**[CPEC and the Great Game](https://www.dawn.com/news/1433210/cpec-and-the-great-game)**

[Munir Akram](https://www.dawn.com/authors/368/munir-akram)September 16, 2018

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OVER the past year, the Western media, echoed by many in India and some in Pakistan, has conducted an extensive campaign of criticism against the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. It has been variously asserted that the project is building roads that are not needed; it will only facilitate China’s trade and bring little benefit to Pakistan; it will burden Pakistan with enormous foreign debt, and so on.

This campaign gained momentum after US Defence Secretary James Mattis remarked that CPEC would traverse ‘disputed territory’ (meaning Gilgit- Baltistan) and former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson questioned the financial structure of projects under China’s Belt and Road Initiative. US opposition to CPEC seemed to be confirmed when in July the current Secretary of State Mike Pompeo argued that an IMF financing programme for Pakistan should not be used to repay Chinese ‘bond holders’ and banks.

The US stance was interpreted widely as part of its strategic confrontation with China (spanning trade, technology, the South China Sea) and an additional point of pressure to secure Pakistan’s compliance with American demands on Afghanistan.

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The state secretary’s remarks redoubled the doubts within the incoming Pakistani government about the wisdom of approaching the IMF to achieve the urgently required stabilisation of Pakistan’s economy, especially its external imbalances. In an interview, Finance Minister Asad Umar stated that ‘if we choose not to go to the IMF’, it will not be because of the expected ‘economic pain’ but because of ‘non-economic’ and ‘national security’ considerations.

Prior to the elections, PTI leaders had spoken of the need to review some of the CPEC projects and to prioritise the social objectives espoused by the party. China was naturally anxious that between this desire for a review by the new government and the Western media onslaught, the CPEC project, which is the flagship of President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative, may be derailed.

CPEC was a major item on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s agenda for his recent visit and talks with the new Pakistani government. Any doubts regarding Pakistan’s position on CPEC were laid to rest in the public and private assurances conveyed by the prime minister, foreign minister and the COAS to the Chinese foreign minister.

But the Western media has persisted in its campaign. The Financial Times published an article entitled ‘Pakistan rethinks its role in Xi’s Belt and Road plan’, printed the day after the Chinese foreign minister’s visit. It quoted purported remarks by Pakistan’s trade adviser expressing disquiet about the ‘disadvantages’ of some CPEC agreements which Pakistan intends to ‘renegotiate’. The commerce ministry immediately issued a strong rebuttal stating that there was “complete unanimity” between China and Pakistan on CPEC’s future direction and affirmed the Pakistani government’s commitment to CPEC.

Even after this, the Wall Street Journal offered an article asserting that Pakistan is ‘pressing’ China ‘to realign the goals’ of CPEC ‘to take on poverty-alleviating initiatives and build factories’.

In fact, the projects included under CPEC were those identified by the previous PML-N government. China has consistently expressed readiness to reflect the priorities of the new government for social infrastructure and poverty alleviation projects. An agreement to make these and other adjustments was in fact reached a day ago by Pakistan’s planning minister and deputy head of China’s National Development and Reform Commission.

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s information minister told the press that during his talks in Islamabad, the US secretary of state had assured that the US will not block an IMF financing programme for Pakistan. This implies a lifting of US objections to the servicing of Chinese debt (which is a fraction of debt to Western financial sources).

A video, circulating on the internet, evidently sponsored by the Wall Street Journal, projects Pakistan and CPEC as the fulcrum of US-China strategic competition. Yet, the Western media may be ‘more royal than the king’ if not dead wrong. Rather than being the focus of competition, Pakistan and Afghanistan may be one area where the US and China could cooperate rather than compete.

The US has several tactical and strategic reasons to cooperate with China and support CPEC.

First, the US needs China’s support to realise a political settlement in Afghanistan. The US and China are both working in parallel to improve Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. China also has close contacts with the Afghan Taliban. It desires, like the US, to eliminate all terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. It can make large investments in Afghanistan. And it can moderate any disruption of a political settlement by Iran, Pakistan and even Russia.

Second, the extension of CPEC to Afghanistan would contribute to its ‘connectivity’ to Central Asia, China and beyond, and foster its development and stability. Moreover, if India joins CPEC (eventually), it will gain access to Afghanistan and Central Asia (which Pakistan has staunchly resisted so far). Both objectives are part of the US strategy for South Asia. While noting the new Pakistan government’s commitment to CPEC, the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman significantly added that the construction of CPEC “can absorb third party participation and benefit the entire region”.

Third, CPEC is essential for the stabilisation and growth of the Pakistani economy. The US will no doubt pressure Pakistan to do its bidding on Afghanistan. It will push Pakistan to bend, not break. In the ultimate analysis, a ‘failed’ nuclear Pakistan is not a palatable prospect for either the US or China. China’s assumption of the onus for Pakistan’s economic stabilisation is not a bad bargain for the US.

These considerations may not be accepted at present by vengeful US generals, intelligence operatives and ideologues, smarting from their failure in Afghanistan. They are better understood by US foreign policy professionals. Indeed, the Obama administration expressed support for CPEC.

The major opposition to CPEC, going forward, will emanate from a chauvinistic Indian regime which sees the sponsorship of terrorism in Balochistan and unrest in Gilgit-Baltistan as a smart strategy to restrain Pakistan’s support for the Kashmiri freedom struggle. Yet, given the tectonic shifts in strategic alignments in the entire Asian heartland, and the opportunities for an economy-led normalisation across the region, India may be shooting itself in the foot.

The writer is a former Pakistan ambassador to the UN.

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