
Land-Bridge Implementation

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: The Challenges

by Ramtanu Maitra

In 2013, China and Pakistan signed a landmark agreement enabling China to build a corridor linking Kashgar in Western China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's port on the Arabian Sea at Gwadar, called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This is the third article on the CPEC in consecutive issues of EIR.

April 11—An ambitious project such as the CPEC—which links China and Pakistan by traversing thousands of kilometers of deserts and mountains to reach the sea—is expected to face many challenges. Some are related to construction and maintenance engineering and the adequacy of preparations to participate in such a large project while carrying on with mundane but challenging daily activities. Some other challenges, however, are related to geopolitical complexities and ensuring security throughout the length and breadth of the project. All those residing in the region and participating in the CPEC project to bring it to life, will experience a kind of change that has escaped them for many decades.

Engineering and Maintenance Challenges

The first challenge is to keep the 1,300 km Karakoram Highway (KKH) functional throughout the year. The highway connects China and Pakistan across the Karakoram mountain range through the Khunjerab Pass at an elevation of 15,397 feet and took almost 27 years to construct. The transport corridor is vulnerable to landslides and voluminous snowfall during the winter—892 Pakistani and Chinese workers lost their lives while building the highway. In January 2010, the Karakoram Highway was submerged near the Khunjerab Pass due to a severe landslide in the Hunza valley that resulted in the formation of an artificial lake 30 kilometers long. Large sections of the KKH were submerged, causing a major disruption of traffic between China and Pakistan. It took five years to get the road



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The Moon over part of the Karakoram Range as seen from Pakistan.

connected by land once again, making unnecessary a boat journey across the lake requiring an hour or more.

China realized that the highway will remain vulnerable in that area because of the geological instability and bare mountains carrying large and loose rocks. It solved the problem by tunneling through the mountain, forsaking the old, “romantic” Silk Road. It took three years and \$275 million to complete the tunnel, an engineering miracle. Nonetheless, avalanches, heavy snow-



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The Karakoram Highway. It links Pakistan to the ancient Silk Road city of Kashgar in Xinjiang province, China. The China-Pakistan border is at the three-mile-high Khunjerab Pass.

falls, and landslides will continue to be hazards and threaten certain sections of the road during the winter and rainy season, disrupting the flow of traffic. The area is also prone to floods.

Security

One of the challenges that Pakistan faces is that the western route of the economic corridor, leading directly to Gwadar Port, runs through a vast landmass where insecurity prevails. Pakistani officials point out that hostile forces, mostly based in the province of Balochistan, are openly against the construction of the CPEC and sabotage efforts to bring in foreign investments and integrate Balochistan with the rest of Pakistan. Balochistan has remained volatile since the founding of Pakistan in 1947, and some of its people have remained steadfast in seeking separation from Pakistan. The decades-long instability in Afghanistan that bor-

ders Balochistan on the west, and the consequent growth of terrorism, have contributed to the insecurity.

During the construction stage, this insecurity poses a threat to the Chinese workers and technicians on the project. The government of Pakistan in Islamabad has asked Beijing to put in place procedures to maximize security, including provision for security officials to have prior knowledge of the movement of Chinese personnel in the construction area. Pakistan has also established a Special Security Division of nine composite infantry battalions (9,000 personnel) and six civilian armed forces wings (6,000 personnel) to be headed by a serving major general of the Pakistan Army.

Islamabad has also set up the Gwadar Security Task Force under the command of a serving brigadier of the Pakistan Army to enhance protection and security in the Gwadar region, also located in Balochistan province. This was necessary because China had shelved several Gwadar-related projects a few years ago, after three Chinese engineers were killed by the insurgents.

Another security challenge is the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan's northwest, bordering Afghanistan on one side and the province of Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa on the other. The CPEC's western route will pass through Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa, which shares the insecurity of the FATA, before it enters Balochistan to the south. A number of terrorist groups function in this area, including Uighurs from China's western Xinjiang Province. The Chinese have been putting pressure on Pakistan to ruthlessly pursue all of these groups, in particular the Uighurs of the separatist, al-Qaeda-linked East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

Motivated to see the project implemented, Pakistan is taking measures. Its success cannot be ascertained at present. In the post-construction period, security will continue to be a key element in the success of the CPEC.

