



Dilemma of National Narrative: The Case for Building Domestic and Regional Narratives for CPEC

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Abstract

Building a national narrative on CPEC is appearing to be a daunting task for the government of Pakistan. Such a dilemma does not characterize Pakistan alone, but troubling policy issue peculiar to the BRI project as a whole. The Chinese-led mega projects have preyed on rival narratives since its initiation in 2013. Since the region is characterized by regional rivalries and interests of the major powers, it is plausible that such an ambitious project like BRI in general and particularly CPEC will continue to face the dilemma of narratives. To place the discussion in perspective, the paper is sectionalized into three parts. The first part theorizes narratives, it why, by who, for what, and whom. With the theoretical premise, the second part argues that Pakistan needs to strategize its CPEC narratives on two levels. Domestically, it requires a very cautious approach to define the national or state narrative. In the presence of multiple sub-nationalities, at the provincial level and relatively weaker broader national sentiment, it is crucial to develop a consensus with caution. At the external level, a regional narrative might be built with the help of like-minded states and by employing a strategy to bring most of the regional powers into the project of CPEC. The paper concludes that building narratives requires a joint effort by the ruling elite (political and intellectual), civil society, and media at the domestic level and also imperative for Pakistan to adopt a counter-narrative strategy through diplomatic channels, to generate mutually acceptable trans-regional



counter-narratives against the propagandist agenda, bent at tarnishing CPEC.

Keyword: CPEC, National Narrative, Regional Integration, Gwadar, BRI.

Introduction

China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is one of the most significant development projects ever initiated with the help of foreign investment in Pakistan. It is expected that this project will open up new avenues for economic growth and development in the country as well as regional connectivity. However, the success of mega projects such as CPEC lies in the degree to which a state creates a consensus over the plausibility of the project, and the level of government's success in connecting policy goals with the shared values of the country—its national narrative. Such connections bolster support for the required policies and investments to effect transformative change. Unfortunately, for Pakistan, despite the acknowledged geo-economic and geo-strategic importance of the project, it has failed to create a consensus over CPEC both at the domestic and international levels. It has been struggling with the provincial divide over the share of CPEC projects as well as its routes. The state of Pakistan is drooping between two kinds of narratives on CPEC. One, at the domestic level - provincial narrative, as every province holds a divergent opinion which often comes into conflict with others. Basically, there is a conflict between local narratives and official narratives. The government has failed to develop a national narrative that is fundamental in creating consensus and reaping the real fruits of the mega project. It is the role of the state at the central to mobilize and galvanize a common narrative amongst the provinces, which eventually should become the state policy. Two, Pakistan is grappling with varying degrees of challenge at both regional and international levels with regard to the acceptability of CPEC. One possible explanation could be the competing interests of major regional and global powers, who see China and its projects as a threat. Therefore, Chinese-led mega projects have been preyed to rival narratives since its initiation in 2013. Since the region is characterized by regional rivalries and interests of the major powers, it is plausible that such an ambitious project like BRI in general and particularly CPEC will continue to face a dilemma of narratives. This paper aims at exploring the way Pakistan could find a consensual narrative at the state level and create a regional narrative with the help of regional powers.

The importance of national interests and national narrative is beyond any doubt. Therefore, this subject has created a lot of interests in western academia, Charles A. Beard in his seminal work "The Idea of National interest" discuss the importance of developing national interests in the context of the nation-state, and explains the historical



