

Chinese leaders discuss economy, B&R with lawmakers

Premier Li Keqiang and other leaders on Thursday discussed economic upgrading, Belt and Road Initiative, people's congress system, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption campaign and other topics with national lawmakers.



Chinese Premier Li Keqiang joins a panel discussion with deputies to the 12th National People's Congress (NPC) from Shaanxi Province at the annual session of the NPC in Beijing, capital of China, March 9, 2017. (Xinhua/Xie Huanchi)

They joined deputies to the National People's Congress (NPC) in separate panel discussions at the NPC annual session.

Joining NPC deputies from Shaanxi Province, Premier Li called for developing high-end equipment manufacturing, information industry, modern logistics and rural e-commerce. Tourism and culture should also be boosted to create more jobs.

The provincial government should further streamline administration, delegate power to lower levels, improve services, play well the province's role as a key junction in implementing the Belt and Road Initiative, and take a lead in the development of China's western region.

Joining lawmakers from Jiangsu Province, Zhang Dejiang, chairman of the NPC Standing Committee, said people's congresses at various levels should implement the decisions made by the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee to ensure effective state governance under the Party's leadership.

He called for innovation in theory and practice of the people's congress system, which is China's fundamental political system.

Yu Zhengsheng, chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference National Committee, joined NPC deputies from Guizhou Province in a panel discussion.

Yu urged the province to continue optimizing the environment for developing private businesses, invigorating the private economy, and supporting private businesses' efforts to speed up transformation and upgrading.

Yu also highlighted targeted poverty alleviation, stressing more effective measures, enhanced implementation of policies and mobilization of all resources to win the battle against poverty.

Wang Qishan, secretary of the CPC Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, joined NPC deputies from Yunnan Province, calling for advancing the anti-corruption campaign, which accords with the aspirations of the Party and the people.

Calling inspections a kind of "political checkup," Wang said undesirable working styles including formalism and bureaucratism during the implementation of CPC Central Committee decisions must be rooted out.

Senior officials at key positions must guard against perfunctory working style and endeavor in a pragmatic way to live up to the people's expectations, he said.

Joining lawmakers from Chongqing Municipality, Vice Premier Zhang Gaoli highlighted the city's role as a strategic pivot in China's "Go West" strategy and asked the municipal government to actively fit into the Belt and Road Initiative and the Yangtze River Economic Belt.

He also urged Chongqing to push forward the supply-side structural reform, promote innovation-driven development and high-end manufacturing, coordinate rural and urban development, and protect the Three Gorges Reservoir and the Yangtze River.

Li Keqiang, Zhang Dejiang, Yu Zhengsheng, Wang Qishan and Zhang Gaoli are all members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee.

[News story: British military chief](#)

welcomes largest number of female Afghan officer graduates

Updated: new pictures

Speaking today at a graduation ceremony for new Afghan officers at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy (ANAOA) in Kabul, Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Gordon Messenger welcomed the increasing female participation in the Afghan security forces.

This year's class has the largest number of female graduates to date, with 23 officer cadets graduating today.



Female officer cadets march at the graduation ceremony.

The ceremony took place the day after General Messenger, the MOD's Gender Champion, participated in International Women's Day events in Kabul, including meeting with British Council and Embassy staff who work closely with the Afghan Government and Civil Society to create a better future for women and girls, including increasing awareness of gender issues in Afghanistan's security institutions.



A British officer presents an Afghan cadet with their graduation award.

This work includes supporting efforts to make the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) a more attractive career choice for women, including improving accommodation arrangements for female ANAOA cadets. Training in the prevention of sexual violence in armed conflict is also provided to cadets as part of the Academy's programme.

Britain is also working to strengthen the role of women in the Afghan security forces through the training of future female leaders at ANAOA. The 23 graduates from the class of 2017 join the 57 female officers who have previously passed the intensive and sought after training. Today's ceremony also saw the Academy's total number of graduates going over 2000.



General Messenger attends the graduation ceremony at ANAOA.

With Afghans in the lead for providing security throughout the country and training their next generation of future leaders, Britain is helping to 'mentor the mentors' at the ANAOA, where over 30 British personnel provide advice and assistance to Afghan trainers.

Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Gordon Messenger said:

Today's largest ever female graduate class demonstrates the progress the Afghan security forces are making in allowing women to help defend their country.

Britain's enduring commitment to Afghanistan means we're helping them in this task, as well as offering broader support to Afghanistan's security institutions.

