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*Report – Seminar*

## **CPEC: Strategizing Pakistan's Narrative**

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## PICTURES OF THE EVENT



China-Pakistan Study Centre of the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI) hosted a seminar titled “*CPEC: Strategizing Pakistan's Narrative*” on April 25, 2019. Speakers at the seminar included: Mr. Amir Jehangir, Founder and CEO of DBTV.live; Dr. Zafar Iqbal, Chairman, Department of Media and Communication Studies International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI); and a discussant, Mr. Jiang Han, Political Counsellor at the Embassy of People's Republic of China.

Director China-Pakistan Study Centre, Dr. Talat Shabbir in his introductory note said that during the past five years, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has become a part of Pakistan's national lexicon. He spoke about the different narratives, both positive and negative, regarding CPEC. He said that pro-CPEC narratives paint it as a ‘game changer’, anchor of peace, prosperity and development not only for Pakistan, but for the region as a whole and win-win cooperation for both Pakistan and China. Anti-CPEC narratives in the national / international media paint CPEC as a neo-imperialist design, thus giving birth to misgivings about this mega-project. Projection of similar storyline in national media reflects the influence of hostile regional, as well as international players. He further said that Pakistan needs to strategize its narrative on CPEC with the aim to project it as an anchor for regional peace and stability.

Welcoming the guests, Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry said that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is very important for Pakistan not only in the context of economic prosperity, but it also reflects the commitment both countries have shown to each other. The friendship has been maintained by both the countries ever since the establishment of diplomatic relations. He further said that this relationship has a strategic dimension as well, and ISSI wants to signify the importance by keeping its China-Pakistan Study Centre very active.

Speaking about Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Beijing to attend the second BRI forum, Ambassador Chaudhry said that it reflected the importance which the present government attaches to relations with China. Moving to the progression of CPEC projects, he said that the emphasis of the first phase of CPEC projects was on infrastructure and energy development and generation. The statistics speak for themselves. Energy projects of over 1000 megawatts have been completed. He further said that present government is concentrating now on socio-economic development of the country and industrial cooperation. Focusing on the fruits of

CPEC, Ambassador Chaudhry said that this project has not only the potential to serve China and Pakistan, but also neighboring countries.

Talking about the countries who have reservations on CPEC, Ambassador Chaudhry said that from the very start when this megaproject was in its initial phase, the nuances of negative narratives started to build up and some of them have run their course. Narratives like no benefit for Pakistan, colonial project and a whole controversy on CPEC routes started. Another major controversy which is still continuing is that China is probably creating a 'Debt Trap', and Pakistan will get entangled into it and will have to pay a huge price by perhaps giving up control of the Gwadar Port to China. He said that all such controversies and narratives are false and are fabricated to malign this project. He said that this seminar has been organized to counter negative narratives, and to strategize and give our own pro-active narrative on Pakistan's relation with China, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Mr. Amir Jehangir spoke about his work on the subject, and said that most of it focuses on competitiveness, analysing narratives, and creating frameworks which can create narratives for the media and government. He said that the job of his organization - DBTV.live - is to generate primary data and create frameworks which can focus on Public Policy and allow it to move in the domains which can help Pakistan to be competitive. He said that narrative is the way one perceives a country, and how its different institutions and organizations operate and are seen. He further said a narrative could be in form of a report, a video, and, it could also be real and even imaginary. It is all about how a message is conveyed. Mr. Jehangir said that the basic function of a narrative is what one wants to convey about him/herself or about a particular issue. It could be done through different mechanisms. There are different symbols to express different narratives. For instance, the national bird of Pakistan, or national animal are used to show resilience and determination. Through different symbols, a country communicates its national pride and strength. However, for narrative building, it is not important what you think, but how you think and for that, world perception matters a lot.

Indicating the key factors of narrative building, Mr. Jehangir said that human development index, global competitiveness, global risk index, corruption index, and freedom index are a few categories where a country or state can confine its narrative building. When a narrative is looked

into from one particular angle or paradigm, then the debate or discussion on it can be confined within an institution or country. He talked about a research report in 2017 which brought forward the narrative that in 2018-19, major issues of concern for Pakistan will be water governance and unmanageable inflation. The report was designed to show how narratives, aspirations and political frameworks were to be created. Such narratives assist policy makers to confine their thoughts and actions under particular issues, and be creative in dealing with them. He also talked about narrative building in China for the next 10 years. He said that synergies of the minds and mending of the hearts in the creation for new hopes for humanity should be a new narrative to be formulated and should be voiced by Pakistan and China.

Mr. Jehangir further said that the core issue of Pakistan-China relationship is that we have not formed a strategic narrative. This is why issues of rights and climate change keep arising. A narrative, he said, shapes opinion and opinions affect narratives. Concluding, he said that different data points can be enhanced or developed into narrative structures.

