

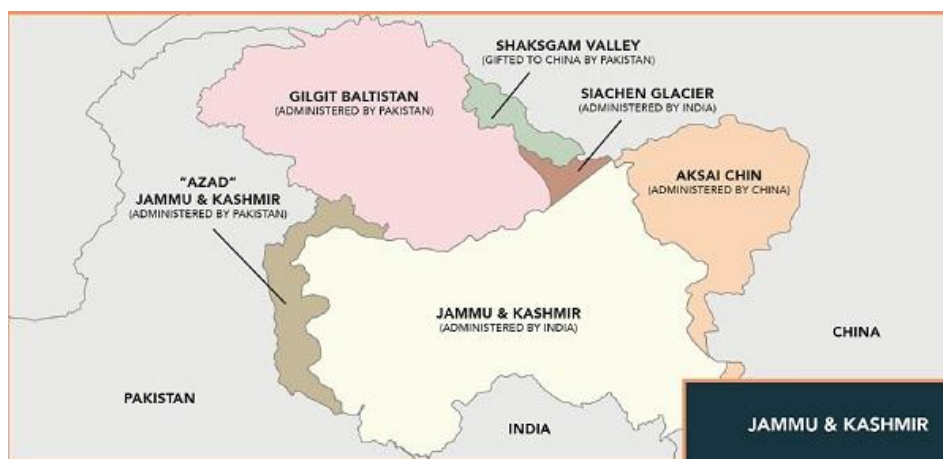
UNDERSTANDING THE 'CHINESE MAN'S BURDEN': CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION BETWEEN INDIA, CHINA, AND PAKISTAN THROUGH CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

Bipasha Nath,

BACKGROUND

China's official announcement of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) came in September 2013, during President Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan. While the transnational project was formally incorporated into China's national economic development strategy in 2014, many analysts are of the opinion that the country's expansion was already an ongoing process

at the time, and that the BRI project was merely a culmination of past initiatives (Panda, par. 5). The project involves more than 2600 sub-projects¹, with confirmed participation (through signed MoUs) from 131 countries². Of these, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is of particular interest to India due to its strategic location in Gilgit-Baltistan, which is a disputed territory between India and Pakistan.



**Map taken from "An Introduction to the Disputed Territory of Gilgit-Baltistan: The Himalayan Flashpoint: EFSAS Report". Pakistan Christian Post, 2019.*

China and Pakistan's collaborative efforts on CPEC has raised concerns in the Indian subcontinent about border-security and national sovereignty, as the project is scheduled to cross a contested territory. The region is administered by Pakistan, but due to the historical linkage with erstwhile Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir, it is also claimed by India. Immediately upon British India's decolonisation in 1947, the region had witnessed great political upheaval, progressing quickly from attaining brief

independence, to forceful accession with India after the signing of Instrument of Accession, and subsequent inclusion into Pakistani territory through military coup (Wolf 2). With India's unrelenting opposition to the merge, international intervention eventually led to the formulation of the Simla Agreement in 1972. As per these regulations, any decision with regard to Gilgit-Baltistan must be taken bilaterally - a measure that India believes has been disregarded through the implementation of

CPEC. Given the probability of resulting complications amplifying cross-border conflict between India and Pakistan, the former remains firm on its rejection of a development project being implemented in a disputed territory.

