

CPEC Route Controversy: Problems and Opportunities

Archaeology & History

Saeeda Mengal ¹

Abstract

History testifies the fact that major project of national importance becomes controversial in Pakistan, Kalabagh dam issue became disputed and could not be built. Similarly, there is seemingly imperishable controversy regarding the routes of China Pakistan economic corridor, it is very shocking why such conflicting narratives unfold about important national projects. This article traces the roots of CPEC route controversy. This paper is descriptive and analytical. There are basically three routes connecting the Gwadar port with Xinjiang in China i.e Eastern, central and western Route. This paper deconstructs the argument advanced by the government of Pakistan in favor of Eastern route. Furthermore, it has been argued that imbalance in economic development leads to regional inequality fueling inter provincial discord and hatred. Such feelings of deprivation and resentment brings about insurgency and instability. Keeping in the view the greater benefit accrued from constructing the western route, the article recommends that the government of Pakistan should prioritize the western route in order to bring the under privileged areas of Balochistan into developed one and kept it par with other areas of Pakistan. This step on the part of government will help stabilize Pakistan.

Key Words: Gwadar, CPEC, Balochistan, KPK, China, Route

Introduction

The schism over the CPEC Route has turned the relation sour between the Federation and Federating units. The lesser developed provinces i.e. Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa harbor serious reservation over any route change. This Project, like Kalabagh Dam, has fueled the centrifugal tendencies among the people of smaller provinces. The Government of KPK and Baloch Nationalist Leaders have put forward the old narrative that

¹ Chairperson Department of History, University of Balochistan Quetta, Pakistan.

political elite of the country is responsible for their backwardness and they are responsible for any route change. They argue that the political elite is diverting the original route to pass through eastern route. On the contrary, the government tried to assuage the concerns of Balochistan and KPK. To allay their apprehension, all Parties Conference was convened on 20th May, 2015 and it was unanimously decided that western route would be prioritized. However, the statistical data show that government didn't follow on its promises pledged in APC.

The Government gave various explanations to justify its position on CPEC Route. At last, it took the stance that CPEC is a "one corridor, multiple passage" project and Eastern route is prioritized because of Pre-existing infrastructure and stable security condition pervading there. The intellectual circles have come up with various explanations regarding route controversy. They argue that government is helpless in deciding the routes and justify their claims by putting forward the 'Security Concerns' and 'Beggars can't be choosers' hypothesis. However, history testifies the fact that the route passing through western alignments has always been seen from strategic point of view by the conquerors and Colonial powers. Consequently, it is pertinent to say that perhaps the fears and reservations of the people of Balochistan, Fata and KPK are rooted in past injustices perpetrated on them. Hence this project, like Kalabagh Dam, has fueled the centrifugal tendencies among the people of smaller provinces. This project seems to become another source of inter-provincial strike. It is very shocking, why the narratives about highly important national projects unfold in this way?

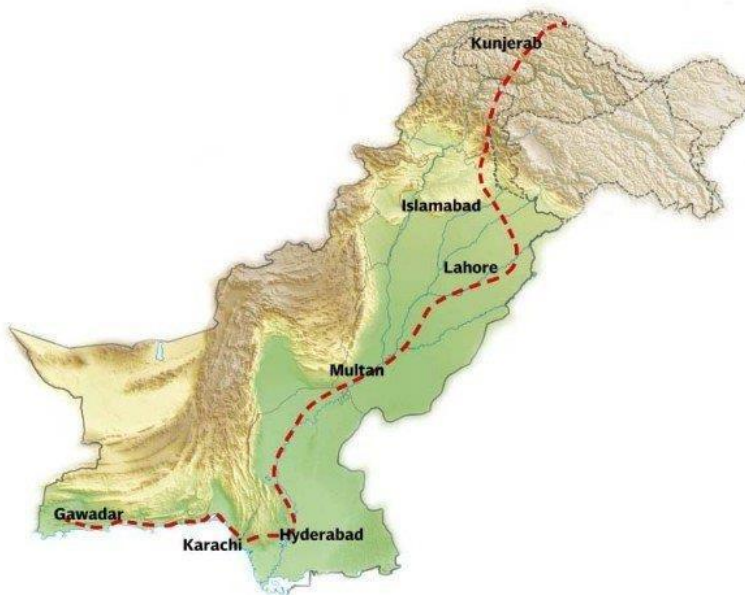
How the Controversy began?

