

Regional Connectivity through Belt and Road Initiative: Issues and Challenges for Pakistan and Central Asia

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Abstract

Central Asian Republics (CARs) are landlocked, but these gained strategic importance because of their vast natural resources and export potential. Great Silk Road which links this region with global routes coming from all corners of the planet gives CARs an added advantage. Since the launch of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, CARs have become active partners in it. They have realized that their economic growth and development is linked to BRI. Pakistan provides an alternative route to China and CARs to reach Indian Ocean in the form of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which is flagship project of BRI. For Islamabad, CPEC is a 'game changer,' allowing it to develop its transport and energy infrastructure and increase trade and connectivity. The article noticed that a lot of expectations have been pinned with CPEC and BRI in Pakistan, particularly connectivity with Central Asian region; however, success of BRI is linked to sovereignty of regional states followed by economic opportunity and stable security situation. China is trying to develop people to people contact to dislodge all allegations raised by the West that BRI in the garb of development is an attempt to gain more influence in the region. The article has tried to explore the facts that CARs consider BRI as an inside out attempt with complete sense of inclusiveness.

Keywords: Central Asian Republics, China, CPEC, Regionalism, South Asia.

1. Introduction

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, are collectively defined as Central Asian Republics (CARs) after the fall of Soviet Union in 1991 and international community as well as CARs have officially recognized this definition (Malik, 1994). In spite of the fact, that CARs being landlocked, these gained strategic importance because regional and trans-regional states know the importance of energy potential of CARs in the region (Duarte, 2014). Great Silk Road which links this region with global routes coming from all corners of the planet gives them an added advantage. In order to make use of resources of CARs, regional powers have been developing ties to establish regionalism. Scholars have been referring that transportation system problems faced by neighboring powers, China, Russia, the Caucasus and Europe can only be mitigated by countries of Central Asia (Levent, 2005).

In 2013, the idea of construction of New Silk Economic Belt was initiated by President Xi Jinping, during his visit to Kazakhstan, and same year, during his visit to Indonesia, he proposed building of 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. These projects are collectively known as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In March 2015, China declared this initiative as China's National Strategy. This initiative along with China's willingness to invest billions of dollars via Silk Road Fund and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has been viewed by CARs as great opportunity to develop trade links not only with China but with other regional countries (Qoraboyev & Moldashev, 2018). The CARs—mostly dependent on primary production or extraction of natural resources, which need to be exported for their economic growth— welcomed China as their trade and investment partner.

The Belt and Road Initiative has political impact also. United States (US), Europe and Russia tried to engage CARs into different regional accords to create a sense of regionalism. Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) led by Russia and concept of greater Central Asia, given by US, were efforts to link CARs with Central and South Asia. Although some economic and trade potentials were linked to these initiatives but these could not gain support from the regional countries. BRI, on the contrary has potential to create an atmosphere of regionalism. Major powers of Eurasian

politics, especially Russia, and US view initiatives like BRI, by China, as an attempt to gain more influence in the region. This state of affairs certainly has an impact on the independent foreign policy of CARs (Qoraboyev & Moldashev, 2018). Further, countries like Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, have strategic importance due to their ability to provide access to sea, but weak security situation in the region, particularly in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops, poses major risk for BRI.

In 2013, Pakistan and China signed Memorandum of Understanding on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2021). Pakistan provides an alternative route to China to reach Indian Ocean in the shape of CPEC which is one of the corridors of BRI. Researchers are of the view that BRI and CPEC has impact beyond economic development including influence on society as well as regional geopolitics (Wolf, 2020). Pakistan considers this project as 'game changer' as it is based on the concept of shared development ("CPEC a Game Changer," 2020). It is important to note that sixty-five economies linked to BRI (National Statistical Office China, 2017) including CARs and Pakistan, have pinned a lot of hopes with the project; however, question of achieving economic growth by keeping conducive political environment in the region still needs to be answered. In this paper efforts have been made to explore economic and political impact of BRI on CARs along with its implications on Pakistan and the challenges associated with it.

