

CPEC AND SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES: POLICY RECOMMENDATION FOR PAKISTAN

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Abstract:

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) are designated areas within a country that possess distinct economic regulations designed to attract foreign direct investment and stimulate economic growth. In Pakistan, SEZs were introduced in 2012 under the Special Economic Zones Act, providing fiscal and non-fiscal incentives, simplified regulatory procedures, and necessary infrastructure to support industrial activities. This study explores the evolution and impact of SEZs in Pakistan, emphasizing their potential to boost economic development, create jobs, and attract investment. Drawing on China's successful SEZ model, the paper identifies key factors such as stable governance, transparent policies, and robust infrastructure that can enhance SEZ effectiveness in Pakistan. It also offers policy recommendations for optimizing SEZ performance, including focusing on pilot projects, ensuring regulatory stability, improving intellectual property protection, and fostering collaboration among stakeholders. By implementing these strategies, Pakistan can maximize the benefits of SEZs and achieve sustainable economic growth.

Key words:

Special Economic Zones, foreign direct investment, Industrial development, Pakistan

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Introduction

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) or industrial parks can help promote the growth of industries and facilitate structural changes in a country, but they must be set up correctly and under appropriate circumstances to be effective (Zeng, 2016). The term "Special Economic Zone" refers to a geographically demarcated area within a state that includes a separate regulatory and financial administrative framework from the rest of the country (UNDP, 2015).

According to Section 3(n) of the Special Economic Zones Act 2016, an SEZ is a geographically defined and delimited area that has been approved and notified by the Board of Investment, Pakistan. SEZs are regions within a country that have different economic regulations compared to other regions within the same country. The regulations in SEZs are typically designed to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and promote rapid economic growth through tax incentives and other financial policies. SEZs aim to increase trade balance, employment, investment, job creation, and effective administration.

SEZs can be broadly classified by four characteristics: they are geographically secured, managed by a single administrative authority, offer significant financial and investment opportunities exclusively within the zone, and provide duty-free benefits with streamlined methods to attract investment. Additionally, SEZs have specific features to attract investment (Akin, 2008), including special administration under which SEZs enjoy slightly more liberal financial laws compared to prevailing national laws.

Introduction of SEZs in Pakistan

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were introduced in Pakistan in 2012 with the enactment of the Special Economic Zones Act. The government recognized the potential of SEZs as catalysts for economic growth, attracting foreign investment, boosting exports, and creating employment opportunities. SEZs are designated areas that offer specific incentives, infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks to promote economic activities and facilitate trade.

Since there are many schemes to facilitate the business community and attract foreign investment in the country, understanding the various types of special zones with their characteristics is essential. The types of special zones are as follows:

Name of Zone	Characteristics
Free Trade Zones	Free Trade Zones (FTZs), or commercial-free zones, are special areas that have fences around them and where no taxes are charged. These zones provide places to store and transport goods for trading, moving items from one

	place to another, and sending items out of the country again.
Export Processing Zones	Export Processing Zones (EPZs) are industrial estates aimed primarily at foreign markets. They offer firms free-trade conditions and a favorable administrative environment. There are generally two types of EPZs: one is a comprehensive type, open to all businesses; the other is a specialized type, open only to certain specialized sectors/products.
Comprehensive Special Economic Zones	Comprehensive SEZs, also known as "Multi-functional Economic Zones," are areas that are quite large and have a combination of different industries, services, and urban facilities. Sometimes, these areas can include an entire city or jurisdiction, like Shenzhen and Hainan in China, where a province is a smaller region or area within the country.
Industrial Parks	Industrial Parks, also known as Industrial Zones, are places where most of the manufacturing activities take place. There are other types of economic zones similar to the ones mentioned above, but they are usually smaller. Industrial Parks typically provide many facilities and advantages.
Bonded Areas	Bonded Areas (also known as "Bonded Warehouses") are specific buildings or other secured regions where products may be stored, manipulated, or undergo manufacturing operations without the payment of duties that would normally be imposed.
Specialized Zones	Specialized Zones are places designed for specific industries and purposes. Some of these zones are for science and technology companies, some are for petrochemical companies, some are for logistics companies, and some are located near airports.
Eco-Industrial Zones or Parks	Eco-Industrial Zones or Parks are areas that aim to improve the environment by reducing waste and helping companies to be more environmentally friendly. They usually use a concept called "Industrial Symbiosis" and environmentally-friendly technologies to save energy and resources. More and more countries are adopting this new type of area due to serious environmental problems.

Note: Data from Akini (2008), Zeng D. Z. (2010), and the author's research were used as sources.

The SEZ Act's main features include the establishment of a legal framework to govern SEZs, the provision of fiscal and non-fiscal incentives for investors, simplified regulatory procedures, and the creation of a one-stop shop for investors' convenience. The Act provides for the establishment of SEZ authorities, which are responsible for the development, management, and promotion of SEZs.

