

BUSINESS RECORDER

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NO COMPROMISE ON TRANSPARENCY

The Caretaker government vigorously defended Pakistan's 50 billion dollar plus economic partnership with China under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through a press release which maintained that "it is because of the favourable financing arrangements that Pakistan opted for Chinese investment under CPEC.... China stepped forward to support Pakistan's development at a time when foreign investment had dried up, and economic activity was being crippled by energy shortages and infrastructure gaps....CPEC projects are financed through a composite financing package comprising long-term government-to-government concessional and preferential loans, as well as grants from the government of China. Repayments on these loans would not commence in the immediate future."

Sadly, the statement circumvents the real issue: that of transparency in all government deals. And does not lay any of the domestic concerns or international allegations to rest for the same reason that Ahsan Iqbal, PML-N administration's chief player in CPEC projects, failed to convince parliamentarians within the national and provincial assemblies: lack of documentary evidence and therefore lack of transparency which could have been achieved either through an in-camera session with parliamentarians or through placing all government-to-government deals on the relevant ministry/department's website for information of the general public.

In this context, it is extremely worrying that Asad Umer, the presumptive Finance Minister, in his maiden interaction with economic beat reporters recently stated that government-to-government deals are secret and therefore cannot be shared, though he did add that any such deals signed during Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) tenure would be made transparent. This comment militates against the PTI's stated position on non-transparency in CPEC-related and other projects undertaken by the PML-N government when PTI was in the opposition and raises a red flag questioning the non-transparency and seeking details of contracts signed under the CPEC. The apparent change of stance on this issue, that Umer's statement reflects would be most disturbing for those supporters who voted for the party to ensure transparency in all ongoing projects particularly those relating to CPEC projects as well as the 15-year Liquefied Natural Gas deal signed by former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi with Qatar Gas.

Unfortunately, President Xi's One Belt One Road initiative (of which CPEC is a minor component) has come under considerable criticism in several countries, including Sri Lanka, Malaysia and some Central Asian Republics for various reasons ranging from being a source of kickbacks (Mahathir Muhammad won elections in Malaysia recently and is not only alleging kickbacks in OBOR projects but has also indicated he would renegotiate the terms of a 14 billion dollar rail deal with China with the objective of reducing the country's ballooning national debt) to claims that Chinese labour is being used to construct OBOR projects which in turn is fuelling discontent amongst the local populations to allegations that some of the projects are compromising national sovereignty.

This newspaper is not proposing a revisit of the projects, (unlike the decision taken by Mahathir Muhammad, a man much quoted by the Prime Minister-in-waiting Imran Khan, to revisit and renegotiate all projects under OBOR) but to simply support transparency in all deals whereby the general public, either directly or through its representatives, can exercise some check and balance on the signing of unfavourable deals. To this end, in case there are reservations from the Chinese side to make public the terms of CPEC contracts/deals then the

least that is required is an in-camera briefing of the concerned select committees of the Senate and the National Assembly with regard to the terms and associated cost details of the already signed CPEC contracts/agreements.

To ensure transparency in government was a commitment made by the PTI to the people of this country because it is not only an essential element of a free and democratic country but is also an inalienable right of the people of this country.