**A rethinking of CPEC security**

On **Aug 23, 2022** [Dr Kaleem Imam](https://nation.com.pk/authorpost/columnist/dr-kaleem-imam-columnist/)

It is time to alter the paradigm of CPEC security. An unstable security situation is the number one fear of foreign investors. Foreign investors are always more risk averse than local investors. Investors’ confidence is directly affected by a lack of security which eventually re­sults in capital outflow. Sever­al academic studies examine the impact of security issues on capital markets. Because of such caveats, no prudent person would expect any increase in foreign di­rect investment.

Rather than opting for quick fixes, one should accept that police are the premier law enforcement agency. There should be no ambiguity that our police can pro­vide adequate security to CPEC projects where presently they are trusted to pro­tect the Presidency, Prime Minister, Sen­ate, Supreme Court, Governor Houses, and even foreign heads of State.

So, it is high time that the first respond­er, federal and provincial police take the lead and oversee CPEC security, which will lessen the sense of deprivation if any among the natives. Local police are best aware of their vicinity as well the tem­perament of its people. Recruiting peo­ple from the area will also give a sense of ownership to its residents.

Nevertheless, the police will require some capacity building, modern re­sources, operational autonomy with stringent accountability, and for the first time be absolved away from illegal extra­neous interferences. A specialised secu­rity arrangement should be deputed to oversee sensitive locations as well as the travel of high-profile personnel.

State-of-the-art equipment required to cordon off certain areas should be pro­vided. More so, uninterrupted coordina­tion with other security agencies must be ensured to assure a prompt syner­gised response. As a result of running away from these measures, we have not succeeded to this day, and expecting a different outcome henceforth will be a classic example of insanity.

‘Policies are the conscience of a govern­ment’. But then in practice countrymen unanimously agreeing on any policy mat­ter is rare in today’s polarised society. A notable exception though is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is widely agreed among all political and apolitical stakeholders that CPEC will prove to be a ‘game-changer’ for the common man and will improve our geo­economics position, but words can be worthless without prudent actions.

CPEC is touted by all political actors as their brainchild or a product of their vi­sionary and unwavering efforts. Whereas China’s counterpart states that CPEC had been envisioned decades before 2015, the year when it was formally launched.

It is expected that this $62 billion con­nectivity project will provide much-need­ed access to China’s landlocked region Xinjiang and our Gilgit-Baltistan region as well as Gwadar Port along the Arabian Sea. According to Mr Akram Zaki, ex-For­eign Secretary of Pakistan, China wants to push Pakistan toward self-reliance, away from the dependency syndrome creat­ed by fair-weather friends, as it gains ac­cess to the Arabian Sea. Moreover, consid­erable parts of South and West Asia, the Middle East, Europe, as well as Africa will be milking CPEC in some way or another.

Pakistan is one of the major beneficia­ries of this mega project. Whether those benefits are fully realised is not a point of contention now, as CPEC also produces a variety of by-products. On the ground, various noteworthy efforts are being made to improve the livelihoods of the lo­cal population through projects like Gwa­dar Livelihood Project and Gwadar Wom­en’s Employment Development Centre.

Electricity shortages are expected to improve from the China Hub Coal Pow­er Project and the Coal-Fired Power Project as well as 3000 solar panels that provide “free of cost” electricity. Sever­al road projects are currently in the pro­cess of being constructed. Moreover, a mass transit system for Quetta is to be considered.

The question arises, with all such po­tential projects, why is Pakistan not reaping the benefits and experiencing an economic crisis? The short answer to this question is our long-term entan­glement with temporary arrangements. This meandering situation can be better understood by examining the slip-ups that led to it.

Another plague that must be cured is a fragile legal skeleton. Taking a closer look at this will help us understand it better. With the formal launch of CPEC, a secretariat under the Ministry of Plan­ning was tasked with overseeing the on­going activities and ensuring there are no unscheduled interruptions. The need for a dedicated authority appeared lat­er. As smooth as it could have been, the path to that authority hasn’t been as easy as it could be.

Potential investors expressed serious concerns about having to overcome bu­reaucratic hurdles in different industries to obtain approvals and licenses. As a re­sult, the creation of a one-stop shop, like the Chinese National Development and Reform Commission, was recommended.

Against this backdrop, in October 2019, the President passed an Ordinance es­tablishing CPEC Authority. The Ordi­nance was extended in January 2020 due to the significant disposition of CPEC. As a result of the inherent sunset clause in Article 89(2)(i) of the Constitution, the Ordinance was eventually repealed in June 2020. However, our then govern­ment was unable to pass an act until May 2021. As a result, the CPEC Authority was working without legal protection from June 2020 until May 2021.

When this void was realised, the Advi­sor to the Prime Minister on Parliamen­tary Affairs moved for immediate consid­eration of the bill for The PEC Authority constitution. Due to opposition concerns about the Minister’s qualification for the role of Advisor, Mr Shibli Faraz tabled the said bill in parliament, which was passed.

One of the major amendments to the Act was the elimination of the Chief Ex­ecutive Officer. Additionally, the role of the Ministry of Planning as an oversight body was replaced by the office of the Prime Minister. The Authority was also given the power to enforce the Act. In terms of how enforcement would be car­ried out, the Act is silent.

Authority has been disparaged since its inception, both in terms of its utility and efficacy. Nevertheless, most of it is un­called for; some of it is not. Without a vi­sion for the future, how can an authority work? The Government did not appoint a chairperson after the resignation. Inves­tors’ confidence was bound to be shaken by such a lack of political will.

At this juncture, we are back at square one and lamenting the Authority’s very existence. Currently, the Minis­ter of Planning, Development and Re­form maintains that this debacle in the ‘game-changer’ project is solely the re­sponsibility of the Authority. Thus, it would be best if a secretariat under his ministry was reinstated.

It is underlined that the Authority was specifically enacted to cater for the hur­dles faced by foreign nationals. If any­thing, the on-window arrangement is better equipped to deal with securi­ty concerns. Eliminating the Authority would be tantamount to disregarding the investors’ confidence and reinstat­ing their concerns.

Our habitual approach to dilemmas and lack of clarity in legislation reflects our failure to solve problems. Interna­tional investors look at the legal frame­work even before considering any op­portunity, though our countrymen are now accustomed to such insecurity. Due to the same reasons, Delaware, USA is deemed to be more business-friendly than Maryland, USA.

Our country has little chance of at­tracting foreign investment under these political circumstances, where a gov­ernment promises exemption from im­port taxes, and then withdraws it. For foreign investors to be attracted and provided with necessary assurances, a long-term policy is required. What about a charter for timely implementa­tion of agreed and established policies, where we don’t have to worry about the change of regime anymore?

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