

Event Summary

7th CAREC Think Tank Development Forum

16-17 August 2023, Urumqi, PRC

The Seventh CAREC Think Tank Development Forum was held in Urumqi, the People’s Republic of China (PRC), on 16-17 August 2023. The Forum under the theme of “Embracing Digital Technology for Sustainable Economic Development” was organized by the CAREC Institute in partnership with China-Eurasia Expo Secretariat and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Finance Department, and with financial support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the ADB-PRC Regional Knowledge Sharing Initiative (RKSII).

Kabir Jurazoda, Director of the CAREC Institute, opened the Forum with a welcome speech, emphasizing the importance of the work of think tanks in advocating for policies and presenting diverse perspectives and advice to policymakers in promoting the digital economy. He noted that the CAREC region has not yet fully and equitably benefited from the transformation of the digital economy, and coordinated and broad-based approaches are needed to unlock the vast untapped digital potential of the region. Shixin Chen, Vice President, ADB, in a recorded speech, called on the participants to develop policies that help the government and private sector collaborate in digital infrastructure, expand connectivity access, and reduce connectivity costs for low-income communities. He highlighted ADB’s support for developing digital finance, governance, skills, e-commerce, and startups in the CAREC region. Distinguished officials from the PRC namely Wencai Zhang, Vice President, the Export-Import Bank of China; Zhijun Cheng, Director-General, International Economic and Financial Cooperation Department, Ministry of Finance, the PRC; and Weijun Chen, Executive Vice Governor, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, also delivered welcoming messages during the opening ceremony, which spotlighted imbalances in digital development across the CAREC region and the role of regional cooperation in addressing them.

Convening about 120 participants, the Forum discussed how think tanks, through strategic advocacy, can provide policymakers with information and guidance to develop effective policies that promote economic growth, stability, and prosperity. Across two days, the Forum featured eight thematic sessions covering various aspects of digital economy development and pathways to achieve sustainable and inclusive digital and economic development.

Context Setting: Digital Economy and Development Nexus

The second session, moderated by Ayumi Konishi, Senior Advisor to CEO, the Multilateral Cooperation Center for Development Finance, discussed the CAREC region’s readiness and experience in digital technology adoption. Thomas Abell, Director of Digital for Development Division, ADB, presented the role of digital technologies in driving sustainable economic growth in the region. Talant Sultanov, Chair of the Center for Strategic Initiatives of the Kyrgyz Republic, shared examples of digital infrastructure and investments in CAREC. Both speakers highlighted that all CAREC countries recognize digital transformation as their key development strategies and are adopting necessary governance frameworks for the ethical use of technologies, supporting the necessary education and training to increase digital literacy and skills for the workforce, and promoting digital entrepreneurship, innovation, and the technology start-up ecosystem.

CAREC Think Tank Network (CTTN) Research Grants Program Presentations: Country Case Studies

In the third session moderated by Roman Mogilevskii, Senior Economist, Central and West Asia Regional Department, ADB, four national think tanks from CAREC countries Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan, presented their research on how digital technologies are used for green, sustainable, and inclusive growth. Albina Muratbekova, Senior Research Fellow from the Eurasian Research Institute, spoke about how the special economic zones contribute to digital transformation in Central Asia, providing tax and trade references. Burulcha Sulaimanova, OSCE Academy Researcher, presented recommendations for Central Asian countries to develop a policy framework for digitalization and decarbonization, including the introduction of smart technologies in different sectors and the development of digital skills. Asif Javed, Senior Research Associate from the Sustainable Development Policy Institute of Pakistan, talked about the contributions of regional trade agreements to Pakistan's economic integration in Central Asia including the provision of infrastructure and services, elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade, and facilitation of cross-border movement of goods. Farrukh Khakimov, Head of Department on Foreign Policy and Security of Uzbekistan's Development Strategy Center, shared Central Asia's digital readiness status, efforts of the various countries in the digitalization of trade through legislation and development of ICT and digital solutions, and how regional cooperation improves trade relations and connectivity among CAREC countries.

