

## Decoding Digitisation

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By **Tania Aidrus**

WE have all been waiting for the story of information technology in Pakistan to unfold and show its true potential but short-lived plans and senseless bans seem to hold it back. Log on to Twitter and you'll find the youth helplessly pulling their hair out at yet another policy intervention (or lack thereof) that's completely divorced from the realities of the evolving global digital landscape, and blaming 'boomers' for being in charge. Equally frustrated journalists would club those failures with the broader bureaucratic inefficiencies and inertia of the government towards reform and meaningful change in most sectors. While this criticism does have value in keeping the decision-makers on their toes, pushing them to act and holding them accountable, it does not offer a meaningful insight into the crux of the problem. It's akin to slapping your old, withering computer randomly out of frustration enough times and the computer jerking into action; sure, it'll work for a bit but only to break down yet again. Eventually, you'll have to take a deep breath, pull the computer apart and really troubleshoot to see what's going on in order to fix it for real. While there is a lot of conversation about what is not working, there is much less about the way forward. As someone who tried to make a dent for this sector in the government — albeit not very successfully — I got a long, hard look at the internal machinery that is meant to be enabling a forward-looking digital ecosystem in Pakistan. Today, I wanted to share why I think things are in a gridlock and which wires need to be untangled for the system to start working — for good.

### **Precise targets and long-term vision**

The scope of information technology or digitisation continues to be discussed in a rather limited manner in mainstream discourse. Reducing it to apps, online portals, start-ups or software houses is a costly injustice. The absence of a broad, comprehensive definition has prevented the development of an overarching, long-term vision for sustainable change. The parochial view has instead allowed policymakers to pat themselves on the back for small, isolated projects and give an illusive impression of real progress. For example, in the past several years, flashy schemes involving distribution of laptops in colleges or grants to start-ups have popped up in various parts of the country. In the moment, they are deemed praiseworthy; it's understandable why that's the case though — given the sheer dearth of resources, any small initiative that solves a problem temporarily for a few people is a welcome 'change'.

However, we now have evidence that such disparate schemes do not contribute to any meaningful, sustainable change. Distribution of grants and creation of fancy incubation spaces (by a debt-ridden government) for entrepreneurs won't help grow the start-up

ecosystem unless it is accompanied by bold reforms by the State Bank, the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan and the Federal Board of Revenue. Investors must be able to repatriate their funds. Entrepreneurs should neither have to spend three months setting up a company and getting it registered, nor an additional few months trying to open a corporate bank account and setting up payroll. The distribution of laptops and internet dongles to students, while noble, does not solve the core problem around access. Making access to the internet (both devices and data) more affordable can have a multiplier effect on connectivity, which has been globally proven to be the single biggest democratising force.

Therefore, instead of implementing short-lived plans that momentarily check off buzzwords associated with information technology and make for splashy headlines, we need to decide where we want to see ourselves a decade down the line and then define precise targets that will help us reach that dream in stages. The process begins with expanding the scope of IT and this is an exercise we conducted in the early stages of the Digital Pakistan initiative. Broadly speaking, five streams need to be running in parallel and complementing each other: 1) access and connectivity, 2) digital infrastructure (which is the most underrated), 3) e-governance, 4) digital skills and literacy, and 5) innovation and entrepreneurship. We need crystal-clear short-, medium- and long-term key performance indicators for each stream and, most importantly, we need to ensure that the relevant stakeholders take ownership so that they can be held accountable against those goals.

### **Clear ownership and accountability**

Both intuitively and officially on paper, it is very clear who has the capacity for and the responsibility to lead the charge of delivering a healthy digital ecosystem: the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunications (MoITT). Currently, however, this easily discernible ownership has become needlessly murky in two aspects.

The first aspect is that there are parallel structures in the form of divisions or advisers that sit outside of the MoITT. The government can bring in the most competent advisers and task forces in the world but they simply won't be able to deliver if their vision is not backed by the relevant bureaucratic machinery and meaningful legal authority. Any new policy or reform is implemented by the government through its Rules of Business. The entity that has the ability to leverage these rules is the relevant ministry and there are no two ways about it.