Speaking about 'Strategizing Narratives in the Context of BRI and CPEC', Dr. Zafar Iqbal began by defining narratives. He said that narratives are metaphors, simplistic representation of a very complex phenomena. He displayed pictures of Pakistan which showed people holding guns, riots, and testing of ballistic missiles. He said that these are the narratives which are used to portray the symbolic image of Pakistan by the international community. These symbols are associated with certain identities, and are very scientifically being used by narrative builders across the world. Narrative builders are attaching a country's symbols with negative ideas. He also gave the example of Germany and said that when one browses it on Google, one can see that the country is associated with beautiful historical sites, good universities, and a place to go for vacation. This is how a country is imagined and chronicled by the world. He further said that normally, such images on Google and other internet browsers are associated with artificial intelligence (AI), but this AI is also driven by human beings. There is a need to find out who they are and what forces are driving them. Dr. Iqbal said that unfortunately we are lacking in this. We do not focus on how our construction is done throughout the world, and what kind of images are used to highlight us.

While talking about narrative building, he said that many forces are operating behind the scene. He said that according to a recent report by US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 872 hate groups, hate-mongers and terrorist groups are operating in Pakistan. This shows what kind of narratives are built about us and who is sponsoring these narrative making organizations. He also gave the example of a 14-minute trailer aired in United States called *Innocence of Muslims*, in which ridiculing and stereotyping of Muslims was done. He said that there is a need to make ourselves aware of how and who are building narratives, and this can only be done by reading reports, surveys and watching documentaries. Dr. Iqbal said that US is behind a lot of negative propaganda and narratives regarding Pakistan and other Muslim states.

Emphasizing on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, he said that various negative and a few positive narratives have been constructed regarding CPEC. He said that we as a nation have failed to build our narrative on CPEC. In contrast, India has come forward with a strong and negative narrative about CPEC and its routes passing through the disputed area of Gilgit-Baltistan. Against this background, there is a need to come up with an informed and stronger counter narrative.

In conclusion, he said that issues regarding narratives should be handled very sensitively because local media, intelligentsia, foreign media, agencies and various other groups are involved in it. Regarding the current scenario of building narratives, he said that we are still in the state of oblivion. We need to come up with strong narratives on CPEC so we can counter the negative propaganda in an effective manner.

The discussant at the seminar, Mr. Jiang Han, agreed with the speakers that there is a need to build a positive narrative on CPEC, and we really need to work on image-building of this mega-project. He said that this particular day was very important for both China and Pakistan as the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation begins at Beijing. He said that Prime Minister Imran Khan is visiting China for the second time, which affirms the strength and significance of the relationship between both the countries.

Mr. Han said that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 revolves around connectivity through construction. This initiative was well-received and gained quick momentum. Uptil now, 126 countries and 29 national organizations have signed

cooperation agreement with China on this initiative. Over the course of 6 years of hard work, BRI has laid its groundwork and entered the stage of all-round growth, and has become a widely participated platform for international organizations and international public. Mr. Han said that it has become a road for prosperity, openness and green and clean development which benefits people of both Pakistan and China.

Mr. Jiang Han emphasized that China has always held to the principle of wide consultation and joint cooperation for shared benefits. He said that for China, CPEC is a significant pilot project of BRI and a significant avenue for cooperation between both the countries in the new era. CPEC is fully aligned with the principles of BRI, and the aim of this project is macro-progress in construction of the Gwadar Port, transportation infrastructure, energy, and industrial progress in Pakistan. Mr. Han confirmed that 11 projects of the 22 Early Harvest Program have been completed, and the remaining 11 projects will be completed shortly. He asserted that CPEC has now entered a new stage of broadening and expansion, which reflects three major points:

First is taking a people-centred approach. He said that as agreed by both governments, education, agriculture, vocational training and water supply will be key areas for cooperation. He mentioned that a joint working group has been formed under CPEC for socio-economic cooperation.

Second, taking industrial cooperation as priority. He confirmed that both countries already have relevant cooperation projects. Last year, China collaborated in automobile sector, and Master Motor Cooperation established a firm in Karachi with an initial capacity of thirty thousand people. Mr. Han said that China has identified industrial cooperation as one of the major pillars of CPEC, and will continue to encourage more Chinese enterprises to invest in Pakistan.

The third point for this new stage is that China and Pakistan would encourage third party participation in CPEC which has grabbed attention of regional and even western countries. He said that China believes that involvement of third party will highlight the inclusiveness and openness of this venture.

Mr. Jiang Han reiterated that Imran Khan's visit to China is very significant in this regard as some very important agreements will be signed, and the second phase of the Free Trade Agreement will also be looked into. Apart from that, China and Pakistan have many agreements

for socio-economic development. He concluded that Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to China will take our bilateral relation to new heights.

Several interesting questions were raised by the audience on topical issues related to CPEC and funding of its projects, knowledge sharing and counselling on CPEC, Chinese loans and financing, and China-Pakistan relations with special focus on building a positive narrative on CPEC while fighting the prevailing negative narrative surrounding these projects.

