



RESEARCH PAPER

The Geo-Strategic and Geo-Economic Significance of The CPEC Project: A Contextual Study of The Pak-China Relations

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ABSTRACT

This study presented an overview of the Pak-China relations in light of the geo-strategic and the geo-economic significance of the CPEC projects. The study mainly had two aims: firstly, it aimed to review the geo-strategic and the geo-economic significance of the CPEC; secondly, it aimed to articulate the major developments in the Pak-China relations i.e. under the ambit of the CPEC projects. The results of this study provided that the CPEC had an overall positive impact on the already existed friendly relations between the China and Pakistan. Further, this study signified that the successful completion of the CPEC projects would also impact the geo-strategic and the geo-economic environment through creating new opportunities and threats for both the global and regional power dynamics. The results of this study recommended that it is in the interest of both counterparts of the CPEC, especially for Pakistan, that they should try to complete the CPEC projects i.e. despite of facing the persistent hurdles in the smooth implementation of the upcoming phases of the CPEC.

KEYWORDS BRI, CPEC, Geo-Economic significance of the CPEC, Geo-Political significance of the CPEC, OBOR, Pak-China Relations

Introduction

The idea of CPEC was initially shared by the Chinese Prime Minister to his Pakistani counterpart in 2013. Later, the Chinese President during his state visit to Pakistan in 2015 formally inaugurated the CPEC by inking the 51 agreements and memoranda promising an investment of 46 billion dollars i.e. under the umbrella of the CPEC (Ali, 2017). The CPEC comprised macro level projects mainly related with development of highways, railway lines, transmission lines, electrical energy, specialized economic zones. Further, the CPEC is ought to be completed in three phases; the Short Term Phase (2015-2020), the Medium Term Phase (2021-2025) and the Long Term Phase (2026-2030). Since the commencement of the CPEC, it has faced much controversy and difficulties due to which the progress over the CPEC projects slowed down and the first phase of the CPEC could not get completed within its due time frame i.e. up till today. Despite of lacking in the full completion of the first Phase of the CPEC (which was ought to be completed in 2020), the state authorities of China has formally verged onto move forward for starting the second phase of the CPEC in 2023 (Hassan, 2020; Khan, 2023).

While formally launching the CPEC in 2015, the leadership of both the states i.e. China and Pakistan clearly understood that the successful completion of the CPEC projects would not only help to transform the economies of China and Pakistan but it would also help to enhance the trade opportunities for the other economies of region as well (Qureshi, 2015). Further, the successful completion of the CPEC projects is being expected to provide lucrative economic opportunities for the whole region i.e. not only

for Pakistan and China, because it would help to marginally reduce the transportation time and cost for the imports/exports from the Afro-Asian states for all the regional economies (Kazi, 2017). In simple words, the successful completion of the CPEC would be vitally crucial for both the China and Pakistan, because the CPEC is supposed to serve the multiple geo-strategic interest of both the states. In light of the aforesaid facts, this study is meant to pursue the following research objectives.

Literature Review

Rehman (2012) discussed that once the Gawadar port became fully operational, it would not only have a positive impact over the general socio-economic conditions of Pakistan i.e. at national level, but it would also help to transform the relatively under developed local economies of the Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtukhwa (KPK) province. Further, he also highlighted the importance and potential benefits of a deep sea port e.g. Gawadar port for the land locked neighbouring countries of Pakistan i.e. Afghanistan and the Central Asian States

Razi (2013) outlined the potential benefits of the CPEC for promoting the international trade ties among the states belonging to the South Asian, Central Asian, Middle Eastern, and East African regions. He provided that the Gawadar port, once becoming fully operational, would become regional hub for routing the regional trade and related commercial concerns.

Mahar (2014) provided a detailed overview of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative of the Chinese government. According to his research, the OBOR is mainly comprised of three routes i.e. the southern, northern, and central routes. The northern route connects the China with Europe by passing through the Russia. The starting point for the central route is Shanghai and it gets connected to the Persian gulf via passing through the Central Asian states and Iran. The central route of the OBOR is the longest route. The southern route of the OBOR starts from Gangzhu region of China, and it passes through the Kashghar for being finally connected with the Gawadar region of Pakistan. The CPEC is part of the southern route of the OBOR, and it directly connects China to the Arabian Sea by providing shortest route for the imports/exports of China to Middle East and Africa.