Facilities provided in SEZ areas include exemptions from customs duties and taxes on imports of machinery, equipment, and raw materials, income tax exemptions, a simplified registration process, and streamlined procedures for setting up businesses. SEZs are equipped with necessary infrastructure such as roads, utilities, industrial estates, and commercial areas to support industrial and commercial activities.

During the 1960s, Pakistan was seen as one of the countries with a rapidly growing economy. Pakistan was ahead of China in terms of GDP per person in 1965, with a value of \$114, whereas the GDP per capita of China was \$98 in 1965 (<https://countryeconomy.com/gdp?year=1965>, 2023). However, since the 1970s, the economic development of Pakistan has declined. Pakistan does not have a strong foundation, which makes it difficult to attract foreign investment. SEZs were established in 2012 with the passing of the Special Economic Zones Act.

In conclusion, SEZs in Pakistan have evolved over time and have become an integral part of the country's economic development strategy. With ongoing initiatives such as CPEC, Pakistan is further expanding its SEZ infrastructure and attracting foreign investment to foster industrial growth and economic prosperity. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) holds immense importance for Pakistan. It is expected that CPEC will bring significant economic growth to Pakistan. It includes many infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, ports, and energy projects, which will enhance connectivity and trade within the country and with China and other countries. Economic opportunities created by CPEC, combined with the establishment of Special Economic Zones with their associated facilities and tax and customs duty relaxations, will stimulate economic activity, attract foreign investment, create job opportunities, and boost industrial development.

Problem Statement

Pakistan's economy has struggled to achieve its proposed economic goals despite its potential in natural resources and human capital. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) offers new opportunities for mutual economic cooperation, investment, human resource development, sustained industrialization, and the consolidation of CPEC. However, the proposed Special Economic Zones (SEZs) under CPEC face several challenges, ranging from structural issues to security problems. This situation raises questions about why Pakistan has been unable to achieve the desired objectives with its

SEZs while China has succeeded. Identifying the key factors and addressing the underlying challenges is crucial for formulating effective strategies to rectify the situation and enable Pakistan to realize the potential benefits of its SEZs. This policy paper aims to provide a comprehensive set of strategies to convert these challenges into capabilities and offer policy recommendations for Pakistan.

Situational Analysis of Special Economic Zones in Pakistan

The Main Goals of Creating SEZs in Pakistan

The Government of Pakistan, recognizing the potential of SEZs to strengthen the economy and attract foreign investments, promulgated the SEZs Act of 2012.

1. **Foreign Investment:** SEZs are designed to encourage Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) by offering various incentives, such as tax exemptions, duty-free imports of machinery and raw materials, simplified procedures, and favorable policies for investors. These benefits aim to attract both local and international investors to establish businesses in these zones.
2. **Trade Advancement:** SEZs focus on industries that export products, creating a conducive environment for manufacturing, managing logistics, and connecting to international markets. This aims to increase Pakistan's exports and enhance its competitiveness in global trade.
3. **Job Creation:** SEZs are intended to generate employment by attracting investments in labor-intensive industries, addressing unemployment issues and improving overall living standards.

Current Status and Progress of SEZs in Pakistan

Since the introduction of SEZs, several zones have been approved in Pakistan, targeting sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, textiles, information technology, and automotive industries. However, the progress of SEZs in Pakistan has been unsatisfactory, and the anticipated outcomes have not been achieved. Various challenges and issues have impeded the effective establishment and management of SEZs in the country.

Current Status of the CPEC-Related SEZs

Ser.	Name of SEZ	Area	Location	Present Status
i.	Rashakai	1000 Acres	Nowshehra, KP, near Motorway	a. Concession Agreement Signed. b. Development Agreement Signed.

				c. Groundbreaking held on 28-05-2021.
ii.	Dhabeji	1530 Acres	Thatta, Sindh, 8 km from Port Qasim	Bidding Awaited
iii.	Allama Iqbal Industrial Zone	3217 Acres	Faisalabad, Adjacent to M-3 Industrial City and Motorway	Under Construction
iv.	Bostan SEZ	1000 Acres	District Pishin, near Quetta, 32 km from Dry Port Quetta	Under Construction
v.	ICT Model SEZ	-	Islamabad	In Pipeline
vi.	Industrial Park	-	Steel Mill Area, Karachi	In Pipeline
vii.	Mirpur Industrial Zone	-	AJK	In Pipeline
viii.	Mehmand Marble City	-	Mehmand Agency, KP	In Pipeline
ix.	Moqpondass SEZ	-	Gilgit-Baltistan	In Pipeline

Source: (MoPD&SI, 2023)

Overview of the Special Economic Zones in China

Favorable Policies: China's SEZs were characterized by special policies and incentives, including tax breaks, preferential customs regulations, simplified administrative procedures, and flexible labor regulations. These policies aimed to attract both domestic and foreign investors and create a favorable business environment.