The second aspect is that there are a variety of sub-bodies under the MoITT or provincial governments that are working in silos.

- There are bodies like the National Information Technology Board, Ignite and Universal Service Fund but between severe resource constraints, delayed decision-making and, in some cases, lack of leadership, they continue to be hamstrung.

- The existence of the KP Information Technology Board and Punjab Information Technology Board (and the lack of equivalent bodies in other federating units) is confusing because they seem to be duplicating some of the work that also seems to be happening at the federal level.
- The role of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority as a regulator is crucial but it needs to have the ability to operate independently with a clear vision on how to reform the sector.

### **Strong digital Identity and Infrastructure**

A critical piece of any type of digital transformation is digital identity, which is why it's unsettling that our mainstream discourse and understanding of the subject hardly ever brings up Nadra.

Success in bringing about reform in any sector depends a lot on your ability to leverage digital identity. This is true for land, education, health, tax — you name it. Are you giving out benefits to the right people? Are you vaccinating the right people? Are you collecting tax from the right people? The list goes on and on.

While it appears simple to talk about leveraging Nadra, it's important to understand exactly what digital infrastructure is. After evaluating case studies from around the world, we believed that in Pakistan we needed to invest in five interconnected areas that can drive true digital transformation:

- Digital identity: A universal biometric digital identity, in line with inter-governmental standards.
- Digital data: A digital repository of personal data and records for every citizen and business, including domicile, property, employment, education, health, taxes, etc.
- Digital signatures: Digital signatures, like wet signatures, that allow digital signoff on documents. The citizen or business is in control of who can access their personal data.
- Digital payments: A real time, low-cost digital payments system that facilitates faster, cheaper and easier commerce between citizens, businesses, and the government.
- Digital services: Infrastructure that allows each citizen and business to approve sharing their data with government and private-sector systems, to receive a variety of personalised, seamless services (eg grants, loans, insurance, taxes, voting etc.)

In particular, the digital services sector offers unique and untapped potential that can help Pakistan accelerate and leapfrog past other countries to become a global leader in digital government and digital citizenship. With this digital infrastructure in place, developers, start-ups, businesses and government departments can innovate on unique use cases to make citizens' lives easier. So the bottom line is that unless we have an independent Nadra with a visionary leader who understands exactly how important digital identity is for

unlocking nationwide cross-sector reform, we will continue being incremental in our approach.

### **Right people for the right role**

We need the right people for the right job not just at Nadra but any institution that's meant to play a crucial role in our digital journey. We need people who are doers and want to get stuff done — people who don't bring politics into delivery and don't chase clout.

It's unfair and unrealistic to expect any government body, new or old, to deliver without the right resources. We have seen time and again across various sectors of government that it's next to impossible to bring on board or, at least sustain, the right people: the long-winded and archaic processes and absurd caps on compensation ensure that those relationships never work out.

It is critical to understand that the wrong person leading an organisation with money at their disposal is more dangerous than not having a leader. We need to champion both meritocracy and open-mindedness in our approach to human resourcing to make a real dent in any sector. Information technology is no exception. In fact, considering that it's a particularly specialised field with constant innovation across the globe, excellent human resource is perhaps all the more important in this industry.

### **Conclusion**

Set a clear vision, break it down into bite-sized goals, assign clear owners to those goals, give them the authority and space to execute those goals (without jumping to premature action based on unverified feedback) and then performance-manage them based on outcomes. It's not rocket science but it's critical to get in place if we want to see sustained performance and results.

*The writer is a former Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Digital Pakistan.*

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# China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Status and Strategy

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By **Dr Rajkumar Singh**

The much publicised China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), launched with great fanfare, is a part of Beijing's ambitious global plan Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) meant for infrastructural development of small and medium range nations of the world although, its original scheme dated back to the 1950s when the need for a corridor from the Chinese border to Pakistan's deepwater ports on the Arabian Sea was felt that motivated the two powers to construct the Karakoram Highway beginning in 1959, followed by Chinese interest in construction of a deep-water harbour at Gwadar in Pakistan in 2002 and completed in 2006.