Hal (2015) discussed that ways in which the economic assistance i.e. through the various projects under the CPEC would help Pakistan to strengthen her defence and economy. He suggested that the CPEC projects would also help Pakistan for developing for countering the possible military aggression e.g. from India. The Chinese plan for building a naval base at Gawadar i.e. as part of the CPEC projects would definitely result in strengthening the defense of the coastal areas of Pakistan. The aforesaid naval base at Gawadar would also provide an opportunity for China to check and directly monitor the activities of the Indian navy in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Hussain (2015) discerned that the CPEC would lead to uplift the regional trade barriers by creating a supportive business environment in the whole region. The territories/land area which are adjacent to the CPEC routes would turn to be lucrative place for investment i.e. in the large scale production and manufacturing sectors of economy. Further, the small and medium size enterprises would also be in position to take full advantage of the opportunities created by the CPEC. He provided that the government of Pakistan intends to develop several Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along with the CPEC routes. He also maintained that the CPEC projects would also result to attract the foreign direct investment i.e. in the aforesaid SEZs from all around the world

which would help to boost the economy of Pakistan i.e. through expanding the employment opportunities for the people of Pakistan.

Liping (2015) highlighted the OBOR as a the modern form of the traditional 'Silk Route' via emphasizing its need and importance in the context of regional integration. He provided that the OBOR would prove as new version of the traditional Silk Road for China by having an additional feature as the 'Maritime Silk Road' i.e. through the CPEC.

Ramay (2016) maintained that a big dream of China has come true through the initiation of the CPEC project i.e. as being part of the OBOR and BRI. He also provided an overview of the Chinese economy to highlight the fact that the economy of China has become the second largest economy of the world. He also maintained that the CPEC is the most important segment of the BRI and it is equally beneficial for Pakistan.

Khan & Kasi (2017) provided a detailed overview of the Pak-China relations. He maintained that China has always extended her full cooperation with Pakistan since after the establishment of the diplomatic relations with Pakistan and Pakistan had also fully supported the China in her very testing period of the diplomatic isolation. He also provided an extensive review of the various areas of cooperation which have been developed between Pakistan and China i.e. the areas of defense, economy. energy, nuclear technology, diplomatic etc. His research highlighted both the historical context and the future prospects for the growing value of the relationship i.e. between the China and Pakistan.

Material and Methods

This study mainly aimed to provide an overview of the Pak-China relations in light of the geo-strategic and the geo-economic significance of the CPEC projects. Keeping view of the nature and objectives of the study, this study has employed case study research methods. For achieving the purpose of this research the researcher has primarily used the secondary data sources, and accordingly, the researchers have conducted a systematic literature review of the relevant published material i.e. Books, published reports of the various think tanks, periodicals, research journals, news reports etc. After collecting the relevant data i.e. through conducting an extensive and systematic literature review, the relevant facts/data have been presented in the form of results/discussion and conclusion i.e. by adjusting those facts/data according to the scope of this research.

Results and Discussion

History of Pak-China Relations

Pakistan enjoys a significant place in the geopolitics, especially, in the politics of the South Asian region due to its territorial location, as it shares her borders (and hitherto, the economic interests) with China (Khan,2011). The diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China were established in the early 1950s and both of the states started their trade ties in the early 1960s by signing a trade agreement in 1963 (Ali, 2017). Pakistan was the first Muslim country which recognized the communist government in China and served as diplomatic corridor of China to the rest of world, especially, for Europe and USA. Up till 1970s, China was experiencing a phase of diplomatic isolation due to her ideological differences with the western world and Pakistan facilitated China with the mediation facility to build relations with the USA (Hussain et al., 2020). Pakistan has also overtly lobbied for handing over the United Nation Security Council's permanent seat to the Chinese communist regime in 1971. Over the course of the history,

Pakistan has extended her full support regarding every issue related with the Chinese national interests, including her long standing issues of South China Sea, Tibet, Taiwan and Xinxiang (Weidong, 2017). The aforesaid profile of the diplomatic ties has led to create trust based strong friendly relationship between China and Pakistan and both of the countries are continuously supporting each other in the geopolitical and geo-economic context (Shamsi & Ali, 2019).

Since the 1950s, the Pak-China relations are being refined through the regular exchange of visits by the high state officials and government dignitaries (Khan & Kasi, 2017). In contravention to the diplomatic relations of the China and Pakistan i.e. as neighboring states, the cultural relation i.e. people to people contacts are severely limited, mainly, due to the language barriers (Khan, 2011). The two nations cater totally different cultural norms, believe systems and the systems of the government, but despite of the aforesaid systemic differences the governments of the both states have successfully managed to maintain very good diplomatic relations with each other. To enhance the cultural ties between the public of the two states, the government of China and Pakistan had took some special measures during the last decade. For example, for two consecutive years i.e. in 2015 and 2016 the two states celebrated the Year(s) of Pak-China friendship and during each of the aforesaid years nearly two lac people visited each other's country. Further to enhance the people to people contact, the Chinese government offers thousands of educational scholarships to Pakistani students each year (Wiedong, 2017).

