

Balochistan, Baloch and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Maria Malik

Abstract

Over the years, Balochistan has swayed between obscurity and prominence but its geo-strategic significance has never slackened. Pakistan's largest province in terms of landmass it enjoys an important geostrategic position because of its proximity with the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. With the recent developments ahead in sight of the CPEC the major world powers are shifting their focus to Gwadar, which is the central piece of the whole CPEC and is located close to the Strait of Hormuz through which 20% of total global oil production passes through. The likely CPEC network of roads and rails will provide China with an easy and much shorter trade route to the markets of Europe, Gulf and Africa. Given the significance of Gwadar and Balochistan province several analysts and researchers have questioned about the welfare of the locals residing in the region. The basic aim of this paper is to look at how the CPEC and its projects are going to impact the lives of the local population, particularly the Baloch. In order to lead CPEC projects to their successful completion, it is imperative to take in account the needs and grievances of the local people; who unless have their objections addressed can cause trouble. The basic thing is to adopt the policy of inclusivity by taking the local stakeholders (the politicians, the fishermen, the nationalists and the young unemployed youth) on board and by making the local people skillfully capable through vocational trainings thus opening the array of opportunities that CPEC shall bring to the region. The paper is qualitative in nature and has employed primary and secondary sources of data collection using literature review, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as tools for data analysis.

Keywords: CPEC, Pakistan, Baloch, Balochistan, China, and Regional Connectivity

Introduction

China-Pakistan all-weather friendship began with the formal diplomatic relations in 1950 and got strengthened in the subsequent decades. It proved to be an all-weather friendship when both of the states stood by each other in tough times. The two nuclear states of the Asian continent do not have much in common in terms of their culture, language, customs and religion unlike India and Pakistan who have a lot more in common. Yet the relations between China and Pakistan have been described with phrases like an 'iron bond', 'all-weather friendship', 'Pak-Cheen Dosti Zindabad (long live Pak-China friendship)', 'deeper than oceans and higher than Himalayas', 'a friendship that has flourished like a tree growing tall and strong'.

Pakistan's recognition of China after termination of diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 1950; the alliance of the two states against India and USSR in the 1960s over

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borderland disputes; military and economic cooperation that began in the 1960s and continued in years to come; Pakistan's stance on Tinanmen square incident and China's assistance to the former on civil nuclear energy under the grandfather clause are the exemplary practices to portray this iron-bond between these two neighboring countries that share a border of 585 kilometers.

Over the years not only the state of Pakistan but also the public sentiments are a counter-reflection of the belief that 'in international affairs states do not have permanent friends or foes'. Most interestingly, on the lines of 'Pakistan's ideology', 'religion' and 'Pakistan Military Forces', the China-Pakistan relations have also made it to the list of the 'sacred cows' making it immune to criticism.

Since the conception days and starting of the development projects under One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) the academics, foreign policy experts, journalists and analysts alike are looking at the projects with an inquisitive anticipation of how the locals are going to benefit from these multibillion projects of networking and regional connectivity. The Baloch are obviously a major part of the local population from where the western CPEC route is expected to link the Chinese city of Kashghar with Gwadar.

The basic aim of this paper is to look at 'if' and 'how' is the Baloch community of Balochistan province going to benefit from CPEC. For that purpose I have extensively reviewed available literature on the developmental projects of CPEC and OBOR, the history between two countries, the regional connectivity models like EU and ASEAN, the Baloch community in Pakistan and their socio-political and economic grievances, the past experiences of the Baloch with respect to the federal government and development projects. Although there was a lot of literature available commenting on the benefits and feasibility of the CPEC projects in Pakistan but there was a lack of research on how CPEC is directly going to impact the lives and lifestyles of locals particularly the Baloch people. In view of lack of literature on this specific issue, I interviewed people belonging to the DMG, Foreign Office, the Baloch nationalists, the common Baloch, academics and the economists. The research methodology was qualitative in nature and the fieldwork was mainly conducted in Lahore, Islamabad, Quetta and Gwadar.

