**Understanding the CPEC Authority legislation**

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The managing authority of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), commonly termed as the game changer for Pakistan, has no legal standing for the last six weeks. The government got the CEPA bill passed from the National Assembly on February 2, 2021 despite commotion from the opposition on many sections of the bills. An opposition Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Ahsan Iqbal has totally rejected the bill saying the Bill is undesired when the Planning Commission was doing its job successfully. He was one of the five members of the NA Committee who voted against the Bill. But, the Committee cleared it by a majority of two votes.

Strangely, the government came up with the CPECA Bill very recently after getting extension of the CPEC Authority Ordinance 2019 several times that President Dr. Arif Alvi promulgated on October 8, 2019, just before the Prime Minister’s visit to China. Perhaps the Prime Minister wanted a face saving for his visit. Otherwise, the PTI government’s entire tenure is a miserable reflection of its interest in the CPEC management.

Prime Minister Imran Khan’s casual behaviour towards CPEC is understandable. Perhaps, it is for the only reason that he hates everything that is signed or initiated by the former premier Mian Muhammad Nawaz. The CPEC was signed by the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his visit to China on July 5, 2013 in Beijing – his first official overseas visit after assuming the PM office. The former Chinese Premier Li Keqiang decided to include Pakistan in the One Belt One Road initiative with CPEC during his first foreign visit in May 2013 after assuming office in March 2013.

In May 2018, just before the general elections in Pakistan, I had the chance to appear on the China Global Television Network (CGTN) for a geopolitical analysis. The host of the CGTN show asked me, what would be the future of CPEC if Imran Khan wins the election because he is against it. The question was reflective of China’s fears that are still there even today.

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In my interview then, I proposed an inclusive and empowered CPEC authority having role of Pakistan army in it, not overall control of it as envisaged in the CPECA Ordinance 2019 or hurriedly passed CPECA Bill from the National Assembly recently in horridly manner. I still believe that Pakistan army’s role is very important in the management and monitoring of the CPEC projects but heading the authority should be the prerogative of a civilian professional with a backbone advisory of provincial representation. Having retired or in-service army officers in key positions in the civilian departments and organizations have already given enough bad taste in the nation’s mouth. It would be too much when the media has already highlighted that the decisions taken by the CPEC authority officials would be beyond the jurisdiction of National Accountability Bureau (NAB) or Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

Interestingly, Prime Minister Imran Khan is keenly interested to directly take care of the CPEC Authority as mentioned in the recently passed Bill by the National Assembly, “to plan and coordinate the smooth implementation of the $62 billion connectivity project”.

The other salient features of the bill are that the Authority can seek assistance from any office, authority or agency working under the government, provincial government or local government in the country.

The chairperson of the Authority will be appointed for a period of four years and will be eligible for re-appointment for one additional term of four years. No person shall be appointed as chairperson, member of executive director operations or research if he or his dependents have any direct or indirect financial interest in with any person or body involved in CPEC-related projects. The chairperson, member, executive director operations or research shall not, during their respective terms of office, engage in any other service, business, vocation or employment.

The auditor general of Pakistan shall annually audit the accounts of the Authority. Quarterly reports shall be published on the Authority’s website. No person shall communicate or allow to be communicated any record or information obtained pursuant to this Act, to a person not legally entitled to that record or information or allow any person not legally entitled to have access to any record obtained under this Act.

No suit, prosecution or other legal proceedings shall lie against the Authority, the chairperson, member, executive director operations of research, employees, officers, experts, consultants, or advisors in respect of anything done or purported to be done in good faith.

It’s ironic to have such type of sections in the CPEC Authority Bill. It seems that the government wants hegemony over the CPEC regime. The question is if the Bill would get through the Senate of Pakistan? It seems possible in the political circumstances we are going through. Hegemonic steps would certainly make the game changer to a debt trap.

While we strive for one-window operation as a backbone for the agricultural and industrial phase of the CPEC which should be handled by the relevant and expert human resource, we also need to make the CPEC projects more transparent and efficient. A rational narrative is imperative to wipe off the ambiguity and rumours by engaging parliamentarians and media counter offensive campaigns. Perhaps, we need to rationalize the new CPEC Authority legislation too.

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