The further plan for the current CPEC, after two years (2013-2014) of extensive discussions and high-level visits from both sides, the Chinese government announced in the last quarter of the year 2014 its intention to finance Chinese companies as part of its \$45.6 billion energy and infrastructure projects in Pakistan. As a follow-up of the announcement, an agreement to this effect was signed on 20 April 2015 during the state visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Pakistan, and in line to further augment the scale and scope of CPEC, 20 more agreements were signed on 12 August 2015 which commenced a series of agreements for expansion of the works in different spheres and in proportion volume of the Chinese aid, grants and loan also multiplied.

On the other hand, the Chinese BRI became very popular all over the world and about 140 countries gave their consent for the scheme, while many of them reached the verge of bankruptcy and became defaulters to Beijing, especially after the worldwide spread of the covid-19 pandemic. The new situation also posed several hurdles in further implementation of CPEC projects in Pakistan, also causing a lot of harassment and accusations from both sides.

CPEC is one of the biggest and largest infrastructural development schemes of independent Pakistan, intended to rapidly upgrade its required structural basics and strengthen its economy by the construction of modern transportation networks, numerous energy projects and special economic zones. This renovation plan for the Pakistani economy includes: a. projects in Gwadar Port and City, b. roadway projects, c. railway projects, d. energy sector projects, e. other areas of co-operation in agriculture and aquaculture, science and technology.

The plan being a landmark project in the history of Pakistan, is the largest investment Pakistan has ever attracted since independence and also the largest by China in any foreign country, and therefore both the Pakistani government and media as well have called the investment a 'game and fate changer' for the region that will ultimately make country a regional economic hub, further strengthening and cementing ties between the two countries. The first impact of Chinese investment was visible in the energy sector, in which the country had been facing shortages for long and was facing a shortfall of over 4500 MW on a regular basis but in December 2017, Pakistan succeeded in producing surplus electricity.

In addition to the schemes and detail of projects, there was a separate arrangement for the finance of the works which would come in the form of concessional loans, interest-free loans, private consortia, and assistance from the Asian Development Bank. Of the total approximately \$11 billion will be dispersed by the Exim Bank of China, China Development Bank and the ICBC at an interest rate of 1.6% while as per an announcement made by the government of China in August 2015, concessionary loans for several projects in Gwadar totaling \$757 million would be converted in 0% interest loans. In a further development in September 2015 China announced that the \$230 million Gwadar International Airport project will be considered a grant which the government of Pakistan will not be required to repay. For energy purposes \$15.5 billion are to be constructed by joint Chinese-Pakistani firms, rather than by the governments of either China or Pakistan. The Exim Bank of China will finance those investments at 5-6 % interest rates. The other dozen or so projects are to be financed by the Asian Development Bank.

From all counts number one beneficiary of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is Beijing and if all things remain normal it is in the interest of Islamabad. It will provide China with an alternative route for energy supplies, as well as new route by which Western China can conduct its trade; however, in context of the Straits of Malacca being dominated by the USA, in particular, CPEC provides China an alternative route in case of any negative action by the USA. In addition, China is heavily dependent upon sea routes which pass through the South China Sea near the disputed area, Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands, currently a source of tension between China, Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines and the USA and in the circumstances, the alternative route provided by CPEC would decrease the possibility of confrontation between Beijing and Washington. The CPEC alignments will improve connectivity to Xinjiang province of China, increasing the region's potential to attract public and private investment. As a result of the CPEC, Chinese imports and exports to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe would require much shorter shipment times and distances and also alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

As the people's Republic of China is the most resourceful country of the region, there is no doubt in its funding capability, but the repayment capacity of Pakistan has remained always in doubt keeping in consideration the already torn economic condition of



Islamabad which was pushed further into a decline due to the slowing down of the global economy in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, which began at the close of the year 2019 from Wuhan, China, and spread to over 200 countries of the world. Thus, in the situation, political fragility, increased interference of security agencies and the army establishment in matters of civilian administration, have put additional pressure on ambitious CPEC projects currently ongoing in Pakistan. The hurdles faced by China in the implementation of its projects related to the BRI have disappointed Beijing and the deferral of the crucial 10th meeting of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor's Joint Co-operation Committee (JCC) testify their differences on the issue. Since the commencement of the projects, the opposition parties of Pakistan have also abused it as a political tool not suitable for a country like Pakistan.