2. China Pakistan Economic Corridor

Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled one of the world history's largest investment project in 2013 for regional connectivity and development. China's One-Belt-One-Road (OBOR) initiative will basically link Mainland China to the Eurasian states through a network of roads and belt (sea route). The OBOR is kind of a revival of the centuries old silk route that connected the world to the center of the globe (areas in the surroundings of the Mediterranean and Caspian Sea), which was once a hub of

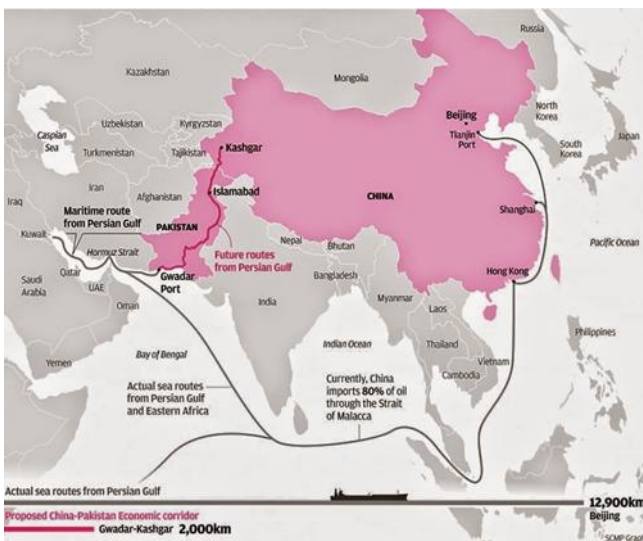
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linguistics, culture, commerce, trade and religious activities. The world, especially the West, is eyeing this initiative as China's aim to gain strategic advancement. However, Chinese are insisting on this being a connectivity and development project that aims to bring regional prosperity through cooperation.

About 75 percent of the world population lives in Eurasia and it is home to most of the world's physical wealth (both in terms of its enterprises and what lies underneath its soil). The continent accounts for about 60 percent of world's total GNP and about 3/4th of the world's known energy resources. In this context, the power that dominates Eurasia will control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions. Eurasia is, according to Brzezinski, the chessboard in which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played (Brzezinski, 1997).

Figure 1

Actual Sea Route versus CPEC



China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a multibillion US \$ Chinese investment project in Pakistan under the OBOR initiative. The initial amount of investment for multiple developmental projects was around 46 Billion US \$. The CPEC is a combination of energy, network and information technology projects and connects the regional economic centers through a central corridor that stretches from the Gwadar Port (in Balochistan province of Pakistan) to Kashghar in China (as shown in the figure 1.). It is the shortest possible and most economical trade route for China into Europe, Middle East and Central Asia; without having to pass by Strait of Malacca and the width of Pacific and Indian Ocean where it has disputes with countries like

Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Vietnam and India and can also effectively avoid contact with US presence in the region. The proposed CPEC route practically cuts down 85 percent of the distance for China to reach its desired markets in Eurasian region. Gwadar holds the position of a ‘center piece’ or as I like to call it the ‘Koh-e-Noor’ in the crown, which is CPEC.

Notwithstanding with what Balochistan province is offering considering Gwadar’s significance, some sources have claimed that as per the recent joint committee meeting on CPEC, China will have a share of 91 per cent of the revenue generated from the Gwadar Port for the next forty years. Whereas the federation of Pakistan has claim over the 9 per cent out of which no one knows how much is going back to resource rich yet the least developed and least populated province of Balochistan (Buledi, 2017).

3. The strategic significance of Gwadar and Balochistan

Balochistan has swayed between obscurity and prominence but its geo-strategic significance has never slackened. It is the largest province in terms of landmass and enjoys an important geostrategic position because of its proximity with the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean (Ahmad, 2008). On the west, Balochistan shares a 520 miles long border with Iran and on the north a 720 miles border with Afghanistan. In the east are provinces of Sindh, Punjab and a part of Khyber Pakhtunkha (Ahmad, 1992).

The Balochistan coast, on the south, is particularly important for Pakistan as it has two of its three naval bases- Ormara and Gwadar- situated on the Balochistan Coast. Gwadar port is located close to the Strait of Hormuz- at the entrance to the Persian Gulf. It is expected of the Gwadar port to not only provide a port but also warehouses and industrial facilities to more than twenty countries including those in the Gulf, the Red Sea, and in Central Asia and East Africa as well as Iran, India and parts of northwest China. Gwadar port, which is around 725 km to the west of Karachi, is also designed to strengthen the strategic defense of Pakistan by providing an alternative to the Karachi port (Grare, 2006).