PROBLEMS SURROUNDING CHINA-PAKISTAN ECONOMIC CORRIDOR

Despite an apparent emergence of Gilgit-Baltistan - and therefore, also, CPEC - from a "constitutional-legal limbo"³, there are various challenges that continue to threaten the successful completion and implementation of CPEC. Pakistan's decision to grant Gilgit-Baltistan a provincial status is being seen by critics as a response to China's unchallenged involvement in Pakistan's internal affairs, as a means to protect its economic investment (EFSAS, par. 7). Given that the legal foundations of CPEC are questionable, a successful implementation will require adoption of effective security measures so as to safeguard its progress from external threats. To this end, there has been heavy deployment of Pakistani (PTI, par. 4) and Chinese security forces (Chaudhary, par. 1) along the Project's route - which has also increased military presence near the international *de facto* border between India and Pakistan. Such decisions are only strengthening India's concerns of threat to its sovereignty and national integrity (qtd. in Frankopan 189), leading to stronger and sustained efforts by India to prevent further developments in the Project. However, since CPEC is the pilot project in China's BRI, its success will undoubtedly have a defining impact on subsequent development activities in other partner countries. Moreover, for Pakistan, the Project promises an emergence from economic stagnation, thus guaranteeing equally significant measures being adopted by the country to ensure that the Sino-Pak initiatives reach fruition. The resulting conflict of interest, however, threatens regional peace and harmony. In light of this political instability, the future of CPEC remains doubtful and unclear.

It is important to note that forced integration of Gilgit-Baltistan with Pakistan may

eliminate, to a certain degree, the questionable legal foundation (Wolf 8) on which the Project rests, but it does not necessarily indicate that the local communities will reap the benefits of resulting economic gains. The upcoming election in the region itself, which promises the political inclusion of a contested territory, appears to be a corrupt strategy. The selection of contesting candidates from Gilgit-Baltistan without the approval from local constituencies overrides the region's authority to present its own list of representatives (Mirza, par. 2). Further, according to political activists and critics such as Amjad Ayub Mirza, repeatedly postponement of election process allows environmental constraints to prevent full participation from communities living in Gilgit-Baltistan, a region that experiences extreme weather conditions that prohibit unrestricted movement in November, when elections are scheduled to be held. More importantly, the systematic suppression of dissenting voices in the region through continued employment of Schedule IV and Anti-Terrorism Act (IANS, par. 5) imply that the purpose of recognizing Gilgit-Baltistan as a fifth province is not aimed at balancing economic development in the region as compared to other provinces; it is, instead, simply a result of Sino-Pak expansionist dream, which has the propensity to, in the near future, pave the way for significant social unrest due to its exploitative nature. For a development project to be successful, socio-political stability is a crucial prerequisite; however, rising economic inequality will augment internal conflicts, and threaten its economic relevance.

Notably, dissatisfaction at improper management and distribution of available resources has already materialised through the existence of Baloch and Sindhi insurgency groups. Security challenges arising from activities undertaken by these groups are evident through instances where CPEC construction sites, Chinese workers, and security forces have been attacked and/or kidnapped (Jalil *et al.* 6) for misusing (or enabling the misuse of) resources in the region, with no foreseeable gains for the local communities. This has

also brought into question the safety of the general masses living in high-risk zones as they come under crossfires between armed groups and the politically significant parties. A case in point can be seen through the attack on police post in Gilgit-Baltistan by a group of “heavily armed terrorists”, leading to the death of security personnel (Gul, *par.* 11). The problem, however, goes beyond sectarian conflict. Heavy terrorist presence in regions that are expected host the economic corridor (Zahid 27) are equally detrimental to the development of communities in the country. This is deeply worrying since the Project may worsen terrorist aggression as CPEC aims to strengthen political and economic cooperation across international borders – an objective that goes against the ideology of extremist groups (Yiwei 83).

Another possible constraint to CPEC is the inclusion of World Bank-sanctioned blacklisted Chinese companies in project execution processes (Chaudhary, *par.* 2). This indicates a high rate of corruption, exploitation, and improper distribution and utilization of available resources, which can impede on the growth and advancement of not just Pakistan, but also other BRI countries in general. The delegation of crucial responsibilities such as project implementation and management to companies that are under legal scrutiny for a variety of offenses may result in severe consequences for CPEC and Pakistan, as it would undoubtedly garner a worldwide response for a plausible erasure of the legitimacy of China’s economic venture, and for gross violation of international policy frameworks that guide transnational projects as well as the Memorandum of Understanding (MoUs)/Joint Statements signed with BRI partner countries.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though CPEC has several significant challenges that threaten its future as a fully-functional project and its role in economic development, the rate at which it is currently progressing shows the inevitability of it being an economic reality in the near future - possibly even in face of foreign

opposition. Thus, to minimize the negative effects of external factors, certain aspects may be incorporated in foreign policies or implementation strategies that safeguard interests of direct and indirect stakeholders. A country-wise analysis can be understood as follows -