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## CPEC — fallacies and realities

By **Inam Ul Haque**

In the last three columns, the agreed framework of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was laid out, mapping its immense scope and expanse; leading to latest progress, modestly reported. This column dispels following perceptual fallacies about this vital project of Sino-Pakistan national importance.

First, that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with CPEC as its flagship project, is a tool of Chinese neo-imperialism. That China is using BRI/CPEC for advancing its global power and influence. True partially. No super power offers free lunches, but the Chinese mode generally and CPEC particularly is not exploitative; it offers a win-win situation for participating nations and is extensively sensitive to social development. BRI/CPEC is not about economy alone; it's about geo-economics, and establishing a parallel non-exploitative economic system... and that makes the West uncomfortable.

The 129 or so mainly under-developed and developing nations on board will benefit from the regional development projects and enhanced connectivity under BRI. Most of these nations have no access to otherwise affordable capital. CPEC in particular has a strong component of social development, poverty alleviation and demographic uplift, unlike similar programmes under other international donors. For full-scale socio-economic development, CPEC is Pakistan's only choice, having tried others. Chinese conditionalities are comparatively milder and mostly without political caveats.

Detractors refer to China using Gwadar as a strategic naval base in its 'string of pearls strategy', to alter global/regional geo-strategic status-quo, through its rising influence. This — critics cite — is a threat to global commerce passing through international sea lines of communications (SLOCs) closer to Gwadar. However, to the contrary, Gwadar is not leased, sold and/or surrendered to China or its companies. It firmly remains part of Pakistan, which has every right to develop it, as it pleases. Gwadar's comparison with the Hambantota Port financing model in Sri Lanka is also erroneous and not applicable; because CPEC as a proof of concept (POC) pilot project, is pivotal to the success of the more significant and global BRI.

Second, that CPEC lacks transparency. Not true, as all available information about the project is open-sourced and available on the CPEC Authority website. Project modalities, like terms and conditions for Chinese companies, investment options, availability of local partners/investors, international financing and profit repatriation, etc are amply covered in each contract. If there are 'any' supervisory lapses by the Pakistani interlocutors in individual contracts, CPEC and China cannot be held responsible as a whole.



Third, that CPEC would overburden Pakistan's likely balance of payments, turning it into a 'debt trap'. This is far from truth. One, the total committed amount under CPEC is over \$50 billion in two broad categories; \$35 billion allocated for energy projects while \$15 billion kept for infrastructure, Gwadar development, industrial zones and mass-transit schemes. About 70% (\$35 billion) of the original outlay was to be provided by Pakistan over an extended timeframe of 14-15 years (2017-2030). This makes the average annual investment under CPEC closer to around \$3-4 billion or 6-7 % of Pakistan's annual investment budget. Export revenues (thanks to uninterrupted power supply as CPEC projects have already added around 11,000 MW) were modelled to rise up to \$40 billion by 2024, easily absorbing this additional amount without much stress on the balance of payment.

Two, as per an IMF report (2017), the peak outflows (by 2024/25) on account of CPEC debt servicing, profit and dividend repatriation and increased imports were not expected to go beyond \$3.5-4 billion, gradually declining thereafter. If our exports grow at least 10% annually (exports grew at 12% in 2017 and 14% for Q2 this year, thanks to decreased energy shortages), the potential earning (calculated at \$6-7 billion) would easily afford the peak outflows. Unforeseen circumstances like the corona pandemic, has strained Pakistan's capital availability but this is expected to be short-term and transitory. Economy/exports are already showing signs of recovery.

Fourth, that the CPEC projects would only benefit Punjab. CPEC's Punjab-centricity is negated as its projects, in all core areas, are spread nationwide, as articulated in three earlier columns.