UK assistance at ANAOA is an important part of NATO's non-combat Resolute Support Mission, which trains, advises and assists Afghan security forces, building their capacity to provide security for the country.

Britain recently increased the number of personnel in Afghanistan, with 500 people now providing advice to Afghan instructors, developing the fledgling Afghan Air Force, advising Afghan security institutions and providing security as part of the Kabul Security Force.

As part of the UK's long term commitment to Afghanistan, Britain has pledged

over £200million to support the ANDSF.

As Her Majesty The Queen today [unveiled](#) a Memorial in London recognising the contributions of the UK Armed Forces and all UK citizens who deployed in the Gulf region, Iraq and Afghanistan from 1990-2015, General Messenger on his visit laid a wreath at the Graves of the Fallen in Kabul.



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[News story: British military chief welcomes largest number of female Afghan officer graduates](#)

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Speech: “What I couldn’t have done was tell you their stories, the lives behind those numbers; the human cost of the fragile security situation.”

As co-lead for the Council’s visit to the Lake Chad Basin, I’d like to focus my remarks this morning on the security situation, and my colleagues, the other co-leads, will tackle the other two big themes of our visit, which is the humanitarian and the longer term and development root causes. But before I do so, I would like to thank, on behalf of all of us, the Governments of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, as well as the United Nations, for making this visit possible. And thank you to all Council members for making the most of the visit, and an ambitious programme, and for keeping up with it.

If I was talking to you about security in the Lake Chad Basin a week ago, I’d have spoken about statistics, the numbers, 20,000 people killed, 2.3 million currently displaced. What I couldn’t have done was tell you their stories, the lives behind those numbers; the human cost of the fragile security situation.

Last Friday, in Maroua, in northern Cameroon, with my colleagues I saw that cost in the eyes of a 15 year old boy whose village had been attacked by Boko Haram. He hid for days, before being interrogated and imprisoned by the authorities for two years on suspicion of being a member of Boko Haram. Most of his friends had already been killed.

I saw that cost in the eyes of a woman crying with her baby in her arms. I saw it in others who spoke of the murder of their husbands or sons, the kidnapping of their daughters, the burning of their homes. We heard from civil society how women were selling their bodies for sex just to eat.

All these people brought home the horrifying consequences of the chaos and insecurity wrought by Boko Haram. And I hope that together we brought some much needed focus to the suffering that has been neglected for too long.

And amid the horror, we also heard of the bravery and commitment of the people of the region as they try to bring stability and security back to the Lake Chad Basin.

We heard chapters from a success story on its way to completion. Stories from the Multi-National Joint Task Force of liberating twenty thousand hostages, successfully winning back territory that will act as future homes for the people of the region. But the story is not over. Security is not yet entrenched. It is fragile in too many places. Force commanders and generals outlined continued attacks; suicide bombings, IEDs are still far too common.

And Boko Haram's tactics are getting more barbaric – mothers turned into suicide bombers with infants strapped to them in addition to their bombs. Boko Haram are down, but they're not out. And make no mistake, their cruelty knows no bounds.

It was clear that international support remains vital for this fight. We visited Operation Barkhane Headquarters in N'djamena where we met French troops, and were joined by members of the British and American military. Together they are supporting the Multi-National Joint Task Force, as well the Nigerian military, through capacity building, training and intelligence sharing. We heard how further support was needed to enable better mobility and logistics in the fight.

Women's participation and protection was a constant theme throughout the visit, and it was clear that women must be more involved in efforts to tackle Boko Haram, and counter violent extremism, and build peace.

We also heard of the hundreds of Boko Haram defectors, including women and children. We made clear the need for compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law by all actors in tackling the scourge of Boko Haram. This is essential to prevent mistreatment, including of detainees; as well as to build confidence among communities and counter radicalisation.

Let me close with this final reflection. Only yesterday, here in New York, I met three inspirational young women from Chibok who were attending an International Women's Day event at the United Nations.

Far from being victims, far from being survivors, these women are now campaigners for education for women and girls in poverty. Despite everything that they had endured, despite being caught up in the hell unleashed by Boko Haram, they are determined to look to the future.

They showed what lies ahead. They showed a future possible when the fighting ends.

To achieve this reality, it's clear that there can be no military solution: only a comprehensive approach will bring stability and peace. And so let me reiterate that the United Kingdom will proudly stand side by side with the region, with the four governments that we visited, and with the affected people in this effort.

With that, let me now hand over to Fodé to focus on the root causes and longer term development.