2. Literature Review

Since the announcement of BRI in 2013, a lot has been written on this project. Shahriar (2019) termed BRI as main feature of China's international economic policy. Ploberger (2020) in his book has attempted to highlight double character of BRI. Domestic development challenges faced by China and second, international focus attached to domestic development strategy. Initiatives of such a mammoth magnitude involving 65 economies by China has been seen with suspicion by the scholars and researchers as they tried to find out the motives other than economic factors behind it. This has been discussed in detail in the book titled, "China's Belt and Road Initiative" by identifying areas of regional cooperation and development for China in BRI as well as the possible strategic and foreign policy objectives which China can attain through BRI (Zhang et al., 2018). A book written by Liu (2018) gives comprehensive analysis of BRI in

terms of economic and economic geography yielding an insightful interpretation of the strategy. Globalization has been a salient feature of BRI so scholars have written a lot on this aspect also. Berlie (2020) in his scholarly work has discussed the importance of globalization and BRI in the context of President Xi Jinping vision. Infrastructure along the modern Silk Road and China's Maritime route has also been discussed. Writers, like Zhao (2016), brought under discussion important issue of regionalization and explored reasons that why earlier efforts did not pay by arguing that regional countries emphasize more on infrastructure connectivity rather than traditional regional economic cooperation models like Free Trade Agreements (FTA) and Transpacific Partnership (TPP) etc.

Pakistan gives utmost importance to initiative -and intellectuals have been focusing on outcomes and benefits of CPEC since its inception. Hussain in an article analyzed economic implications of CPEC and BRI in region with emphasis on Middle East. He is of the view that benefits of CPEC under BRI will be extended to Middle East in the new emerging investment and trade trends (Hussain, 2020). Economic and political differences between West particularly USA and China have remained under discussion since decades. With the advent of this ambitious BRI, scholars have explored facts behind allegations raised by the West on China and its policies. Vltchek (2019) is of the view that US won war against Soviet Union by utilizing both propaganda and economic terror; however, China is committed to defend its system which has made China an economic power and the same, in the eyes of China, has the potential to work for the rest of the world.

China has been successful in seeking support of the SCO in launching BRI in the region. Abdul Rab and Zhilong (2019) are of the view that SCO's support to BRI will enhance global and regional economies especially China. The CARs have a huge export potential of natural resources and scholars have discussed economic benefits linked to BRI and CPEC. Danilovich (2018) has discussed economic and social growth as well as issues of national security and public discontent. Tseng and Lim (2019) have discussed BRI within the context of globalization, regionalization and regionalism, forces imperative for trans-regional integration. There is a need to study that BRI is an inside out initiative or an outside in effort by China. Any outside-in approach with no ownership by masses is never going to bear fruits. In this paper effort has also

been made to explore the facts that CARs consider BRI as an inside out attempt with complete sense of inclusiveness. Success of BRI is linked to security and political stability in the region.

3. Results and Discussion

Implications of BRI for Pakistan

China's land links with Europe, Russia, Central Asia, the Caucuses, Turkey, Iran, West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia are through six BRI corridors: i) New Eurasian Land Bridge Corridor; ii) China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor; iii) China-Mongolia-Russia Corridor; iv) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); v) China-Myanmar-Bangladesh-India (BCIM) Corridor and vi) China-Indochina Peninsula Corridor (Figure 1). Launched in 2015, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is considered in Pakistan as 'game changer' while in China as flagship project of BRI. In this project, an investment of 62 billion dollars in Pakistan's port infrastructure, railways, highways, mass-transit and power-generation projects will be made by Chinese government (Tseng & Lim, 2019). Since 2015, CPEC has helped Pakistan in resolving its longstanding issues of electricity load shedding, communication sector issues and infrastructure related issues, by attracting an investment of more than US 25 billion dollars. Pakistan in the shape of Orange Line Metro has been able to complete Pakistan's first electric-powered public transport project. Similarly, development of Gwadar port, Gwadar Airport and Export Processing Zones are contributing towards the development of the country (Feng, 2021). The Long Term Plan for CPEC (2017-2030) includes energy, communication and infrastructure projects and Mass Transit Project (2020). These CPEC projects are a step forward towards development of Pakistan through employment generation.

Figure 1: China's Belt and Road Initiative



Note: Chaudhuri, P. P. (2019, January 4). India nudges China toward Belt and Road changes.

