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CPEC: Pakistan's newest holy cow could also become its millstone

By Shabir Choudhry
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Pakistan faces many serious problems -- and among them is the status and invulnerability of holy cows, and people who are above Pakistani laws. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is not a living being, yet it has also gained the status of being a holy cow -- and people are warned of serious consequences if they dare to oppose or criticise this new holy cow.

People are accused of being 'anti-Pakistan' and 'agent' of foreign powers because they dared to criticise holy cows -- and some are facing sedition charges for attacking CPEC and demanding a share in the accruing benefits.

I am also among the 'bad guys' who are perceived as 'disrespectful' and critics of this holy cow and who demand a fair share in the benefits because it runs without permission through our land, Gilgit-Baltistan, which is part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Pakistani officials, some Pakistani people and Kashmiri foot soldiers of Pakistan may not like what I write or say. Their dislike and even hatred does not deter me from speaking out to protect and promote interests of people of Jammu and Kashmir state.

In my opinion, CPEC could have the following negative effects on Gilgit-Baltistan:

- Status of Jammu and Kashmir dispute and Gilgit-Baltistan can change because of CPEC;

- A serious danger in the demographic changes; already hundreds of thousands of non-local people reside there and control local economy and politics;
- Exploitation of our resources will increase;
- Growing influence and power of secret agencies of Pakistan and competing interests of secret agencies of other countries;
- Stationing of foreign troops to protect the CEPC route;
- Possible stationing of non-state actors of countries or groups who want to sabotage the project; and
- A serious danger that Gilgit-Baltistan could become a battleground for competing interests of countries and their proxies.

CPEC could be a holy cow to some Pakistanis but to China it is an economic project with strategic and military significance. Chinese are very cruel businessmen -- they will fully exploit Pakistan just like Pakistan is exploiting resources of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. What one fears is that despite much hype and attraction, CPEC will prove to be a white elephant for Pakistan and it could prove to be Pakistan's Waterloo.

Because of poor economic performance and rampant corruption, Pakistan has difficulty in paying back loans obtained at very low interest rates. One wonders how Pakistan is going to pay back the loan incurred on CPEC with very high interest rates. People need to be told that more than \$35 billion has been taken as loan at very high interest rate for this ambitious project.

Anyone who criticises the CPEC or demands a rightful share is portrayed as an 'agent of enemy' and 'anti-Pakistan' and that forces thinking people to remain quiet on the topic. However, some genuinely believe that this economic project could be a 'game-changer' -- but they are not sure in whose favour it may change the game.

May be keeping the above in mind, Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, a Kashmiri religious and political leader, while speaking on the CPEC said: "It is an opportunity for J&K also to be part of the old Silk Route, once again. We can be part of the CPEC, even before the resolution of Kashmir issue and become part of the Central Asian discourse rather than a South Asian discourse. Kashmir can become a gateway for India as well".

He further said "I am sure India will also want to be part of CPEC" but did not explain the reasons for his feeling so.

The people of Jammu and Kashmir want peace and harmony and not a war of attrition. They want to live in peace and economic stability, which can only come if there is peace in the region, hence they support economic projects. But at the same time, they don't want plundering of their natural resources by those who occupy this beautiful and resource-rich land.

Resentment, anger and rebellious attitude against the system is created when he/she is a victim of inequality; and is systematically exploited and oppressed. The system, instead of analysing the causes of resentment and rebellious trends or rectifying its own shortcomings, accuses the victim, which aggravate the situation even more.

For example, when East Pakistan was part of Pakistan, the ruling Punjabi elite of West Pakistan said distribution of wealth or resources should be based on the area and not population (because East Pakistan had more population). When East Pakistan became Bangladesh, the same elite changed its stance and said distribution of resources should be based on the population (because now Punjab had the largest population), hence deprivation of other provinces of the remaining Pakistan.

People may remain quiet but they are not fools that they don't understand who is doing what. If CPEC is being called 'China Punjab Economic Corridor', it is because of the feeling of exploitation and unfair treatment.

According to a report in Pamir Times, people of Gilgit-Baltistan have been denied compensation for land acquired for the CPEC. In frustration, people of Gojal Valley protested and demanded payment, and action against NHA officials. "It is pertinent to note that, so far, not a single penny has been paid to the land owners in Gojal Valley."