The economic and security oriented ties between the two nations were solidified during the 1962 war between India and China and the War of 1965 between India and Pakistan. After the testing moments of the aforesaid wars, Pakistan and China had signed various agreements for the exchange of intelligence sharing, border security management and technical assistance about the nuclear technology (Ganguli, 1990). In April 2005, both of the states entered into a new era of the bilateral relations by signing a very significant treaty which is called "the China-Pakistan Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighborly Relations" (Awan, 2020). The main tenet of the aforesaid treat is that both of the states would avoid to become a part of any alliance/bloc which aims to deter the national integrity, sovereignty or state security of the both states. Later, Pakistan and China has signed another similar kind of treaty in July 2013 outlining the "Common Vision for Deepening China-Pakistan Strategic Cooperative Partnership in the New Era" which emphasized the need for a greater degree of the economic engagement i.e. to further enrich the already present cordial diplomatic ties between the two nations. The key developments in this regard included the economic and energy cooperation framework, Currency Swap Agreement, Free Trade Agreement and many other policy initiatives ranging from extending the academic scholarships to the exchange of professionals (Weidong, 2017).

The phenomenal growth in the Chinese economy has led China to foster some supportive arrangements which may ensure the security of the Chinese trade and investments. Accordingly, some significant economic initiatives were taken by the Chinese government through starting the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) in 2014, and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) in 2017. The aforesaid initiatives of the Chinese government mainly aimed to foster economic growth through creating new international trade routes by connecting the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. From the very beginning of the OBOR, China has integrated Pakistan with the OBOR through her offer to build the 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) i.e. as part of the OBOR (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015). The following figure shows the general map of the proposed OBOR initiative.

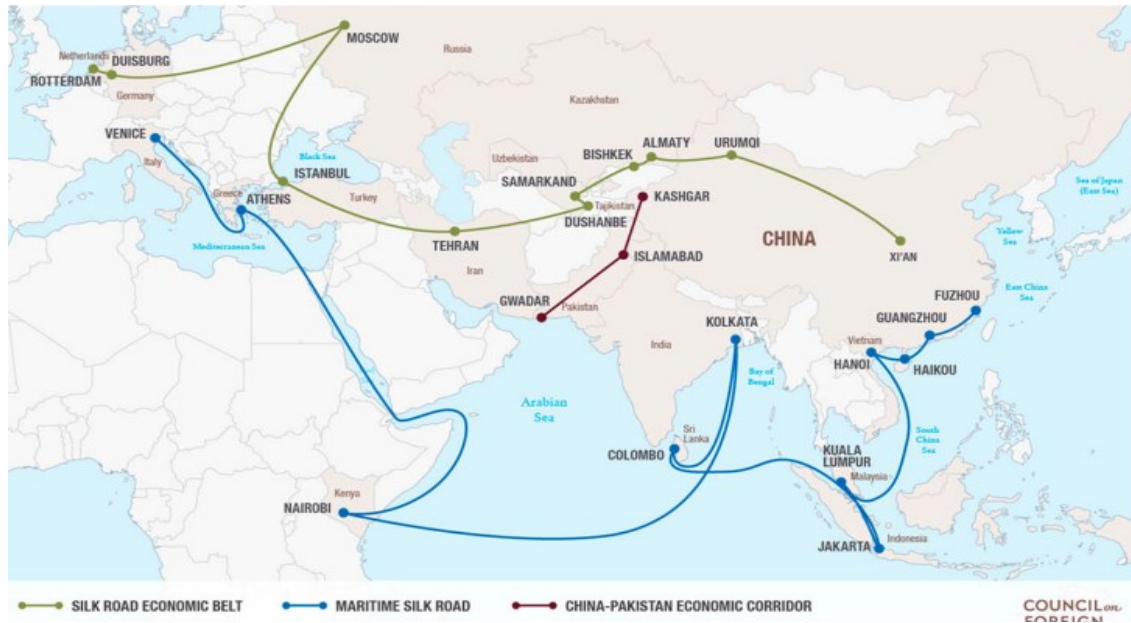


Figure-1: General Map of the proposed OBOR initiative of China Source: Council on Foreign Relations (<https://www.cfr.org/>)