<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/belt-road-initiative-dangers/>

Why CPEC is important for China

China is the largest energy consumer and is sensitive about its energy security. About 80 percent of Chinese energy imports pass through insecure narrow straits of Malacca over which China has limited control. CPEC provides most feasible alternative to China by diversifying its energy supplies and lessening China's dependence on straits of Malacca. CPEC will not only develop its western regions but will also greatly improve Chinese energy security (Long Term Plan, 2017). China has been traditionally viewed by world as 'factory' with low labour cost (Ghosh, 2020). China's technological advancement has transformed it from labour intensive to high value-added manufacturing by capturing higher status in global value chain. This shift requires capturing of new markets where Chinese products can compete with rest of the world with its own standards. The BRI and CPEC are crucial mechanism for providing space in global value chain. Famous

Chinese Dream of Strong China which is Civilized, Harmonious and Beautiful, is development model for rest of the world which is based on efficient institutions, ecological urbanization, equitable sharing of benefits of economic development, having limited market interference and social stability. The CPEC and BRI provide ideal platform to transform this 'Chinese Dream' into reality (Wolf, 2020).

Pakistan – CARs and Regionalism

CPEC provides an access to Central Asia via Karakoram Highway, however, historically and economically most feasible route to Central Asia is via Afghanistan. Pakistan has always welcomed efforts of regionalism in Central Asia as it provides an opportunity to materialize real benefits of BRI. Similarly, China-Iran 25-year Cooperation Programme gives new vistas of enhanced regional cooperation for Pakistan and CARs. China is planning to bring huge investment of about 600 billion dollars in Iran in the next 25 years, which makes it obvious that Iran will join CPEC. This will open new avenues of regional commerce and trade (Wolf, 2020).

The Central Asian region are rich in natural resources and Pakistan is an energy deficient country. Pakistan has not been able to develop strong trade relations with CARs. The renewed efforts of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan for energy and trade connectivity in the form of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline Project and CASA-1000, which are different from the CPEC, are 'sign of spillovers' of BRI and CPEC (Rauf et al., 2018).

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline Project

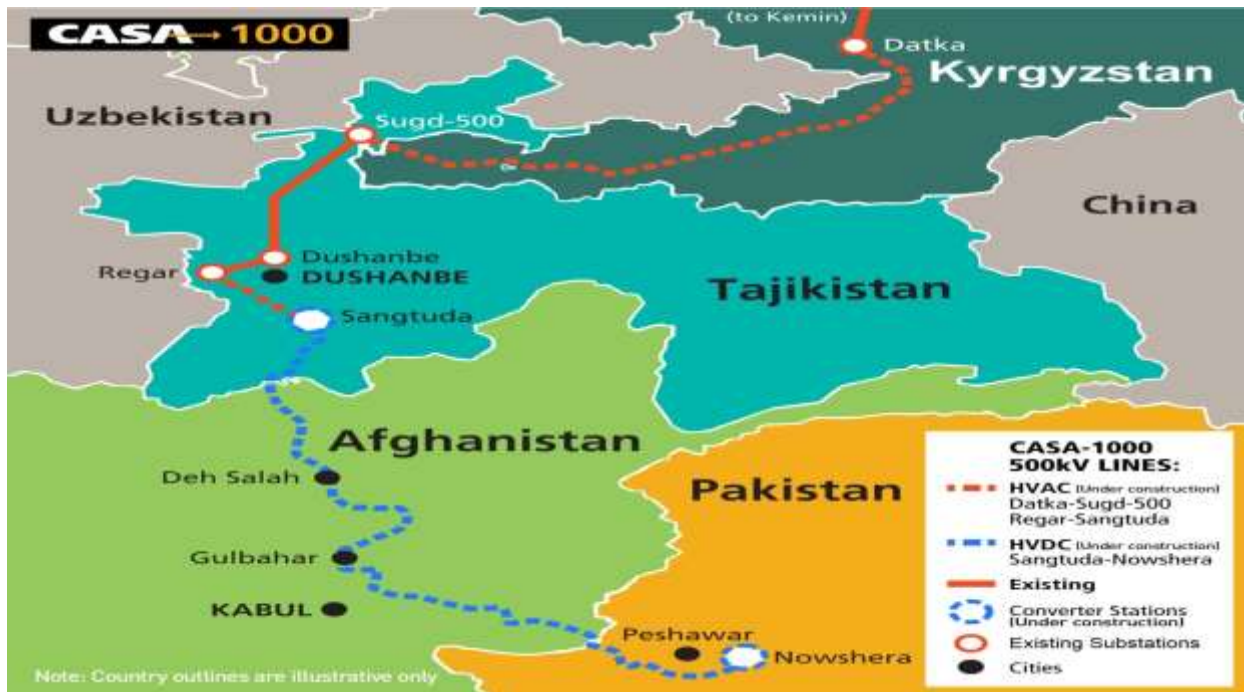
The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, originally conceived in 1990, will be 1,814 km trans-country pipeline. Investment agreement was signed by four countries in February 2016 to serve for 30 years. Construction ceremony of Afghanistan-Pakistan section of pipeline was held in February 2018 (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI), 2021). Out of the 33 billion cubic meter natural gas to be transmitted from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, 5 billion cubic meters will be for Afghanistan and 14 billion cubic meters to each Pakistan and India. However, serious threat to this project lies in the political instability in Afghanistan. Although this project was launched before BRI but after announcement of BRI, these energy projects have become part of global agenda. China has