Gwadar Port became functional in 2016 with the annual capacity to handle 19 million tons of crude oil. So far China has invested \$10.63 billion for construction of trade network of roads and railways for the mobility of goods and resources in Pakistan. Many Chinese companies are also working in Balochistan to extract its many resources, for example, Rekodik and Saindak copper and gold mines of Chaghi District (Akins, 2017). The Chinese investment in CPEC projects, which was initially said to be \$46 billion, has now been pushed to \$ 62 billion (Siddiqui, 2017).

Considering the strategic significance of this port, India is apprehensive of and opposed to Chinese investment in form of CPEC and fears the policy of encirclement

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in the region. United States of America is also concerned about the rise of China as a regional power and its strengthening ties with Pakistan in shape of an economic corridor that can counter its alliance with India and Japan in the region and undermine its 'Pivot to Asia-Pacific' policy.

4. CPEC and Balochistan- the State Narrative

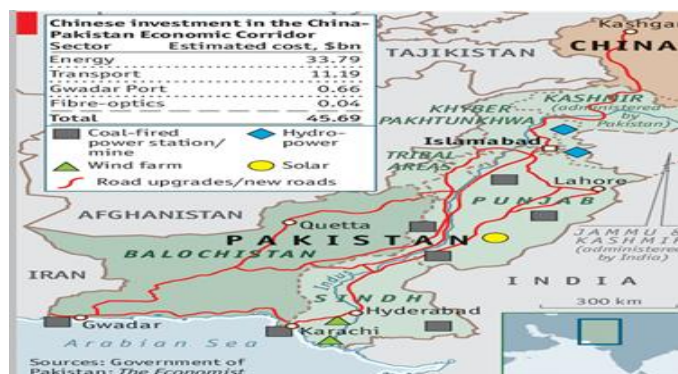
Both China and Pakistan claim CPEC to be the 'game changer' for the regional development and connectivity. It is going to connect more than sixty countries of the Eurasian region and will provide them with new prospects of progress and growth in different sectors including trade, commerce, culture, information technology, education, language, energy and roads and railway infrastructure.

In response to the objections raised by India and USA, both China and Pakistan have insisted that CPEC is a development and connectivity project that aims at achieving prosperity for the people of the region. It is solely an economic cooperation initiative that has nothing to do with the territorial disputes other than bringing opportunities for the people of the region.

The experts and intelligentsia in Pakistan believes that CPEC will definitely bear its fruits in the future years as the western route will open up the backward districts of Balochistan and southern KPK and will integrate them with the national markets. This would bring opportunities of employment and small businesses to the masses of the least developed areas in the country.

Figure 2

Chinese investment in the CPEC



Also, considering Pakistan's energy deficit, CPEC will open new corridors and may be a step closer to inviting more FDI by resolving the now decades old energy crises. China is investing \$33.79 billion in the energy sector by developing hydropower

projects, solar and wind farm energy as well as coal fired power stations in different parts of the country.

Chinese investment in the transport and fiber optics is an indication towards better job prospects for skilled labor in these two sectors. Development of the Gwadar port city has kicked off with a new airport in Gwadar and construction of a road network linking the city with the major economic hubs of the country (through Karachi and Quetta mainly).

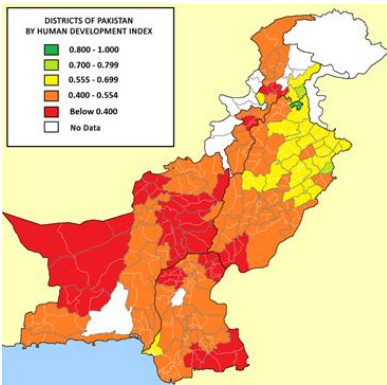
Both Chinese and Pakistani authorities at various points have invited India to join the CPEC believing that it will not only be good for regional connectivity and development but may also have a chance at resolving the Kashmir issue that has served as a bone of contention between the two countries since the partition. The invitation was in fact also praised and appreciated by the Huriyat leader Mirwaiz Omer Farooq who is of the opinion that CPEC will bring long due prosperity to the people of Jammu and Kashmir by making them financially self-sufficient through regional connectivity. However, India has its reservations against the CPEC; it views it as a bilateral agreement between China and Pakistan, which passes through an internationally disputed territory (Gilgit Baltistan) and an attempt to encircle India through a regional strategic alliance.