The Geo-Strategic and the Geo-Economic Significance of the CPEC Projects

The geographical location of some state is one of the most essential feature for determining the best suitable geo-strategic policy frameworks which a particular state may verge to pursue. Further, during the last two decades the modern geo-strategic approaches are being understood in the economic terms rather than the military terms (Chihai, 2019). In the strategic context, Pakistan is luckily situated at a very important place on global political map. For example, it hold a sandwich position between the major petro-energy producer and the petro-energy consuming countries, hitherto, its boundaries are geographically adjacent to the globally acclaimed politico-economic giants i.e. China and India providing the shortest route for them to connect with the mineral rich central Asian states.

In the modern day international political economy, the economic corridors providing the options for regional connectivity have gained an enhanced importance and are being adopted as a significant foreign policy option for the purpose of achieving international economic cooperation, regional integration and economic development. During the early 1980s USA showed an interest in the development of the Gawadar port in Pakistan in the backdrop of her strategic interests in Afghanistan i.e. against her geopolitical rival USSR. But after the withdrawal of the USSR from Afghanistan in early 1990s, USA lost her interest in the aforesaid project. After two decades of the USSR's withdrawal from Afghanistan, China verged onto take over the same project and launched a comprehensive CPEC project (as part of her flagship project of BRI) in 2013 (Nurmuhammedov, 2017). The Chinese president, while formally launching the CPEC in 2015, vowed that the CPEC would not only help to transform the economies of China and Pakistan but it would also help to enhance the trade opportunities for the other economies of region as well (Qureshi, 2015). The CPEC is being expected to provide lucrative economic opportunities for the whole region, especially for China, because it would help to marginally reduce the transportation time and cost for the Chinese imports/exports from the Afro-Asian states (Kazi, 2017).

The successful completion of the CPEC is vitally crucial for China as the CPEC is supposed to serve the multiple geo-strategic interest of China. The first and foremost

Chinese interest is to reduce the transportation cost of the vital imports/exports via directly linking its western region to the Indian sea. The following table provides a brief overview about difference between the estimated per container transportation cost i.e. between the conventional trade routes used by China and the cost through the proposed CPEC routes.

Table 1
Difference of the Transportation cost/container between the normal route and the proposed CPEC route

Routine Trade Destinations	Hosting State	Normal Freight Cost/Container	Cost Through CPEC	Saving in Cost	Saving Percentage
Selalah Port	Oman	3417 \$	1560 \$	1857 \$	54.35 %
Jeddah Port	Saudi Arabia	3517 \$	2060 \$	1457 \$	41.43 %
Shuwaikh Port	Kuwait	3517 \$	2060 \$	1457 \$	41.43 %
Rottardam Port	Netherlands	4117 \$	2760 \$	1357 \$	32.96 %
Hamburg Port	Germany	4117 \$	2760 \$	1357 \$	32.96 %
La Havre Port	France	4117 \$	2760 \$	1357 \$	32.96 %

Source: Alam, Baig & Muhammad (2023)

Further, the following table provides a brief overview about difference between the estimated transportation/travel time i.e. for the routes routinely used by China and the estimated/expected time through the proposed CPEC routes.

Table 2
Difference of the delivery time between the normal route and the proposed CPEC route

Routine Trade Destinations	Hosting State	Normal Delivery Time (in days)	Delivery Time Through CPEC	Time Saved	Saving Percentage
Selalah Port	Oman	27 days	07 days	20 days	74.07 %
Jeddah Port	Saudi Arabia	33 days	12 days	21 days	63.64 %
Shuwaikh Port	Kuwait	32 days	08 days	24 days	75 %
Rottardam Port	Netherlands	49 days	28 days	21 days	42 %
Hamburg Port	Germany	50 days	29 days	21 days	42 %
La Havre Port	France	48 days	27 days	21 days	42 %

Source: Alam, Baig & Muhammad (2023)

The Chinese government has a deep interest in the development of a Maritime Silk Road which would be connected through the Gawadar port, and the China would use the aforesaid Maritime Silk Road for expanding her international trade with Arabian, East-African and Mediterranean states (Kazi, 2017). The CPEC also aims to safeguard the economic security concerns of the Chinese government by providing a potential solution

to the 'Malacca Dillema' as currently more than seventy percent of the energy supplies to China is meant to pass through the Strait of Malacca (in the Indian sea), which is controlled by her rival naval forces i.e. USA and India (Akram & Fareed, 2019). The aforesaid dependence of the Chinese economy on the safe passage through the Strait of Malacca is considered as a serious security threat to the energy security of China, as any disruption to the energy supply i.e. by the rival naval forces would prove detrimental for the economic stability of China (Hussain & Jamali, 2019).