experience of the US foreign policy and inquire how diplomacy has been used to achieve national interests. Although, Beard's work does not present any theoretical explanation of national interests but the description of US foreign policy for achieving nation interests presents a good case to study the importance of national interests and national narratives in the context of contemporary dilemmas of national interest (Beard, 1934). National narrative based on national consensus holds primary importance for achieving national interests in a highly competitive strategic environment as faced by Pakistan. The national interests if, supported by a national narrative create discipline and significantly regulates the actions and policies of political and local interest groups. Foreign policymakers are very much concerned with national interests and how to achieve a consensus on them at domestic and external levels. Speculating that how this evolution of consensus building and national narrative development takes place, there is a logical question arises how national interests are stated? Does national interests relate to mere political or economic advantages or go beyond that and stand for the nation's economic or security survival in face of severe security threats. States manifest their national interests very explicitly in their official statements, documents, publications as well as unofficial data. They take all political forces on board to avoid any ambiguity and demonstrate national consensus on critical matters of national interests. That is how a state creates a common narrative. They serve as the public declaration of a state's objectives and policies. Such manifestation serves at both domestic and external levels. First, it helps to assist in prioritizing the objectives of the states and ensure effective use of resources. Secondly, the development of a national narrative helps to alleviate undue constraints on the government and strengthen its standing at the external level. Third, a National narrative, build with a consensus ensures continuity and timely implementation of policies. This conceptual lens provides a deeper understanding of dilemmas faced by CPEC and how they can be effectively sorted out. CPEC is a matter of national interests that can be defined as "a system of interconnected and logically coherent statements on what can be beneficial for a particular state in a given period of time" (Alekseevich, 2015). A pronounced national narrative makes a state more predictable to the external world. It shows the readiness of a state to use all its means in the pursuit of such objectives.

Joseph Frankel's interpretation of National interests provides the best scenario to understand the CPEC's dilemma of connecting national interests and national narrative building. In his work "National Interests" he states that while drawing the important national objectives a state must apply a systematic inquiry of geography, ethnicity, population, interest groups which ultimately helps a state to evolve a consensual policy and achieve national interests (Frankel, 1970). This is perhaps the most significant approach while looking at the domestic and external challenges faced by CPEC. This dilemma is very well presented by Siegfried O Wolf. He describes national consensus



and harmony as a precondition for investment and its continuation in CPEC. At a domestic level, he sees unpleasant civil-military relations and a constant conflict between political groups as the biggest hurdle in developing consensus. At the external level, regional rivalries have been an impediment in extending the benefits of such a significant project (Wolf, 2020). Therefore, it is important to look at the ways and means to build a national narrative. The paper is based on qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data which includes, official statistics, reports and documents, and policy statements. The study is divided into two parts looking at the narrative issue exclusively at domestic and regional levels. By analyzing the domestic differences on CPEC and highlighting the external anti-CPEC narratives, it concludes that CPEC is an issue of prime national interests, building consensus and projecting national narrative would not only help in its execution at the domestic level but also helps in spreading the CPEC's advantages to the surrounding regions. This will help in creating greater connectivity and enable the whole region in reaping its benefits for the economic development of the whole region.

How Nations Build Common Narratives?

Interestingly, we cannot discount the narrative around CPEC from the larger canvass of state-building and development. As a country, we should start maturing and visualizing CPEC beyond mere regional connectivity and economic development. It must be seen in the prism of national interests. CPEC as a project strategically demonstrates and affirms the transitory position of Pakistan in the region. When theoretically premised, BRI in general and CPEC, in particular, is a reminder of Mackinder's Heartland theory. According to Mackinder (Mackinder, 1943) Central Asia is the first historical pivot area because it provides space for strategic thinking and it from which "horsemen have dominated Asian and European history because of their superior mobility" (Flint & Taylor, 2000) Furthermore, "Mackinder's Heartland theory casts a broad geographic net capturing much of today's Central Asia that is becoming a strategic bridge between Europe and China in light of the latter's BRI (Chen & Fazilov, 2018). CPEC will strategically link China, Pakistan, and Central Asia. Sher, Khetran, and Khalid dubbed CPEC as a gateway to Central Asia (Sher & Khan, 2019). As a grand strategy, the Heartland theory "tapped Central Asia as the strategic 'energy' heartland of the world and whoever dominates it, could rule the world (Bakare & Toor, 2019). A common narrative that must be shared and celebrated in the country is that despite all odds, Pakistan strategically holds and provide transitory help to reaching the heartland. While China might be the major gainer, Pakistan will also have a strategic edge as China will be penetrating and connecting the "pivot area – of Central Asia" (Bakare & Toor, 2019), which according to Mackinder would remain the "pivot of the world politics (Venier, 2004). This strategic importance must be reiterated at both national and provincial levels.



