



China-India Economic Cooperation: Alternate Economic Corridors through India to China's Western Region

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Introduction

The historical echoes are rather remarkable and intriguing. As 21st century China reaches a position of its greatest power and prestige since the Tang Dynasty in the 8th Century C.E., a new military threat is emerging in the form of a new Islamic Caliphate in West Asia. This new threat is the rise of the so-called Islamic State under a proclaimed Caliph, demanding the allegiance of all Muslims worldwide, which has begun military operations to enforce its writ. The Islamic State (IS), as it calls itself, is using a mix of seemingly organized tactical ground operations as well as threats of terrorist acts across the world. It has begun to find willing recruits among the Islamic countries across the world, and even, as very recent events in the U.K. and Canada have shown, among the radicalized new converts to Islam in the advanced Western countries.

President Xi Jinping of China enjoys much greater personal power in China than his immediate predecessors, and the strength and capabilities of the armed forces of China today command respect both in the Asia-Pacific region and the world.

With its leading position in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, its military power

and its global economic clout, China has emerged as the dominant power all across Central Asia. Xi Jinping thus enjoys a position in both China and Central Asia comparable only to the Tang emperor Taizong. In another parallel, in 747 C.E. a Tang general, Gao Xianzhi (Guo Xianzhi/Kuo Tzu-i), a Korean in the service of the Tang court, crossed the Baroghil Pass and entered what is now known as the Gilgit-Baltistan area in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, establishing a Chinese protectorate over Gilgit. This marked the furthest Chinese penetration so far, into this mountainous region lying between the Hindukush mountains and the Himalayas. Today, after many centuries again, there are Chinese government personnel in the Gilgit-Baltistan area - construction workers and security personnel - and it is reported that the region has been leased to China by Pakistan¹ for 50 years.

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¹ The area falls within the area of Jammu & Kashmir state occupied by Pakistan in 1947-48, referred to in India as Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK).

Contemporaneous with Chinese westward expansion into Central Asia during the Tang dynasty, Islam had been expanding across West Asia and into Central Asia under the Arab Abbasid Caliphate. This led to a confrontation between the Arabs and their allies, the recently Islamized Turkic tribes, and the Chinese forces in central Asia. The fateful Battle of Talas or Battle of Artlakh (751 C.E.) between the united Arab-Turkic forces and the Tang army, took place near the present-day town of Taraz (formerly Aulie-Ata and Talas), along the River Talas in today's Kazakhstan, near the border with Kyrgyzstan, at which the Chinese army under Gao Xianzhi (Kuo Tzu-i) was annihilated. General Gao Xianzhi's defeat ended Chinese power across most of Central Asia for the next many centuries.

Widening Span of Islamic Fundamentalism

Today Islamic fundamentalists are active in the Xinjiang Province of China, in adjacent Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, all attempting to overthrow the existing regimes in order to replace them with states run under Islamic Sharia law. The Uighur unrest in China may be ethno-political based, but arguably, it is reinforced by Islamic separatist feelings. Some of these fundamentalist terrorist organizations, such as the East Turkestan Islamist Movement (ETIM), also known as the East Turkestan Islamist Party, and the East Turkestan Liberation Organization (ETLO) or Hizb ut-Tahrir, are avowedly pan-Islamic organizations, which do not believe in the concept of the modern nation-state. They desire instead a universal Islamic state – exactly what the IS has declared itself to be. In Pakistan too, there are groups within the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, such as the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) in the Swat Valley, which espouse a world caliphate under Islamic Sharia law. The TNSM has easy access to the Karakoram Highway (KKH) and can attempt to target a soft target with high publicity value. The KKH has already been targeted and disrupted in the recent past

by rival sectarian Islamic militias in the Gilgit-Baltistan region, which is Shia-dominated. In its southern-most stretch around Mansehra, the KKH also passes through territory dominated by an anti-Shia militant group, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which has no respect for the Pakistani state.

Under these circumstances, it does not seem to be sound policy for China to be investing in the proposed Kashgar-Gwadar Economic Corridor. Billed as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, it has been under active consideration since about 2006. It is intended to link Xinjiang Province of China with the Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea coast of Pakistan, which is being developed by Chinese companies. Both Xinjiang Province and Pakistan are under terrorist threat from local Islamic terrorist groups, and the proposed economic corridor will run along the KKH: through Xinjiang, and through mountain territory in northern Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The entire 1,300 km from Kashgar to Abbottabad will be a vulnerable stretch that will be difficult to physically protect. The remaining distance of about 700 km to the sea will also be difficult to protect, given that the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has formally declared war against the Pakistani state itself.

Security Concerns

It is necessary at this early stage in the building of the Kashgar-Gwadar Economic Corridor for China to re-examine both its aims and objectives and its vulnerabilities, especially in terms of security concerns. If the aim is indeed purely an economic one, intended to bring and continue to provide long-term prosperity to the people of Pakistan and the people of the Chinese province of Xinjiang, then its physical security must be of paramount concern. The inherent vulnerabilities caused by steep mountainous terrain in a geologically young and unstable mountain region and extreme high altitude climatic conditions apart, the Islamic terrorist threat is now assuming

greater salience. In Pakistan, the Government has declared war against Islamic militants and the Pakistan Army is presently in active operations against them: in effect there is an ongoing civil war in Pakistan. Until and unless political stability and peace within Pakistan is restored and physical security of all infrastructure is assured, the creation of such an economic corridor will be a great financial risk.

