

Pakistan-China strategic relations

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On January 1, 2011, in a heartwarming ceremony held in the Pakistan-China Friendship Centre at Islamabad, yet another gift from the People's Republic of China, the Pakistan-China Friendship Year was launched. The Friendship Year, which coincides with the 60th Anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, provides a timely occasion to take stock of their bilateral ties which have been described by the most adulatory metaphors possible. There could have been no better backdrop for this exercise than the recently concluded visit by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Pakistan on 17-19 December, 2010. In glaring contrast to the summit level visits from USA, UK, France and Russia in quick succession confined to India alone, the Chinese Premier paid back- to-back official visits to India as well as Pakistan.

In his arrival statement in Islamabad on 17 December, 2010 Premier Wen Jiabao declared that it was a firm policy of the Chinese Government to further cement and deepen the strategic partnership of cooperation with Pakistan, which his visit will push to a new high. Addressing the Pakistani Parliament on 19 December, 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao lyrically waxed that “the friendship between China and Pakistan is deeply rooted in the hearts of the two peoples. It is in our blood, and has become our noble and firm conviction.” These sentiments were reciprocated in equal measure by the rhapsodic Pakistani leadership and people. They stressed that pursuing friendship with China was the bedrock of Pakistan's foreign policy, enjoying national consensus. The Joint Statement issued at the conclusion of the visit on 19 December, 2010 expressed the shared view that “the China-Pakistan all-weather strategic partnership of cooperation ... has gone beyond bilateral dimensions and acquired broader regional and international ramifications.”

This assessment represents the culmination of a process which spans the last 60 years. The Pak-China relationship has been marked by deep mutual trust, confidence and understanding, rooted as it is in their strict adherence to the universally acknowledged Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and Charter of the United Nations as well as strong opposition to hegemony of all kinds and hues. Their friendship has been

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tested in the crucible of time. The two countries have always stood by each other through thick and thin.

This relationship emerged in a given set of circumstances when the world was in the grip of Cold War between the capitalist and the Socialist world, the ideological rift between the two leading socialist states, USSR and China, had started developing. China was then relatively an isolated and less developed country and both Pakistan and China perceived India as a common threat.

However, the context in which this unique relationship took root and prospered has been undergoing a change. Pakistan became instrumental in facilitating contact between two erstwhile enemies, China and USA, leading to the recognition of People's Republic of China by USA and the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two states. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States has emerged as the sole super power, adding to the complexity of its relations with a rising China. The ideological and territorial conflicting relations between China and the former Soviet Union have given way to cooperative ties between them. China and India who went to war with each other in 1962 have since normalized their relations, the casus belli, i.e., the unresolved border dispute notwithstanding. Their bilateral trade and economic cooperation is racing fast ahead. Lately, the growing bonhomie between USA and India has introduced a new destabilizing element in the region, directly impacting Pakistan and China.

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And China itself too has been undergoing a monumental change. Following Deng's policy of internal reforms and opening to the outside world, China has transformed from a puritanical socialist economy to a system of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Or is it now Capitalism with Chinese characteristics? Resultantly, China has become (after USA) the second largest economy in the world, whose responsible policies are indispensable for international financial and monetary stability and to cope with the challenges of global warming as well as energy and food security. And as a permanent member of the UN Security Council with increased military and political clout it has been playing a valuable stabilizing role in the maintenance of international peace and security and to counter the

menaces of terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism, separatism and nuclear proliferation. At the same time, contemporaneously India has been incrementally acquiring the sinews of a major economic and military power with resultant enhanced influence in world affairs.

The end of Cold War era saw the crystallization of Chinese foreign policy propelled by its domestic agenda. Henceforth, the Chinese were primarily concerned with fostering an international climate of peace and stability which they deemed essential for wholeheartedly pursuing the goal of development and modernization at home. They in particular endeavoured to have friendly ties with all neighbours, including India.

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How has this sea-change in the global scenario and within China affected or is likely to affect the much vaunted relations between Pakistan and China? One thing is sure that enmity with India no longer constitutes the main determinant of their mutual bond. Their relationship has matured from a tactical alliance to strategic partnership. At the same time, the inherently latent competitive if not inimical nature of China's relationship with India cannot be altogether ignored, particularly in the context of burgeoning Indo-US relations in the politico-strategic, military and nuclear fields. Former US National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski believes that "Washington's decisions to help India with nuclear energy have stimulated China's unease." The US assertive intrusive policies in the South China, East China and Yellow seas have heightened tension between China and USA. Here US "national interests" are pitted against China's "core interests". These developments clearly have overtones of containment of China. According to Rober D. Kaplan, writing in the *New York Times* of 12 November; 2010, President Obama's recent visits to India, Indonesia, South Korea and Japan were "about one challenge: the rise of China on land and sea."

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Pakistan signals the continued validity of their strategic congruence, now elevated from the bilateral to the regional and global level. It may be recalled that one of the most significant provisions of the Pakistan-China 2005 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourliness states that both countries would support each other's efforts to safeguard their territorial integrity.

On the issue of terrorism, China and Pakistan are on the same page. China appreciates Pakistan's contribution and sacrifices in the international counter terrorism campaign. It shares the view that terrorism should not be linked with any particular religion or ethnic group. Likewise rejecting double standards, China believes that both the symptoms and root causes of terrorism need to be addressed. The 19 December, 2010 Joint Statement affirmed the two countries resolve to undertake substantive cooperation, under bilateral and multilateral framework, to jointly fight the forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism.