5. CPEC and the Baloch- a counter State Narrative

Lack of information and the secrecy involving the CPEC projects are also making Pakistani's to question the feasibility and legitimacy of this mega development project. The first and foremost question being raised is that what are the terms and conditions of financing under which Chinese companies are participating? What will be the job quota for Pakistanis and more importantly amongst the federating units, especially the smaller and most backward ones? Some people have actually gone to the extent of calling it neo-colonization on the pattern of East-India Company's take over of the subcontinent. Neo-colonization or not, the secrecy is quite inexcusable for the analysts and human rights activists. The people of Balochistan, and particularly the Baloch, are concerned about their future when it comes to Chinese investment in Gwadar.

Figure 3

Districts of Pakistan as per HDI

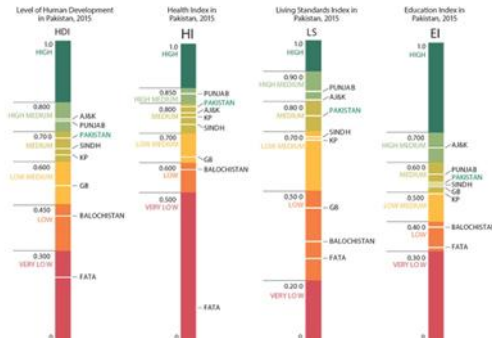


5.1. Balochistan and the Baloch

Balochistan did not become a province until 1970 (twenty three years after independence) and is still struggling for provincial autonomy. Seventy one percent of Balochistan’s population is living in multidimensional poverty with maternal death rate three times as much in other provinces and thousands of children out of school along with ghost schools and substandard education; the recent Human Development Index report by UNDP ranks Balochistan at the lowest of HDI amongst all the four provinces (see figure 3) (UNDP, 2017).

Figure 4

HDI in Pakistan (2015)



The relative socio-economic and political deprivation coupled with the use of force to settle the political and economic issues alienated the Baloch even further. With regard

to CPEC and the influx of migrants from Afghanistan, the Baloch are apprehensive that they will soon become a minority ethnic community within their own province. Most of the Baloch are uneducated and unskilled and will be unable to compete with the skilled labor and educated professionals from other provinces. This will lead to an influx of non-Baloch in the province that will change the demographics of the province in the longer run. As per Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Chinese nationals could outnumber Balochistan natives by 2048 given the current influx rate (Yousafzai, 2016).

5.2. Job prospects and Vocational Training

Out of the nine proposed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) only one is being planned for Balochistan. The plan for developing the SEZ is quite vague and incomplete as the official website for the CPEC doesn't provide much information on as to what will be the blue print of this SEZ; how many jobs will it generate; how many jobs for the locals and the Baloch per sector; and how long will it take to get developed.

Being backward and least underdeveloped of all the provinces, the Baloch lack in skill and education as compared to the people of the other federating units. The job opportunities under CPEC are most likely to hire skilled labor and professionals from the bigger provinces. Unfortunately, under CPEC, although Mandarin is being taught at different universities of Pakistan, none of the universities in Balochistan is teaching Mandarin. One young Pashtun business management graduate and professional in Quetta mentioned that it is kind of ironic that the Pakistanis are being taught Mandarin to interact with the investors while the investors are not bothered about learning the local languages, which indicates the colonial mindset. Another Baloch IT graduate seemed worried saying that although he graduated with a distinction from the IT University of Quetta but he doesn't think the future is so bright for him in Balochistan or even Pakistan. Since the CPEC advertised jobs are mostly for the people of other provinces and he cannot go to the other provinces and compete with the graduates of that area for the jobs there.

Unfortunately, the government has not announced any new vocational training institutes for the people of Balochistan to equip them with skills so that they can secure jobs when the opportunity comes knocking at their doors. So no matter even if the CPEC creates job opportunities it won't make any difference for the locals, as the government has not done much for the human development or their capacity building. While talking to the former Chief Minister of Balochistan Dr. Malik Baloch about CPEC being a game changer for the people of Balochistan he stressed upon a fact "not a single penny under CPEC has been spent for the welfare of the Baloch so far". He further said

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“We don’t want our ethnic identity to be compromised because of CPEC as we are already in a small number. The people being brought in to Balochistan to work on these projects shall not be settled here permanently nor shall be given citizenship. Balochistan and Gwadar should get its due share in the revenue generated by the CPEC projects. Gwadar Port shall be given under the supervision of the provincial government where the CM Balochistan is the chairperson and the Baloch shall have a 51 per cent share in the decision making panel. The federation should recognize CPEC as an opportunity to address the grievances of the Baloch rather than alienating them further by not giving them a fair share in revenue and control over their own resources”.

