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## Kashmir's Reckoning With the Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

By Saba Muzaffer Nazki

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While India has continuously opposed the \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), saying that it passes through its territory in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, the ambitious project was discussed for the first time by experts in the region itself. A panel considered the effects of the corridor on China-Pakistan-India relations on Saturday in the

summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir, saying that the CPEC will have a definite impact on Kashmir and that the region needs to integrate itself into the South Asian and Central Asian paradigm to reap the project's dividends.

The economic, political, and geostrategic aspects of the CPEC were discussed during a seminar titled, "Impact of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Kashmir," which was organized by The Kashmir Institute – a think-tank focusing on all parts of Kashmir, including its interests vis-a-vis the governments of India, China, and Pakistan. The CPEC is an ambitious economic project between Pakistan and China that includes motorways, dams, hydropower projects, railways and pipelines. It connects Pakistan's deep-sea Gwadar Port with the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China. The project is part of China's larger initiative, the One Belt, One Road, which is aimed at helping regional economic integration along.

During the three-hour long seminar, the panelists discussed how CPEC would seriously impact the state of Jammu and Kashmir, both politically and economically. Kashmir is currently going through a civilian and armed uprising against the Indian government. Last year, around 80 people were shot dead during a months-long uprising that started after the killing of a popular militant leader, Burhan Wani. Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \$5 a month.

Fahad Shah, the director of The Kashmir Institute, said at the onset of Saturday's discussions that CPEC has become a significant project in South Asia that will have a serious impact on both economic and political issues concerning the regions connected to it. Kashmiris need to keep a close watch on the CPEC as it is a region locked between three nuclear-armed countries, India, China and Pakistan. Any geoeconomic project that has an impact on these economies will affect the politics of the region. Amid these changing dynamics, it is important to see where Kashmir fits into the larger China-Pakistan and India-Pakistan dynamics.

Andrew Small, author of *The China-Pakistan Axis* and a fellow at German Marshall Fund, while explaining the economic and political significance of CPEC said that China would like to use Pakistani ports both for the People's Liberation Army Navy.

"China's economy is in a transition phase right now," Small said. "The growth rate has decreased and it is looking for new markets. Privileged access will be given to Chinese industries inside Pakistan. China has in the recent past made statements on Pakistan's policy on the region including the Kashmiri militant groups and Kashmir itself through which some of the corridor route passes."

The moderator of the session, Gowhar Geelani, a political commentator and journalist, made critical points on the aspect of Kashmir's importance in the modern economic shifts around the world, including the growing interests of many countries in CPEC. Small added that Beijing has urged both New Delhi and Islamabad to bring down tensions in the region, stressing that such an atmosphere could create difficulties for CPEC.

Laying down the importance of Kashmir into the South Asian context, Professor Siddiq Wahid, a historian and former vice-chancellor of the IUST university in Kashmir, said that in past,

economic spaces used to be smaller and now, in relation to CPEC, geopolitical economic spaces have gotten larger with smaller political spaces.

“The power lies within states or the empires,” said Wahid. “We need to put the CPEC beyond India and Pakistan, and this would put Kashmir in a larger South Asian and Central Asian paradigm. We, the people of Kashmir, Ladakh, Jammu and Gilgit-Baltistan, are on the periphery of South Asia and Central Asia – so we have to take Jammu and Kashmir out of [the] India-Pakistan paradigm. I don’t want to think of Kashmir as a buffer zone because it has connotations as a shock absorber. If the CPEC happens, it is we the people of Kashmir who will have control to how we create capacity.”

Giving the local trade perspective, if Kashmir somehow benefits from CPEC, Mubeen Shah, former president of Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry, strongly advocated for two divided sides of Kashmir to be declared as a single free economic zone. “Both India and Pakistan need to be specific about their political positions,” said Shah. “The CPEC might not change everything but it is a first step towards final settlement of Kashmir issue. We can focus on horticulture, textiles and other industries. The distance will be reduced and the road between Kashmir and Central Asia will be much cheaper.”

Contrary to discussing only the economic aspects of the CPEC, Zubair A. Dar, a researcher in economics at the University of Berkeley, spoke about how CPEC could have huge impact in terms of environment; its pollution could affect Kashmir at large scale. He called the China-Pakistan partnership as “much deeper strategic partnership supported by military power.”

To explain why the CPEC has become a contentious issue for Kashmir, Mohammad Ibrahim, an economist at the University of Kashmir, gave a brief introduction of CPEC in relation to Kashmir, and explained the significance of the initiative in the current scenario. “India is not in favour of the CPEC because they are more interested in Chabahar port,” said Ibrahim. “Kashmir is important to Pakistan in terms of water resources. Maybe the CPEC could in future help in the peace process between both the countries and geoeconomics can actually impact geopolitics.”

He said that if Iran also becomes a part of CPEC and convinces Pakistan to use the Chabahar port, then Afghanistan can be tempted to join too because it is a landlocked country. “Developments in Pakistan-administered Kashmir will entrench Chinese economic interests in parts of Kashmir, which will be protected at all costs, even militarily,” said Dar. “China has its own model of economic development, which does not make economic progress subservient to ideology. When CPEC becomes more powerful and economically beneficial, then maybe India will change its mind. Economics drives the politics of any place, including Kashmir.”