

Managing security & economy

MANY interpret the government's recent reshuffle of the federal cabinet as a way of venting its frustration over a seemingly intractable economic challenge. The reshuffle came days before Prime Minister Imran Khan's scheduled visits to Iran and China, where economic and security cooperation will be among the major points of discussion. In particular, Pakistan anticipates more relief from Beijing, mainly in terms of an early launch of the Special Economic Zones under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

China is considerate of Pakistan's economic woes.

However, Chinese investors demand the award of projects on softer terms and on a fast track. They also consider investment in the country risky. Their main concern is the prevailing insecurity in Balochistan where a multitude of separatist and religiously inspired militant groups are creating an environment detrimental to the implementation of CPEC projects and the functioning of the Gwadar port.

The recent attack on security officials travelling on the Makran coastal highway, which is considered a safe highway in the province, will certainly add to Chinese concerns. The Baloch insurgents have perpetrated some high-impact attacks in recent times, including a few suicide blasts, which have started to defy the oft-told tale that the Baloch insurgency is a low-scale conflict. Secondly, Baloch separatist groups have started to launch joint attacks; the latest one, hitting security personnel on the coastal highway, was also claimed by an alliance of three separatist groups.

The timing of the attack will not help Prime Minister Khan convince the Chinese and Iranian leaders of an improving security situation in Balochistan. His visit to Tehran was long due and overshadowed by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's visit to Pakistan. Border security will be the high point of the Iranian diplomatic call during the prime minister's visit to Tehran. China, too, is concerned about insecurity at the Pakistani-Iranian border, which has become a hub of separatist and religiously motivated as well as criminal groups. This is not only causing geostrategic complications, it is also impeding progress on CPEC-related projects in coastal areas of the province.

Iran alleges that a Saudi-backed separatist group, Jaishul Adl, is operating from Pakistan and attacking Iranian security forces. The group launched an attack in February, killing 27 members of the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and provoked tensions between the two countries. Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Alavi, spoke of taking revenge on those responsible for the crime. This country sent a high-level delegation to Tehran to give assurances of a thorough investigation and cooperation in finding the culprits. As with Afghanistan, the Pakistan government has decided to fence its border with Iran too, but that is a comparatively more complex task.

Pakistan also has concerns about recurrent border violations by Iranian border security forces. In 2018, Iranian border security forces carried out six cross-border attacks in Balochistan's Chagai, Gwadar and Panjgur districts, compared to 12 such attacks in 2017. Shelling by the Iranian security guards causes much physical damage, affecting residents living along the border; sometimes it leads to the complete suspension of daily activities.

Local residents suspect that Iran has gone soft on anti-Pakistan separatist groups, especially the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), whose militants are evidently sheltering on Iranian soil. This is conceived as a counter-move by Iran though the BLF and the BLA are left-leaning secular separatist groups that also advocate the liberation of Sistan-Baluchestan in Iran.

In December 2018, an attack was claimed by the BLA that killed six Pakistani soldiers in Kech near the Pakistan-Iran border, implying BLA militants' cross-border movement for shelter. The attack occurred a day after the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding for 'improving border security and stopping the smuggling of petroleum products, drugs and arms, and human trafficking'.

Despite complicated border security issues, both sides can still develop an effective bilateral mechanism to check cross-border incursions by all shades of separatist and Islamist militants. The agendas and objectives of different brands of militants operating along the Pakistan-Iran border are known to both countries, which they can counter by working jointly. In retrospect, Iran and Pakistan have done that in past, during the regimes of Raza Shah and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the mid-1970s, by launching an extensive security operation against the militants.

However, one cannot ignore the Saudi factor.

Though Pakistan is in dire need of economic assistance, it should not close its eyes to militant proxies that can complicate Pakistan's core economic interest linked with CPEC, and a conducive security environment in Pakistan, particularly in Balochistan.

Prime Minister Khan can get a positive response on security cooperation from Tehran before his visit to Beijing where such a commitment will have a positive impact on bilateral deliberations. The removal of federal finance minister Asad Umar will also be read positively by Beijing; not only did he fail to run the economy of the country but was also responsible for the slowing down of the execution of CPEC projects.

Pakistan needs CPEC to sustain its economy; unfortunately, the vague and sluggish policy responses of the current government, as well as its overconfidence in attracting foreign investment by mobilising the Pakistani diaspora, has damaged not only CPEC but also the overall economy of the country. The worsening economic condition is forcing the country to put the economic focus back on CPEC. However, the direction will become clearer only after the new adviser on finance and his team lay out the government's revised economic roadmap -if there is any.

China wants to make the Belt and Road Initiative a success story, and CPEC is an integral part of that. China realises that Pakistan has the potential to put CPEC back on the fast track. It will boost the confidence of the BRI's potential stakeholders who are reluctant at the moment to become partners in the initiative.

Still, security will remain at the heart of any potential outcome of renewed economic cooperation between Pakistan and China. □ The writer is a security analyst,

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