

# *Pak-China Economic Corridor*



Everyone knows about the Silk Route as it connected Europe through Central Asia with South Asia and China for thousands of years. Before the Navel ships were invented this was the only gateway to Indian Sub Continent. Qissa Khani Bazaar in Peshawar was the bazaar of story tellers because several caravans of traders would land there on daily basis to bring goods and tell their stories. Regional and international trade was the most important source of socio-economic prosperity in this area. The region witnessed decline when trade shifted to oceans after naval ships were invented and used on a large scale. But the Silk Rout was finally and completely blocked when Central Asia came under Iron Curtain after the socialist revolution in Russia in October 1917. With the dismemberment of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1990s and the emergence of China as the new economic super power in the last few decades chances for the revival of traditional Silk Rout have brightened. States in the region are entering formal agreements to create mechanisms for promoting economic cooperation. The ever growing Chinese economy requires a connection with the energy resources of Central Asia and Middle East apart from facilitating the exports of commodities produced in China. The land locked Central Asian States also need access to sea ports of Indian Ocean.

In this context came the agreement between China and Pakistan to connect western parts of China with Gwadar in Balochistan. An agreement was signed to this effect on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2013 between National Development Reform Commission of China and Planning Commission of Pakistan. It is going to establish communication links including Roads, Railways, Fiber Optic Cable and Oil and Gas Pipelines. The project also includes developing energy resources and industrial parks. Keeping in view its breadth and length this project can be a game changer in the region.

As we know the Karakorum Highway enters Hazara Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province from Gilgit Baltistan. So the shortest and logical rout would have been through Southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Zhob, Quetta and Gwader. In fact that is the rout that was selected originally as the maps on the Website of the Planning Commission indicate. But instead of coming out with budget allocation and time bound plan for the construction of the aforementioned rout the government seems to have developed second thoughts about the rout of Pak-China Economic Corridor. The new line of argument says that since the building of original rout will take a lot of time so the government has decided to fill some gaps in the existing road systems and start using them for connecting Gwadar with the Karakorum Highway. The proposed route will be now passing through Islamabad, Lahore, Multan and Sukkur and then enter Balochistan.

This development has created serious concerns and doubts in the minds of people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, FATA and Balochistan. It is only natural. As mentioned before Pak-China Economic Corridor does not envisage a simple road system. It also includes railway track, fiber optic cable, oil and gas pipelines and industrial parks. Will the government build this heavy infrastructure twice? Will they have the resources to do that? The economic corridor will also need a comprehensive security system. Will it be possible to provide security systems to multiple routs? Pashtuns and Baloch in view of their historical experience are worried about getting by-passed in building the aforementioned Corridor. They know that once the existing routes are used for Pak-China Economic Corridor, the powerful vested interest will not let it be shifted to the original route.

The irony is that people in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been told over the past 68 years that being away from the sea ports they have a locational disadvantage. Now for the first time in history there is a regional mega economic project in which we have a natural locational advantage. But it is being denied. Can there be anything more unfair?

Apart from being natural, shortest and logical the original route passes through the most backward part of the country. It is a historic opportunity for this grossly under developed area to enter the process of industrializations. This is also an area which is very badly hit by the menace of terrorism. The proposed economic corridor will bring jobs and economic development leading to the deradicalisation of society. It goes without saying that terrorism is a joint enemy of all states in the regions and we shall have to launch a joint struggle to defeat it.

The original route has many strategic advantages. Apart from being short and economical it has an edge in terms of security. We know that the idea of constructing Indus Highway emerged after the 1965 war with India. Keeping the unfortunate nature of our relationship with India will it be wise to prefer MI over the original route that passes through FATA, Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan? Another advantage of the original route is its close proximity with Afghanistan and Central Asia. Sooner or later the proposed economic corridor will also pull Afghanistan and Central Asia into it. This possible expansion of the corridor will be quite easy on the original route. We should not forget two important facts about the nature of state and society in Pakistan. First Pakistan is a federation. The federal government is supposed to represent the interests of all the federating units. There can't be the core areas and the peripheries. That will be against the constitution of the country and unacceptable to the people of smaller federating units. The other fact is that there is uneven socio – economic development in Pakistan. Unfortunately the unevenness has deepened over the last many years. FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been used more as strategic space for playing Great Games rather than an area where there are human beings with aspirations of their own. Colonial names like FATA or N.W.F.P. sound more like chemistry formulas than names representing the identity of the people of the area. Terrorism which has been an unfortunate product of the misguided state policies has brought death and destruction on a large scale in FATA, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The area has seen a lot of flight of Capital and brain drain. To rectify these heavy losses the Pakistani state will have to take pro active policies. Sticking to the original route of the Pak-China Economic Corridor route and building it will show that it is honest and sincere in rebuilding the most under developed parts of Pakistan. If our legitimate rights were trampled upon once again we shall have no other option than resorting to peaceful political agitation.