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Young ISSI Professionals' Corner

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) should be supported by people to people contacts

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July 09, 2015

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The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a development megaproject which aims to connect Gawadar Port in southwestern Pakistan to China’s northwestern autonomous region of Xinjiang via a network of highways, railways, airports and pipelines to transport oil and gas. The economic corridor is considered central to China–Pakistan relations and will run about 3,000 km from Gawadar to Kashgar. Overall construction costs are estimated at \$46 billion, with the entire project expected to be completed by 2030. This is an extension of China’s proposed 21st century Silk Road initiative also named as One Belt One Road (OBOR). This is the biggest overseas investment by China announced yet and is expected to be a strategic game changer in the region, which would also make Pakistan a more prosperous and stronger country. When the corridor is built, it will expand the number of trade routes between China, the Middle East, Central Asia, West Asia and Africa. The Asian Development Bank projects that CPEC will connect economic agents along a defined geography.

The CPEC is considered vital for Pakistan to help it drive its economic growth. It will provide connection between economic nodes or hubs, centered on urban landscapes, in which large amount of economic resources and actors are concentrated. They link the supply and demand sides of the markets. The expected outcomes of the CPEC include people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges to promote inter-civilization communication and coordination of diplomatic strategies to build a harmonious neighborhood.

During the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Pakistan on 21 April, 2015, China and Pakistan issued a Joint Statement which proposed a number of measures to promote cultural exchanges and people to people contacts. The Statement said that the two sides attach great importance to people to people contacts and cultural exchanges between the two countries, and will build Pakistan-China relations as a model of friendly exchanges and cooperation among countries of different civilizations. Pakistan and China are jointly celebrating the Pakistan-China Year of Friendly Exchanges in 2015, and have agreed to further expand exchanges between think-tanks, media, youth, academics and artists of the two countries to make Pakistan-China friendship even more deeply rooted in the hearts of their people. China announced the establishment of the Chinese Cultural Centre in Islamabad, which has been welcomed by Pakistan. The two sides will also actively encourage and support their publishing organizations to participate in each other’s book fairs and to translate and circulate high-quality publications of each other. The Chinese side announced a training program of 2000 experts from Pakistan in the next 5 years. The Pakistani side expressed its gratitude.

It was agreed in the Joint Statement that the CPEC is a comprehensive package of cooperative initiatives and projects. The agreed initiatives included the launch of CCTV English News Channel and International Documentary Channel, the establishment of the “FM98 Pakistan-China Friendship Radio” studio by the China Radio International and the Pakistan-China Small-sized Hydro Power Technology National Joint Research Center in Pakistan.

President Xi Jinping, while addressing Pakistan’s Parliament in Islamabad on 21 April 2015, highlighted the important objectives of the CPEC and its promotion through people to people contacts. President Xi said that we should enhance close exchanges to build lasting friendship. It is the people who advance progress of nations and history. The support of our peoples is an inexhaustible source of force fostering China-Pakistan all-weather friendship and all-round cooperation. President Xi said that we should use the platforms of sister cities, cultural centers and media organizations to conduct diverse events of celebration. China and Pakistan should continue to send 100-member youth groups to visit each other's country and encourage more contacts and exchanges between young Chinese and Pakistanis. In the next five years, China will provide 2,000 training opportunities for Pakistan and train 1,000 Chinese language teachers for Pakistan. The Chinese President welcomed Pakistan's participation in the program for people-to-people and cultural exchanges between China and South Asia to strengthen popular support for China-Pakistan friendship.

Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif in his address to the Joint Session of Parliament said that the CPEC is a product of the joint endeavours of our two countries at the conceptual and operational levels. This year is the year of friendly exchanges. “Let the youth of the two countries inherit this unique relationship that we have developed over the decades and take it to new heights. Our young entrepreneurs, academics, media-persons, teachers, students and professionals, will sustain our friendship and make it even more productive”, he emphasized.

President Xi in his op-ed titled as “Pak-China Dosti Zindabad” (Long live Pakistan-China friendship) on 19th April, 2015 said that the two sides are working together to steadily advance the CPEC. Its aim is to deliver even more benefits to people and realize brighter development prospects. The government and people of Pakistan are pursuing economic development and the improvement of people’s livelihood. The aim of China’s initiative of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road is to promote common development by enhancing connectivity among countries along these routes.

The visit of Chinese President to Pakistan started a new chapter in Pak-China Friendship and it will give a new stimulus to China and Pakistan in the promotion of people to people contacts. President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif noted with satisfaction the excellent progress the two countries have made in expanding the economic dimension of the ties and mentioned the launch of several projects under the framework of "path-breaking" CPEC. It will propagate the connectivity amongst people while breaking the barriers and bridging up the gaps, hence strengthening the people to people contacts.

President Xi stressed the need to intensify people-to-people contacts and cultural exchanges to promote inter-civilization dialogue. On the basis of excellent political ties, China and Pakistan should build a momentum of people-to-people exchanges and set a good example of mutual learning and friendly cooperation between different civilizations. President Xi said we need to increase mutual visits, language training, youth exchange and cooperation between sister cities, media and think-tanks so that China-Pakistan friendship will have strong popular support, and the hearts of our peoples will be brought even closer. He said that it was important that the two countries maintained close communication.

For the sustenance of the CPEC and for its promotion, the role of highly qualified professionals such as engineers, business entrepreneurs and doctors is necessary. But people to people contact is also a vital component which cannot be overlooked at any cost.

The proper working of the CPEC is being done by integration and connectivity of both nations at national, international and global levels which is bolstered by cultural exchange programs of youth and students via different academic institutions to foster harmony between the two countries. Awareness needs to be created about their customs and traditions. For this purpose, one needs better airports, communication system, roads, and railways.

There should be selection of researchers and students from different universities and think tanks who can work on the following topics for the promotion of the CPEC: logistics, transportation and infrastructure development including railway lines, roads, ports, airports, ICT; political, social and cultural challenges; skills and future employment generation; agriculture, environment, climate change and food security; economic stability, prosperity, while increasing international trade and investment through knowledge inputs, energy and water security.

While Pakistan and China enjoy very close strategic and political relationship, people to people contacts are not very strong. In the recent past, several steps have been taken to promote frequent people to people contacts and interaction. With the launching of the CPEC, it has become more urgent to invest in exchanges between different segments of Pakistani and Chinese professionals, youth, students, and corporate leaders as such exchanges would not only help in creating deeper understanding of their political and economic systems and cultural mores, but also prepare ground for the implementation of various projects relating to energy, infrastructure and industry. In this endeavour, the emphasis should be on youth because they have to inherit the unique friendship of Pakistan and China and take it forward in the years to come in all spheres. An excellent blueprint has been given in the Joint Statement cited above, but both sides need determination and diligence to bring the outlined initiatives to fruition.