



Overview of Karakoram Highway/CPEC Connectivity to Xinxiang and Gilgit Baltistan

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Received: 04.05.2023; Revised: 28.05.2023; Accepted: 29.05.2023

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Abstract: Pakistan presented the Karakoram Highway (KKH) to China in the late 1950s as its first major overland route to the Indian Ocean, the Middle East, and Africa. The KKH, also known as National Highway 35 (N 35), connects Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Gilgit Baltistan to Xinxiang as part of Chinese National Highway 314 (CNH 314). As part of CPEC, the KKH is currently undergoing extensive renovations. It connects China's Gwadar port to the landlocked Xinjiang province and is also slated to be expanded into an industrial corridor known as the Karakoram Corridor (KC). Through a well-developed network of highways, high-speed rail, and airports, Xinxiang is now well connected to the Chinese heartland. The infrastructural upgrade of KKH, CNH 314 with feeder links to other locations as part of CPEC has offered China with another route to deep waters, circumventing the Strait of Malacca and lessening reliance on the South China Sea. While CPEC covers a wide range of topics such as trade, energy, special economic zones, infrastructure, education, public health, and telecommunications, the scope of this article is limited to an examination of infrastructure development in the Xinxiang and Gilgit-Baltistan regions as part of CPEC.

Key Words: Infrastructure • Trade • KKH • CPEC • Xinxiang • Gilgit - Baltistan • POK • Gwadar • Kashgar • OBOR • BRI • Indian Ocean.

Introduction

The China-Pakistan Friendship Highway, also known as the KKH or N35 (Sange H Shering), is a 1,300 km national highway that runs from Hasan Abdal in the Punjab province of Pakistan through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and across the Khunjerab Pass in Gilgit-Baltistan before entering China as part of China National Highway 314 (CNH 314) and connecting with Urumqui in the Kashgar region of Xinxiang. The Chinese portion of the KKH is located on CNH 314, which runs between Kashgar and Khunjerab Pass for 420 kilometres. The Pakistani portion of the KKH is located on the 837-kilometer route from Hasan Abdal to Kunjerab. The highway is also part of Asian Highway AH 4.

The route traverses across passes, hazardous terrain, and isolated areas of Xinxiang and Gilgit Baltistan in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK). It runs through or near the Pamirs, Hindu Kush, Kunlun Mountains, and Karakoram Ranges, with steep slopes, gorges,

high altitude, and landslip prone areas, and is considered one of the highest paved roads in the world, with a maximum elevation of 4,714 metres or approximately 15,500 feet near Khunjerab Pass. It is commonly referred to as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" due to its great elevation and harsh terrain conditions.

The route comprises multiple tunnels several bridges some of which are great feats of engineering over a treacherous terrain. The KKH transgresses POK, connects Pakistan to China, borders Central Asian countries, India and Afghanistan. The highway cuts through the collision zone between the Eurasian and Indian plates, where China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India come within 200 km of each other (Khwaja Umer Farooq 2013) It provides deep water access to remote and underdeveloped Western China and has provided China an alternate route bypassing the Strait of Malacca thereby reducing dependence on the South China Sea, highlighting its strategic importance.

History



Post the 1962 and the 1965 wars the seeds of a firm strategic partnership between China and Pakistan were set. The common rivalry with India and strategic interests caused the natural convergence of China and Pakistan over the KKH also known as the Friendship Highway in China. Work on the highway was started in 1962 and it was completed by year 1978. For construction of KKH, Pakistan initially favoured routing through the lower Mintaka Pass however China, citing security and strategic concerns recommended the steeper Khunjerab Pass instead.

The route of the KKH is based on one of ancient Silk Routes. In year 2007 the next phase of KKH highway reconstruction was started as part of MoU between Pakistani National Highway Authority (NHA) and China's State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) wherein from section from Kashgar to Kunjerab as part of CNH 314 was addressed. The upgradation included increasing road width from 10 to 30 meters with multiple increase in transport capacity. The upgradation was planned to accommodate heavy-laden vehicles under extreme weather conditions.

From year 2013 onwards as part of CPEC, the KKH was majorly upgraded to link the Pakistani port of Gwadar with Kashgar. The idea is to develop the KKH into a motorway network all the way to Gwadar, with railway line, pipelines for oil and gas, and create economic and industrial hubs all along (Debashish Roy Chaudhary 2013) Various alternate roads and axis in Gilgit Baltistan and Xinxiang region are planned as a major supply artery to the KKH.

The highway was closed in 2020 due to COVID and has been reopened in April 2023 this year It is generally open from April to Nov each year. As per the available report (Amjad Ali 2020). The cross border trade with China is mainly in China's favour with China accounting for 96% exports and only 4% imports from Pakistan along the highway. As

per Express Tribune dated 29 Dec 2019 trade volume between China and Pakistan surged by nearly 47% to \$856.3 million at the Khunjerab Pass till 2019, (Express Tribune 2019). The total Cargo import and export reached 66,600 tonnes across Khunjerab Pass between Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region and China's north-western Xinjiang. The operationalisation of Sost Dry Port near Kunjeraab on Pakistani side with all the modern infrastructure has been a major facilitator for the trade.

