percent. States across the world are according to top priority to the development of tourism as an industry. However, for that, a large investment in tourist infrastructure is required which most developing states sadly lack on their own. On a more optimistic, South Asian states including those of Maldives and Bangladesh have impressively developed their travel and tourist industry as a result of market-friendly reforms that have eased Public-Private enterprise and has brought investment from international hotel chains (Zang, 2020).

China has emerged as one of the most attractive tourist destinations in the world. The quantity of inbound Chinese tourists has enlisted an increase in the course of the most recent couple of years. China saw a record number of 65 million traveler appearances. The Chinese have also been one of the quickest to advance tourist ties with all the countries of South Asia. They have also expressed their readiness to assist the countries of the

region in the development of their tourism enterprises through various means, including direct investment (Farooq, 2020).

There is incredible potential for religious travel in Pakistan not only for Hindus and Sikhs, as Pakistan has recently provided unprecedented access via Kartarpur Corridor, but for Buddhists as well. The ancient Buddhist Kingdom of Gandhara contained the regions of modern-day Peshawar, Swat and the Northern Punjab. The archeological sites of Taxila and Takhtbai help remind of the civilizations grandeur. Through these regions, Buddhism spread out to China and Central Asia and remained for a considerable length of time “a source of inspiration for the spiritual life, arts, lifestyle, politics, philosophy, and medicine and material culture” in China. With Chinese Buddhists comprising of more than 250 million, which is close to 18 percent of the country’s population, there lies a major potential for Chinese religious tourism in the northern Pakistan. The World Bank estimates that travel industry for Pakistan has a mere share of 2.93 percent to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in contrast with other states of the region (Medhekar, 2017).

The Pakistani government has grabbed the attention of leisure seekers across the world by relaxing its visa policy. The policy of giving e-visas and visa on travel, exclusively for tourists has worked remarkably well. Prestigious magazine, Forbes named Pakistan to be “the coolest spot to visit” in 2019. The British Backpacker Society, positioned Pakistan as its “best experience travel destination” and “perhaps the friendliest nation on earth that is past anybody’s most stunning creative mind.” Conde Nast Traveler has as of late positioned Pakistan as the “number one holiday destination in 2020”. These improvements will no doubt be helpful in also raising awareness for potential investors and entrepreneurs interested in collaborating with CPEC projects. However, for that government of Pakistan must continue to fabricate economical and business friendly policies.

Maritime Tourism

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) by tapping in the maritime capability of Pakistan and Gwadar port specifically, is anticipated by pundits to give the fundamental force to a prosperous sea-based tourist industry in Pakistan. Maritime Tourism has become the 'popular expression' in the worldwide financial industry. A survey by the World Economic Forum concluded that sea-based tourism industry would develop at a worldwide pace of 3.5 percent every year by 2030. It has recently also acquired attention of leisure seekers across Pakistan, who dream of visiting coastal areas of Pakistan to experience boat rides, snorkeling, scuba-diving, presently being offered by private parties in Karachi and Kund Malir (Farooq, 2020).

The coastline of Pakistan is 1050 km along the Arabian Sea, of which Sindh province has 350 km and Balochistan fragments 700 km. The coastal belt of Balochistan has international fascination, specifically due to its number of sand beaches with “shifting sand dunes” (Farooq, 2020). The diversity in the species, adds to the magnificence and significance of the beach front, where migratory birds can be seen at Pasni, Jiwani and Miani Hor. Astola Island, nation's first Marine Protected Area (MPA), is a known settling ground for imperiled green turtles that can be made into “sustainable tourist attraction”. (Farooq, 2020). The Balochistan government, in collaboration with international investors, has announced to build tourist resorts at Kund Malir and Kalamat.

Karachi, provincial capital of Sindh, is the seaside city that has for years remained part of a mainstream goal of international and local vacationers. The Clifton sea shore is a popular spot to visit where camel and buggy rides are offered for families on outing. Hawke's Bay is one more of the sea shore for recreation searchers who for the most part stay in a rented hut to go through their ends of the week. The Indus Delta and the mangroves at the Sindh coast additionally offers a potential fishing spot is an asset for the maritime sector of Pakistan. It merits referencing that China expanded its incomes to multiple times over from RMB 147.8 billion (2002) to RMB 1463.6 billion (2017), as a result of sea-based tourism. The two nations can broaden the scope and horizon of CPEC, whereby China can be asked to share and assist from its fruitful experience to build a suitable sea-based tourism industry in Pakistan (Haider, 2017).

