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Regional Security Threats to CPEC: A Strategic Overview

Abstract

CPEC is a multi-billion project aimed at regional connectivity, improving Pakistan's economy and turning Gwadar into a trade hub of this region. Various countries have shown interests in becoming part of CPEC and reaping its benefits. However, the mega project faces huge strategic and security challenges. The changing dynamic of South Asia is particularly concerning for the security of CPEC. The region is witnessing the rise of Islamic State in Afghanistan, Baloch insurgency in Balochistan and India's hostility towards Pakistan in general and CPEC in particular. For a past couple of years, these threats have begun to materialize, in 2018 a suicide attack in Mastung killed 149 people. The responsibility of the attack was claimed by Islamic State. While this year Baloch insurgents stormed PC hotel in Gwadar, resulting in the death of five people. These events indicate the need for swift action and planning on part of both China and Pakistan.

Introduction

Pakistan is positioned among the most critical geo strategic and geopolitical locations in the entire region. On one hand, it serves as the pathway to the resource haven Central Asia and on the other a neighbor to India and China, two potential world powers, along with Iran and Afghanistan on the western border and Arabian sea on the South. Moreover, Pakistan is sandwiched between the most significant sea trade route the Strait of Malacca and the Persian Gulf. Pakistan's affinity to the Gulf States is also noteworthy (Ahmed 2019).

Pakistan is surrounded by significant world powers, advancing their own agendas in the international stage. While Pakistan for the past decade has battled with terrorism and instability, the idea of CPEC presented itself as a golden opportunity to transform the country from a potential failed state to a hub of trade and investment in South Asian region. Dubbed as a game changer for Pakistan, CPEC entered its fifth year in 2019 after its official initiation in 2015. China and Pakistan have always enjoyed exceptional strategic and diplomatic relations, yet CPEC transformed a purely strategic relation to an economic one. CPEC is a massive investment of \$62 billion dollars in infrastructure and energy sectors in Pakistan. It is a component of One Belt One Road (OBOR) (Abid & Ashfaq 2015). It aims to connect Gwadar in Balochistan to Kashgar in China. CPEC's strategic importance lies in the simple proposition that it aims to provide China with an alternative route to access oil and energy supplies. China's energy needs are mostly catered by the oil rich middle east, though the route consists of the Strait of Malacca in the South China Sea. The South China Sea is a contested area claimed

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violent incidents against the general population as well as around 250 armed clashes with the security forces. Moreover, the clashes between Taliban and ISKP to assume control over territory continue. Since 2017 a total of 207 armed clashes between the two groups were noted (CSIS 2018). One of the factors that have compelled the US and Taliban to negotiate a peace deal is the threat of IS. If the groups gain more control in Afghanistan, it can effectively destabilize the neighboring Central Asian Republics, Pakistan, Iran, and even Russia.

For Pakistan, the implications of unrest are even greater. It played a significant role in supporting the peace negotiations, and Pakistan's role was acknowledged by Zalmay Khalilzad (The News 2019). Pakistan's security and stability were always tied to the situation in Afghanistan, whether it's the aftermath of Soviet invasion or the US war on terror. Pakistan battled extreme militancy and terrorism since 2007. It was only since 2015 that some semblance of stability prevailed in the country. Anti-Pakistan elements operating from Afghanistan played a major role in destabilizing the country (Kiran 2009). A stable security situation is directly related to economic development; in the last few years, Pakistan's economy underwent a drastic downfall. CPEC emerged as a golden opportunity to transform the ailing economy. The current situation in Afghanistan presents a threat to the project (Ali 2019). Pakistan and China invited Afghanistan to become a part of CPEC, since its inclusion would be beneficial to the whole region and most of all to Afghanistan (Daily Times 2019). **The trilateral dialogue between Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China was held in 2018, and Afghanistan's potential role in CPEC was reaffirmed. It was termed as a connection among the regions of South and Central Asia. Some commentators suggest that it is the ideal time to engage Afghanistan in the project since the chances of a peaceful political settlement are greater than ever (Masood 2019).** However, the worsened security situation and uncertainty is a major hurdle in the path of Afghanistan's inception into CPEC. Pakistan has grave concerns about the link between the ISKP and Pakistani Taliban (Ali 2019).

According to reports, ISKP was responsible for the kidnapping and killing of two Chinese workers from Balochistan. This clearly indicates that the threat of ISKP is a reality. The motivations behind the group's violent opposition to CPEC are varying. First is the issue of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China, who were branded as oppressors of Muslims by the Islamic State. Second is the grand nature of the project itself; any terrorist activity perpetrated would gather maximum media coverage, which is highly beneficial for the perpetrators in order to project their strong image in the face of their defeat in Syria. The Islamic State has conducted terrorist incidents with the aid of local militant groups in Pakistan (Mahmood 2019). A suicide bombing carried out in Mastung district of Balochistan was dubbed as the worst terrorist incident in the history of the province. 149 people died and 186 were injured. The Islamic State announced that it was behind the attack; moreover, in 2017 a Chinese couple was kidnapped and later executed by the Islamic State. This alarmed the Chinese and Pakistani authorities. As a result, free travel of Chinese citizens without security escort was restricted. To ensure the protection of Chinese workers and the various CPEC projects, Pakistan formed the Special Security Division (SSG) comprising nine army battalions and six civil wings (Amir, 2018).

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