It is also pertinent to mention that the Pakistan government plans to establish 29 special economic zones along the CPEC route and, according to Sultan Rais, Chairman Awami Action Committee of Gilgit-Baltistan: "CPEC will pass through 600 km area of Gilgit-Baltistan but it is unfortunate that they are not getting even a single industrial zone or any development project."

Apart from economic aspects, the Gwadar port also has a great strategic and military significance. Astonishingly, not much attention is given to this and even not much has been said about the deal under which eight submarines are to be supplied by China to Pakistan, which will surely elevate Pakistan's naval military strength. Chinese military ships and submarines have already taken position in and around Gwadar.

Panos Mourdoukoutas writes in Forbes that "China desperately needs the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It's part of that nation's vision to write the rules of the next stage of globalisation and help its export and investment engines grow for years to come... China has to either appease India or 'forget' about the CPEC project".

The article further suggests that "if pro-Indian forces in Pakistan sabotage China's CPEC route", China should expect an open confrontation against India, because that raises the possibility of an open confrontation between China and Pakistan on the one side, and India and its allies on the other.

It is claimed that the key to success of CPEC is stability in Balochistan; and to some extent peace and stability in Gilgit-Baltistan. Can there be peace when people are denied their fundamental rights, their natural resources are systematically plundered and, in some areas, F16, Cobra helicopters and guns are in action?

Whether one likes it or not, the fact is that there is a credible presence of tens of thousands of Chinese military personnel on Pakistani soil and on Jammu and Kashmir territory controlled by Pakistan. Also the Chinese navy is playing an active part in and around Gwadar. Doesn't that undermine sovereignty of Pakistan? Or is it acceptable because the Chinese are paying a good price for that?

Apart from proxies of other countries, the role of banned terrorist organisations, including Taliban and Daesh, will also be essential because some of them are extremely angry with Pakistan, and may create problems for CPEC-related projects to settle scores with the Pakistani state.

To understand the real situation of Balochistan and possible threats to the CPEC, we cannot ignore sentiments of the local people. Balochistan Home Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti said on Saturday, December 10, 2016, that 13,575 terrorists were arrested while 337 were killed in around 2,825 operations in the province during 2015-16. Of course, the figures provided by the rebels are much higher and help us to understand the gravity of the situation.

Bramdagh Bugti, grandson of Baloch nationalist leader Akbar Bugti, not only thanked Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his open support to the people of Balochistan, but also hoped that he would raise this issue at international forums. He maintained: "It is too late; we can't remain with Pakistan any longer as it has deprived us of basic rights."

Mama Qadeer, another renegade Baloch leader, told the German Radio: "India supports our cause and the Baloch people appreciate it. Islamabad takes it as Indian interference. They blamed India's RAW for the Quetta attack. They like to blame everything on RAW. The authorities even call me a RAW agent."

No matter how rosy a picture Pakistan presents of Gwadar, the bitter fact is that there are severe problems which need to be resolved before smooth sailing of the CPEC. There is even no drinking water and people are facing enormous problems in the province.

Gwadar is now presented as a lifeline of Pakistan, but not many people know that Gwadar was not part of Pakistan until December 8, 1958. Legally, this territory was part of the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman and Pakistani Prime Minister Feroz Khan Noon bought it for 3 million dollars.

CPEC also provides China great military and strategic advantage as it will enable China to monitor Indian and American activities from Gilgit-Baltistan and Balochistan, especially from Gwadar. Gwadar can in future develop into a well-equipped military naval base, which would provide China an enormous strategic advantage in the region. This will result in increased rivalry in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean between India, China and other interested parties.

Pakistan will once again be in the eye of the storm and Pakistan may not be able to deal effectively with the challenges and the mounting debts, especially with high interest rates of the CPEC loan. Perhaps to settle certain issues or for the safety and security of Pakistan, they may compromise on Gwadar or some other national strategic assets, even on nuclear-related issues.

One fears that there is danger that after some time Gwadar may not be in control of Pakistan, as China will have complete control of the sea port. The Chinese will decide what to do and who should benefit from the facilities available at the Chinese-built port.