**Second phase of CPEC**

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In the presence of the visiting Vice Premier of China, Mr. He Lifeng, and Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, the two countries signed six important MOUs and agreements at a ceremony held at the Prime Minister House on 31st December. The Chinese Vice Premier is visiting Pakistan to participate in the celebrations concerning the completion of one decade of CPEC. Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, speaking on the occasion, said that the two countries were entering the second phase of CPEC, which will feature Business-to-Business investment in agriculture and information technology to enable Pakistan to export its products according to Chinese standards and requirements. He revealed that during the first phase, more than $25 billion investments took place in power, road, hydel power, and public transport.  
Regrettably, the progress on CPEC projects stalled during the three and a half years of PTI rule for inexplicable reasons, notwithstanding the fact that CPEC was not an exclusive agenda of any political party but a project of transformative impact on Pakistan’s economy undertaken with the cooperation of our perennial and most reliable partner, China, which has stood with Pakistan in times of adversity and played a pivotal role in its economic advancement as well as in strengthening its defense capabilities.  
The visit of the Chinese Vice Premier to Pakistan to participate in the 10th anniversary of CPEC celebrations, being held when the PDM government is to end within the next ten days -- as rightly observed by the intellectual circles -- is not an inconsequential event and means a lot in the context of unflinching and uninterrupted Chinese support to Pakistan, as well as a strong message to the detractors of CPEC, showing how seriously China and Pakistan view the transformative role of this pivotal project of BRI in regards to regional connectivity and its ultimate objective of shared economic prosperity.  
In this regard, the congratulatory message of Chinese President Xi Jinping on this occasion amply demonstrates the abiding commitment of China to this project for the realization of its objective and unswerving support to Pakistan under all circumstances. The Chinese President emphasized three things. Firstly, he reiterated that China would work with Pakistan to aim for high standards and livelihood-enhancing outcomes and build CPEC into an exemplary project of high-quality BRI cooperation. Secondly, CPEC is a vivid testament to the all-weather friendship between China and Pakistan and provides an important underpinning for building an even closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future in the new era. Thirdly, no matter how the international landscape may change, China will always stand firmly with Pakistan.  
As far as standing together, the sentiments are mutual. The relations between the two countries, which are surely beyond the domain of normal diplomatic ties, have withstood vicissitudes of time and grown from strength to strength. Both countries have been extending unqualified support to each other on issues of vital concern to them in the domain of global and geopolitics, besides expanding economic cooperation. China has played a pivotal role in the economic development of Pakistan, strengthening its defense capability, in addition to unflinching support in developing nuclear energy.  
The CPEC has given a unique impetus to their ties by taking them to new heights with the prospects of both countries reaping colossal economic benefits. For Pakistan, CPEC is a harbinger of a new era of prosperity by making it a hub of economic activity in the region and a conduit for regional connectivity. The success of CPEC, as per its envisaged objectives, could also allow Pakistan to be less prone to the dictates of a superpower.  
For China, the CPEC, besides conferring a tremendous boost to its economic success, means a pathway to the entire Asia and eventually the world, loaded with prospects of ultimately leading to the enhancement of her political influence at the global level.  
However, it is an undeniable reality that the USA and its allies perceive a threat to their global standing and strategic interests from the burgeoning economic and political influence of China and consequently are pursuing a ‘contain China’ policy with the help of some regional players, including India. The USA and India have been openly opposing CPEC and are engaged in all sorts of overt and covert efforts to sabotage it.  
It is also a reality that though the USA publicly denies putting pressure on Pakistan to choose between her and China, its efforts behind the scenes do aim at dissuading her from -- as it perceives -- falling into the lap of China. Pakistan surely faces a dilemma. Pakistan’s relations with China and becoming part of CPEC are dictated by the regional ground realities. I have always maintained in my writings that Pakistan’s economic progress and security interests are inextricably linked to this region, and China is the most reliable partner in this regard. Maintaining and strengthening those bonds are indispensable factors and lend eternity to their cooperation.  
Nevertheless, it does not mean showing the cold shoulder to the USA or its allies. Pakistan also has very strong economic and strategic linkages with the USA and EU. Pakistan, in this situation, needs to convince the USA that it was neither entering into an alliance with China against her nor contemplating to lower its engagements with it or the EU. Pakistan’s relations with China in the multifarious domains were indispensable for her economic well-being and regional strategic interests, and Pakistan, like other nations, had the right to do so. Further, the strengthening of these ties could also contribute to regional peace, harmony, and prosperity without undermining the interests of the USA and its allies. Though it seems a difficult proposition in the given circumstances, it is not an impossible one.