On a question related to increasing the number of Chinese embassy officials tasked with narrative building and PR on CPEC; Mr. Jiang Han stressed that building a constructive narrative for CPEC is a task for both Pakistan and China. He emphasized the importance of Pakistani and Chinese people working together for positive promotion of CPEC and its projects.

Answering another question about the 'debt trap' rhetoric being fabricated and spread about CPEC; Mr. Han made the participants wise on the actual figures of Chinese investment. He said that there are many figures being quoted by media sources. However, the tangible investment to date is about \$18-19 billion dollars in projects that have actually been initiated, most of which is investment; not loans. The loan portion amounts to perhaps only 20% and the hue and cry about a so-called 'Chinese debt trap' is quite baseless. He also stressed that for the past 70 years, Pakistan and China have shared a deep bond of friendship which means that any issue of interest for Pakistan will also be a priority issue for China. Seconding the counsellor's answer; Director General ISSI, Ambassador Aizaz Ahmed Chaudhry said that projection of a positive narrative about CPEC is a shared responsibility, and is not the sole obligation of the Chinese press department at the embassy, rather the task falls on all friends of China in Pakistan.

A question was raised on why the narrative around CPEC was in hands of third parties and why weren't the involved countries like China and Pakistan in charge of defining success measures?

Dr. Zafar Iqbal responded that in current times, a war of metaphors was underway all over the world, where it has become even more essential than ever to formulate one's own powerful narrative. Mr. Amir Jehangir opined that the narrative from the Pakistani side needs to come forth from not only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but also from the Planning Commission. The best thing to show the world is that the Sino-Pakistan relationship is based on mutual trust which

sets it apart from the transactional relations which are a norm in the West. DG ISSI added that an important recommendation from this seminar to the government could be that Pakistan and China should define the success measures regarding CPEC projects in particular which would prevent others from making any negative assumptions. For this purpose, transparency regarding the data available on progress of these projects must be ensured within institutions of both countries.

A valuable comment was made about how the information regarding CPEC project funding, figures, and respective Chinese departments and banks, is quite easily available on websites of the Chinese embassy, as well as governmental institutions in Pakistan and we need to educate ourselves on how to access, assess and disseminate this information in a responsible manner.

Another member of the audience pointed out that Chinese government has implicitly conveyed to Pakistan on numerable occasions about the lack of reforms on the Pakistani side as only then we would be able to raise the desired amount of funds needed for all projects.

Mr. Amir Jehangir explained how the budget making process in Pakistan is carried out on incremental basis rather than deploying a need-based approach for the population. He said that it was imperative to make 'data' a part of the policy-making process in Pakistan.

Answering a question about how the process of formulating a narrative is often talked about but not actually implemented, DG ISSI opined that it is an important query and it is for think tanks and the government to decide when and how a narrative can be formulated, spread and followed. Formulating a wholesome strategy is crucial through input by advisory councils which contain members of academia and should have apt governmental representation.

Addressing a question about the role of science and technology in CPEC, Mr. Han informed the audience that the Chinese Minister for Science and Technology visited Pakistan last year and signed several agreements on the subject which have not yet been made public. He also talked about the increasing number of Pakistani students studying on Chinese scholarships in Pakistan, and how they were the most facilitated foreign students residing in China.

In his concluding remarks, Chairman ISSI, Ambassador Khalid Mahmood, thanked the speakers and the guests and said that it was a very interesting seminar. Ambassador Mahmood said that

we all are aware that CPEC is a flagship project of BRI launched by President Xi. Also, this project has a regional aspect along with the bilateral one. CPEC has already covered the early harvest phase focusing on energy, transportation, and infrastructure. We are now moving into the middle phase which will cover socio-economic aspects and industry. Apart from this, there is a long-term plan for the CPEC project as well. Things are heading in the right direction. However, it has evoked strong opposition from countries like India, and United States has also shown disagreement towards BRI. He said that European countries also stand in the same position taken by United States. He further said that some European representatives have said that the mantra of win-win cooperation is actually China winning twice. Ambassador Mahmood said that although there are some shortcomings and minor problems regarding CPEC projects, but this would not bring any disaster or destruction in the international economic order. He mentioned that there are a few problems like that of transparency, but it's not like these problems cannot be eliminated. Both the governments need to simplify the problems and complexities and should eradicate them. He further said that the Western idea of Chinese debt trap does not really put the complete picture in front of the world. China has actually offered investments, grants and concessional loans to Pakistan. So it is very wrong to say and propound the debt trap narrative. Ambassador Mahmood stressed on the need for counter-narratives to compete against the existing negative narratives on CPEC, particularly in the West. He suggested that a series of seminars on this subject should be conducted, so that ideas may come out, along with this exercise, an inter-governmental or working group can also be set up including all stakeholders including the concerned ministries and civil society. This is how Pakistan can strategize its narratives on CPEC. Also, a similar exercise should take place from the Chinese side. Ambassador Mahmood concluded by saying that both China and Pakistan should get together and work out a narrative which is well-thought out and can balance out with all the negative narratives about China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.