been actively engaged in materializing the project. If TAPI turns into a reality, then not only Afghanistan but Pakistan will also receive benefits through transit fees (Kerven, 2019). In recent times, China approached Pakistan and submitted a proposal for a China-Turkmenistan pipeline that would travel from Pakistan's territory to cross the Karakoram ranges to China's western border. Subsequently, Pakistan shared Chinese proposal with Turkmenistan where it is currently passing through an evaluation process (Khan, 2020).

CASA-1000 Power Transmission Line

Central Asia-South Asia power project called CASA-1000 project is regarded as a mega power projects for transmitting surplus hydroelectricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and then to Pakistan. Afghanistan and Pakistan have been facing acute shortage of electricity for household consumers as well as industry. Out of 1300 megawatts of electricity transmitted through CASA-1000 from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, 300 megawatts will be allocated to Afghanistan and remaining 1,000 will be transmitted on to Pakistan (Kerven, 2019).

Figure 2: Map of CASA-1000 Power Transmission Line

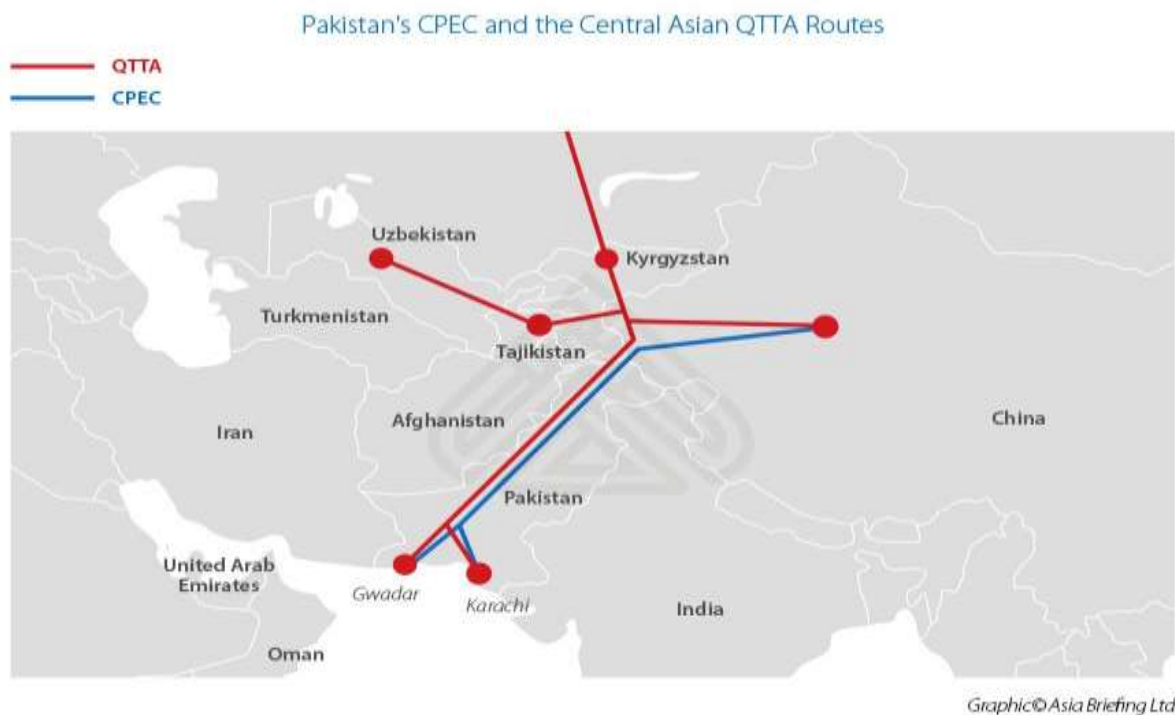


Note: The CASA-1000 Power Transmission System. (n.d.). CASA-1000.org

The Trans-Afghan Railway

Trans-Afghan Railway is 572 Kilometres rail route between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan with an estimated cost of 5 billion dollars. This link will provide Uzbekistan access to seaports of Arabian sea through Pakistan. This project is part of Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) which will be linked to China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The QTTA is transit trade deal between China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Tajikistan has also shown its interest to join deal in February 2017. Inclusion of Tajikistan in QTTA would be beneficial as Islamabad would use Karakoram Highway that connects Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan to Xinjiang in China which is linked with CARs (Rafiq, 2020).

Figure 3: Pakistan's CPEC and Central Asian QTTA Routes



Note: Ellis, C. D. (2020, May 12). Uzbekistan looks to China's Belt & Road and Pakistan's CPEC to connect through to Gwadar & Karachi Ports. Silk Road Briefing. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/05/12/uzbekistan-looks-chinas-belt-road-pakistans-cpec-connect-gwad>

Issues of BRI-CPEC in Pakistan

Major issue faced by CPEC is decline in economic growth of Pakistan during last two years which led country to lose its capacity to contribute towards their share in CPEC projects. As per official sources only 19 billion dollars have been spent on CPEC projects against pledged investment of 62 billion dollars. This has slowed down progress of CPEC in Pakistan. United States has time and again warned Pakistan that CPEC would add debt burden, foster corruption and repatriate jobs and profits to China (Prasso, 2020). Due to Covid-19 pandemic and economic recession in Pakistan, it has been pushed to seek concessions from IMF, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and World Bank (Markey, 2020). Unfortunately, US influence on these institutions is used to force Pakistan to back away from CPEC projects.

