**Strengthening CPEC**

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In this crucial time when our country is facing economic instability, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – with a massive $62 billion investment plan – can play a key role as a ‘game changer’ for the national economy, especially for the development and prosperity of Balochistan.

The significance of this multi-billion-dollar corridor is, however, poorly understood. This is a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to connect more than 60 countries across Asia, Europe and Africa. CPEC promises to open up new vistas of socio-economic development and employment opportunities for the people of Balochistan.

We can say that Balochistan, and Gwadar in particular, is the linchpin of this mega project. This project will contribute to the development of the whole province and address various economic and social problems there. Gwadar will be transformed into an economic hub after the completion of several projects under CPEC. It is heartening to see that more countries are taking advantage of the investment opportunities offered by the special economic zones there. With the construction of the western route of CPEC, property value has skyrocketed in areas where these roads have been built. Other cities like Qalat, Quetta and Zhob will also become more vibrant with the completion of the planned road network which will give a boost to economic activities and other development projects under CPEC.

Numerous road and transport, energy, education and training, industrial and other socio-economic projects are also being carried out under CPEC. Energy projects include a 320MW China Hub Coal Power Project, and 300MW Coal-Fired Power Project at Gwadar. Likewise, connectivity projects encompass the 19km four-lanes East Bay Expressway Gwadar which is near completion, linking the Makran Coastal Highway N-10 to the Gwadar Port. Those under construction are Zhob-Quetta, Kuchlak (N-50), Khuzdar–Basima Road (N-30), Hoshab–Awaran Road Section (M-8), Nokundi–Mashkhel Road, Awaran–Khuzdar Road Section (M-8), up-gradation of DI Khan (Yarik) –Zhob, N-50 Phase-I, Mashkhel–Panjgur Road and Quetta Mass Transit.

Upgradation and development of fishing, boat-making and maintenance services to protect and promote livelihoods of the local population is being carried out under the Gwadar Livelihood Project. As a matter of fact, CPEC will affect the province economically, commercially as well as geographically. A positive impact is likely to be a step towards mitigation of poverty and reduction of unemployment. It will be a catalyst for change in the shape of reduction of inequities among undeveloped provinces. Soon after PM Shehbaz Sharif took charge as the 23rd prime minister, he turned his attention towards CPEC which had been started by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

In his maiden speech in the National Assembly after winning election, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had said that his government would speed up the construction of CPEC. He had previously spoken highly of CPEC several times, calling it an ambitious blueprint to transform Pakistan into a major emerging economy so that the less-developed parts of the country could enjoy the dividends of development.

The corridor will not only help and benefit Pakistan and China but the whole region, including Afghanistan, Iran, India, and the Central Asian Republics. Road, rail, and air linkages will lead to a win-win model for all and is considered a real hope for a better future with growth and development of the economy. India and Afghanistan will sooner or later join this project.

Per a market pundit: “Pakistan may have some leverage in Afghanistan, but as far as CPEC is concerned, it cannot afford to miss this once-in-a-lifetime chance, especially when the people of the country are getting desperate for the promised future."

Unfortunately, there are those that are working on an anti- state agenda with the support of foreign countries and have been trying to undermine the development of the province by targeting state institutions, security forces and also Chinese nationals. In a span of just one month, the city of Karachi witnessed three bombing incidents – a suicide attack on Chinese teachers at the University of Karachi’s Confucius Institute in which three Chinese language teachers and their driver were killed; and bicycle and motorbike improvised explosive device (IED) blasts in the densely populated Saddar and Kharadar areas targeting Pakistan Coast Guards and police..

Moreover, there is no doubt that CPEC is the game-changer in the region and beyond. Both the Pakistani and Chinese leadership need to place special attention and focus – with dedication and commitment – to promoting CPEC and OBOR as a success story. They need to do this with strong political will, wisdom, vision, for real economic growth and common prosperity for the whole region through regional connectivity.

We should strengthen deep strategic cooperation with China and use CPEC to develop infrastructure, hydro-energy resources, and industrial cooperation for real dividends and long-term industrialization. No doubt, CPEC is not only for our economic growth but in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and will bring transformation through regional connectivity.

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