

theirview

# Cpec: the need for a second look by India

*New Delhi should open negotiations with the Chinese to explore if Cpec can be extended west to Afghanistan and east to India*

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**M**ost narratives on the subject published in India stress that as the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Cpec) traverses through Indian sovereign territory in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) which is a part of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), India is well within its rights to refuse any participation. This stand is a principled one with considerable merit. While this position meets with the short-term tactical requirements it does not answer what should be India's long-term strategy on this issue.

When India gained independence in August 1947, the state of Jammu and Kashmir had an area of 222,236 sq. km. Since then, due to conflict and aggression, Pakistan occupies about 78,114 sq. km and China about 42,685 sq. km, including 5,180 sq. km illegally ceded by Pakistan to China. About 101,437 sq. km remains with India. Thus three states are now in contention in Kashmir, with China denying strenuously that Aksai Chin, the area that it occupies, was ever a part of Kashmir. However, as far as Cpec is concerned, what interests us is the position of GB.

Over the years Pakistan has tried assiduously to maintain that PoK and GB are two separate entities. There is no mention of GB as a part of Pakistan in the various constitutions of Pakistan, be it the 1956, 1962, 1972 or the 1973 constitution. Even the Sino-Pak Agreement of 1963 states in Article VI that "after the settlement of Kashmir by India and Pakistan, the sovereign authority will reopen negotiations with the People's Republic of China..." Thus both Pakistan and China admit that presently they do not exercise sovereignty over GB till a final settlement is reached. Perhaps Pakistan would like GB to become its fifth province, but prudence dictates that this would adversely negate its position on the Kashmir issue and that is why it has desisted so far. Pakistan prefers to rule GB directly rather than through the PoK authorities. The possibility exists, therefore, that China may encourage Pakistan to detach GB from PoK and to declare it as a province of Pakistan with full Pakistani sovereignty over it.

Apart from forthright statements, India's actual policy too has been one of strategic ambiguity. Soon after the 1962 conflict with China, both the US and the UK pushed India into talks with Pakistan with a view to arrive at a final settlement of the Kashmir issue. The Swaran Singh-Zulfikar Ali Bhutto talks that followed had as their basis the partition of Kashmir along the ceasefire line (CFL) with a few more areas going to Pakistan. The conflict of 1965 led to the Tashkent Agreement where both the great powers, Soviet Union and the US, determined to restore the CFL by asking both India and Pakistan to withdraw to positions previously held. It was the same story in 1972 as also the Kargil conflict of 1999. In fact US official maps show PoK with the same colour wash as Pakistan and a similar position for India. In Chinese maps, Aksai Chin is never shown as a part of Kashmir.

In our several discussions with the Pakistanis over the years, India has maintained that if Pakistan accepts the CFL/LoC (line of control) as the international boundary between India and Pakistan, then it would be quite willing to give up its claims on PoK. That was the unstated logic of the Simla Agreement also.

Cpec is a net geo-strategic power addition to the formidable Sino-Pakistan nexus as it exists today. Assured of unstinted Chinese support, it will considerably embolden Pakistani ambitions for adventurism in Kashmir. There is no doubt that India will be faced with a daunting challenge as the construction and other activities pick up in Cpec in the years ahead. What is perhaps more disconcerting is the fact that in the area of Cpec, Chinese-run establishments are likely to dot the landscape, with perhaps the presence of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at vital junctions. This will limit India's military options, since no serious military planner in India would wish for a two-front situation to emerge simultaneously. The real issue is what are the options available to India?

The first option is to plan a diplomatic offensive with vigorous protests to both China and Pakistan. This may not get us far. The second option is to cause sufficient turmoil in the Baloch areas particularly by verbal and diplomatic support to dissidents there. This



option also has limited value since the Chinese can push back in the Ladakh sector in retaliation. The third option is the most interesting one: Why not enter into negotiations with the Chinese on Cpec?

The Chinese ambassador to India while speaking at United Service Institution, a think tank, offered to change the name of Cpec, if that would help India join the inaugural Belt and Road Forum Summit. Later this was withdrawn perhaps on Pakistani protests. Nevertheless what could the agenda for the talks be? The first issue would be on how to circumvent the vexed issue of sovereignty in the GB area, since this has emerged as one of the more important points in the position taken by India. After all China also takes a hardline position when development issues are on the table in the case of Arunachal Pradesh. Perhaps diplomatic finesse and obfuscation would be necessary.

But the most important issue on the agenda could be the extension of Cpec (or a renamed version of it) into a western arm to Afghanistan and an eastern arm to India. If this can be agreed upon, then can India not export its goods via the eastern arm both to Afghanistan and to Xinjiang and beyond to Central Asia? We have long desired a land link to Afghanistan and to Central Asia and this would be a major strategic gain for us. Would Indian trucks be able to ply on the road links thus created? If this could be negotiated, it would represent a major strategic gain for us.

However the fundamental question remains: Would China buy into this narrative? And could it persuade Pakistan to comply? The only way to test it is to open negotiations with the Chinese.

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