5.3. Clean Drinking Water

The most ironic point is that the port city of Gwadar lacks clean drinking water. The daily requirement is six million gallon per day (MGD) and currently the city is facing a deficit of four MGD. Currently, two MGD is being supplied to the population of the Gwadar city through tanks from Mirani Dam that is located 150 km in the neighboring Kech District. The cost per tanker is almost \$254. With Gwadar’s annual population growth rate of three per cent, the demand for clean water will rise to twelve MGD by 2020 hence the crises of provision of clean water requires immediate action. Before this, Ankara Kaur Dam was being used to provide water to Gwadar city but since it dried up, Mirani Dam is being used which can provide water for only few more months. Unfortunately, by redirecting the provision of water, Turbat City is being deprived of water supply, which is located only 43 km from the Mirani Dam hence resulting in a conflict over this water reservoir.

Instead of building a more efficient method of supplying water like aqua ducts, desalination plants or the pipelines, the government has relied on provision of water supply through the tanks. These tanks were once used for supplying crude oil hence risking the contamination of drinking water. Also, the water from Mirani Dam was declared unfit for drinking purposes under the WHO guidelines but it appears that it is right now the least of the concerns (Suleman, 2018).

At present, there is only one desalination plant that is providing clean drinking water to the one thousand (700 Pakistani and 300 Chinese) workers on the port. The desalination plants require a lot of energy where as we are facing acute shortage of energy right now. Plus the corruption and embezzlement has not made it possible to develop a more lasting solution for the shortage of clean drinking water for the port city of Gwadar that holds the entire future of CPEC.

In the past two years, the provincial government has been able to build three small dams (Sawar, Shadi Kaur and Belar) to overcome the problem with Chinese

assistance. Ironically these dams are rain dependent and these areas receive very little rainfall annually (Notezai, 2017).

5.4. Coal Power Plant

Pakistan is facing severe energy crises for past two decades now with an energy deficit of 4,000 MW. However, under any circumstances going for coal based energy production is not a viable option because of the environmental and health hazards associated to it. Recently in UK the demand for coal dropped by 52.5 per cent and China reduced its coal consumption by 1.5 per cent where as Pakistan is aiming to double its coal consumption which is an alarming trend.

A 300 Mega Watt (MW) coal power plant is being developed in Gwadar under CPEC. It is the only energy related project that is planned for Balochistan under CPEC (see figure 1). The first and foremost concern related to this project is being raised by the environmentalists arguing that no proper cost and benefit analysis or environment impact analysis has been carried out so far. The recent case of smog in Lahore is the recent development that should make us think twice before investing in projects related to carbon emission as they have human health and security concerns attached to it. Moreover, the general climate change in Pakistan has already become an alarming issue as it is affecting the agricultural dependent economy of Pakistan.

Most interestingly, the coal plant in Gwadar will compete for water that is already a scarce resource in the region. It is a vicious cycle of competition, as the desalination plants require energy while the coal power plants are water dependent (Baloch, 2018).

5.5. Development of the Western Route

The other major concern for the Baloch is that being one of the major stakeholders in the CPEC the political leadership of Balochistan was not taken on board regarding any major decision. Under the last elected government, there were two parliamentary committees on CPEC and none of them had any Baloch representing the interests of the community and province. The Baloch nationalists who are up in arms against the federation are a major source of threat for the development projects under CPEC. This is one of the few reasons why the development of Western route was postponed adding fuel to the fire for the moderate nationalists who are still unsure about the sincerity of the federal policy makers. Since Gwadar is the centerpiece for CPEC, Pakistani military is safeguarding the projects under development in Balochistan at the moment making sure that nothing derails the CPEC. The militarization of the province for security purposes further infuriates the Baloch nationalists who don't have pleasant experiences to share when it comes to the forces. Dr. Shah Muhammad Marri believes that

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“CPEC will only materialize if the establishment is willing to show a serious resolve by genuinely addressing the socio-political and economic issues of the Baloch people. Baloch have a culture of resistance, and the federation of Pakistan has been trying to manage the conflict for decades now but has never made a serious effort to transform the conflict. The issues of Baloch are of political nature and shall be dealt with politically and not by force. However, the federation and establishment have always tried the formula of ‘carrot and stick’; they either tried bribing the Sardars to join the Sarkar or they used force against the Baloch. Both will not work in the long run and are not a permanent solution to a problem that is political in nature. Baloch needs to be treated with respect and honor on the basis of equality and fairness”.

