

Pakistan and Terrorism: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as Critical Juncture?

Written by Siegfried O. Wolf

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/11/pakistan-and-terrorism-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-as-critical-juncture/>

SIEGFRIED O. WOLF, MAY 11 2016

Regionalism in South Asia has entailed the search for collective efforts to overcome mostly weak, congeneric economies, political fragmentation, socio-religious cleavages and the consequent deep-rooted conflicts between different states, especially between Pakistan and India. In order to enhance regional cooperation, for quite some time, the *idea* of Economic Corridor (EC) has become not only a trend in foreign policy strategies but also a buzzword in plans for stimulating economic growth as well as deeper integration of Asia's sub-regions. This has especially been the case within South East Asia, spearheaded by the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) initiative. In South Asia, it is a more recent phenomenon that the establishment of economic corridors has gained prominence. One of the most advanced examples is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The CPEC, a multi-billion dollar infrastructure investment project, is heralded as a game changer for Pakistan's economy and regional cooperation. Being a crucial part of a major development initiative led by China, known as 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), to connect Asia with Europe, the Middle East and Africa via roads, railways, pipelines, communication networks and industrial economic zones, the CPEC is much linked to hopes, interests, as well as regional and global geopolitics. However, such a megaproject raises numerous questions, foremost how Pakistan will be able to guarantee a secure and stable environment for the CPEC development which is the top requisite demanded by China, the main investor. Beijing is remarkable keen on an immediate (speedy) implementation of the CPEC, but it is also much worried about the safety of its projects and workers as well as the overall feasibility of an economic corridor in Pakistan.

Pakistan's complex security situation: Terrorism and militancy as major threats for CPEC

Besides several political, administrative, and environmental hurdles, there are two major security challenges towards the implementation of the CPEC: The unrest in Balochistan province and Islamist militancy in its domestic and global dimension. Due to the fact that Gwadar port as the central piece of the CPEC is located in the province of Balochistan, the ongoing insurgency in the province determines the most crucial challenge for a successful implementation of the CPEC project. Besides the Baloch insurgency, there is the fear that domestic terrorist groups (especially Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan/TTP), and international Jihadi organisations (al-Qaeda and Islamic State/IS), might use the upcoming opportunities of the CPEC to carry out activities not only to damage the country's economy but also to intensify their attacks on Chinese development projects, companies, and workers on Pakistan's soil. In this context, one should be aware that joined the Islamic State, who declared Jihad against China, by condemning Beijing for its handling of its Uighur Muslim population. Both organisations worship the fight against the Chinese as their "Islamic responsibility" describing them as "enemy of all Muslims".

Civilian incompetence and the increasing formal role of the army in politics

In order to address Chinese concerns as well as under the impact of Peshawar school massacre and subsequent domestic public pressure, Islamabad formulated the National Action Plan (NAP). The NAP, which was drafted jointly by the government, parliament and army in early 2015, is a 20-points package of measures to combat terrorism in the country. However, after a first assessment of the progress of the NAP implementation, the military expressed its

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disappointment over the poor performance of the civilian agencies. Latter one got accused to undercut the success of the armed and intelligence-based operations because the government would not offer sufficient administrative initiatives to improve governance in areas 'officially' cleared of terrorists. More concrete, the civilians missed to carry out initiatives which would complement the military campaign and help to secure its long-term achievements against terrorism. Furthermore, regarding the armed forces the civilians remained inactive in addressing critical areas of the NAP.

To better the civil-military coordination, to harmonise the relations among all intelligence and law enforcing agencies, to ensure the participation of the whole society, and to enhance the effectivity and sustainability of the counter-terrorist measures, the military took a more active role and intervened directly in the respective decision-making and implementation processes of the NAP. This finds its most visible expression in the formation of the so called Apex Committees. The establishment of Apex Committees, at the federal and provincial level, aimed at the enhancement of civil-military interaction in order to improve the security situation in general and to counter terrorism in particular. In this context, Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif emphasized that the country has no other option than to eliminate "all manifestations of extremism and terrorism at the grass roots level". Furthermore, that "we [Pakistan's security forces] will not stop unless we achieve our end objective of a terror-free Pakistan", irrespective of the costs.

The evolving scenario: Continuing the path of ambiguity and state-support for terrorism?

Above mentioned measures and statements to ensure a safe environment for the CPEC development created much expectation within Pakistan that the civilian and military leaderships are finally willing to tackle terrorism seriously, meaning in a comprehensive manner. Until now, military campaigns had only limited success at best and peace negotiation always failed, leading to compromises on the expense of local people and strengthening the position of militants. But also abroad, there was some semblance of hopes that Pakistan is now dropping any kind of ambiguity in its anti-terror campaign.

However, it seems that there is a clear discrepancy between claim and ambition after assessing Pakistan's counter-terrorism activities. In fact, one must state that Pakistan increased tremendously its engagement in combatting domestic militancy and suffered a lot from human and material losses. But all these efforts did not have any remarkable impacts regarding the eradication of cross-border terrorism by organisations based on Pakistani soil. The major reason therefore is that the country's security sector agents and the civilian government did not went much beyond the rhetoric of condemning and banning the cross-border terrorist groups like the Haqqani Network (HQN). More concrete, the Pakistan's security circles did not take actions that are comprehensive, transparent and lead to an 'all-inclusive counter-terrorism' strategy.