Fifth and more sinister is the 'anti-China campaign' mainly by the US/Western media/governments and their local interlocutors in media and our ashrafiyya (elite) in/out of power corridors. These elements cite China's ultimate economic domination of Pakistan given Pakistan's fragile, highly indebted economy, weak exports, dependency on foreign assistance and susceptibility to periodic external payment crises.

For greater clarity, infrastructure projects are financed by grants and long-term concessional loans with an average interest rate of 2% or so. Chinese state-owned companies — designated by Chinese government — are financing projects through 'project loans' from government-owned banks on concessional terms. And in several projects, Chinese and Pakistani companies are into joint ventures. And Chinese investment benefits Pakistan also through technology transfer, job creation and value addition etc.

Easing energy shortages is to reduce import of capital goods, leading to saving on import bill. Reduced demand for imported fuel oil/diesel will ease-up POL imports. The above calculations do not take into account the 'transit fees' of the Corridor or associated economic activity generated in the CPEC command areas. These calculations also do not reflect the 'second order bonus', whereby greener projects make our industries more

competitive for import substitutes and new export products. And sustained Chinese inflows are projecting Pakistan as an attractive investment destination.

The cumulative effect of all this is not only enabling Pakistan to repay its obligations under CPEC; Pakistan shall have surplus capital for investment in more projects. This is hard-nosed economics and not some gullible rosy picture-painting. So, the chance to break Pakistan's begging bowl is now or never.

Chinese interlocutors are especially incensed by misrepresentation of facts by many Pakistanis and the constant barrage of doubts being created in the Pakistani population — from inter-marriages to economic enslavement etc. China is characterised as the erstwhile East India Company and Pakistan its likely satellite. Chinese companies are also irked by Pakistan's red tape, inconsistency of power tariffs and slower dispute resolution etc.

Sixth, that Pakistan has a risky security environment. Actually, Pakistan protects Chinese working on CPEC projects through an integrated security system, incorporating local police (Punjab has raised special CPEC police), paramilitary forces, intelligence apparatus and Pakistan Army. The army has raised two 'Security Divisions' (a division roughly has 20,000 personnel) for K-P/Punjab and Sindh/Balochistan respectively. There are over 80,000 Chinese nationals living in Pakistan including around 25,000 deployed on CPEC projects. Attack on any Chinese anywhere for any reason is exploited as attack on CPEC workforce.

In the final verdict, Pakistan should stay the course and China to maintain its amity through re-scheduling of loans on softer terms, being sensitive to corona-induced damage to Pakistan's economy. Expectations should be manageable and CPEC benefits spread equally far and wide.

If CPEC can boost Pakistan's industrial productivity, exports, and job creation, it should be a game-changer. It actually is.

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# What China's poverty reduction experience means to the world

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By **Yi Fan**

Earlier this year, China declared the eradication of extreme poverty. For anyone trying to assess what it means to the country, it would be useful to look at what persistent penury has done to some of its population.

Even just 30 years ago, in the desert-covered villages of northwest China, it was not unusual for brothers from the same family to share just one pair of pants. Some villagers lived inside earthy caves and slept on rock beds. Young women accepted arranged marriages for dowries worth the price of a donkey. Though hard to believe, this was the reality in Xihaigu, regarded by the United Nations as "one of the most unfit places for human settlement".

Xihaigu was not the only place in China plagued by humiliating poverty. Liangshan, a prefecture in southwest China, captured the nation's heart in 2016 with pictures of children climbing a cliff with bare hands on a vine ladder, the only thing connecting their mountainous village with the nearest school at the foot of the hill—and the world beyond. By 2012, China had 832 counties and 128,000 villages just like Xihaigu and Liangshan. They were all listed as priority targets for the nationwide anti-poverty campaign.

The enormity of the task is mind-boggling. So not unexpectedly, when China announced the end of extreme poverty, the news was met by scrutiny and disbelief in some quarters. Questions have been raised about the reliability of the figures, the adequacy of the poverty standard and the cost-effectiveness of the effort. Let me address each of these questions in turn.