CPEC:

Initiated in mid-2013 and formally launched in April 2015, CPEC is China's 15-year, comprehensive investment in Pakistan and the flagship project of its One Belt One Road (OBOR) or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Vinod Bhatia 2023). In April 2015, President Xi visited Islamabad and formally launched CPEC. With the stated objectives to strengthen trade, provide economic growth, expand the Sino-Pak relationship beyond a strategic and military Alliance, economic partnership, attract foreign aid and investments, develop ports, road, rail, energy infrastructure, and develop backward areas of Pakistan and the landlocked areas of Western China (Arif Rafiq 2017).

CPEC provides western China access to blue waters, linking Kashgar to the Arabian Sea through three alignments with the multimodal corridor comprising of road network, rail links, oil and gas lines and optical fibre communication infrastructure. Originally valued at \$ 46 billion it is the biggest investment by China in Pakistan as part of their strategic relationship in the form of a series of energy and infrastructure projects. As per data the cost of CPEC projects had increased to \$ 62 billion by Apr 2017 and by year 2022, the Chinese investment in Pakistan was close to \$65 billion (Asif Shahzad 2022) which notably is China's most significant foreign investment to date and is three times greater than the total Foreign



Direct Investment (FDI) that Pakistan has received since 2002.

CPEC is a scheduled for completion in 2030 to address energy, infrastructure & geostrategic needs. The KKH is a major subset and the main artery for enhancing road and rail connectivity between Kashgar and Gwadar. The Planning Commission of Pakistan has divided CPEC into four phases, with phases 1, 2 to be completed by 2020; medium-term projects by 2025; and long-term projects by 2030. The progress report as per CPEC official website of April 2022 lists, 16 energy projects completed and five under consideration stage whereas six infrastructure projects have been completed and 18 are in initial/ planning stages (Source CPEC authority website).

Current Scenario

Of the six main BRI economic corridors three pass through Xinjiang and Central Asian regions. Thus the centrality of Xinjiang as part of China's connect under BRI to Central Asia, Russia, Eurasia, Central, West Asia, Indo China and to Indian Ocean region placing it at the core of the BRI (Alex He 2020).

China's 14th Five-Year Plan, covering the years 2021-2025 also lays emphasis on the acceleration of the construction of new infrastructure, establishing as a transportation powerhouse strengthen the construction of strategic backbone corridors out of Xinjiang and into Tibet. Certain other infrastructure and strategic focus areas especially to promote inter-connectivity and interoperability of infrastructure as part of BRI.

Currently the land route between the two countries has seen little traffic in bilateral trade. In year 2018 a total of 1508 containers entered from Chinese side into Pakistan whereas only 61 containers entered through KKH into Xinjiang region from Pakistan (Nazir Ali 2021). The territories on either side of the border are underdeveloped and sparsely populated and industrial development (China's

industrial bases are primarily on its eastern coast, whereas Pakistan's mainly are in Punjab and Sindh region) (Saeed Shafqat 2018).

The current economic crisis coupled with political instability in Pakistan has gravely impacted the progress of CPEC. The pace of progress is slow since Pakistan cannot afford further infrastructure loan, as well as the economic slowdown in China (Michael Kugelman 2023). As Pakistan's economic crisis deepens, the Chinese debt is being blamed by critics and economists. According to IMF reports Pakistan owes 30 percent of its total \$100 billion external debt solely to China (Furqan Khan 2023)

Regional Implications

The CPEC connectivity to Xinjiang has major strategic implications. The strategic connect of China and Pakistan provides an alternate axis, improves connectivity, reduces the dependence on Malacca Straits, promotes easier and faster mil build up, increases reach to Middle east and Indian Ocean countries and more importantly provides an entry to the Indian Ocean deep waters thereby reshaping the strategic scenario.

Considering Pakistan it is a win win situation lest it falls into the debt trap like other countries. A major strategic advantage that accrues is that, China has strategic and economic stakes in the corridor which effectively balances India and other countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The KC passes through POK and India has time and again expressed its concerns of breach of sovereignty. The corridor can be exploited to move military material and wherewithal in the event of impending hostilities.

The corridor provides alternative transportation routes to China thus mitigating the 'Malacca Dilemma' (Ian Storey 2006). The Control of Gwadar allows China to transport oil from the Middle East via KKH thus ensuring its energy security. The KC post completion shall will provide a much shorter



route than the current 12,900 km route from the Persian Gulf through Malacca to China (Debashish Roy Chaudhary 2013). It will also further aid the development of underdeveloped western regions to include Xinxiang and Tibet.

The deep sea port of Gwadar once completed will facilitate the People's Liberation Army Navy to establish a presence in the Indian Ocean, giving China the ability to protect the maritime routes from the Middle East and investments in Africa. The direct access of China to the Indian Ocean enlarges its strategic footprints and thus changes the regional power matrix. To the Middle East countries it provides a shorter axis to Xinxiang and western China, the proposed oil pipe line along KKH provides a shorter route but the cost of transportation of oil and goods along the difficult KKH economic will still be far costlier than the cost involved in transportation by sea and may not be a viable economics option however the strategic importance and feasibility of alternate route to China and Central Asia has a multitude of implications

Discussion

As the KKH as part of CPEC undergoes upgradation, the inhospitable and rugged Xinxiang and Gilgit Baltistan regions now have better infrastructure and connectivity to both China and Pakistan. The work is fast changing the strategic construct in the regions. For China it is pivotal to its OBOR/BRI

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