Until now, it appears that Pakistan's establishment is still following the rules of its traditional 'double-game': On one side the country is carrying out massive military campaigns against militant groups, enforcing law and order by newly established military courts, new armed units, banning several terrorist organisations among other things. On the other side, all these measures have a strict domestic focus, meaning that only anti-Pakistan elements are identified as targets. Subsequently, Pakistan acts only against militant groups which developed an anti-Pakistan agenda. Terrorist organizations with Afghanistan and India as main focus of violent activities got to a large extent spared. Even if the Pakistan security agents carried out measures against them they were mostly ineffective and temporarily in order to please the international community. Regarding the Country Reports on Terrorism (2014) by the U.S. State Department, „the Pakistani military undertook operations against groups that conducted attacks within Pakistan such as TTP, but did not take action against other groups such as LeT, which continued to operate, train, rally, propagandize, and fundraise in Pakistan. Afghan Taliban and HQN leadership continued to find safe haven in Pakistan, and although Pakistan military operations disrupted the actions of these groups, it did not directly target them.“ These organization are still maintaining basis and operating in the Afghan-border region (Federally Administered Tribal Areas/FATA). For a long time, the military did not do much to combat terrorist organisation in the FATA. The fact, that Pakistan is also doing more or less nothing to eradicate terrorist groups at its northern & eastern border with India is emphasizing ambiguity in its counter-terrorist activities.

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Facing numerous insurgencies, armed confrontations, sectarian violence all over the country, it seems that Pakistan is not willing to provoke militant groups which are (officially) not targeting the government and its people, like HQN or Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). Any substantial action against pro-Pakistani terror groups is perceived as the creation of more instability. Furthermore, it seems that the civilian and military leaderships are still convinced that terror groups can be a useful asset in its foreign policy approach towards India and Afghanistan. This asset can be in form of a bargaining chip in potential negotiations over territorial disputes, foremost Kashmir with India and Durand Line with Afghanistan, or the distributions of resources (water). As such, conservative segments among Pakistan's security establishment seems to be convinced that the detachment from state terrorist activities via proxies would benefit India and Afghanistan while Pakistan would have to deal with the negative consequences, fighting and dismantling its former allies.

Final thoughts – CPEC as a critical juncture in Pakistan's anti-terror campaign?

In sum, it seems that Pakistan did not learn its lessons from the past and continues support for terrorist groups. The recent attack in Kabul on 19 April 2016 by Pakistan based HQN, or the attacks in India (for example Gurdaspur 2015; Pathankot 2016) by terrorist of Pakistani origin can be seen as an indication that Pakistan is either not willing or not able to break with the historical path of state-support for terrorism. The country's army and ISI either ignores or don't recognize, that their country was already very close to face an UN charge of being a state sponsor of terrorism under the US-Clinton administration. However, due to the US involvement in Afghanistan it was not followed up because of the dependence on Pakistan's collaboration. However, with the withdrawal of the bulk of the international combat troops and the build-up of Afghan security forces, Islamabad loses its significance as strategic partner from a military point of view. In other words, Pakistan has to be aware that if it continues to use state terrorism as a strategy to achieve political goals it will face most likely concrete international responses.

Additionally, Pakistan establishment has to realize "that terrorist organizations are not reliable allies for states". Even if they have for many years an informal but deeply rooting alliance, like TTP with the country's army and the ISI, at the end they turned against the state and the society. To avoid that other groups, like HQN or LeT, turn also against the country's and its people, the Pakistan government and its security agents try to appease by continuing the support and providing diplomatic protection for them. This approach can be described as a combined strategy of appeasement and containment in order to prevent terrorist attacks against Pakistan. In this context, one can state that the long lasting relationship between LeT or HQN and the Pakistan state remains rather as an exception than a norm. This is an extraordinary unfortunate situation.

Pakistan not only remains to be a challenge for security and stability for its neighbours but determines a tremendous risk for its own statehood and people. One can't help feeling but there are too many indications that the country's military and civilian leaderships are still not willing to break totally with the patterns of its involvement in state terrorism. In result, most of the militant Jihadist forces got out of control of the country's security agents and terrorism turned to be a part of daily life in Pakistan and carrying out measure to downgrade all spheres of state and society in the whole region. In result, the chance that the CPEC would function as a critical juncture in order to change the mindset of Pakistan's security establishment failed so far and the visions of a 'terror free Pakistan' and the subsequent end of export of Jihadism are remaining as 'Pie in the Sky'.

About the author:

Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf is a Senior Researcher at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, and Director of Research at South Asia Democratic Forum, a Brussels based think tank. Additionally he is a visiting fellow at the National University of Science and Technology, Islamabad, affiliated researcher at the Pakistan Security Research Unit, Durham University, and a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi. He has worked as a consultant for the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany and is member of the external expert group of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force, Federal Foreign Office, Germany. He

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is the co-author of 'A Political and Economic Dictionary of South Asia' (Routledge; London 2006), co-editor of 'Politics in South Asia. Culture, Rationality and Conceptual Flow' (Springer: Heidelberg, 2015), 'The Merits of Regionalisation. The Case of South Asia' (Springer: Heidelberg, 2014) and 'State and Foreign Policy in South Asia' (Sanskriti: New Delhi, 2010), and Deputy Editor of the 'Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics' (HPSACP).