Unfortunately for the federation of Pakistan, the security forces have not distinguished between the separatists and the sub-nationalist groups of the Baloch who have been demanding provincial autonomy at par with other provinces. The use of brute force, militarization of the province and not taking the Baloch leadership in confidence on mega development projects has amplified the trust deficit between the Baloch and the civil and military bureaucracy. The former Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Ms. Hina Rabbani Khar was of the opinion that Balochistan has not gone through the governance structure like the rest of the Pakistan. Considering even the rest of Pakistan has suffered when it comes to development of democratic institutions. According to her,

“Gwadar has a potential of being Dubai one day. But you cannot have Dubai in the law and order situation that is surrounding the major sites of the development in Balochistan. The solution is to make aggrieved Baloch the rightful owners of the resources, which will make them the protectors instead of instigators of violence against developmental projects. The spinoff of Gwadar can change the entire Balochistan. If the intention is there, capacity is there. Capacity cannot be built artificially rather it is an on job thing; you train people when they join a job and build their capacity”.

6. CPEC-How to turn it into a ‘game changer’

Balochistan is a province of only 1.5 million families. Instead of alienating them for their small number they should be treated as an asset. At one job per family, they only need 1.5 million jobs and CPEC is the best way to achieve that. With CPEC projects and the SEZs involving development projects for agriculture, horticulture, fisheries and mineral resources this can be achieved in less than half a decade (Bengali, 2018).

Former Pakistani Ambassador to India, Abdul Basit stated that for one house in AJK they have provided electricity, which was not even economically viable for the government but they have done so because of political reasons. He was of the opinion that a similar kind of preferential treatment should have been extended to the people

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of Balochistan in order to address their issues. But since their population is very small and doesn't have a huge political impact hence the authorities have not made serious efforts for the resolution of their grievances. Time has come for Pakistan especially with reference to CPEC and Gwadar that they settle these issues once and for all so that the foreign countries don't have a chance to exploit the fault lines with in Pakistan. Considering that only \$ 0.66 Billion is being spent in Balochistan and that the Baloch are not expected to get much out of this, he said

“Eventually CPEC will bear fruits for the people of Balochistan. The tribal system is one hindrance in development and it will stand challenged by the development and modernity. People will get education and come out of the shackles of the tribal system and things will inevitably improve in the long run. No matter how small the share is, once systems and infrastructure gets developed things will get better. Development has its own dynamics and doesn't happen overnight but takes a long time to bear fruits. However, we have to put in extra effort for the people of Balochistan this time”.

7. Conclusion

It is interesting that the state narrative is just all praises for the CPEC and the counter state narrative (with respect to the Baloch only) is loaded with concerns about how much the Baloch will get out of this multi-billion dollar project that is being termed as a 'game changer'. As the former Senator and a distinguished Baloch politician Sana Ullah Baloch thinks that “the divide and rule policy is no more the solution. The government and the security forces should address the issues on genuine terms because if the Baloch conflict escalates it will create obstruction in the development of CPEC”.

Balochistan and Gwadar are very crucial to the development of CPEC even if the Western route is not developed at all. Without Gwadar, there is no CPEC. So this is plain common sense that in order to complete the CPEC and achieve its desired aims, the trust deficit between the (civil and security) establishment and the Baloch needs to be bridged up. The Federal Government and the Security Forces need to make a serious effort of resolving the conflict and not just manage it through force or coercion rather this time co-option, engagement and dialogue should be a strategy. The first step to achieve this is to be less secretive about the projects under CPEC and the share of each province in the jobs and revenue. To make it a real game changer we need to engage people especially the ones who have high stakes in it, for example, the Baloch especially living in Gwadar and the areas adjacent to it. The government of Pakistan should de-centralize the Programme of development and should train the locals through proper vocational trainings. CPEC should be made a part of curriculum in different universities within Balochistan (and other areas too) to develop local expertise on the topic and hence preparing them for the future challenges as well as opportunities.

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Henry Kissinger once said, “Control oil and you control the nations; control food and you control the people”. If you are able to provide the Baloch with basic necessities of life in disguise of CPEC, then yes it does have a potential of being a game changer for the entire region.

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