So after the successful completion of the CPEC, China would be in position to manage her 'Malacca Dilemma' i.e. by becoming a nation having access to the alternate sea route (Ahmad, 2019). Once the Gawadar port becomes fully operational, it would be available as one of the biggest deep sea port of the world. Pakistan and China are also planning to develop an adjacent naval base for securing their strategic and security interests i.e. related to their respective operations in the Indian and Arabian sea. The establishment of the Gawadar naval base in near future would serve the security interests of both the China and Pakistan for effectively counter balancing the hegemonic aims of the Indo-US naval forces i.e. against their naval schemes in the Indian and Arabian sea fronts (Bukhari, 2011).

Additionally, the CPEC is claimed to be an 'open project' offering economic opportunities to all of the stake holders in the regional economy. In the geo-political and geo-economic context, the land locked Central Asian states which are rich in the natural resources can use the CPEC for enhancing their access to the regional and international markets. The economy of Pakistan and China are heavily dependent on the energy imports for which they can develop strong trade ties i.e. through the CPEC with the energy rich Central Asian states (Saud, 2018). Thus, the successful completion of the CPEC would not only serve the economic interests of China and Pakistan, but it would also help to provide very viable economic and strategic opportunities to the Central Asian states i.e. by providing an easily accessible sea route for their international trade and gaining a competitive advantage in the regional/global economy. In this way, the CPEC would result to expedite the already going on process of the regional integration and promoting the economic development of all of the stake holders involved in the CPEC. Further, the economic progress achieved through the economic opportunities offered by the successful completion of the CPEC would result to reduce the conflicts among all of the regional stake holders by enhancing their mutual economic interdependence (Javaid & Rashid, 2016).

Since the CPEC mainly aims to serve the vital economic and security concerns of Pakistan and China, hitherto, it is perceived as a challenge for the economic and security interests of their respective regional/global rivals i.e. India and USA. As matter of geographical necessity, the CPEC transportation projects are meant to pass through the Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) region which is presently under the control of Pakistan. India unilaterally claims the whole disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir as "inseparable part" of her territorial sovereignty, therefore, regards the CPEC projects as territorial incursion over her territorial sovereignty i.e. being committed by both the China and Pakistan (Singh, 2013; Khan, 2019). In the go-political and geo-economic contexts, India aligns with the USA i.e. against the China and aspires to become the regional hegemon, but India has not become successful yet to achieve her aforesaid goal due to her hostile relations with Pakistan and China (Lashari, 2016). India perceives the CPEC as a serious threat for her national security goals because India considers both the China and Pakistan as her arch rivals and poses that China and Pakistan are joining their hands for engulfing India i.e. through the CPEC projects (Lashari, 2016).

Further, India perceives the establishment of the Gawadar port and the related naval base i.e. under the CPEC as a direct threat to her maritime economic and security interests because India strategically considers this region as very significant for preserving her economic and security concerns (Prakash, 2017). There existed a security dilemma between the India and China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and India perceives the main projects of the BRI (including the Gawadar port under CPEC) in the IOR as 'String of Pearls' which are supposedly meant to strategically encircle India. Almost, half of the total sea-routed international trade shipments pass through the IOR, and all of trade shipment of the Indian origin has to pass through the IOR (Roy, 2019). Following figure helps to elaborate the Indian "String of Pearls" approach for BRI projects in the IOR.



Figure 2 Map Showing the CPEC as Part of the "String of Pearls" designed by the China for engulfing India Source: Adapted from Roy (2019)

Keeping view of the geo-strategic importance of the South Asian region, USA aims to pursue her long standing policy of regional control. In the futuristic perspective, China and India are aspiring to emerge as new global powers through founding a strong geo-strategic base in the South Asian region and accordingly US interest to preserve her conventional position in the region has become more vital (Lashari, 2016). The USA perceives China as her geo-political rival which is aiming to reconfigure the whole international politic-economic system i.e. through the implementation of the 'Chinese Model'. Although the USA does not overtly opposes the CPEC, yet her covert efforts to halt the progress of the CPEC are inevitable as for USA the CPEC is not only a matter of concern in the South Asian region only, but potentially it is a matter of concern for the US interests in the Central Asia, Persian Gulf and the Middle Eastern region too (Butt & Butt, 2015: 39).

