[Sabotaging CPEC: An Indo-US ploy?](https://nation.com.pk/02-Jan-2019/sabotaging-cpec-an-indo-us-ploy" \t "_new)

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Pakistan’s Foreign Office spokesman, during his last week’s press briefing, made it just clear that the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) had no military dimensions. “The CPEC is a bilateral economic project, which is not against any country”, he further clarified. He was commenting on a report published in a leading US newspaper alleging that the CPEC was not about economy and trade but had military dimensions as well. No doubt, there are strong military ties between China and Pakistan. The CPEC, however, has nothing to do with these ties. Both ‘all-weather’ friends have been enjoying close diplomatic, strategic and military relations for decades, independent of, and prior to, the CPEC project. China and Pakistan, being two sovereign states, have the right to foster strong economic and military relations in accordance with their national interests. Therefore, any regional or global power is by no means justified in unnecessarily objecting to this bilateral relationship.

Last week, Chinese embassy in Pakistan also refuted another media report which claimed that Pakistan would pay $40 billion to china in 20 years in shape of repayments of debt and dividends on Chinese investment under flagship CPEC. The embassy issued a statement that the Chinese government provided concessional loans of $5.874 billion for Pakistan’s transportation infrastructure projects, with a composite interest rate of around 2 per cent in a repayment period of 20-25 years. The embassy also clarified that all the CPEC energy projects are investments in nature and the companies are responsible for their own profits and losses and repayments of loan. Therefore, both of the latest media reports on the CPEC are wrong and misleading, which appear to be only aimed at making the CPEC project controversial.

As a matter of fact, there has been a systematic and persistent propaganda campaign against the CPEC since this project was formally announced in April 2015. Ever since, this mega project has also been the subject of numerous conspiracies and controversies, both domestically and internationally. In order to dispel similar domestic controversies, Pakistan had to conceive and announced the idea of the “Western Route” of the CPEC in addition to some Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the CPEC route in different provinces in the country. Noticeably, a section of national media, and various so-called nationalist political parties and pressure groups have also been the ardent critic of this mega economic project.

Terrorism has been a major tool to sabotage the ‘game changing’ CPEC project. We have observed a significant surge in the terror attacks across the country following the formal launch of this project. The province of Balochistan, which occupies a pivotal position in the entire CPEC project owing to deep-sea Gwadar Port, instantly became the hotbed of terrorism, militancy and insurgency. This troubled province has experienced most of the worst terror attacks in Pakistan during the last couple of years. According to official statistics, there have been some 1860 terrorist incidents in Balochistan during the last 7 years, leaving more than 2300 people dead and many more injured. In this respect, Quetta, Mastung, Awaran, Khuzdar and Dera Bugti were the worst affected districts in the province. Gilgit-Baltistan, which hosts another important segment of the CPEC route, has also been under attacks by the terrorists. This region experienced the unfortunate 2013 Nanga Parbat massacre where 10 foreign tourists were shot dead. A large number of schools have also been torched by miscreants in this region. Many Chinese nationals, engineers and workers, who were working to complete various CPEC projects in Pakistan, have also been attacked and killed. The recent terror attack on Chinese Consulate in Karachi is also being viewed as a conspiracy to sabotage CPEC.

The United States and India, the two strategic allies in the post-9/11 era, are particularly known for their strong opposition to the CPEC as well as an anti-CPEC hostile propaganda. Both countries have lunched a proactive diplomatic and media campaign against the CPEC for the last few years. We have noticed Indian PM Modi’s persistent anxiety over the CPEC project. He has openly hinted at supporting the separatist elements in Balochistan and Gilgit-Baltistan. In May 2015, he readily visited China to persuade the Chinese government to abandon this project by maintain that the CPEC route was passing through the disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan. During the G-20 summit at Hangzhou in China in September 2016, PM Modi had expressed India’s concerns over the CPEC in his bilateral meeting with Chinese President, holding that the two countries needed to be “sensitive” to each other’s strategic interests. In October 2017, the Trump administration told the Senate Armed Services Committee that CPEC was passing through a disputed territory. Similarly, a senior Trump administration official has recently also remarked that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) “is a made in China, made for China” initiative.

Substantially shifting the focus of US foreign policy from the Middle East to the East Asia, the Obama administration ambitiously launched its ‘pivot to Asia’ regional strategy in 2012. Under this US foreign policy initiative, the US will endeavour to increasingly relocate its extensive military and economic resources in the Asia Pacific region, realising the utmost economic, political and military significance of this region in the twenty-first century. This US regional strategy includes actions like engaging with regional multilateral organisations, strengthening bilateral security alliances, forging an active broad-based military presence, deepening relationship with emerging powers, expanding trade and investment, and advancing democracy and human rights in the region.

There is a general perception that the US pivot to Asia strategy is nothing but another important tool of its so-called China containment policy in this region. It only aims at minimising or undermining the rising economic and political influence of China in the world. At present, the US economy is in trouble on account of the current global financial crisis and a number of domestic economic constraints. The long-term viability of the US economic model is also being questioned. Therefore, the US is wary of the rapidly growing Chinese economy, which already has become world’s largest economy in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). China has also become the global hub for manufacturing, and the largest manufacturing economy as well as the largest export of goods in the world.

Besides the East Asia, the South Asian region has also become the primary hub of US extensive strategic manoeuvring in Asia over a period of time. Therefore, notwithstanding its typical ‘pivot to Asia’ strategy, South Asia is now playing a pivotal role in articulating and realising US strategic goals in the region. Bordering China, Iran, and Central Asian Republics, South Asia is bounded on the south by the Indian Ocean, which provides the major sea route connecting the Middle East, Africa, and Europe to East Asia and Australia. Thus this region is central to the so-called One Belt, One Road plan. The flagship OBOR project of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is also located in this region. Therefore, South Asia is by no means strategically less important to the US than East Asia.

India and Afghanistan have occupied a central position in the US ‘pivot to South Asia’ strategy. On the pretext of fighting its War on Terror, the US has been staying in Afghanistan since 2001. Ever since, it has spent its enormous economic and military resources apparently to stabilise the volatile Hindukush state. However, its broader strategic interests demand its active presence in the region. The US has greatly helped India consolidate its position in Afghanistan. Now India is ambitiously desirous of replacing the US in Afghanistan as its ‘successor in interest’ in the region after the US exits Afghanistan. India, Afghanistan and Iran have also signed a tripartite agreement to develop Iranian Chabahar port and a linked trade corridor. Many believe that the primary objective of this project is to undermine the strategic importance and relevance of Pakistan’s Gwadar port.

At the moment, Pakistan’s strategic, security and economic interests observably converge with that of China in this region. Both countries will certainly benefit from the CPEC. Therefore, both countries are currently determined to actively protect their shared interests. To provide security to Chinese nationals working on the CPEC project in Pakistan, Pakistan Army has already established a Special Security Division (SPD), comprising some 15 thousand security personnel. Indeed, Pakistan and China need to be more active, vigilant and cautious to counter all CPEC-related controversies and conspiracies being hatched in the region and beyond.

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