

PAKISTAN TAKES CPEC TO CAIRO

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CAIRO: Federal ministers, senior government and defence officials, leaders of central banks and principal commercial entities, business and sectoral heads, investors, policymakers and opinion formers from Pakistan, Egypt, China and Europe have gathered in Cairo to discuss ways and means to create partnerships and maximise gains from the trillion-dollar projects that form the core corpus of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Belt & Road Initiative, set in motion by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013.

The four-day CPEC-BRI Cairo Dialogue and Trade Summit, a brainchild of Islamabad-based South Asian Strategic Stability Institute (SASSI), hopes to create a novel informal platform for continued conversation for future cooperation between countries in Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Linking the historic maritime trade routes through the Suez Canal to new markets via the emerging Gwadar Gateway is a unique prospect that promises progress and prosperity to millions of people currently waiting or working to be connected through the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR).

Justifying the rationale to organise the dialogue in Cairo, SASSI President, Dr Maria Sultan said: “Egypt is not only the gateway to Africa, it is going to be the gateway to emerging corridors of international trade and commerce. What we are proposing is the north-south corridor that is going to build up on the existing frameworks that are already in place through CPEC and BRI. It is like building our own win as what the Chinese would describe as a win-win. But we will have to craft our own wins. We are going for regional connectivity and building partnerships which will enable our people to benefit from this great economic transformation.”

Many months into planning, the Cairo summit could not have come at a more opportune time when Pakistan is claiming to have signed up Saudi Arabia as the third strategic partner in the CPEC project with Chinese affirmation. But is talking of extending it to Egypt so that it reaches the European shores through Suez Canal too ambitious and too soon? Talking to The News - the official print media partner of the Cairo Dialogue & Trade Summit - retired general and a former corps commander, Asif Yasin Malik thinks it pays if one plans ahead. “We are living in transitory times and the global geopolitics is undergoing a change. The United States is working towards self-inflicted isolation. China, interestingly, has a foothold in Africa in a major way courtesy the Western negligence of this continent. So the germs of CPEC are already present here.”

“Egypt remains the historical pivot of Africa and the north African states are transiting from the turmoil that afflicted the region as Arab Spring towards stability. And when the stability comes the markets get hot. So it makes perfect sense to come here and work for future.”

General (R) Malik agrees that the between Pakistan and Egypt lies the war-afflicted and war-torn Middle East but remains hopeful that the turmoil in the Middle East is waning. “Pakistan is already thinking of the old Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) – connecting through Iran and Turkey. We are already moving on this side. It is long before Syria and Yemen are settled and stabilised as Saudi are already re-evaluating their strategy towards Yemen. Iran is rethinking new approaches after the Trump withdrawal from the Six Plus group and the European approach towards this region is also changing. So it’s always good to be too early than being too late.”

Agenda for the speakers from Egypt, Pakistan, China and other invited countries is not limited to opportunities in trade and commerce. Apart from regional connectivity, cooperation in the fields of future security challenges, counter terrorism, hybrid security threats, maritime security, migration and cyber security are on the discussion table for which experts have arrived from three continents.