Political Challenges

Biggest threat to BRI in CARs is feeling of threat to their sovereignty in shape of acquisition or long-term rent of land by Chinese companies. Such incidents in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan led to protest and popular resentment. In such situation, host countries must listen to protesters and should not handle the issue with force. Timely amendment in the laws by Kazakhstan resulted in calming down situation (Laruelle, 2018). Thus, China must ensure “people to people” contact in CARs.

Moreover, the route of CPEC passes through Gilgit Baltistan (GB) which has complex geographic location as well as geopolitical issues. Severe weather conditions, uncertain climate, endangered environment and above all a region having disputed politico-constitutional status. Although Pakistan has taken some revolutionary steps such as introduction of “Self Rule” through “Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self Governance Order, 2009” which gives important fundamental rights to people of GB. However, as CPEC will enter into full implementation, the questions about the legal status of GB will be raised by India and its allies which will be challenging for Pakistan (Zahid & Hashmi, 2021).

Security Issues Linked with BRI

China has been very sensitive about security issues linked with BRI. That is why China, in 1996, signed border treaty with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan confirming existing

borderline (Trenin, 2002). Scholars are of the view that China's tilt towards CARs is primarily because of its internal regional concerns. China has been concerned about stability of Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region, which borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as Uighur activists once attempted to establish themselves in that region. In 2001, with foundation of SCO, China succeeded in strengthening its relations with CARs under the slogan of anti-terrorism. Since then, China has been providing military assistance to CARs to curb terrorism and separatist movements in the region. Tajikistan developed close military ties with China by building border posts along Tajik-Afghan border with the help of Chinese funds. In 2019, military exercises under the name of "Cooperation 2019" were held with Central-Asian partners. Similar military exercises have been held with Uzbekistan's National Guard and Kyrgyzstan's National Guard in Chinese city of Ürümqi in Xinjiang (Nurgozhayeva, 2020).

