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Russian researcher says CPEC 'game-changer for the region'

KARACHI: In an attempt to initiate a nuanced debate on the country's economic fluctuations, the Institute of Business Management (IoBM) organised a two-day international conference titled 'The state of Pakistan's economy: issues and challenges in the 21st century'. Present were academics, economists, as well as those who have closely worked on policy formation, and the prominent discourse on the first day focused on development related to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Science Academy in Moscow, Dr Natalia Zamaraeva read out a paper in which she shared her research on the prospects and challenges of CPEC which she considers a "game-changer for the region". "CPEC, in my opinion, is the second phase of the new concept of the Silk Road. Signed in March 2015, China made a concrete proposal to Islamabad on interfacing the development strategy of the two countries," she said.



Encompassing the field of railways, highways, steel, automotive, electricity, engineering, high technology, and environmental projects, "China is willing to assist in implementing several priority infrastructure projects in a bid to establish a long-term, stable partnership." According to estimates of Pakistani experts which Dr Zamaraeva shared, "its implementation will contribute to the country's GDP by three per cent".

In response to a question regarding security threats the project faces, she said that Pakistan would try to avoid any sort of global engagement that might put a strain on the project. "One such example is when Pakistan decided not to send its troops to Yemen." She also lauded the efforts of the organisers to encourage different perspectives on the topic, and added that in the "Russian federation too, we have similar heated discussions on the topic of CPEC."

Another voice representing the Russian Federation was of Consul General Oleg N. Avdeev, who was the guest of honour at the conference. "Intellectual exchange on opinion is essential as it may help the [Pakistani] government to chart an economic policy in the interest of every citizen," he said, while speaking about the importance of holding such conferences that especially targeted the youth. He said a lack of awareness between entrepreneurs of the two countries about each other was a problem that needed to be rectified, and IoBM, which has recently begun a student exchange programme, was a step in the right direction.

Prof Dr Shahida Wizarat, Dean and Head of the Department of Economics at IoBM, read out a paper titled 'State of the Pakistan economy: an action plan for sustainable economic development'. "I wish to highlight the issues and challenges faced by Pakistan and suggest an action plan which will make Pakistan water, food and energy secure," she said. One of the more interesting elements of her presentation was her focus on agricultural development in the country, and how it is plagued by "low and erratic growth".

With major fluctuations in crop production, cotton growth was particularly hit hard. "There were negative growth rates in 2012-13 and 2013-14, turnaround in 2014-15, and a steep decline in 2015-16. The decline is mainly attributable to the use of genetically modified (GM) cotton seeds."

Her criticism of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) was based on international researches. One such was by French scientist Gilles-Eric Seralini which yielded results in which "female rodents fed GMOs for 24 months developed tumors, while male rodents suffered from liver damage and kidney problems among others." Prof Wizarat also delved into the CPEC debate and offered several suggestions to make the project a greater success. "Personnel to serve should be vetted thoroughly to ensure that foreign nationals and Pakistani nationals with close links to foreign governments are not selected," she said. "Honest Pakistani nationals should be selected to serve the authority with technical skills."

Former ambassador Syed Hasan Javed said that Pakistan was witnessing "an era of transformation as there is more construction going on in Pakistan at this moment than in the whole of Europe". Referring to CPEC as a means to an end, Mr Javed argued that it would allow Pakistan's economy to take off. "China in 1980 was in many respects 25 years behind Pakistan. Today it is definitely 25 years ahead. The good thing is it still remembers its old friend and is willing to help." However, some audience members raised questions about the extent to which Pakistan would benefit from CPEC, and whether the benefits were mostly imagined by the country's analysts and the public.

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