[Speech: £625,000 for England's](#)

Economic Heartland to help shape its future transport priorities

It's a pleasure to join you this afternoon, at the end of a packed day of discussion on the future for England's Economic Heartland.

And how apt it is that we are meeting in Silverstone.

It reminds me of something I've been repeatedly telling my friends and family ever since I became a transport minister.

That transport can be fun.

In seriousness, it's great to see so many people here from a broad range of organisations.

Local Authorities, Highways England, Network Rail, National Infrastructure Commission and so many businesses from the supply chain that supports it all.

All here, and all demonstrating a commitment to improving this region's transport.

Significance of England's Economic Heartland

It's entirely right that this region is getting the attention it deserves.

It contains some of the fastest growing cities in the UK; Oxford, Milton Keynes, Cambridge.

Over 175,000 businesses.

1.6 million jobs.

And three and a half million people.

It's a region of world-leading universities.

And I am delighted that this region is gaining a reputation as a centre of excellence for the science, technology and innovation of transport.

As part of the government's Intelligent Mobility Fund, Milton Keynes is trialling autonomous vehicles that will revolutionise travel.

Yet none of this success can be taken for granted.

Many of you will have seen the National Infrastructure Commission's interim report which came out in the autumn.

The report highlighted the housing and connectivity challenges your area faces.

This region has some of the most expensive housing of anywhere in the UK outside London – driven up by the university towns of Cambridge and Oxford.

Yet thanks to a legacy of underinvestment by successive governments, its transport connectivity leaves something to be desired.

Getting across the region is time consuming; it's often quicker to travel in and out of London than to travel between east and west.

For example, the distance from Aylesbury to Milton Keynes is 21 miles, but can take up to 2 and a half hours by train.

Cambridge to Luton are 41 miles apart but a train journey takes almost 2 hours.

Transport for growth

When transport isn't all it should be, there's an economic and social toll to pay.

Yes, effective transport is essential for prosperity

But transport isn't just about getting people from A to B.

Transport helps people get on.

It provides access to education and to jobs; it connects businesses with customers, patients to healthcare, friends to friends and family to family.

So I am glad that in the Autumn Statement we were able to announce that we would press ahead with plans for a new road expressway from Oxford to Cambridge via Bedford and Milton Keynes.

And we're also looking into making improvements to the A1 between the M25 and Peterborough.

We're working to include these projects and more in our next Road Investment Strategy, and you will continue to be included in that work.

We are investing in East to West Rail, and we anticipate that train services will be operational between 2022 to 2024.

Late last year, the Secretary of State asked Rob Brighouse, former chief executive of Chiltern Rail, to look at how the project could be delivered more quickly.

And in the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor provided £10m to continue the development of the central section between Bedford and Cambridge.

All this is a good start.

It means we've got 2 important ingredients for investment – long-term planning and money.

But there's a third ingredient that's just as vital.

And that's the right governance.

After all, the government can find the money and make plans but the plans need to be turned into concrete reality, and the money spent in the right way.

This is where organisations such as England's Economic Heartland can have such an important role to play.

By taking local knowledge of needs and opportunities, and thinking strategically.

About how money is best allocated, on what schemes, and in what order.

You know your economy better than anyone.

You know what's needed to drive growth.

Yet currently decision-making over strategic transport schemes, for example, is often centralised at a national level.

So over the year ahead, we want to work with you, to support you in making a real difference to the region.

We want England's Economic Heartland to shape its future.

We want to see the region speak with one voice.

To have a shared vision for trains and buses, taking into account what passengers want.

We want to see your plans for reducing road congestion, and speeding up links the region's airports.

And we want to see a vision that links this thinking on transport to thinking on housing and economic growth.

We're seeing the early evidence that when local areas come together to plan long-term infrastructure, they can deliver outputs greater than the sum of their parts.

I'm pleased too that you're giving consideration to becoming a sub-national transport body.

It might offer significant benefits to the region.

But by definition, it's not something that should be imposed, or decided on before the hard work of analysis has been done.

The region must put forward its proposal and make the case for the benefits.

The government door will be open, and to help you have asked for £625,000

match fund to get moving. I am happy to confirm that central government is willing to confirm that funding today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, my message is this.

We know the transport infrastructure across the region isn't good enough for a region with such incredible potential.

Now we have the chance to put it right.

Not by sitting in London and telling you what to do.

But by giving you the chance to shape your own future.

So thank you for listening, and thank you, Martin Tett, the Strategic Alliance, and Highways England for organising a brilliant event.

And thank you for bringing everyone together.