Conclusion

The expansion of cooperation in the economic, trade and investment areas under CPEC would prompt welfare and greater prosperity of the two brotherly countries. The recognition of bringing the people of the two nations closer to one another is being felt by the policymakers in the wake of CPEC. The two governments have since then made efforts to synchronize their institutional components for the advancement of people-to-people contacts in Pakistan and China.

The direct people-to-people contacts remained limited owing to various constraints, chief among them being the language barrier. This had been addressed to some extent under CPEC where the governments have started measures to create awareness regarding the cultures, social norms and values. For this purpose, the Pakistani government with Chinese assistance has opened China Study Programs for the teaching of the Chinese language in various local universities. The travel and tourism industry is yet another area that needs more scoping, as there is huge potential for expanding social participation and elevating people-to-people contacts. Presently, tourism between the two countries remains at a level far below its potential. It is one of the recommendations of this paper that officials from both sides need to consider upon as China is fast rising as a nation with record number of both inbound and outbound leisure-seekers. In the view of vast potential for religious and recreational tourism, Pakistan can turn into an appealing destination for the Chinese tourists given that Pakistan provides the required tourist infrastructure. The cultural and commercial ties between Pakistan and China will undoubtedly increment under the CPEC as the venture aims to construct a system of rail and road network between the two countries. The corridor between the brotherly countries provides an ample opportunity to all the regions of Pakistan to share 'the fruits of economic development'.

The massive investment in the economic zones of CPEC will bring in great number of laborers of both Pakistani and Chinese origin, which will give them a chance to interact and share their experiences with each another. It is also a reality that the new generation of Chinese know little about Pakistan and more about the West. Similarly, indigenous Pakistani workers have little knowledge about the Chinese people. This can be improved by promoting people-to-contact via the media. Pakistan's first Baloch channel, WSH News already has a number of such segments for ease of both Chinese and Pakistani viewers. Pakistan's business condition has extensively improved considerably, as a consequence of CPEC venture. It is presently positioned by World Bank Ease of Doing Business as 108 among 190, an impressive improvement by 28 spots. Moody's International has likewise updated Pakistan rating standpoint to 'stable' from 'negative'. Foreign companies, including Hong Kong based Hutchinson Port Holdings have contributed \$240 million for the up gradation of container terminal at Karachi Port, which as of late left a mark by docking largest ever vessel in the maritime history of the nation. According to the Parliamentary Secretary for Planning Development and Reform, Pakistan has completed 13 projects worth 11 billion dollars, while 13 other CPEC related projects worth 18 billion dollars are under in progress, and another 21 billion dollar ventures are in the pipeline. According to the pundits of finance, the completion of CPEC can give Pakistan a growth impetus at the rate of 10 to 15 percent by another decade.

It is also recommended that a public campaign with the help of media maybe started to educate the masses regarding the various possibilities and openings of CPEC. Institutes within the academia have previously successfully carried out seminars, conferences and workshops for the CPEC cause. These include *Obortunity*, an initiative of National Defence University, Islamabad which brought in experts from organizations of all cadres who participated to share their feedback, insight and experience regarding CPEC. The first *International China Pakistan Economic Corridor Workshop* (ICPECW) was in 2019 at Gwadar, Beijing and Islamabad. The second International CPEC Workshop (ICPECW) is to be held in March of this year, which would be devoted to bridging the gap between the private and government circles on various aspects of CPEC. Similar activities are also held by the Higher Education Commission (HEC), which has set up CPEC Consortium of Universities in Islamabad to elevate business-to-business linkages between students, professors and work force of China and Pakistan. The extent of the Consortium has of late been upgraded by including 56 colleges from the two nations, to cover every significant region of advanced education.

All these steps are taken in the right direction; however for a project like CPEC, grandeur in scope and vision, effort needs to be made from local and regional to international level. It is suggested that Foreign Office and associated Pakistani trade missions across the world may be taken into loop, to organize seminar and workshops like *Obortunity* in various financial capitals of the globe. Added to that the good offices of multilateral organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Organization Islamic Cooperation (OIC) should be taken into confidence and used to promote the narrative regarding CPEC. The CPEC is a lucky opening and distinct advantage for the region and beyond. The advancement of CPEC would help bring China and Pakistan even closer. The neighborly collaboration between both the states would prove as a 'multiplier-effect' in all sectors and would significantly uplift the lives of the masses. The association of Gwadar with Kashgar will help in building up the most remote regions of Pakistan and China.

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