

Emerging irritant: on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is China's ambitious project for increasing connectivity and economic cooperation within Eurasia. Since its announcement in 2013, the BRI has been positively received by many countries covered within its ambit. However, notwithstanding the [recent meeting](#) between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan, China, one issue associated with the BRI will likely be considered an irritant for China: India's position on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Last May, New Delhi sent a clear message to Beijing that it doesn't support CPEC. India registered its protest by boycotting the high-profile Belt and Road Forum organised by China. Its principal objection was that CPEC passed through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Earlier this month, the Ministry of External Affairs made its position clear on this issue when asked about a possibility of cooperation between India and China on the BRI. The Ministry's statement read: "Our position on OBOR/BRI is clear and there is no change. The so-called 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' violates India's sovereignty and territorial integrity. No country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The new game changer in Pakistan

India's position will undoubtedly have a larger impact on China-India relations. PoK is considered a contested territory by the international community. Nevertheless, for India, PoK remains an emotional and sensitive issue. It is little wonder that China's insistence on establishing the CPEC project through PoK is seen by India as a deliberate disregard of its territorial claims.

At a broader level, if China invests heavily in the region, it risks becoming party to what has been a troubling bilateral dispute between nuclear-armed rivals. If CPEC gets operationalised and fortifies the emergence of a fully functional China-Pakistan axis, this would hamper India's larger interests in the South Asian region and force a strategic rethink in South Block. The incentives for this would be even stronger if CPEC's potential success renders PoK more industrially developed, thus granting Pakistan greater legitimacy over the region. Whether India has any road map to take the conversation on PoK forward is a different debate but no nation can be expected to wilfully forsake its territorial claims. Had India not registered its protest, that would have been perceived as a weakness, and would have been a setback for India's emerging power status in the international system.

CPEC is ultimately a thorn in India-Pakistan relations. The best way forward would be for India to come up with a concrete plan on PoK. Otherwise, its protests on CPEC may well be ignored by stakeholders in the project, with little consequence.

Martand Jha is a Junior Research Fellow at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

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