Bridging Digital Divide and Boosting Digital Skills

In the fourth session moderated by Artem Levenkov, Head of Socioeconomic Analysis and IFIs, Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development, Russia, panelists and participants discussed ways to bridge the digital divide and boost digital skills in CAREC. Dr. Xiaojun Feng, Associate Professor of Sociology, China Agricultural University, explained why technological upgrading leads to job displacements, but also creates new jobs, causing both de-skilling and re-skilling of workers. Ana Pashalishvili, Programme Specialist at the Women's Entrepreneurship Acceleration and UN Women, spoke about barriers that women face in the ICT sector, and shared examples of how the promotion of social entrepreneurship and ICT trainings for women helps improve the women's participation in the digital economy. Syed Hassan Alsagoff, Manager of the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation and Capacity Development of the Islamic Development Bank, talked about how the quality of education can be improved using digital technologies and blended learning approaches.

RKSI South-South Learning Seminar: Digital Governance and Commerce

The Forum also featured a South-South learning seminar hosted by RKSI. In this session, moderated by Hsiao Chink Tang, RKSI Head, representatives of governments and the private sector shared their respective experiences in the application of digital technologies. Dr. Sherry Tao Kong, Associate Professor at Peking University, talked about the PRC's experience in e-commerce, highlighting the best practice of working in synergy with local and national stakeholders, which involves devising local policies to promote e-commerce and supporting rural development. Remon Moes, Senior Manager for Public Affairs, Alibaba, shared Alibaba's success story in global e-commerce development, and how the company promotes public-private collaboration in establishing inclusive global trade through the electronic World Trade Platform launched in 2016. Syed Shakeel Shah, Director-General, Reforms and Automation, Federal Board of Revenue, Pakistan, spoke about Pakistan's experience in the introduction of the single window for trade facilitation and regional economic integration, which digitalized Pakistan's cross-border trade and eliminated paper-based manual processes. Enkhzulga Ganbat, Specialist of Cross-Sector Coordination, Mongolia's Ministry of Digital

Development and Communication, presented her country's experience in the application of ICT tools in optimization of public services.

Financial Inclusion and Digital Finance

The sixth session moderated by Yixin Yao, Senior Research Fellow, Asian Development Bank Institute, covered inclusion in digital finance. Khalid Umar, Chief of Strategic Planning Division of the CAREC Institute noted that financial technologies present a tremendous opportunity for reaching the financially excluded and underserved segments of the population by offering cost-effective and easily accessible financial services. He emphasized the need for CAREC countries to create an enabling environment to encourage financial inclusion, and expand financial education programs. Jieru Ba, Senior Researcher from the Tencent Research Institute, talked about how the PRC's mobile payment market contributes to financial innovation and inclusion through expanding market size, driving adoption rates, and catering to a diverse pool of stakeholders and partners including commercial banks, outsourcing agents, and merchants.

A Booming CAREC Startup Ecosystem under CAREC Digital Strategy 2030

The seventh session, moderated by Roman Mogilevskii, spotlighted various initiatives aligned with the CAREC 2030 Digital Strategy. ADB consultants Naveed Zafar Durrani, Shuqi Su, and Eli David presented cases of interactive and collaborative startup ecosystem models. They noted that digital innovation, entrepreneurship, and ICT competitiveness lay the foundation for a start-up ecosystem capable of applying digital technologies modernize the economy.

Building Alliances for Regional Prosperity

Representatives of CAREC think tanks Zhang Jin, Vice President of the Center for International Knowledge on Development; Zeeshan Salahuddin, Director of the Center for Regional and Global Connectivity, Tabadlab, Pakistan; Tuvshintugs Batdelger, Director of the Economic Research Institute, Mongolia; and Mahir Humbatov, Chairman of the Board Economic Scientific Research Institute, Azerbaijan, shared their thoughts on how think tanks can help countries navigate the uncertainties of the global economy and geopolitical landscape. Through advocacy research and dialogue, think tanks can provide policymakers and stakeholders with the information and recommendations they need to develop effective policies that promote economic growth, stability, and prosperity.

During the closing session, Huang Jingjing, Deputy Director One, CAREC Institute, commended all speakers and participants of the two-day event. She noted the value of coming together and having a platform to discuss critical regional issues and strengthen cooperation among diverse stakeholders.

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