Historically, Pakistan has always played a role of the key US ally in the region, say it may be the US war against communism or terrorism. Despite of the development of the deep relationship with China, Pakistan has always served the US interests in the region. The successful completion of the CPEC and the Gawadar port is likely to change the aforesaid scenario and the China would get upper hand both in the policy circles of Pakistan and the regional geo-strategic position i.e. by jeopardizing the existing US position in the region (Mustafa & Zafar, 2011:5065).

Conclusion

The diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China were established in the early 1950s and both of the states started their trade ties in the early 1960s by signing a

trade agreement in 1963. Over the course of the history, both the China and Pakistan have mutually supported on all of the international forums i.e. regarding their international issues e.g. about the Tibet, Taiwan and Kashmir issues. The President Xi of China started the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) Initiative' in 2014, which mainly aimed to foster economic growth in China through creating new international trade routes for the Chinese economy by connecting it with the continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. From the very beginning of the OBOR, China decided to integrated Pakistan with the OBOR through her offer to build the 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor' (CPEC) i.e. as part of the OBOR.

The successful completion of the CPEC is vitally crucial for China as the CPEC is supposed to serve the multiple geo-strategic and geo-economic interests of China. The first and foremost Chinese interest that will be served through the completion of the CPEC projects would help to marginally reduce the transportation cost of the vital imports/exports, because the CPEC would result in directly linking its western region to the whole world i.e. via Indian sea. Further, the successful completion of the CPEC, China would be in position to manage her very crucial 'Malacca Dilemma' i.e. by becoming a nation having access to the alternate sea route. The Chinese economy is heavily dependent on the Strait of Malacca i.e. for the safe passage of its imports/exports, and the rival naval forces of India which currently dominate the Strait of Malacca are enjoying a strategic position which may disturb the economic stability of China at any time in future. For overcoming the aforesaid 'Malacca Dilemma', China plans to build a naval base at Gawadar which would essentially result turning the table in favor of China i.e. leading to deter the geo-strategic and geo-economic interests of India and USA. Since the India considers both the China and Pakistan as her arch rivals, that is why the India is perceiving the CPEC as a serious threat for her national security goals and it overtly opposes the CPEC. India apprehends that China and Pakistan are joining their hands for engulfing India through creating a 'string of pearls' in the Indian sea i.e. for damaging the regional/global politico-economic interest of India.

Both the India and USA perceives China as their geo economic and geo-political rival which is aiming to reconfigure the whole international politic-economic system i.e. through the implementation of the 'Chinese Model'. Although the USA does not overtly oppose the CPEC, yet her covert efforts to halt the progress of the CPEC are inevitable as for USA the CPEC is not only a matter of concern in the South Asian region only, but potentially it is a matter of concern for the US interests in the Central Asia, Persian Gulf and the Middle Eastern region too. This research concludes that although Pakistan has always served the US interests in the region i.e. up till recumbently, but the successful completion of the CPEC projects, especially, the Gawadar port and naval base is likely to affect the aforesaid scenario. Further in the context of the geopolitical and geo-economic significance of the CPEC, it is very likely that 'the China factor' may capture the central position in both of the foreign policy of Pakistan and in the regional geo-economic/geo-strategic environment i.e. in juxta-position with the the existing US interest in the contemporary global political economy.

Historically, Pakistan has always played a role of the key US ally in the region, but the Pakistan may be required to reconfigure her relations with the USA i.e. in the light of the CPEC and the nature of engagement with The China. Further, during the whole history of her diplomatic relations with the USA, Pakistan managed to develop and upgrade her politic-economic ties with the China.

Recommendations

In light of the above given facts about the geo-political and geo-economic significance of the CPEC projects, this research recommended that Pakistan should continue her engagement with the China i.e. for the successful completion of the CPEC projects by being vigilant about the fact that the CPEC should not become the host-bed for settling the geo-political conflict among the global geo-economic and geo-political forces i.e. the USA and China, in Pakistan.

Further this research recommends that Pakistan should remain constantly vigilant of the differences between the USA and China i.e. about the role of CPEC in changing the geo-strategic and the geo-economic environment, and try to keep balance while dealing with the global/regional interests of the both global powers. this study recommends that the Pakistan has to keep a balance between her relationship with both the China and USA i.e. in light of the changing geo-political and geo-economic environment and shall have to avoid becoming party to any sort of global conflict, especially, between the USA and China.

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