

[A golden opportunity](#)

[ISHRAT HUSAIN](#) PUBLISHED ABOUT 23 HOURS AGO



The writer is former governor of the State Bank of Pakistan.

INFRASTRUCTURE projects all over the world have a tendency towards cost overruns and schedule delays. Pakistan's implementation record has been relatively worse, irrespective of the form of government or party in power. It is characterised by sluggishness, frequent change of managers, passing on the buck and not accepting responsibility. The recent increase in load-shedding epitomises this trend as the planned addition to generation could not be achieved on time.

To be successful, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor requires an entirely different approach, ie clear delineation of responsibilities, specific goals and targets, a defined set of indicators along with incentives and penalties for performance and non-performance and finally, transparent accountability. If a beginning is made with CPEC under the sharp scrutiny of the Chinese as well as our own political leaders — both in government and in the opposition — this new paradigm might gradually permeate our bureaucratic nervous system.

At present we have the 'too much too little' accountability syndrome. Honest and competent officers have given up doing their best because of the constant fear of their names and reputations being unnecessarily tarnished by the FIA, NAB, Public Accounts Committee and media, particularly the free-for-all social media. Taking cognisance of these 'allegations and

accusations' suo motu, the courts step in and drag the officers into the fray. For such officers, the sensible choice is 'do not commit' and 'do not take any decision'.

CPEC provides a chance to improve our institutions of governance.

On the other hand, those who are complicit in corruption go scot-free with the help of their political godfathers. The National Reconciliation Ordinance, various implicit or explicit compacts, open or secret deals between major political parties, etc have impaired the credibility and the deterrent effect of the accountability process. In the ultimate analysis, the officers belonging to the group of 'actor officers' may in the short run suffer some temporary inconvenience or dislocation but in the long run, they are better off having amassed so much wealth that they and their next generations can live comfortably in Canada, Dubai and London, etc.

In the event their political godfathers are back in power, they can return and resume their activities. The country hence suffers both ways: firstly, competent and honest officers shy away from doing their jobs leading to a paralysis in decision-making and suboptimal results, and secondly, public resources are utilised for 'personal gain' rather than the public good. Implementation is thus either paralysed or attained at a huge cost to the public exchequer.

What needs to be done is well known and documented but no action has been taken by successive political leaderships. Short-sighted leaders with an eye to the next electoral cycle do not find it in their interest to undertake 'unpopular' reforms. Only a visionary leader, whose aim is to lift Pakistan into the upper tiers of economic ascendancy and make it competitive in the global economy, is capable of bringing about these changes.

Unfortunately, external pressures from the US, World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and IMF have not made much of a dent on our institutions of governance. CPEC provides such an opportunity. Whether it is the ministries, provincial departments or executing agencies, they have to deliver within the time-bound, resource-specified plan agreed with the Chinese government. To meet this goal officials responsible for planning, coordination, regulation and execution of CPEC projects should be:

Selected on merit, technical and/or managerial competence, and integrity rather than on loyalty and connections.

Assured security of tenure until the project's completion and not at risk of being transferred on the whims of the "competent authority" while the project is being implemented.

Provided requisite resources, autonomy to operate without too much interference, monitored regularly and their performance evaluated against pre-agreed indicators.

Given full support and protection against frivolous accusations and character assassinations.

Held accountable for results and outcomes.

As institutional reforms across the board have been stymied by lack of political will, a more selective approach may be adopted, targeting the ministries, provincial departments and executing agencies involved in the planning, coordination, regulation, supervision and implementation of CPEC projects.

For example, it is a gigantic undertaking to lay the track, and rehabilitate, upgrade and construct the double track extending several thousand kilometres on BOT (build, operate, transfer) basis. This undertaking exceeds Pakistan Railways' present capacity. Until it is completely restructured and reorganised, and the reforms outlined here put in place, the risks of non-completion, shoddy work and cost and time overruns would remain elevated.

It is useful to remind the political parties that CPEC timelines extend over 15-20 years, and the impact of these reforms may be felt when any of these parties is in power. The consensus reached on them now can benefit almost all the political parties in the form of efficient and expeditious completion of projects without much effort on their part when they assume power. As they say in Urdu: "Paki pakai kheer khanay ko mil jae gee" (we will get ready-made pudding to consume). These reforms have to be institutionalised and given broad political support and approved by parliament to ensure their continuity even when there is a regime change. They will take an extended period of time to get rooted and any attempt to derail them prematurely would have highly pernicious effects. CPEC projects in the absence of these reforms may cost the nation way beyond current estimates with much lower benefits.

It is important to recognise that the risks are quite high. The reforms will meet obstruction, resistance and may be accepted in principle and on paper, but their substance may be deformed and obfuscated in actual practice. Those glib talkers who are going to be the losers in this game may find all kinds of flaws and loopholes in them. They may try to convince the decision-makers that they are being taken for a ride as their powers and authority are being curtailed, that the people of Pakistan have given them the mandate to do whatever they wish and these reforms are in fact an abridgement of that mandate. But my hope against hope is that our leaders will be able to see through this game.

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