## Who has benefited?

According to Chinese President Xi Jinping, 98.99 million rural residents have been lifted out of poverty in the past eight years, bringing the total number of Chinese escaping poverty in the last four decades to 770 million, which accounted for over 70 percent of poverty reduction worldwide. This also means that China met the poverty reduction goal in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda ten years ahead of schedule. "We should not forget the fact that China has contributed the most in world poverty alleviation in the past decade," noted UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres. Leaders of South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka also expressed congratulations.

Liu Yongfu, director of the government agency overseeing the effort, told reporters last year that the threshold for extreme poverty was set at 4,000 RMB yuan (\$628) per annum. Slightly above the World Bank benchmark of \$1.9 a day, it was “only part of the package”, according to Liu. “The government also guarantees proper food and clothing, safe housing, free education for children and essential medical services.”

Apart from benefiting its own people, China’s poverty reduction experience has helped other developing countries as well, particularly its neighbours. For example, China hosted a seminar on poverty policy and practice for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in 2007. Similar exchanges and projects on development cooperation have been carried out with the five South Asian nations as well as under the China-SAARC framework, including sub-national poverty reduction exhibitions, construction of roads, airports and schools, and vocational and agro-tech training programmes.

### **Why has it worked?**

China’s anti-poverty success can be explained by what may be called a L-E-A-P strategy (i.e., Leadership, Empowerment, All-sector participation and Paired assistance). Hopefully some elements of the strategy can help other developing countries move faster towards the Sustainable Development Goal of “ending poverty in all its forms” by 2030.

### **First, leadership.**

A campaign on such an enormous scale would not have been possible without the mobilisation and execution capacity that the Chinese system is best known for. Strong leadership is the key to delivering it. In 2017, the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) declared “war” on poverty. The choice of word made it abundantly clear to party officials that their leaders were treating the issue with utmost seriousness and urgency. President Xi personally took charge of the matter. He promised that “no one will be left behind” and warned officials against deceptive efforts.

Apart from setting an ambitious goal, President Xi also called for “targeted poverty alleviation”, demanding tailor-made solutions for different villages and groups. This strategy avoided the easy, one-size-fits-all solution that often created waste and discontent in a vast, diverse country such as China.

### **Second, empowerment.**

As a Chinese saying goes, “Better teach people how to fish than just give them fish.” Experience shows that people who get rid of poverty by receiving handouts instead of training would soon fall back into poverty once the help is withdrawn.

In Liangshan’s case, young adults were taught vocational skills to help them find jobs in cities. Agricultural experts were sent to pass on know-how about growing cash crops. Peasants who had only small potatoes for supper have become planters of organic strawberry, a business which brings over 20,000 yuan (\$3,140) per head a year.

### **Third, all-sector participation.**

What was most remarkable is the human resource committed to this campaign. More than 255,000 teams of 3 million up-and-coming party officials were sent from across the country to join millions of local officials in the battle against poverty. They were asked to stay in their posts until their villages were declared “poverty-free”. Many of them were promoted or rewarded with national honours afterwards.

The government channelled 1.6 trillion yuan (\$251 billion) into this endeavour, roughly one-sixth of the GDP created by the world’s second largest economy in 2020. Yet poverty alleviation shouldn’t and can’t be the business of the government alone. China’s corporate sector invested over 1 trillion yuan (\$157 billion) in the poverty-stricken areas. Many companies made donations to rebuild ramshackle dwellings, create funds that rewarded work on village roads or set up convenience stores that sold daily necessities at reduced prices. What did they get in return? A debt of gratitude and millions of potential customers.

### **Fourth, paired assistance.**

Richer provinces and cities from China’s eastern coast also stepped forward to form pairs with poor ones in the interior. For example, the coastal province of Fujian partnered with the northwestern province of Ningxia, of which Xihaigu is a part. When serving as Fujian’s deputy party secretary in the 1990s, Xi visited Ningxia to discuss how to help villagers in Xihaigu emerge from poverty. He was behind the momentous decision that led to relocating the villagers to more hospitable places at the government’s expense.