CARs have realized that their economic growth is linked to BRI and sustainability of BRI is linked to peace in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is shortest outlet to southern direction. Uzbekistan wants to develop rail links as well as share projects with Pakistan through Afghanistan, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan desire to export electricity to Pakistan via Afghanistan. But all of this is linked to peace in war torn country which has again been pushed into war because of withdrawal of American forces from country. Both CARs, having influence in Northern Afghanistan and Pakistan having influence in southern belt of Afghanistan can work together to bring peace in Afghanistan. Even for India it would be beneficial to cooperate in bringing peace and stability in Afghanistan because future trade prospects of CPEC and BRI can be extended to India and further south (Nurgozhayeva, 2020).

4. Conclusion

CARs have welcomed BRI as the AIIB and Silk Road Fund developed by China have given CARs the space to become part of BRI without facing conditionality's of World Bank and ADB. In fact, AIIB and Silk Road Fund allowed China to have tight control on the institutions and freedom to execute its development policy objectives. The CARs could not develop strong economic ties with EU and American led Trans-Pacific Partnerships as these were more focused towards Malaysia and Vietnam, while socio-economic condition of Arabs also compelled these states to look for alternatives. China with a lucrative investment in the shape of BRI was the best alternative which was welcomed with an open heart by CARs. Improvement in the economic

indicators of last five years reveals that most of the countries of CARs have started benefitting from BRI.

Large scale investment by China in BRI to improve its slowing down economy and diversifying its supply routes compels China to protect its projects using diplomatic and military power; however, BRI is being viewed by the West as an 'expansionist and imperialistic strategy' of China in the garb of development of regional countries. West thinks that China's lending will turn regional countries into a debt-trap, whereby providing China opportunity to take control of strategic assets such as agriculture land, mines and ports etc. Example of Hambantota port is often "wrongfully" narrated to substantiate the Chinese debt trap (Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021) Pakistan has also been warned that CPEC might push Pakistan into deeper debt burden.

Western sanctions on Russia have limited its investment capability in CARs, resultantly, China has replaced Russia in Central Asia as leading investor. Apart from developing economic and political relations with CARs, China has been increasing people to people contact with CARs in the shape of scholarships for Central Asian students and establishing scientific centers focused on Central Asia studies. China has been able to establish stronger ties with Russia also and succeeded to retain its economic dominance in Central Asia. Only anxiety in masses of CARs is about China's presence in the region and limited access to information about BRI projects. China has started working on improving transparency and reciprocity of BRI projects by sharing its ideas of BRI with domestic and international communities to bring more collaboration and inclusivity of local institutions in the BRI.

CPEC and BRI have huge economic opportunity for Pakistan and CARs. Sustainability of BRI is linked to peace in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is shortest outlet to southern direction. Uzbekistan wants to develop rail links as well as share projects with Pakistan through Afghanistan, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan desire to export electricity to Pakistan via Afghanistan. But all of this is linked to peace in war torn Afghanistan which is now linked with policies of Taliban which took over Kabul in August 2021 just a few days after the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan.

Recommendations:

- i. In order to build confidence and minimize corruption, information related to BRI projects should be made public so that researchers and analysts may scrutinize the project activities. This openness will allow general public and critiques to ensure protection of domestic interest and respond to false allegations against the BRI. This will also allow host country as well as China to address legitimate concerns over BRI. This will ensure fairness and transparency.
- ii. Pakistan as well as CARs will have to make use of Chinese investments in fair and transparent manner to boost their economic growth, ensuring sustainable human development, otherwise continued borrowing will push countries into debt trap.
- iii. Success of BRI is linked to political independence in the region followed by economic opportunity and then above all stable security situation. Political independence means that China being prime financier of BRI and regional power, must respect sovereignty of CARs. Any outside-in approach with no ownership by masses is never going to bear fruits as has happened with projects of Russia and US.
- iv. China has invested a lot in attaining its own engineering standards. However, to make these standards a model for the world, China has to export not only its technology and engineering standards but has to ensure that these are accepted also. To ensure that regional production chain continues, China must ensure continuity of flow of Chinese investment into CARs and Pakistan through Silk Road Fund and AIIB.
- v. Pakistan and China should ensure “people to people” contact in CARs.
- vi. Regionalism plays very vital role in Central Asia. China will have to ensure that BRI is inclusive in scope without giving undue favour to any Central Asian State in the region. Any geopolitical competition in region by any power will bring backlash. If BRI has to succeed it must ensure sovereignty of regional countries with a feeling of inclusiveness.

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