It must be one of the most talking points and running themes of political debate in the media and academic production – either at the university or think tank front should ensure that it becomes part of the national consciousness. In furtherance, CPEC must be synced with national integrity and prestige in the realist term, which suggests that such status must not become contestable, but a centripetal narrative with uniform acceptability. Concomitant to the national integrity and prestige framework should be the language of resilience. The attendant political, economic and diplomatic fallout of the War of Terrorism has not only shaken Pakistan, but the regional player has also made some serious attempts to exploit the situation for the isolation of Pakistan. While CPEC has emerged as an outstanding opportunity for strengthening its economy and security situation, it is expected that it will face harsh criticism and counter-strategies. Pakistan needs to show perseverance and stand strong to protect its national interests while taking on board all those regional forces, who foresee bright chances to enhance their economic activity by linking them to CPEC.

The Dilemma of National Narrative Over CPEC

Pakistan is a multiethnic country where provincial biased has taken an asymmetrical form. Therefore, it has become one of the greatest challenges in achieving national integration. Founded on the ideological ground, Pakistan started facing numerous problems related to ethnicity, linguistic, and provincial divide. Soon after 1947, Pakistani nationalism comes into conflict with ethnic or local nationalism. First, it led to the disintegration of the state in only 24 years of its establishment. Later, the ethnic divide became more visible and provinces whose boundaries are actually formed on ethnic lines start differing on various issues ranging from social and cultural biases to economic issues, distribution of resources, budget allocations, water distribution, etc. The state of Pakistan remained unsuccessful in the alleviation of these differences and originating a national consensus related to the matters of national integrity and solidarity. One prime example of this failure might be seen in the government's unsuccessful bid to create a consensus on the issue of constructing new water reservoirs. Despite severe energy shortfall and sinking water levels, the state of Pakistan has failed to bring all federating units on one point. The case of CPEC related development projects is not much different. Started with the controversy of routes in its initial stage (Rifaat & Miani, 2016), when prioritizing the eastern route over the western route of the CPEC was regarded as a threat to the interests of KPK and Baluchistan (Fazil, 2016). As CPEC was originally proposed to pass through KPK, southern Punjab, and underdeveloped areas of Balochistan, thus, improving the prospects of security situation and development levels in the impoverished areas of the country. It appeared quite hard for the government to address the concerns and satisfy the provinces over the issue. The construction of the 5th route of CPEC came



under criticism. However, it was categorically rejected by the government by projecting the minutes of the Joint Cooperation Committee meeting (Abbasi, 2016). CPEC has brought some of the most crucial challenges for building a consensual narrative. CPEC, in its earlier stage, started fueling the existing divide between the center and federating units over inequitable resource distribution for economic growth and development. Sindh and Baluchistan are still concerned that routes of the corridor, infrastructure projects, and proposed industrial zones will benefit Punjab, which already owns most of the resources and ahead of them. The local population in Baluchistan has long been perturbed over their exploitation and neglect by the center. They are also concerned about not receiving any direct share of economic benefit from Gwadar port and turning the area into a commercial hub as promised by the center. Similarly, coal-based energy projects in the Tharparkar district of Sindh are damaging the environment and locals are concerned over their deprivation and displacement affecting their livelihood (Lashari, 2019). The Gilgit Baltistan region feels more isolated as there is little input by their leadership in deciding the projects for the region. They suspect a few employment opportunities of the local population. Moreover, their journalist and media personals are warned against criticizing any CPEC project.

Constant division among political groups is yet another case of creating doubts about CPEC. This division has been expressed in a political blame game. These differences took a controversial turn with the arrival of the PTI government in the center in 2018. Their inexperience and insensitivity to controversial arguments regarding CPEC created so many doubts about its development. Razzak's controversial remarks that CPEC "unfairly benefits Chinese companies" through tax breaks and many other incentives that are unavailable to local counterparts. Not only that, he went on to say that the deals under CPEC would be reviewed, adding that "we should put everything on hold for a year so we can get our act together" (Dawn, 2018). Later Army Chief visited China for damage control and ensured to support CPEC. In 2019, the PTI government established a CPEC Authority to avoid hurdles and one window solution of all related projects. Ex-DG ISPR Asim Saleem Bajwa appointed its head. Now army controlled and monitored CPEC directly. China also wanted one window dealing and had a long experience dealing with the military establishment. The establishment played a key role in muting the growing controversies, and at least apparently making consensus between provinces and political leadership, to manage and control the media (Afzal, 2020).