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To undergird the strong strategic ties in political and defence and defence production fields, it has been agreed to step up cooperation and coordination in space science and technology, maritime security, climate change, food, and UN reform. What is equally significant is China's offer to help Pakistan in overcoming its crippling energy crisis. An Energy Cooperation Mechanism is to be established to promote cooperation in conventional, renewable and civil nuclear energy. To strengthen China-Pakistan strategic consultations and coordination, it has been agreed to establish Annual Meeting Mechanism at the leadership and Dialogue Mechanism at the Foreign Ministers' level. All these steps are undoubtedly of strategic significance.

China's fast growing demand for secure energy sources and commercial outlets for its Western regions, now focus of its accelerated development drive, has added to the importance of Pakistan's strategic geographical location. Indeed Pakistan lying astride China, South Asia, Central Asia and West Asia at the mouth of the Persian Gulf has the potential of becoming the hub of crisscrossing trade, transportation and

energy corridors linking these regions. China's participation in the construction of Gwadar port, 180 nautical miles from the Strait of Hormuz through which 40% of world's traded oil passes, and up-gradation of KKH amply speak of China's realization of the value of linkage with Pakistan. The potential viability of this gateway becomes evident when one realizes that the distance between China's Xinjiang area and Karachi or Gwadar is just about 2500 kilometer against its distance of 4500 kilometer from China's eastern sea-board.

There has been growing realization on the part of both Pakistan and China that the level of bilateral economic and commercial cooperation and people-to- people interaction is not commensurate with their strong political and security strategic ties.

The level of bilateral trade stands at a low figure of roughly US\$ 7 billion, with the balance of trade heavily tilted in favour of China. Foreign Direct Investment from China and Hong Kong has been gradually increasing. About 120 Chinese companies employing 13,000 Chinese nationals are working on 250 projects in Pakistan in Oil & Gas, IT & Telecom, Power Generation, Engineering, Automobiles, Infrastructure and Mining sectors. A joint Investment Company with a paid up capital of US\$ 200 million was launched in 2007. Youth exchanges have made a modest start. However, all this falls far short of the full potential.

No wonder during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit the accent was on redressing these lacunae in Pakistan-China relations. The renewal of Five Year Development Programme for Trade and Economic Cooperation and China's unilateral tariff concessions on additional 286 items under the existing Free Trade Agreement, which also covers services sector, would help in achieving the trade target of US\$ 15 billion by 2015. Furthermore, the two sides signed 12 Agreements / Memorandums of Understanding at the Government level and 22 commercial agreements, total worth \$35 billion, on cooperation in the fields of culture, transportation, economic assistance, media, finance and energy. Agreements to establish currency swap arrangement, opening of branches of their respective major banks, enhanced cooperation in Capital Market as well as proposed Special and Trans-border Economic Zones would prove as catalyst in boosting growth in bilateral economic and commercial ties.

The Pakistan-China Joint Declaration on Directions of Bilateral Cooperation signed on November 04, 2003 at the Head of State level had laid down the future roadmap for a sustained "future-oriented all-round cooperative partnership". The two sides had stressed that considering its

profound popular basis, this relationship be passed on to the future generations. This resolve has been vigorously renewed during Premier Wen Jiabao's last visit to Pakistan.

Pakistan-China relations may not enjoy the uniqueness of the late 60s and 70s, but Pakistan retains importance for China as a reliable ally internationally and a factor of security for China's Southern and Western periphery. The Chinese leadership has repeatedly assured Pakistan of the special nature of Pak-China relations and that they would not be affected by the development of China's relations with India. Former Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing had told his Pakistani counterpart that "the only country with which we describe our relationship as all-weather friendship is Pakistan." For Pakistan, China remains the closest friendly country and the most reliable source of military hardware and technology, in addition to its involvement and support for many important projects in the defence, heavy industry, energy including nuclear power and infrastructure sectors. China has a definite interest in Pakistan's security and territorial integrity. This mutuality of interests acquires critical salience in the fast evolving global power alignments and adjustments.

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"China and Pakistan were, are, and will for ever be good neighbours, good friends, good partners and good brothers," thus said Premier Wen Jiabao. The scintillating history of Pak-China relations leaves no doubt that this unique, friction-free, time-tested relationship, rooted in deep mutual trust and confidence, will not only endure but has the potential of getting stronger and deeper, provided while keeping the strong strategic relationship in the political and defence fields, more substance is added to it by way of increased trade and investment and mutually beneficial economic cooperation as well as greater people-to-people interaction. The accent should shift to economic collaboration and a partnership for development and prosperity. Only this way we can ensure to pass on this profound friendship to the succeeding generations.

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The recent highly successful visit by Premier Wen Jiabao to Pakistan provides a solid basis for way forward. The best measure to judge the success of the Pakistan-China Friendship Year will be the manner and speed by which the existing some 275 Agreements! MOUs signed between the two countries are implemented. Given the committed symbiotic strategic partnership subsisting between Pakistan and China, there is no reason to doubt that the Friendship Year will be highly rewarding, taking their bilateral ties to new heights.