

Expanding the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Third Parties Could Lead to War in South Asia

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*New Delhi described plans by Islamabad and Beijing to involve third countries in the multi-billion-dollar **China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**, that passes through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, as “illegal” and “unacceptable”. With CPEC pivotal for the development of western China and Beijing’s ambition to establish its own globalised transportation network, the Belt and Road Initiative, essentially hinging on being able to traverse Kashmiri territory currently occupied by the Pakistani military, introducing third countries to CPEC, such as Turkey, has the potential to engulf the region in war.*

Indian External Affairs Ministry spokesman, **Arindam Bagchi**, said on July 26 that such activities under CPEC are “inherently illegal, illegitimate and unacceptable”, and will be treated accordingly by India. “India firmly and consistently opposes projects in the so-called CPEC, which are in Indian territory that has been illegally occupied by Pakistan.”

India’s warning came after reports emerged that Pakistan and China decided to welcome interested third countries to participate in CPEC during a Joint Working Group meeting on International Cooperation and Coordination on July 22.

“We have seen reports on encouraging proposed participation of third countries in so-called CPEC projects. Any such actions by any party directly infringe on India’s sovereignty and territorial integrity,” Bagchi stated.

CPEC was launched in 2013 to improve Pakistan’s road, rail and energy transportation infrastructure so that the deep-sea port of Gwadar can connect with China’s western Xinjiang province. The port of Gwadar has effectively become a Chinese port in Pakistani territory, and cuts down the transportation of goods coming and going from western China by thousands of kilometres.

The Indian warning comes as Chinese fighter jets continue to fly close to Indian military positions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. According to Indian government sources, as quoted by local media: “Chinese fighter jets, including J-11, are flying close to the LAC. Cases of violation of the 10 km Confidence Building Major line have been reported in this area in recent days.” Chinese analysts claim that Beijing were provoked into these flight manoeuvres because of India upgrading its military infrastructure in Ladakh.



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None-the-less, what it does highlight is that the Kashmir region, including Ladakh, is already in a tense situation as the three nuclear powered states of India, China and Pakistan continue to compete. With China and Pakistan not only cooperating in the economic sphere, but also the military, introducing a third country like Turkey to CPEC, which already strongly supports Islamabad’s position on Kashmir, is a scenario that India will find intolerable.

Addressing a ceremony on May 20 to mark the launch of PNS Badr in the port city of Karachi, Pakistani **Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif** said turning CPEC into a trilateral project with Pakistan, Turkey and China would be beneficial for the region.

“The ongoing China Pakistan Economic Corridor was set to translate regional connectivity and a trilateral arrangement with the inclusion of Turkey could prove beneficial for the people in the region,” he said at the time.

In the same speech, Sharif stressed that the multi-dimensional cooperation between Pakistan and Turkey in defence, foreign policy and public welfare was reaching new heights. He said the launch of the ship was a “moment of pride for the entire Pakistani nation and the naval forces of the two countries.” The Pakistani prime minister then thanked Turkey for always supporting his country’s positions against India.

“Turkey and Pakistan, as ‘one nation living in two countries’, and even before the

creation of Pakistan, the Muslims of the sub-continent supported the cause of their Turkish brethren,” said Sharif.

With India already competing with the Chinese-Pakistani alliance over controlling Kashmir, the introduction of third parties to CPEC, especially Turkey, is a matter of national security. Turkey proves in deed through its illegal invasion and occupation of northern Cyprus, funding of terrorists in Syria, and direct intervention in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, that it is willing to take hard action to defend its interests and allies.

Although conflict with a nuclear-powered state like India is a different prospect to fighting Armenia, Turkey has deep experience through the wars in Syria and Libya in funding, arming and training jihadist forces. It is this experience in weaponising Islamists, in which Pakistan is a hotbed for, that concerns New Delhi.

It is not known to what extent India will react if third parties are introduced to the CPEC project, but it can be expected there will be an escalation in military readiness if Turkey were to be involved and use Pakistan as a spearhead against India. As Pakistan reverses its nation-building mythology from Arabism to Turkism, Turkey has embraced this identity shift and sees the South Asian country as part of the wider Turkic world. This has naturally put Kashmir in the eyes of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and therefore at odds with India.

If Islamabad and Beijing were to go ahead with plans to introduce third parties to CPEC, especially with a state like Turkey, it will have the potential to see three nuclear countries at war as India too has demonstrated in action that it is willing to defend its national security.

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