Min-Ning, the place name coined by Xi from a combination of Min (another name for Fujian) and Ning (the usual shorthand for Ningxia), has since prospered with the help of farm experts travelling half the country to teach the locals how to grow grapes, wolfberries and raspberries and start their own winery business. Their rags-to-riches story had been adapted into a drama series which aired early this year. It became an instant hit with viewers young and old and received a rating of 9.4 out of 10.

### **What next?**

China has reason to be proud of what it has accomplished, but the battle is far from over. By delivering what it has promised, the CPC is driving up expectations. Today, people in Liangshan and Xihaigu no longer worry about whether there are enough pants or what to put on the dinner table. They want better education for their children, more accessible healthcare and more comfortable nursing homes. As the CPC celebrates its centenary on July 1st, it must embark on another mammoth task to raise living standards for all Chinese and lift hundreds of millions into middle-income status.

China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh all have great development potential. They have much to offer each other and contribute to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Their foreign ministers agreed at a recent virtual meeting to create a China-South Asia poverty reduction and development cooperation centre to share best practices. China will host a forum on the role of e-commerce in reducing rural

poverty and post-Covid economic recovery. No one should be left behind as the world embraces a better, shared future. China and South Asia are natural partners and there is a lot that can be achieved together.

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## Remnants of US withdrawal

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By **Faisal Ali Raja**

The withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan is going to be completed before the cut-off date of September 11, 2021. Already a chaotic situation is emerging in which the receding forces are looking for new ways to maintain old alliances and ensure their footprints in the region. An uncertainty is sweeping across Afghanistan which can impact the whole region if the peace process fails to bring the key protagonists on a negotiating table. The United States military withdrawal is leaving behind different types of remnants which will keep defining the relationship between the US and Afghanistan. The complex association calculus can only be solved through a sustainable economic and military assistance to maintain an effective counter-Taliban force in the country. History tells us that Mujahideen factions failed to overthrow Kabul despite Soviet withdrawal in 1989, as the latter continued assisting Kabul and held its influence over local warlords during the period.

The US may not be able to transport back all its war equipment as the cost surpasses its utility. So, the Pentagon is handing over less sensitive equipment to local Afghan security establishment along with the military bases in key Afghan cities. The Americans are also reaching out to neighbouring countries to strike some sort of a deal for its military equipment which may fetch it unexpected dividends in material or non-material terms. There is a possibility that the equipment handed over to Afghan security forces might end up in the hands of Taliban fighters. Therefore, in the absence of any guarantees, military gadgets which might not pose any significant challenge to Kabul will be doled out to local Afghan forces.

There are legitimate concerns over the presence of security contractors in the country. Though the US announced a military withdrawal, it has not given any timeframe for private security officials working in the country. The latter have established connections with local Afghan networks and forged close bonds with the war lords for mutual benefits. How these assets are used in coming months through an indirect or direct approach will be interesting to see. It may result in a private contractor job boom in the country. All indications suggest that private military contractors may try to plug in the vacuum left behind by US withdrawal. They can prolong their stay in the country through an independent or coordinated approach against Taliban forces in Afghanistan. They may try to maintain their human capital through financial means so that such local forces can be utilised against the Taliban onslaught. They will maintain a close liaison with US military so that any aerial assistance required might be readily available through a swift mechanism. For this purpose, it is essential that the US air force deploys its aerial CT forces

at flexible platforms in the region. Such an arrangement would support on-ground contractors or their assets in case of an emergency. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) in Afghanistan will maintain close intelligence coordination with the US and seek assistance from the contractors and US air force in case of any eventuality.

The Islamic State (IS), though suffered greatly in the last one year or so, is still making spikes of violence in selective areas of the country. The group may not dissipate instantaneously as the main protagonists in the future turbulence can utilise their services for certain objectives. The group along with other anti-Taliban violent groups may also act as a catalyst to prolong the period of disturbance to maintain a constant pressure on forces of the regional countries. It may also entice one or more regional actors to participate in the Afghan turbulence which can have serious repercussions for the internal security of these countries.