Strategic Locations: SEZs were strategically located in coastal areas, close to major ports and international trade routes. This facilitated easy access to global markets and enhanced connectivity for trade and logistics.

Infrastructure Development: China prioritized infrastructure development in SEZs, including transportation networks, ports, industrial parks, and residential facilities. This infrastructure supported the growth of industries, facilitated logistics, and improved the overall business environment.

Market-Oriented Reforms: SEZs served as testing grounds for market-oriented reforms, allowing the introduction of free-market mechanisms,

foreign investment, and competition. These reforms gradually spread to other parts of China, contributing to its overall economic liberalization.

Government Stability: The stability of the government, which ensures the continuity of economic policies, plays a pivotal role in economic development (Masry, 2015). In China, there has been no regime change since 1978.

Strict Laws to Control Corruption: China addresses corruption with a strict legal framework. Corrupt officials face severe penalties, including the death penalty for embezzlement or bribery of 3 million Renminbi (\$463,000) or more. Additionally, embezzling disaster-relief funds can result in death by firing squad (Shanghai, 2016). As a result of these stringent laws, China has achieved a 45% score in transparency and ranks 65 out of 180 countries in the Transparency International Report for 2022 (Transparency International, 2022). Corruption negatively affects economic growth by impacting investment, taxation, public expenditure, and human development (Chene, 2014). In contrast, Pakistan ranks 140 out of 180 countries with a 27% score according to the Transparency International Report for 2022. Investors are more likely to invest in countries with lower corruption levels. To attract foreign investment to its SEZs, Pakistan needs to improve its transparency index.

Lessons Learned from the Chinese Experience Applicable to Pakistan

Based on the analysis of Chinese SEZs, the following lessons can be applied to enhance the effectiveness of SEZs in Pakistan:

1. **Government Stability:** Ensuring the continuity of economic development through stable governance is crucial.
2. **Continuity of Microeconomic Policies:** Since 1978, China has not experienced a regime change, allowing macroeconomic policies to remain consistent. This stability increased the trust of foreign investors.
3. **Pilot Projects:** Instead of establishing several SEZs simultaneously, Pakistan should initiate one or two SEZs as pilot projects. These should be equipped with all necessary infrastructure, legal foundations, utilities, and other facilities. After evaluating and analyzing the outcomes, lessons learned can guide the introduction of additional SEZs.

Challenges for Pakistan

After a detailed discussion on the factors behind the success of SEZs in China, several key aspects to consider in Pakistan emerge. (Zeng D., 2016) explains the SEZ model in a straightforward manner:

1. **Administrative and Legal System:** The rules and laws governing SEZs can be complex and confusing, discouraging investors and creating operational difficulties.

2. **Infrastructure Development:** Essential infrastructure such as roads, power lines, and communication systems are currently inadequate, posing challenges for businesses in SEZs.
3. **Skilled Labor Accessibility:** There is a shortage of skilled labor. Training workers with the specific skills required by industries in SEZs is vital for their success.
4. **Regulatory Challenges:** Complicated paperwork, bureaucratic hurdles, and corruption make business operations and investment in SEZs difficult.
5. **Environmental Sustainability and Social Responsibility:** Ensuring environmental protection and responsible land use is crucial for the long-term success of SEZs. Addressing social issues such as workers' rights and safety is also essential. Tackling these challenges will enhance the effectiveness and success of SEZs in Pakistan. The government is working on improving regulations, building infrastructure, simplifying administrative processes, enhancing skills training, and ensuring environmental protection in designated areas.

Conclusion

Creating and managing Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Pakistan presents both opportunities and challenges. By examining China's successful experience, Pakistan can derive valuable insights to address these challenges and maximize the benefits of its own SEZs. China's success in developing SEZs is attributed to several key factors. These include having a stable government that ensures continuity in economic policies, transparency in government affairs which builds investor confidence, and the implementation of well-thought-out policies that offer attractive incentives for investors. Furthermore, China's emphasis on building robust infrastructure, such as transportation networks, ports, and industrial facilities, facilitated seamless logistics and supported industrial growth. Additionally, the development of a skilled workforce, coupled with simplified administrative procedures, reduced bureaucratic hurdles and made it easier for businesses to operate. Sustainable development practices also played a crucial role in ensuring long-term viability. These lessons can guide Pakistan in establishing and managing its SEZs effectively. To follow these suggestions, it is crucial for the government, businesses, and international partners to work together. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of SEZs are essential to assess their performance, identify and address emerging challenges, and make necessary adjustments. By adapting these insights to its context, Pakistan can enhance its SEZs, boosting economic growth, attracting foreign investment, and creating job opportunities, thereby driving long-term industrial development and prosperity. Such a

collaborative and adaptive approach will be instrumental in ensuring that SEZs become a cornerstone of Pakistan's economic development strategy.