I. China

China’s contribution to the Project is monumental. It is not only providing intellectual resources, but also financial support, basic infrastructural requirements, as well as planning and overall implementation measures for the success of its economic investment. One of the many advantages that China claims will come with an operationalized economic corridor is regional peace and cooperation. However, in light on rising tensions between India and Pakistan over contested lands and ambiguous international borders, the aforementioned promise gets nullified much before the Project’s completion. Such matters can raise serious concerns about the feasibility of CPEC’s socio-economic and political provisions. And so, China must consider certain factors before proceeding further with its economic venture -

1. **Maintaining neutrality on territorial matters between India and Pakistan.** Over the years, India has been cautioned with dire consequences against initiating a military-centric response to its land conflict with Pakistan. Such statements do not reflect positively on China as a key stakeholder in the Project, and can cause more harm than what may be anticipated. India-Pakistan conflict over territory is infamous for being violent, wasteful in terms of loss of natural, human, and monetary resources, and for causing irreversible damage to public perception of the neighbouring country on both sides of the border. A third-party influence will undoubtedly make the situation more volatile. Hence, China must refrain from interfering what is often described as a “bilateral issue”, and can instead take

measures to bring both the countries on one platform to resolve ongoing conflicts in a peaceful and diplomatic manner.

2. **Postponing completion of CPEC till the formulation of a mutually-beneficial solution to territorial conflict between India and Pakistan.** If China's primary goal for the Project is indeed regional cooperation and economic development, then it must consider holding the ongoing construction activities till India and Pakistan reach a consensus for Gilgit-Baltistan. This will make a fully-functional Project less susceptible to future complications - particularly in the form of military confrontations between India and China or extremist activities carried out by terrorist groups. In case of a temporary suspension of construction activities, China must bear all costs so as to lessen the burden on developing countries like Pakistan.

II. Pakistan

Unlike China, Pakistan's measures must focus on certain internal matters first. Policy recommendations for the country include -

1. **A complete eradication of terrorist outfits within its territory, with or without external aid.** This will not only benefit the Project, but will also reduce ongoing conflict with India. Further, this will remove a long-standing global pressure of resolving a major irritant. Notably, presence of terrorist groups affects not only other countries, but Pakistan's own populace as well. With no terrorist groups building base on their land, there will be very little threat to safety and life, infrastructure, and economic growth, thereby allowing a smooth functioning for CPEC.
2. **Holding diplomatic meetings to resolve border issues with India.** Territory is one of the most sensitive conflict areas that can exist between neighbouring countries, and

it has indeed made Pakistan's relations with India highly complex. It is time that seven decades of hostility gives way to peaceful collaborations and sustained deliberations. Instead of using military power as a means of maintaining regional superiority, the two countries must engage in frequent discussions to resolve differences and concerns. Needless to say, conflict zones have a negative impact at various levels - it not only affects healthy relations between neighbouring countries, but also causes difficulties for communities living in the regions. Due to geographical vulnerability, governments tend to prefer heavy military presence in such places, which automatically disrupts quality of life for the inhabitants. These territories experience severe development problems since unstable socio-political environment prevent initiatives from reaching fruition. And so, the governments of Pakistan and India must resolve border issues, take accountability of activities that take place in contested territories on their respective side of the border, and undertake decisions that favour communities that have been systematically overlooked.

3. **Adhering to previously established international norms before resolving the Gilgit-Baltistan issue.** Lack of mutual agreement since the signing of the Simla Agreement in 1972 means that activities undertaken in the region must be decided upon bilaterally by India and Pakistan. For this reason, initial measures regarding political integration of the region into Pakistan have not only met resistance from India (as it believes all legal measures on Gilgit-Baltistan to be invalid due its status as a contested territory) but also from Pakistani activists and political analysts who believe that such politically motivated decisions will be effective only if supported by other protective measures such as

removal of Anti-Terrorist Act and release of political prisoners. It is important for Pakistan to understand the risks of giving a provincial status to Gilgit-Baltistan on the basis of China's interests, while internally, continuing the suppression of local communities through use of draconian laws that impinge on their right to dissent, and reportedly manipulating democratic processes such as the upcoming elections.