Thus, the remnants of US withdrawal will play a critical role in the future regional security and stability.

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## The terrorism of Israel

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By **Jai Kumar Dhirani**

The innocent people of Palestine are facing Israeli aggression as well as acts of terrorism, not only in recent times but the process has been going on since 1948. World powers, especially the United States, are watching atrocities on the people of Palestine by Israel and its armed forces but opt to remain silent rather than take any action.

On March 8, 2021, Israel's police attacked Muslim worshippers inside Al-Aqsa Mosque while they were performing tarawih. Israel attacked Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Damascus Gate of the Old City and the Sheikh Jarrah district in East Jerusalem. Al-Aqsa Mosque is the world's third-holiest site for Muslims. Jews call the area the "Temple Mount," claiming it was the site of two Jewish temples in ancient times. Israel occupied East Jerusalem, where Al-Aqsa is located, during the 1967 Arab Israeli war. It annexed the entire city in 1980 in a move never recognised by the international community.

The latest violence erupted on May 10, when Israel launched air raids on Gaza after Hamas, the Palestinian group which controls the territory, fired rockets into Israel. At least 222 people have been killed in the Israeli bombardment of Gaza, according to health authorities, including 63 children.

The bombardment began after the Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza responded to more than 20 days of Israeli violence against Palestinian worshippers in Al-Aqsa Mosque, and Israel's refusal to abandon plans to expel a number of Palestinian families from their homes in Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. The homes were to be handed over to illegal Jewish settlers through a lengthy and false legal process. Israel's goals in attacking Gaza included the destruction of the resistance infrastructure and the re-imposition of the army's deterrence.

The settlers have played a key role in Israel's act of terrorism on innocent Palestinians since 1947. Settlements are Jewish communities in historic Palestine built by the Zionist movement pre-1948 and thereafter by the state of Israel. These communities can range in size from single-person outposts to entire cities. One of the first settlements built by Zionists was Tel Aviv in the early 20th century. Eventually, as the Jewish immigration from Europe increased, Zionists began acquiring more plots of land for settlement. After the military assaults of 1948-'50, Zionist armed forces, subsequently transformed into the Israeli army, constructed Jewish settlements over the ruins of Palestinian towns and villages throughout the 78 percent of historic Palestine they controlled.

A building that housed international media offices including Al Jazeera's in the Gaza Strip has been hit by an Israeli air raid that demolished the structure. Israel said its "fighter jets attacked a high-rise building which hosted military assets belonging to the military

intelligence of the Hamas terror organisation". Whereas it provided no evidence to back up the claims.

American president Joe Biden is not far behind in supporting Israel for its contemporary terrorism acts. The White House tweeted, "Today the president spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, reaffirmed his strong support to Israel's right to defend itself against rocket attacks from Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza and condemned these indiscriminate attacks against Israel." Undoubtedly, the United States has a "special relationship" with the state of Israel, as characterised by the US State Department: "Israel is a great partner to the United States, and Israel has no greater friend than the United States. Americans and Israelis are united by our shared commitment to democracy, economic prosperity, and regional security. The unbreakable bond between our two countries has never been stronger". US and Israeli interests have converged in important ways. The United States has served as a critical sponsor for Israel financially and politically. And Israel has played an invaluable role in helping the United States dominate the Middle East.

A ceasefire was settled between Israel and Hamas-led Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip as Egyptian mediators pressed on with talks with the two sides on securing longer-term calm.

The role of Pakistan is appreciable in this scenario. Pakistan was engaged in establishing contacts with other countries in a bid to pressure Israel to stop attacks on Gaza which have been continuing since May 10. Pakistan joined Turkey in urging the UN to deploy an international protection force in illegally occupied Palestinian territories to protect innocents there from Israeli violence. Speaking at a UN General Assembly special meeting on Palestine, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said, "Gaza has plunged in darkness, literally and metaphorically, while the only light is that of Israeli explosions". Pakistan and its citizens will always stand up, not only for the oppressed Kashmiri people, but for innocent Palestinians as well.

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