Initially, people were oblivious to the number of routes and the entries to the corridor plan. They only knew about a huge Chinese investment and development of Gwadar port. However, as time passed on, people came to know about various routes connecting Gwadar with Xinjiang in China. Instead of making the whole corridor plan and its various routes crystal clear to the public, Government played no fewer roles in exacerbating the confusion lurking in the minds of people. The Government took various positions to explain the corridor plan and its infrastructure development. First, the Government held the view that there would be no change in the route. This stance of Government raised many questions, then it answered them. People started to ask questions about the original route of CPEC. Questions of route and what was the original route were regularly discussed. It was the time that the Government made it clear to the public that there were three routes i.e. Eastern, Central and Western. And further added that three

would be built simultaneously. The Government took a U-turn and presented another explanation that the three routes would be built in stages and Eastern route would be prioritized because of Pre-existing infrastructure. Backing out on its promises made in All-Parties Conference. This is how the controversy erupted between the Federation and Federating units. This controversy seems unlikely to die out.

Following conclusion is drawn from the debate that either government itself was ignorant of the number of routes and came to know about it with the passage of time or it wanted to conceal the real facts and information from the public for unknown reasons. Resultantly, the vacillating position of government over the CPEC routes can be held responsible to kick off the controversy. (Narani, 2016)

Now it is pertinent to look at the Eastern and Western routes and make a comparative analysis of this benefits and pitfalls. The Eastern route is a Six-Lane Highway that starts from Gwadar and passes through Panjgur, Khuzdar, Ratedero, Kashmore, Multan, Faisalabad, Hassanabdal and onward. The Eastern route passes through relatively developed provinces of Pakistan i.e. Punjab and Sindh. It connects the two largest cities of Pakistan i.e. Karachi and Lahore.



On the other hand, the Western route passes from the lesser developed provinces of Pakistan i.e. Balochistan and KPK. It takes its start from Gwadar and passes through Turbat, Panjgur, Kalat, Quetta, Killa Saifullah, Zhob, Dera Ismail Khan, Hassanabdul and onwards. (Shabaz, 2015)



Opposition from KPK and Baloch Nationalists

Provincial Assembly of Khayber Pakhtoon Khwa opposed the Eastern route. KPK Assembly passed a resolution against any route change. Moreover, it threatened to purchase land for the Eastern route in KPK. KPK Government held the view that Eastern route is the shortest possible route and it passes through the backward area. It can help minimize the poverty and unemployment ratio in these areas. Hence, the Baloch Nationalist Leaders are of the opinion that Eastern Route should be completed on priority basis. (Ahmed, 2015)

The Baloch Nationalist Leaders posed staunch opposition to the project that the local people would likely to lose control over natural resources. Besides this, they have serious apprehensions that multi-billion dollar project would not benefit the local residents. Their reservations are not baseless rather rooted in the past injustices inflicted on them. History is testimony to the fact that territory of Fata, KPK and Balochistan routes have been used for defense purpose only by the Colonial Powers. They only laid down railway tracks to these areas in order to quickly mobilize their army to curb the advancing Russia during "Great Game". However, following the policy of mercantilism, the colonial powers established canal system and related infrastructure in Punjab and Sindh in order to boost agricultural growth and subsequently gain maximum Economic benefits. Resultantly regional inequality was created by

the Colonial Powers. Pakistan inherited this regional inequality after independence. The Pakistan Government did very little to bridge the gap and continued on the footsteps of Colonial Policy. It is a golden opportunity to narrow down this regional inequality. However, the Government seems non-serious in eliminating the deep concerns of smaller provinces. Any carelessness on the part of Government is likely to aggravate the apprehensions of smaller provinces, thus endangering the federal integrity. In short, the opposition from smaller provinces took such a serious proportion that the embassy of China in Islamabad issued a statement to resolve the conflict.

"China hopes the relevant parties in Pakistan could strengthen communication and coordination on the CPEC to create favourable conditions for the project." (The Express Tribune, 15 Jan, 2016)

Argument proposed in favor of Eastern Route

Various justifications are advanced in favor of Eastern route. First argument is built on the "Beggars can't be choosers" hypothesis. It is argued that it is Chinese foreign direct investment; as a result, the Pakistan Government wields no authority to funnel these investments on the particular projects.