The strategic importance of the project is well understood in policy making and literary circle. Pro -CPEC narratives are perceived and portrayed as synonymous to "anchor of peace, prosperity, and development not only for Pakistan but game-changer for the whole region. but for the region as a whole and win-win cooperation for both Pakistan and



China. Anti-CPEC narratives in the national/international media paint CPEC as a neo-imperialist design, thus giving birth to misgivings about this megaproject. Projection of a similar storyline in national media reflects the influence of hostile regional, as well as international players. Pakistan needs to strategize its narrative on CPEC with the aim to project it as an anchor for regional peace and stability (ISSI, 2019).

Most of these issues emanate from opaque policy formulation, and the central government's failure to cognize regional and local concerns. The center itself formulated the Long-Term Plan of the CPEC (2017-2030) with little input from local and provincial leaders, civil society actors, businesses, and other stakeholders. From Gwadar, which is the southern edge and entry point of the project, to Gilgit Baltistan its exit point, there was a knee-jerk reaction by the state to local dissent. Later, some segments raised the issue regarding the future of the domestic industry and Pakistan's exports. Numerous questions have been raised regarding the relocation of Chinese industry in the Special economic zones being developed under CPEC. Additionally, high return rates over equity to a Chinese investor and the issue of the soaring national debt were also raised. Hence, it is evident that official policy and domestic narratives are in constant conflict and continuously projecting confusion and conflict over the issue.

Ever since its initiation, every political party in Pakistan is busy in self crediting of CPEC. Every political party not only claims to initiate the project but champions itself in the execution. They also use it for political mileage and blame their political opponents for delaying the development of the project. This kind of political immaturity has become a fashion in Pakistan's contemporary political scene. This attitude creates doubts at domestic as well as at external levels regarding political maturity and their seriousness for such a sensitive issue of national interest.

Although, it is a joint responsibility of every segment of society to play their role in the development of consensus and national narrative on CPEC, but it is the prime responsibility of political leadership to devise a consensus-based mechanism to eliminate the political point-scoring and use this project for strategic benefits of the state. For this purpose, all political parties must be included in their planning and execution process. Parliament provides the best platform to create this consensus. All political parties and media must stand behind the CPEC authority for this purpose.

Competing Regional Narratives

CPEC is the flagship project of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to its location at the intersection of the 21st century maritime Silk Road and major corridors of



the economic belt. The CPEC has played an instrumental role in taking Pakistan-China strategic ties to a new height with approximately \$ 62 billion investment (Siddiqi, 2017). An in-depth analysis of the impacts of this mega project reveals that its long-term impact would pose a threat to the rival regional and global powers. Therefore, Pakistan is facing a severe challenge with regard to creating a common narrative at the regional level. First, it would enhance the business opportunities for the Chinese infrastructure companies that are facing rigorous competition in the domestic market, second, CPEC would expedite the development and expansion of some new production chains at the regional level that will put China at the center of all economic activity. Moreover, it would play a crucial role in developing the underprivileged and politically unstable regions of Pakistan. This would help in bringing stability in the political and security situation of the country (Brewster, 2016). CPEC is of great significance for Pakistan with regards to development opportunities intended at galvanizing its economy and above all, it will be a great source of providing much-coveted symmetry against India's strategic and economic ingress in the region. Pakistan's location between India and Central Asia and the CPEC route put India at a disadvantageous position barring its access to Afghanistan and Central Asia and lucrative trading regions.