III. India

The country's involvement in the Project is limited to its refusal to accept the Corridor's route through Gilgit-Baltistan, which it considers as an illegally-occupied region by its neighbouring country. Some factors that must be considered by India involve the following -

1. **Continued discussion with Pakistan and China to resolve border issue.** India prides itself for its democratic political system. Some crucial responsibilities of a democracy include delivery of socio-political and economic equality, access to fundamental rights, and sustained efforts towards welfare of citizens. This can happen for the erstwhile Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir only if there is social and political stability in the entire region. Ruling political parties of the three countries must undertake suitable interventions so that conflict zones effectively emerge from an unstable environment. India must take the lead for these collaborations if it wishes to successfully uphold its claims of safeguarding border security and territorial sovereignty. This will be relevant so that a change in government (and therefore, a change in political ideology, shift in priorities, and a conflict of interest) at any given point in the future does not damage the pace of development.
2. **Strengthen its regional position by participating in suitable international initiatives.** Given that the fast pace at which

the Project is developing, it will be in India's best interest to resolve a number of CPEC-related concerns internally. A major determinant of the country's stance on the transnational development project is its impact on India's foreign relations and relevance in South Asia. In order to retain, and even strengthen its regional significance, India can take proactive measures to consolidate the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue alliance with the United States of America, Japan, and Australia, and secure collaborative measures to counter China's global expansion.

REFERENCES

- ❖ Panda, A. "How Old Is China's Belt and Road Initiative Exactly?". *The Diplomat*, 2019.
- ❖ Wolf, S. O. "China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Its Impact on Gilgit-Baltistan". *South Asia Democratic Forum*, 2016.
- ❖ "Pakistan's plan to usurp Gilgit Baltistan and further divide Jammu and Kashmir is disquieting". *European Foundations for South Asian Studies*, 2020.
- ❖ PTI. "Pakistan Army's Separate Special Force Will Protect CPEC Projects & Chinese Nationals". *The Print*, 2019.
- ❖ Chaudhury, D. R. "China "deploys" troops closer to Indian border: Russian media". *The Economic Times*, 2019.
- ❖ Wolf, S. O. "Towards a Leviathan? The Establishment of a New Authority for the CPEC". *South Asia Democratic Forum*, 2019.
- ❖ ANI. "Gilgit-Baltistan Elections to Held Under Watchful Eye of ISI, China". *Businessworld*, 2020.
- ❖ Xing, Li. *Mapping China's 'One Belt One Road' Initiative*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

- ❖ Frankopan, Peter. *The New Silk Roads*. Bloomsbury, 2018.
- ❖ Gul, Ayaz. "Suicide Bomber Attacks Chinese Engineers in Pakistan". *Voice of America*, 2018.
- ❖ Zahid, Farhan. "Understanding the Islamic State: Ideology, Affiliates and the Da'esh Model". *Peace and Conflict Studies*, 2014.
- ❖ Yiwie, Wang. "The Belt and Road Initiative: What Will China Offer the World in Its Rise". *New World Press*, 2016.
- Chaudhary, D.R. "World Bank Bans Chinese Companies Again for Financial Crimes". *The Economic Times*, August 2019.

¹ For more details, please refer to a report released by Refinitiv, titled "BRI Connect: An Initiative in Numbers": https://www.refinitiv.com/content/dam/marketing/en_us/documents/reports/refinitiv-zawya-belt-and-road-initiative-report-2019.pdf

² For more information, please refer to the Green Belt and Road Initiative Centre: <https://green-bri.org/belt-and-road-initiative-quick-info>

³ Wolf, S. O. "China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Its Impact on Gilgit-Baltistan". *South Asia Democratic Forum*, 2016.