China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Challenges, Opportunities and the Way Forward

Roundtable Discussion of NUST GTTN And National Institute of Strategic Communication, Peking University, China

Global Think Tank Network (GTTN), key policy research, analysis and advocacy centre of the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) organised a Roundtable on Thursday, the 14th of January, 2016, on the significance of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as the key node of One Belt, One Road Programme of the People’s Republic of China on the occasion of the visit of the delegation of the senior officials of Peking University’s National Institute of Strategic Communication (NISC), a major Chinese think tank and public diplomacy platform for promoting Track-II diplomacy.

The Roundtable was chaired by Engineer Muhammad Asghar, Rector, NUST, and moderated by the noted public intellectual and GTTN Senior Fellow, Humayun Gauhar.

The participants conducted an in-depth exploration of the multidimensional opportunities, multi-sectoral needs, and various challenges that were inherent in the successful development of CPEC within the broader context of China’s Land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (One Belt) and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (One Road). The discussants collectively recognised and affirmed the game-changing significance of CPEC and went on to enumerate its national, regional, and global dimensions as a game-changer.

“One Belt, One Road was a brilliant geostrategic programme of China and CPEC was a crucial part of this programme. CPEC was a veritable national project that involved the whole of Pakistan for the benefit of all the peoples of Pakistan without exception. It would also contribute to the sustained development of China. This overarching national character should be remembered at all times by all the stakeholders in CPEC, especially when there were differences of opinion on the table,” said Riaz Khokhar, GTTN Senior Fellow and the former Foreign Secretary of Pakistan.

Dr. Manli Cheng, Dean, NISC, said that the People’s Republic of China was working side by side with Pakistan to ensure that CPEC objectives and benefits were mutually achieved and shared. She expressed the hope that CPEC would benefit Pakistani population uniformly but would especially uplift the impoverished people in the country. Dr. Cheng noted that developments related to CPEC were of special interest in China as China was committed to building the community of common destiny with Pakistan under the One Belt, One Road initiative and that the neutral and impartial construction of CPEC was very important for its success. While the two governments were working together successfully, the need was also felt to activate cooperation of other sectors of Chinese and Pakistani societies. Dr. Cheng opined that CPEC had undoubtedly started with projects in infrastructure and energy but the time was right to expand and deepen those projects. She further applauded the close working relationship between NUST and Peking University and shared that NISC was closely involved in One Belt, One Road initiative as well as CPEC.

Mr. Amer Hashmi, Advisor, NUST and President, GTTN, stressed the need for leveraging perception management and strategic communication for powerful projection of CPEC in Pakistan and abroad for obtaining a willing domestic and international consensus on CPEC development. He appreciated NISC’s work and shared GTTN was the first think tank in Pakistan to initiate high-level strategic and operational research in CPEC and was currently the leading centre with multidimensional expertise related to CPEC unlike any centre as of now in Pakistan.

Dr. Shoaib Suddle, GTTN Senior Fellow and a former high-ranking bureaucrat who had held
various top positions in Pakistan’s civil service, noted that the steps taken toward the settlement of route controversy were positive but more needed to be done so that convergence of views in Pakistan could become possible in the fulfilment of common objectives and goals. He further added that China and Pakistan had to work together in order to facilitate the development of common and unanimous understanding on CPEC in Pakistan.

Dr. Akram Sheikh, former Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission of Pakistan, currently Professor Emeritus at NUST and the Co-Chairperson of GTTN said, “The vision of CPEC had to be the enhancement of Pakistan’s competitiveness and providing of regional trade and cooperation opportunities by the improvement of national trade and transport logistics to international standards.” Dr. Sheikh further clarified that CPEC could not be reduced to one route in isolation but was to consist of a well-knit system of routes for maximal regional integration and in this regard all routes had to be developed and were of equal importance.

Dr. Sania Nishtar, GTTN Senior Fellow and former caretaker S&T Minister remarked that CPEC represented connectivity and growth of Pakistan’s provinces. She highlighted that CPEC could also promote good governance in the country through occasioning institutional reforms and reorientation for the creation of a new mechanism of public service delivery centred on fostering widest human welfare and public benefit in Pakistan. Dr. Nishtar further stressed the need to combine reorientation of domestic policy with an astute foreign policy in order to ensure the success of CPEC.

Lt. General (retd) Masood Aslam stressed the importance of transparency in CPEC projects and cautioned that domestic and regional challenges to CPEC were galore and required a masterful strategic approach to handling those challenges.

Dr. Ashfaque Hassan Khan, renowned economist and Principal, NUST School of Social Sciences and Humanities highlighted the need for greater financial transparency and remarked that financial spread related to CPEC projects needed to be made publicly available so that CPEC-related changes in the total debt of Pakistan could be properly studied and correct policy recommendations could be derived to ease the debt burden. Lt. General (retd) Mustafa Khan proposed the establishment of a permanent commission consisting of federal and provincial representation to oversee and provide strategic guidance to the development of CPEC and determine timelines, phasing, and overall and phase-wise priorities.

Owais Ghani, Senior Fellow, GTTN and former Governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan proposed the establishment of a permanent China-Pakistan Joint Task Force for combined implementation of CPEC as well as to jointly address challenges involved in completing CPEC in a volatile geostrategic environment.

Hamid Ali Khan, Director, South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI) University and former Chairman of National Highway Authority (NHA) opined that CPEC was a network that brought eastern and western routes together with the latter being the shortest route with sizeable work on it having been completed already. He remarked that the overall progress on energy projects in CPEC was rather slow but that of infrastructure projects was more or less steady and encouraging. He highlighted that the security aspect of CPEC involved too many diverse organisations in addition to the military which could lead to complicated legal implications so there was a need to rationalise the force structure for efficient and uninterrupted security of CPEC. Dr. Shahid Hashmat, Principal NUST Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (NIPCONS), remarked that security was only an operational aspect and that there was a need to address strategic aspects like political, technical and financial questions of CPEC which would facilitate the security aspect as well.

Rector NUST, Engineer Muhammad Asghar, called for holistic and continuous stock-taking of challenges facing CPEC in economic, financial, political, cultural, logistical, and human resource development domains of CPEC. He stressed there were serious knowledge and skills gaps in Pakistan in so far as the development of CPEC was concerned. Rector NUST pointed out that universities of Pakistan had to face and surmount this challenge and focus on plugging these gaps. He mentioned HEC in one of its major inter-university workshops on CPEC.
had already identified these gaps to exit in the six areas of transportation and logistics planning and business, cultural and political aspects of China-Pak relations, energy, food, and water security, mining and resources, exploitation of ocean resources, and harbour engineering. He highlighted that NUST would increasingly focus on these national academic gaps and build professional and research capacity in these key areas. NUST has also recently established the Chinese Studies Centre being headed by the veteran senior diplomat, Syed Hasan Javed, with the aim of becoming the leading centre of excellence in the country which, considering NUST’s extensive linkages in and expertise on China, is a realistic goal.

The Roundtable was attended by statesmen, diplomats, thought leaders, corporate leaders, academics, scholars, professional experts, researchers, and students.

Press Statements:

