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The CPEC Factor in the Chinese-Indian Relations

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The ambitious project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has been repeatedly discussed in NEO, is gradually moving to the center stage in the troubled bilateral relations between the two Asian giants – China and India.

It should be reminded that we are talking about the construction of transport (rail and road) infrastructure with a total length of almost 1,500 miles, which will pass through the territory of Pakistan and will link western China's provinces with the Arabian Sea. It's needless to say that

such links will give rise to various smaller infrastructure facilities that are to be built to support the CPEC.

Such niche projects, in which transport and industrial facilities are built with a specific purpose, are often referred to as “infrastructure-industrial corridors”. Similar economic structures are now being created in India. Of these, the most impressive is the Delhi-Mumbai corridor with a length of almost a thousand miles.

Those projects often allow states to solve the problem of economic development of distant territories, especially when those countries that are not a part of the so-called “Western world”. In this regard, it is obvious that for Islamabad, Beijing’s intentions to allocate a total of 46 billion dollars for the implementation of the CPEC can become a game changer.

However, when offering this project to Pakistan, China is not getting engaged in some sort of charitable gestures, instead it is solving one of its own key strategic goals, which is dictated by the need to get a reliable exit into the Persian Gulf zone and to Africa’s east coast, bypassing the vulnerable Malacca Strait.

And although in Beijing stresses in every possible way the purely economic nature of the CPEC, it seems certain that it will further strengthen the relations between China with Pakistan.

The very nature of CPEC is bound provoke negative sentiments in India. Moreover, they are being reinforced by the fact that a half of the future “corridor” will pass through the administrative units of Pakistan, which once belonged Kashmir.

As a result of several Indo-Pakistani wars, the former principedom is now divided approximately in half and each of the parties claims full ownership of its former territory. In India, apparently, it is believed that the future “corridor” will be protected not only by Pakistani but also by Chinese troops. This fact will make the prospects of hypothetical “reunification” of Kashmir under Indian control nothing but a dream.

Therefore, New Delhi has been reluctant to accept any appeals of Islamabad and Beijing that urged it to “discarding any hostility” to join the CPEC project. Moreover, Indian generals are openly discussing the prospects “war on two fronts” now.

Such an announcement, for instance, has been voiced by the Indian Army chief, General Bipin Rawat on January 8. There’s been two points of interests in the comments of the Indian media about this statement. Firstly, it must have been provoked by the implementation of the CPEC project, as well as the construction of transport infrastructure in the areas of Chinese Tibet, adjacent to the border with India. The factor of development of Beijing’s relations with such countries as Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan has also been mentioned.

It’s believed that India can put on the table the Agni-V nuclear warheads (currently undergoing tests), as well as the forming corps of mountain shooters of about 100,000 people, as the potential response, should the war on “two fronts” be ever started.

Nevertheless, less than a month ago the above General Bipin Rawat has openly admitted that the existing Indian land troops cannot provide an adequate response to such a threat, while, at the same time, it is now getting enough funding to grow into being capable of waging a war on two fronts. That is why Bipin Rawat is convinced that there's an urgent need to form allied ties with such countries of the region as Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

This statement was provoked by the latest incident at the "ceasefire line" with Pakistan, which happened on May 1 in the territory of the former Kashmir. According to the Indian side, the Pakistani special forces entered the no-mans-land zone and killed an Indian officer and disfigured his corpse.

Recall that last year alone India and Pakistan (two de facto nuclear powers) were on the brink of war twice because of similar incidents in the "ceasefire line". Which fully fits into the long-established general picture of terrorist acts and skirmishes between the regular units of both armies that have been going on here in recent decades several times a year.

Such a situation in the region in any way contribute to India's positive reaction to the calls of Islamabad and Beijing to join the implementation of the CPEC. In addition, consent to such proposals would mean that India de facto recognizes the situation in the territorial issue that has developed to date in relations with Pakistan. And, consequently, the "ceasefire line" will have to be transformed into an internationally recognized border.

However, it is far call to state that Pakistan will also agree with such outcome of the territorial dispute it has with India. For Islamabad believes that New Delhi does not take into account the interests of the population of the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir, with a total of 70 to 100% of their respective population (in different districts) professing Islam.

All this makes it possible to conclude that there no chance that India will in any form take a part in the CPEC project, in spite of the obvious economic benefits it can get from participating in this project.

India's choice is the decision of solving its problems via strengthening of its positions in the zone adjacent to the Persian Gulf.

An important step in this direction was a tripartite summit with the participation of the leaders of India, Iran and Afghanistan, held in May 2016 in Tehran. Perhaps its main result was the allocation of a loan of 500 million dollars to India for the reconstruction of the port and related infrastructure in the Iranian village of Chabahar.

Let's pay attention to the fact that Chabahar is located on the coast of the same Arabian Sea, where the CPEC is heading, and only a hundred miles away from the Pakistani port of Gwadar, which lies at the far end point of the above mentioned "corridor".

Afghanistan, in turn, has been particularly pleased with the project of modernization of Chabahar, which has been enjoying tensed relations with Pakistan for a long while. Finally, Kabul will have the opportunity to enter the Indian Ocean while bypassing the Pakistani

territory, using the zone controlled by the utterly friendly Iran and establish closer ties (with no less friendly) India.

In conclusion, we should recall that the CPEK is perceived in China as one of the most important parts of the ambitious concept of the revival of the Great Silk Road. Meanwhile, the cautious approach that New Delhi takes in relation to the CPEC project explains the absence of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Moody at the Beijing forum dedicated to the implementation of the One Belt, One Road project.