Second justification in favor of Eastern route is that it is safe and secure. It is further argued that pre-existing road connections save time and investment. However, the three justifications advanced by Government or some writers are baseless. First the money lent for developing transportation infrastructure from Gwadar to Xinjiang is not Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). It is basically a concessional loan provided by the Exim Bank of China.

"The Exim Bank of China will lend the Government of Pakistan approximately 11 billion to overhaul the country's transportation infrastructure at heavily subsidized concessional loans with an interest rate of 1.6%." (The Nation, 15 Jan, 2016)

Hence the government of Pakistan possesses complete authority to build any of the routes on a priority basis without any Chinese constraint.

The second argument that Eastern route is safe and right to the extent that it is relatively peaceful and not prone to any insurgency. However, the government ignores the fact that it is vulnerable to natural disasters. During summer, monsoon rains cause severe floods and destroy the infrastructure.

The flood in 2010 is testimony to this fact. On the other end, fog creates many problems in winter for the drivers.

Another justification is advanced by the government is that pre-existing road connection save time and investment. This justification by the government ignores the fact that it will deepen the regional inequality; hence it will fuel the cycle of migration from relatively lesser developed areas to developed areas. This regional inequality is likely to exacerbate the sense of deprivation among the people Balochistan, Fata and KPK. Hence this sense of deprivation fans of feelings of resentment against the federation. There is no denying the fact that Regional inequality leads to provincial hatred, instability and civil wars. Civil war between North and South USA was outcome of such regional inequality. In fact, this huge multi-billion dollar investment is part of Chinese Government effort to bring the Western China on an equal footing with the Eastern China. Hence the Pakistan Government needs to learn from USA and Chinese examples.

Comparative Analysis of Eastern/Western Route of CPEC

Comparing the Eastern and Western routes, one comes to the conclusion that Western route is more beneficial for Pakistan in terms of equitable and balanced development. The Western route is the shortest than other two routes. The Western route is 2674 km's while the Central and Eastern routes are 2756 km's and 2781 km's respectively. Hence the shortest route is Western and longest is the Eastern.

The Eastern route passes through relatively developed areas of Pakistan. These areas are highly productive and thickly populated. The average population density along the Eastern route is 264 km². The total area under cultivation along the Eastern route is 10.3 million hectares. On the contrary, the western route is thinly populated and average population density is 98 km². 2.9 million hectares make up for the cultivated land along the western route. Hence the cost of land acquisition and dislocation compensation is much higher on the Eastern route compared to Western route. (Muhammad, 2015)

Besides this, many bridges need to be built on Eastern route due to Indus River. Twenty-five (25) bridges need to be built on the Hyderabad to Sukkar section of the Eastern route. Fifty-six (56) bridges are to be built on Sukkar to Multan section. Collectively, Eighty-One (81) bridges are to be built on these

two sections of the eastern route. On the contrary, only Fifteen (15) bridges need to be built on the Western route. (Fareeha, 2015)

The most convincing argument in favor of Eastern route is that it is safe and secure. There is no denying the fact that Western route is mired with conflict and insurgency. However, a deep analysis of the history testifies that inequality has been the outcome of object poverty, burgeoning unemployment, serve of deprivation, unequal distribution of resources and power asymmetries. Hence passing the route through Punjab and Sindh lands is likely to ferment controversies in the province. On such an undesirable conditions the whole corridor plan is jeopardized.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the Western route is not only shortest then the Central and Eastern routes. But it also incurs low examples because of minimized land acquisition and dislocation compensation cost. Moreover, prioritizing the Western route is likely to mitigate the regional inequality. It can also help alleviate the fears of smaller provinces. Hence wisdom demands that Western route should be prioritized in order to create regional equality, eliminate inter-provincial discord. Keeping in view the isolation of Pakistan in the region. It is need of the hour that the Political Leaders discard their parochial mindset and thrill for an independent, self- sufficient and well-integrated prosperous Pakistan.

References

- Ahmed, W. (2015). Balochistan CPEC another view. Islamabad: The Daily times.
- Fareeha, R. S. (2015). China Pakistan Economical corridors line of Development not lines of divide. Islamabad: The Tribune.
- Muhammad, S. A. (2015). The Far Reaches of the corridor. Islamabad: The Tribune.
- Narani, A. (2016). CPEC route controversy routed. Islamabad: the news international.
- Shabaz, R. (2015). Eastern corridor route Pakistan China to Sign financing deals. Islamabad: The Trubne.