



## **An alternate route for CPEC**

CHINA'S remarkable economic development has transformed the lives of billions of people at home and around the world. Its outreach includes the markets of Africa and Asia, and the country enjoys great commercial success as a result of its robust economic relationship with Europe and North America.

On the home front, after developing the densely populated areas of the country, China turned its attention to its sparsely populated western region. The country embarked on an ambitious programme of development in the western province of Xinjiang to cater to the growing needs of this region as well as to tap into its rich natural resources. It developed industrial zones and allied infrastructure on a large scale, incurring costs of billions of dollars. Launched decades back, these activities transformed the economic landscape of this region, creating an economic boom and concomitant industrial productivity.

The slogan 'go west' has led to prosperity and security requiring fast and cost-effective access to international markets. While the existing access routes through Eurasian land bridge i.e. the Silk Route and Siberian railways, or the east-west corridor provided access to the European market, transportation costs were high and access to other markets not available. To get its products to the Middle East and the rest of the world, China required a seaport through a fast and economic route. A range of geopolitical considerations also necessitated a direct short route to a seaport to its western route.

In view of the existing access through Karakorum Highway built by China in the 1970s, China, in partnership with Pakistan, decided to develop the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) from its border pass at Khunjerab to Gwadar port for the benefit of both countries. This has entailed a staggering investment of \$46 billion — in addition to billions already invested in China. But this combined investment in CPEC essentially depends on a single land route through a perilous highway carved through the rocky mountainous areas of the Indus gorge. Any disruption along this route caused by natural or man-made disasters will have grave implications

for the entire project with a domino effect disturbing economic activities at both ends. Perhaps this factor should be given careful consideration.

**Modern technology can be easily harnessed to open up a well-travelled historical route again.**

A high-level delegation from China visited Gilgit-Baltistan last month and met local stakeholders in the districts of Chilas, Skardu and Gilgit, conferring with the administration and members of civil society to assess and determine the challenges in this region bordering China. In a meeting with a writers' forum at Skardu, major aspects of CPEC in the local context were discussed. While the discussion was focused on reviving the historical and cultural ties between the two regions, to foster friendly relations with the local population and explore economic development projects within the scope of CPEC, a number of concerns including unexplored opportunities were highlighted during the meeting with the Chinese delegation.

One of these was the question of an alternate route; it was suggested that China and Pakistan seriously consider an alternate route to safeguard the free flow of CPEC traffic. It was highlighted how local historical records documented instances of regular travel between Shigar and Yarkand across the Karakoram range through the Mustagh Pass. Drawing upon historical archives, Hashmatullah Khan, a historian working with the maharaja of Kashmir, and Prof Ahmed Hassan Dani, a scholar and an academic, have recorded mentions of frequent travel between Shigar and Yarkand.

In his recently published book, *The Apricot Road to Yarkand*, Salman Rashid has chronicled the details of his journey from Skardu to the Mustagh Pass to explore the old route to Yarkand, not only describing in detail the physical land features but also drawing upon the historical narratives of British travellers and officials. He also travelled to Yarkand and to the other side of the Mustagh Pass, where he met Balti families (members of which form a 2,500-strong population) residing in "Mohalla five or Darul Khaz and its neighbouring Balti Mohalla". He also met their religious leaders Haji Akbar Mahmood and Noor Mohammad Khan.

A local historian Yousaf Hussain Abidi whose book on the history of Baltistan has been translated into Chinese explained how the Mustagh Pass closed down due to the growing glacier, thereby preventing regular travel somewhere around 1880. The last reported journey by a Balti was in the year 1905.

In view of the existence of a well-travelled historical route over a century ago, modern technology can be easily harnessed to open up the passage once again. The authorities can consider a second CPEC route from Yarkand to Skardu through the Mustagh Pass. This route should then be linked to the Neelum Valley through Shuntar Pass, thus bypassing Chilas and Indus Kohistan for passage through a relatively more peaceful area.

This route will have the advantage of providing a safe passage that will not only double the transportation capacity but also provide an alternate shorter and safer route for uninterrupted flow of traffic, thereby safeguarding the massive investment made by both countries. It remains to be noted that the revival of the Shigar to Yarkand route will not only meet the goals of the economic corridor but will also bring more even economic development to other areas, most notably Azad Jammu & Kashmir.

Given the historical eminence of this route and the familiarity of the government functionaries with the local landscape due to their frequent work-related travel over the local terrain, it is surprising that no one in government circles considered the possibility of an alternate route while planning the CPEC project. However, the latter has yet to take off, and it is not too late to explore and execute this alternate route, thereby guaranteeing the success and sustainability of CPEC, in case of unforeseen changes in circumstances or calamities, affecting either of the two routes.

Reference : The writer, a former IGP Sindh, belongs to Gilgit-Baltistan.

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