If the primary Chinese aims are to secure alternative energy supply routes from the Persian Gulf to western China and Xinjiang, and to facilitate development and prosperity for the people of that province, then prudence dictates that the likely benefits to Pakistan from this project may need to be temporarily postponed. It would perhaps be wiser for China presently to assist the Government of Pakistan in stabilising its internal security situation, rather than presenting the various anti-government Islamist militants with high publicity-value soft targets which are difficult to protect. A revised plan for a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, without a very vulnerable oil pipeline, could easily be worked out later when conditions along the proposed corridor are peaceful.

An Alternate Proposal

It is hereby suggested that alternate economic corridors be developed through India instead of through Pakistan, which will provide near-total physical security and entail less expenditure. Such economic corridors will provide all the benefits that China perceives will become available to its Western Region, as are being sought from the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor. The desired objective of an oil pipeline conveying oil from the Persian Gulf to western China can actually be achieved through India. Oil pipelines from India's coast to China's inland areas in its Western Region can help move energy safely and in a cost-effective manner to Xinjiang, the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and even to that most isolated area of all from the

energy transportation point of view, China's Hequ region.

The suitable pipeline layout would be a main pipeline from the northern Arabian Sea coast to north-central India, with another branch line leading out from it thereafter, while the main line continues into Nepal and thence into the TAR. A second line pipeline from the northern Bay of Bengal coast would travel northwards to supply energy to the eastern TAR, from where it would continue to the Hequ Region, which is the area around the first big bend in the Yangtze River, and thus at and around the junction of the Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu provinces.

The main pipeline can be taken from the Arabian Sea, western coast of India in Gujarat state. The requisite oil terminal could be either at Kandla or at a new oil terminal facility-cum-port, which can quite conveniently be developed in the Gulf of Kutch (also spelt Kachch). In order to maximize security, such a new pipeline could run alongside the existing 1,075 km long oil pipeline, which connects Salaya in Gujarat, via Koyali to Mathura in Uttar Pradesh state.

Western Line

The two routes, which can be used onwards from Mathura to China, are a main pipeline (Western Pipeline Economic Corridor) to the TAR via Nepal, and a branch pipeline to Xinjiang via the state of Himachal Pradesh. Broadly, the route via Nepal could travel in a direct line through the north Indian plains towards Raxaul-Birganj on the India-Nepal border in Bihar state, and thence northwards into the Kathmandu Valley. Thereafter, it would run alongside or closely parallel to the Kodari Highway into Tibet. This route would entail traversing the least possible distance through difficult and mountain terrain than the presently-proposed insecure route along the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

The branch pipeline would run northwards from Mathura, parallel to the existing highway alignment, and thereafter from the environs of Shimla, it could run parallel to the old Hindustan-Tibet Road. This would take it over Shipki La into western Tibet, from where it can run beside the existing highway system to Xinjiang. The route would run about 400 km through Himalayan mountain territory, much less than the approximately 800 km through such mountains along the Karakoram Highway. This route too, like the one through Nepal, would be free from real and present terrorist threat, and could be more easily kept physically secure.

Eastern Line

The suggested eastern pipeline (Eastern Pipeline Economic Corridor) would be along the alignment Kolkata Port (Haldia Terminal)-Kishenganj-Kalimpong-Jelepla-Yatung (Yadong) route, or Kolkata-Kalimpong-Yatung (KKY) for short. North of Kalimpong it would follow the general alignment of the ancient traditional trade route between Lhasa and the Indian plains. However, in the TAR it will need to go up to the east-west projected Chinese railway line from Xigatse to Nyingqi, and thence onwards towards the Hequ region. This particular eastern pipeline would have minimal or low-threat vulnerability when compared to the Gwadar-Kashgar corridor through Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. However, that anticipated level of low-level vulnerability – only in a stretch close to the Bangladesh border, if and when any Islamic fundamentalist political party comes to power in that country - is easily catered for by

modern pipeline security architecture and by effective counter-intelligence systems of West Bengal state and of the Indian central government.

Securing the pipelines and the proposed economic corridors

Security of the pipeline and associated infrastructure can be provided by an effective and cost-effective combination of traditional physical security methods, augmented by the most modern security technology. This would include installed fibre-optic pressure and temperature sensors for the pipeline environment, and 24 x 365 visual observation, multi-frequency coverage through a geostationary satellite-based observation system, backed-up by small short-range drone (unmanned aerial surveillance platform) systems. Thus three new physically secure and administratively convenient Economic Corridors within India could then be developed along the alignment of these pipelines, the two interconnected western ones, and the one eastern one.

The suggested new China-India Economic corridors, if implemented, will most likely propel the economic relationship between India and China to new and unprecedented highs. It will bring oil to the western region of China and allow complementary economic development of both India and Nepal, as well as bring with it Chinese investment in infrastructure in India. Such an economic corridor will have much less high-mountain terrain to traverse and will be free from the constant threat of attack and disruption by Islamist terrorist militants.



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