If China is investing so heavily in Pakistan mega-projects, as one Pakistani analyst pointed out, it is Islamabad's responsibility to develop its capacity building and professional skills to meet the deadlines for the construction of roads, railways, and power stations. Failure to meet deadlines will have a negative impact on the CPEC, and Beijing might then seek other options to obtain an outlet to the Arabian Sea, via Iran.

Geopolitical Conundrum

The CPEC enters Pakistan from China through the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which is part of the state of

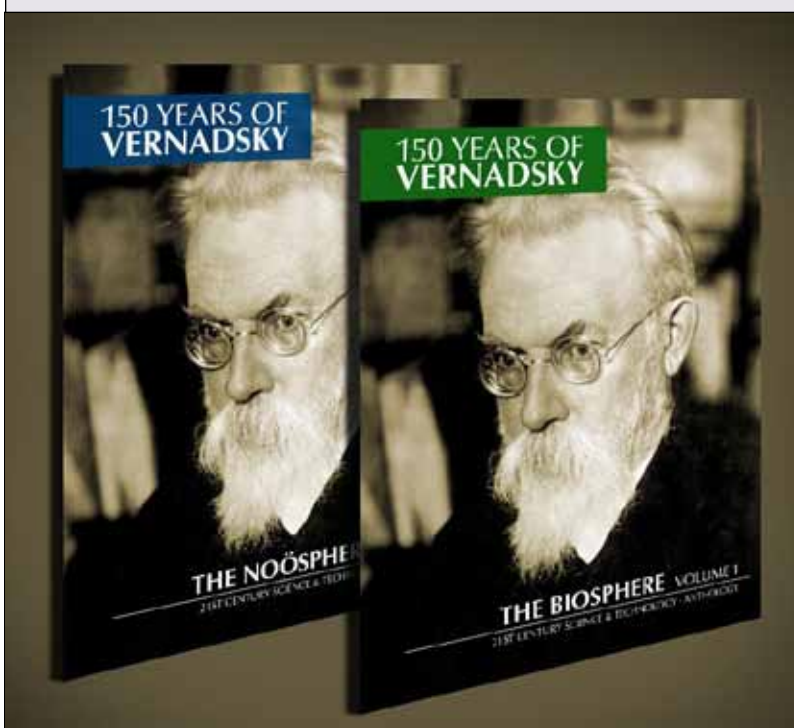


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One of the frequent, minor landslides along the Karakoram Highway. The monumental landslides, such as the one in January 2010, are the real threat.

Jammu and Kashmir, a state that remains disputed between Pakistan and India. Gilgit-Baltistan is located in the Pakistan-occupied part of the state, but instead of integrating the residents as citizens, Islamabad has accepted them into Pakistan only for administrative control. Pakistan is now in a quandary how to deal with this

problem. While Pakistan cannot make Gilgit-Baltistan a province, lest it contradict its long-standing claim to Jammu and Kashmir as a whole—and thereby sacrifice assured votes if the promised plebiscite should ever take place, to determine whether Jammu and Kashmir belongs to Pakistan or India—most local residents demand that Gilgit-Baltistan be made a province of Pakistan. Despite Pakistan's caution in this respect, India-Pakistan relations still have an untoward impact on the CPEC project. Although India acknowledges the benefits it would derive from the CPEC if it were to be extended to connect with Indian markets, creating an overland route from India to the Central Asian markets, it has raised objections to the corridor's route through Gilgit-Baltistan, which India claims as part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Gilgit-Baltistan has been under Pakistani control since the founding of Pakistan in 1947. India has objected to Pakistan's moves to assert ownership or consolidate control over what it considers Indian territory under Pakistani occupation.



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