Recommendations

In light of the above analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to achieve the goals of Special Economic Zones (SEZs):

1. Initially, Pakistan should establish one SEZ as a pilot project, preferably the one nearest to completion. Given Pakistan's limited resources compared to China, it should concentrate all available resources on making this single SEZ successful. A successful SEZ will yield better results than thirteen incomplete or unsuccessful ones.
2. To ensure the continuity of regulations and policies regarding SEZs, Pakistan should enact an Act with the consensus of opposition parties, guaranteeing that the rules and policies of SEZs will remain unchanged for the next ten years.
3. Improve the protection of intellectual property rights within SEZs to encourage innovation and attract industries that rely on advanced technology. Additionally, introduce regulations to ensure fair treatment, safety, and protection of workers' rights in SEZs.
4. Focus on enhancing infrastructure, including roads, bridges, energy sources, healthcare facilities, storage areas, and communication systems, to improve connectivity both within and outside SEZs.
5. Collaborate with educational institutions and businesses to develop vocational training programs that equip workers with the skills needed for SEZ industries. Support partnerships between industries and academic institutions to foster research and development efforts within SEZs.
6. Simplify administrative procedures and eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles to facilitate business operations in SEZs. Establish a single service center in each SEZ to provide comprehensive and efficient services to investors. Utilize digital tools to streamline government processes, enhancing transparency and efficiency.
7. Promote strong collaboration between the government, private sector, and international partners, leveraging their expertise, knowledge, and resources to effectively develop and manage Special Economic Zones.

Logical Frame Matrix of Rashakai SEZs in Pakistan

As development/progress on Rashakai SEZ is ahead of other SEZs, it is recommended that this be completed as a pilot project.

S.No	Project Development Pathway	Description
I	Goal (Overall Objective)	To attract foreign direct investment to Pakistan through the establishment and successful operation of Rashakai Special Economic Zone to stimulate economic growth.
II	Purpose (Specific Objective)	To create a modern and business-friendly industrial zone in Rashakai, fostering infrastructure development and providing incentives for businesses and foreign investors to invest and operate efficiently, leading to increased inflow of foreign investment and exportable goods and services.
III	Input / Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Infrastructure development b. Investment promotions and facilitation c. Job creation and skill development d. Business environment improvement e. Establish medical treatment/care centers.
IV	Activities/Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Conduct feasibility studies and design approval plan. b. Secure funding and start construction of roads, telephone, electricity, water, internet, sewerage system, industrial park, etc. c. Establish an investment promotion unit and conduct a marketing campaign. d. Simplify and streamline the investment approval process. e. Collaborate with local educational institutions to provide skill development programs. f. Allotment of plots to investors for construction of offices, factories, etc. g. Engage stakeholders and relevant Government agencies to improve business-related policies and regulations.
V	KPIs	a. Increase in developed land, increase in established industries, availability of utilities (electricity, telephone, water, gas, sanitation, sewerage system), and storage areas.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Number of investment inquiries, value of approved investment, and average time for investment approval. c. Number of jobs created, percentage change in local employment, number of training programs conducted. d. Ease of doing business ranking, number of regulatory reforms implemented, investor satisfaction survey results. e. Availability of medical facilities.
VI	Means Verification of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Surveys and interviews. b. Reports and documentation of relevant Government offices. c. Feedback and testimonials from investors and stakeholders.
VII	Timeframe	Two years. From 1st September 2023 to 30 August 2025.
VIII	Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Completed feasibility studies and infrastructure plans. b. Developed roads, utilities, and industrial parks/storage. c. An investment promotion unit established and investment campaign launched. d. Streamlined investment approval process. e. Skill development programs initiated and conducted. f. Policy and regulatory reforms implemented.
IX	Outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Improved accessibility and availability of modern infrastructure for business. b. Increased investment from domestic and foreign companies. c. Growth in industrial output and productivity within the SEZ. d. Creation of a significant number of jobs for the local workforce. e. Improved skills and employment of the local workforce.
X	Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Sustainable economic growth and development in the region. b. Attraction of foreign investment to Pakistan. c. Increased employment opportunities and reduced poverty in the area.

		d. Increased industrialization and economic diversification.
XI	Assumptions	a. Availability of required funds. b. There will be a stable political environment in Pakistan. c. Sufficient level of interest and satisfaction from local and foreign investors. d. Support from the local communities. e. Global economic conditions and competitiveness will not hinder investment in SEZ Rashakai. f. Effective governance and implementation. g. Skilled and trained labor force will be available.
XII	Executing Agency	a. Ministry of Planning Development and Special Initiatives. b. Board of Investment. c. CPEC Secretariat. d. 4. KP Economic Zone Development and Management Company.

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