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SEIZING THE NARRATIVE GENERATING CIVIL-SOCIETY OWNERSHIP ON CPEC IN PAKISTAN

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The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is not only the lodestar of Sino-Pak relations, but also has the potential to harness economic connectivity and integration in the region and beyond, giving way to the establishment of a new, cooperative, and mutually-beneficial economic order. Due to its gargantuan nature, coupled with the fact that it is China-led, CPEC is under the scanner of the academic and policy communities in various important capitals, including New Delhi and Washington. Criticism on CPEC has taken different hues. From apprehensions about China's predatory economics and debt-trap diplomacy, the project has been berated for its slowdown, lack of transparency, and its highly-contestable ramifications on civil-military relations in Pakistan and overall stability in the region.

Since the change of guard in Pakistan in 2018, western analyses on CPEC have geared towards two aspects. First, analysts contend that the mega-project would be dealt a severe blow, mainly due to the lack of enthusiasm and the desire to 'renegotiate' terms on part of the new government. However, CPEC got impetus through a flurry of deals that were signed by both Beijing and Islamabad this year. Second, watchers of the region and Sino-Pak relations have increasingly looked at Islamabad's CPEC turnaround through a civil-military lens. While dubbing the ongoing upsurge in CPEC as

"modest", a new [report](#) has linked the creation of the CPEC Authority to the changing patterns of civil-military balance over handling and controlling CPEC.

Broadly, two intertwined issues have been ascribed to the CPEC Authority. First, it is being deemed as a vehicle for the consolidation of military's control over the project, at the expense of the civilian government. Related to that is the appointment of Lt.Gen. Asim Saleem Bajwa (Retd) as the Chairman of the CPEC Authority. However, such an assessment is problematic, and signifies a dearth of understanding of the role and importance of the CPEC Authority.

Two aspects are noteworthy. One, it is imperative to fathom that the CPEC Authority was established to give a fillip to CPEC. According to the Chairman of the Authority, the idea behind constituting this separate body was to ensure the implementation of the agreed-upon projects. Empowered and mandated by the Prime Minister to fast-track the completion of CPEC, the Authority is involved in liaising with federating units and various ministries with a view to providing one-window operation to foreign investors.

It is fair to argue that, as a national project, CPEC is essential to turning around Pakistan's economy. Therefore, it is heartening to see that

Pakistan is taking measures aimed at removing snags and hindrances that had slowed down this economic juggernaut. Thus, the establishment of the Authority is a manifestation of Pakistan's commitment to making CPEC a stellar success and a veritable game-changer.

Tied to this is the appraisal of the landscape that both China and Pakistan have to navigate in order to achieve the shared-vision of economic connectivity. Some of the most conspicuous challenges to CPEC pertain to security. That the project has to be secured from a mosaic of internal and external threats is perhaps one of the reasons why the Prime Minister chose a retired army man to head the Authority.

Given the urgency and significance associated with the project, it is understandable that the government has decided to increase the pace of CPEC, by co-opting the military's dexterity, capacity, and experience in overcoming bureaucratic hitches and barriers that had marred and slowed down the implementation of CPEC's deliverables.

The CPEC Authority is poised to bridge the gap between planning and implementation which is an important reason as to why it needs to be made more functional and impactful. Efforts aimed at making the Authority more robust will serve two purposes. One, it will greatly help Pakistan pounce on the dividends of CPEC in a

manner that benefits all stakeholders and corresponds to the economic needs of the country. Two, it will positively affect Pakistan's ability to reset the narrative on CPEC. Three steps can be taken to bolster these objectives:

First, the government must work towards establishing an integrated information cell under the aegis of the CPEC Authority. The cell should be staffed with officials from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and other media professionals, with a view to disseminating timely information and updates about the workings of the Authority. The cell should be tasked with giving bi-monthly briefings to local and international media on ongoing developments. **The idea behind launching this public relations campaign is to enhance effective strategic communication on CPEC, and bring in more transparency.** This dedicated cell should be mandated to regularly brief the Parliament and relevant government bodies dealing with CPEC. A fully-empowered cell will give a new face to the Authority, something that will allow the incumbent Chairman to focus on the more intricate issues of coordination and planning. The net effect would be visible in the shape of credible, nuanced coverage of the Authority's workings, something that is missing at this stage, given the absence of a communication conduit.

Second, the CPEC Authority must release a document outlining its vision, mission, deliverables, and strategic roadmap. Its online and print versions should be made available for academicians, scholars and experts so as to enable them to conduct evidence-based research on the strategic direction of CPEC. This will help mitigate misperceptions that stem from lackluster input from academia (especially in Pakistan who question lack of access to information) on all things related to CPEC. The proposed tell-all document should pave the way for a more scholarly imprint on CPEC coming from Pakistan.

Coupled with the publication of the document, the Authority should make space for inducting full-time consultants from academia, a step that would engender an academic and intellectual discourse on CPEC while putting in place an effective framework to deride propaganda related to the project. The document must be complemented by two performance reports each year in a bid to gauge the progress and efficacy of the Authority.

Taken together, the first two proposals will help open up the project for public scrutiny, and develop a better connection between the public, academia, and officials insofar as CPEC is concerned.

This openness will help Islamabad seize the narrative on the project and allay disparate, yet important concerns of various stakeholders.

Third, targeted and focused advocacy and social media campaigns must form the basis of engagement with, and outreach to, the general public on CPEC. Here, it is important to understand that due to minimal public outreach by Pakistani officials on CPEC, the civil society and the general population are exposed to propaganda and misinformation on the project. That no serious efforts have been made to provide the Pakistani public a detailed counternarrative on CPEC is one of the reasons why the public shares some of the concerns related to the project. Those fears are related to China's alleged colonization agenda, loss of jobs to Chinese labor, and provincial bickering over share of CPEC projects in Pakistan. It is therefore essential to robustly engage with the public.

The authorities must provide information to reduce the impact of and deride disinformation. Pakistan's civil society must be presented with the correct picture on CPEC and China's role in it, something that is imperative to eliciting a public buy-in on the project. In that regard, direct communication linkages with segments of the society must be established and used.

Officials must conduct awareness and advocacy campaigns with students, businessmen, labourers, and other important civil society stakeholders. Trips to the SEZs along the length and breadth of the corridor, and lecture series in universities, colleges, and business houses are ways through which this could be achieved.

In tandem with that, the social media platform must be used to good effect. The government must continuously inform the public about the developments related to the project, identify and counter fake news, and seamlessly engage with the public. In a project of such magnitude, there is no space for lack of communication between citizens and the state. Social media will certainly help create that connection while reducing scepticism and uncertainty.

Emphasis should not be on passive spread of information, but on using social media to erect a two-way interactive model that keeps citizens invested and interested in the direction that CPEC takes.

It is reasonable to argue that the establishment of the CPEC Authority is reflective of Pakistan's political commitment to CPEC. The Authority should be strengthened so that it becomes an institution that will augment Pakistan's institutional capacity to embrace CPEC. Concerted efforts, coupled with political will and strategic thinking, will effect a transformative change in Pakistan's economic profile while giving it much-needed geopolitical space.

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