

Report Part Title: Conclusion

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VI. Conclusion

If properly carried out, CPEC could promote economic development and growth and thus have a profound impact on Pakistan and its citizens. Yet, as a high-profile business representative rightly warned, “if there are opportunities, there are also serious risks”.¹²⁹ Unless there is a serious rethink in policy circles, CPEC could inflame tensions between the centre and federal units, and could trigger or worsen conflict within provinces.

To avoid such outcomes, Pakistan’s CPEC projects and programs should be guided by diligent planning and policy. Islamabad should determine the direction of Pakistan’s CPEC policy, based on its – and not Beijing’s – economic and political interests. It should place CPEC in the context of a broader strategic vision for modernising its economy in ways that do not destabilise the polity.

The best chances for the country’s stability – and indeed CPEC’s success for Pakistan and, by extension, China – lie in giving provinces and communities a voice in shaping CPEC projects and thus helping promote local buy-in. Rather than suppressing criticism and dissent, the federal and provincial governments, as well as the security institutions, should recognise that the viability of CPEC projects rests on stakeholder ownership. Unequal prosperity, favouring outsiders over local communities, would aggravate social and political divides, fuelling tension and potentially conflict.

Beijing and Chinese companies face a steep learning curve with CPEC, but many problems could be mitigated through consulting and engaging the full spectrum of Pakistani stakeholders, from competing elites to the grassroots, and conducting comprehensive risk and political analysis to balance competing priorities. Efforts to ensure benefits are shared equitably need to be complemented by effective and extensive communication to illustrate common interests.¹³⁰

As Pakistan’s democratic transition approaches another milestone, with a second consecutive elected government completing a full term and a successor assuming power in August 2018, the new parliament should seize the opportunities of a fresh mandate by shaping public debate on CPEC, and informing government policy. That policy should have the well-being of Pakistani citizens at its heart, rather than treating it as something that can be negotiated away in the pursuit of mega-development or perceived strategic interests.

Brussels, 29 June 2018

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Karachi, December 2017.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group discussions, Beijing and Shanghai, April 2018; “Opportunities and Challenges for Constructing CPEC”, and “Opportunities and Challenges of Implementing the “Belt and Road” Initiative”, both op. cit.