

CPEC Security in 2020

Anam Fatima*

-
- Anam Fatima works as Research Fellow at Pak Institute for Peace Studies. She holds Master of Philosophy (M Phil) in International Relations from National Defence University (NDU), Islamabad.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, is moving forward in the face of multiple internal and regional security and political challenges. Since its initiation, Pakistan and China have displayed a strong commitment to pursue a smooth and secure implementation of this mega project. CPEC security has gradually improved following a visible decline in trends of militants' attacks and fatalities this year. Compared to two such attacks in 2019, a single terrorist attack targeted CPEC related projects and its workers in 2020. Reportedly, a Chinese man escaped an attack on his life when a remote-controlled bomb planted on his vehicle failed to detonate. Police recovered the device, a magnet bomb, attached to his car and defused it.²¹⁰ In 2019, Pakistani law enforcement agencies and security forces had repulsed a terrorist attack targeting Chinese and other foreign workers staying at the Pearl Continental (PC) hotel in Gwadar.

On the whole, since January 1, 2017, at least nine (9) terrorist attacks have targeted CPEC-related projects and workers as well as Chinese nationals and interests in Pakistan. Four of these attacks happened in Balochistan, another four in Sindh (three in Karachi including the one on Chinese consulate and one in Ghotki district), and one attack in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These attacks claimed in all 11 lives, including four Chinese nationals, and injured as many others.²¹¹

Despite the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, both the Pakistani and Chinese governments ensured that CPEC is moving forward in full swing. The Primary Joint Working Group (PJWG) on Chinese Security held a meeting in July to discuss various measures to enhance the security of Chinese nationals working on CPEC and other projects. The meeting decided that the Chinese consulate would promote maximum cooperation between Chinese nationals and law enforcement agencies.²¹²

The government of Pakistan has prioritized a foolproof security for the CPEC. It has strengthened the paramilitary forces to ensure smooth execution of the projects.²¹³ Deeming the increased industrial activities in Rashakai Special Economic Zones (SEZ), Peshawar police have developed a unique strategy to safeguard the workers of CPEC related projects.²¹⁴ Likewise, the Pakistani armed forces have demonstrated their commitment to the peaceful execution of CPEC. Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi, while stressing upon the maritime security of CPEC, had reiterated, in January 2020, the resolve to protect naval frontiers including the Gwadar Port.²¹⁵ During his visit to Naval Headquarters Islamabad later in the year, Prime Minister Imran Khan lauded the efforts to protect CPEC and assured full support and cooperation in this regard.²¹⁶

Gwadar is termed as the '*Crown Jewel*' of the CPEC because this port city is the lynchpin of the mega project. With the development of Gwadar port, Pakistan has strengthened its

maritime security. In addition, the government has also started fencing certain areas of Gwadar under the *Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan 2017-2050*.²¹⁷ The move has stirred some controversy and faced local resistance but the authorities maintain that the fencing is meant to ensure free and secure movement of people, mainly Chinese nationals. The Gwadar master plan reportedly comprises urban security mechanisms including urban video and alarm networks, vehicle management, and police management programs.²¹⁸ However, the lack of connectivity in the port city has raised security concerns. The Chinese authorities have expressed concerns over the lack of access to telecommunication services in Gwadar. Mobile phone connectivity and coverage has been very poor in the city, and the government has paid little attention in this regard.²¹⁹

The success of the CPEC is largely hinged on the Pakistani state's ability to address complex security issues both at internal and external fronts. To a great extent, the government has shown the will and capacity to tackle the internal challenges. However, the project is also impacted by geopolitical developments in the region. It is heartening that regional powers like Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran have welcomed the CPEC and expressed willingness to join this megaproject. On the other hand, the US has been expressing reservations about the project, and criticizing it intermittently. The reason is probably the United States' suspicions and concerns about China's growing influence in the region including in the Indian and Pacific Oceans that it believes threatens the interests of the US and its allies in the region.

However, among the CPEC opponents, India sits on the top. It considers the Chinese-led project as an encroachment on its sovereignty. Pakistan has repeatedly stated that India is attempting to disrupt the CPEC through various means. As the project moves forward, the accompanying security challenges are becoming graver. The Pakistani military has claimed that India is trying to damage Pakistan's image by targeting the CPEC. However, Western actors such as the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre (ESISC)²²⁰ has noted that Pakistan could not prove its claim of Indian attempts to sabotage CPEC. Pakistan presented a dossier to the UN secretary-general evincing Indian support of terrorist activities inside Pakistan and targeting CPEC projects. The dossier claimed that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was directly running an anti-CPEC terror cell. With initial funding of \$500 million, this cell had been operating since 2015 from headquarters of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to dent the peaceful execution of CPEC.²²¹

Following the US-India Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement on Geospatial Cooperation (BECA),²²² China and Pakistan have increased bilateral military cooperation by signing an MoU to promote peace in the region.²²³ The MoU was preceded by Pak-China discussion on CPEC security. Considering the increased Chinese interest in Kashmir because of CPEC, China is likely to reinforce Pakistan's strategic position in the region

through a defence pact and help it counterbalance Indian belligerence in Kashmir. Meanwhile, China and Pakistan have declared that any attempt to sabotage CPEC would not succeed. Chinese Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi, underlined strengthening bilateral cooperation on CPEC security.²²⁴ On the other hand, the Pakistan army has also enhanced and strengthened the CPEC security infrastructure.²²⁵

While addressing the traditional security threats facing CPEC, it is equally important to tackle non-traditional security issues via investment in human development, better health care, and climate change. China and Pakistan have taken steps to address non-traditional security challenges to CPEC. It is pertinent to note that CPEC projects remained unaffected amid the epidemic. Chief of China Overseas Ports Holding Company, Zhang Baozhong informed that neither any Pakistani employee in any CPEC project has been dismissed, nor has anyone suffered a salary cut during the COVID-19. However, differences and conflicts in the workplace are inevitable. For instance, workers at the Suki Kanari Hydropower Project had quit,²²⁶ lamenting the breach of labour policy. To allay the grievances of local workers, the government has formed a committee to solve the issue amicably.²²⁷ Besides, the local people's involvement in decision making is important. Ignoring the locals' concerns can instigate resentment and threaten security. Therefore, the government must take all local stakeholders on board on matters like fencing areas in Gwadar.

The geopolitical developments and security dynamics of the region have further reinforced the importance of Pak-China defence cooperation and regional integration under CPEC. Reports claim that the *Five Eyes* – an intelligence alliance of Britain, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the US – has been exchanging classified intelligence on China's foreign activities.²²⁸ On the other hand, Russia and Iran's strategic interest in CPEC would offer Pakistan an opportunity to strengthen regional security through the CPEC. In fact, Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan could form an alliance to promote regional integration and security under the CPEC. India's exit from Chabahar²²⁹ and China's growing relations with Iran would bring China, Pakistan and Iran closer, enhancing the regional security. Thus, it is palpable that the security of CPEC linked projects and workers will not be compromised at any cost.