The US backlash over the project comes from its concerns about Beijing's expanding influence in the region. The US presence in Afghanistan for the last two decades has severe repercussions for the regional security. One of the factors behind China's increasing involvement in the Afghan peace process is the Afghan location in the heart of Asia, CPEC's possible expansion by linking it to Afghanistan and Central Asia West Asia corridors have posed serious challenges for US interests in the region (Sarwar & Siraj, 2021). One cannot deny the significance of stable security for achieving economic goals. It is worth noting that Chinese involvement is more economic-oriented. It has never been part of any armed conflict in Afghanistan in the past. On the other hand, the US involvement in the region has been more security-oriented which has unfortunately brought more chaos in the region rather than peace and stability. The US has failed to understand these dynamics and bent upon countering the CPEC in the region by supporting the Indian narrative (Sarwar & Siraj, 2021).

Another opposing narrative comes in the form of Gulf States opposition for Gwadar port. After becoming fully operational, Gwadar port will provide access to landlocked Central Asian states to the port facility for trade. Gwadar is likely to enhance economic activity by increasing trade volume and generating economic and financial advantages to Pakistan. Moreover, the port will enable the movement of high-volume cargo ships in the Indian Ocean and beyond (Kovrig, 2018). Given its potential for attracting huge economic and trade activity, it is increasingly portrayed as a rival to the ports of Gulf



States. Gwadar port will emerge as the gateway for Central Asian states. Therefore, starting from Gwadar, the CPEC corridor will help reduce transport time for goods from Gwadar port to western China and Central Asia by about 60 or 70 percent creating serious competition for Port Rashid and Port Jebel Ali in Dubai and Chabahar in Iran (Shammari, 2017).

Among many projects of CPEC, Gwadar deep seaport project is extremely important for the development of the poverty-ridden and underdeveloped province of Baluchistan. This will help in generating abundant employment opportunities and raising the standard of living of the local population. This is particularly important in countering the separatist tendencies in the region, which often gain support from anti-Pakistan forces in the region like, India (Aamir, 2018).

It is evident that it serves as the shortest trade route for China to the Arabian Sea and then connecting it to West Asia and Europe bypassing the Strait of Malacca. Therefore, regional connectivity is producing new avenues of cooperation for landlocked states including Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (Siraj & Sartaj, 2019). Given the fact that there exist several competing narratives against CPEC. Therefore, Pakistan needs to take on board all regional forces to initiate a strenuous diplomatic initiative by projecting a positive aspect of CPEC. Due to its huge geo-economic and geo-political importance, it is evident that Pakistan must ensure the smooth progress of the CPEC. This would not only enhance Pakistan's geopolitical importance but also create long-term economic opportunities for Pakistan. The biggest challenge faced by Pakistan on the issue of CPEC is building a national narrative, which could support the national for the realization of such an important project. Therefore, it is extremely important for Pakistan to develop a consensus. Unfortunately, Pakistan is facing surmounting challenges in this regard.

Conclusion

Consensus on a National narrative is hard to create artificially, but it emerges when government ensures a continued process of social and economic justice along with "democratic political pluralism" (Ahmar, 2019). Ethnic, cultural, and religious divergence is present in almost every state. However, an astute and prudent leadership which ensures a sense of participation, opportunities for progress and development. Therefore, a bottom-up approach is required where economic progress, based on equity is ensured along with human and social development. The state must ensure a system of justice, rule of law, political pluralism, and non-discriminatory policies by warranting equal opportunities despite the absence of homogeneity in ethnic, religious, racial, and



other dimensions. In the absence of these characteristics, the state cannot transform its people as a nation and their narratives as national narratives. Instead, it accelerates the ethnic, racial, religious, and social polarization. CPEC could provide a huge boost to Pakistan's economic development once it is moved ahead by initiating a national debate in Pakistan's parliament. Besides, provincial governments and local interests must be taken into confidence. Otherwise, the already existing friction between the center and neglected federating units causing a further social and economic divide. It will be the greatest drawback in creating a national narrative on CPEC. Similarly, by projecting CPEC's benefits for the regional economic integration and connectivity, Pakistan needs to promote the idea of a shared future through CPEC. Pakistan must adopt an arduous diplomatic initiative for creating a regional narrative. Without creating a national narrative at the domestic level and a regional narrative at the external level, the realization of CPEC related dreams would be hard to become a reality.



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