

Wang Yi's Visit

Dr Ahmad Rashid Malik



Another productive dialogue was held between Pakistan and China in the larger perspective of improving trilateral relations between Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid a visit to Islamabad on 24-25 June. This was his second visit to Pakistan after he paid a visit to Islamabad in February 2015, just two months ahead of President Xi Jinping's visit to Islamabad when the historic China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) deal of US\$ 46 billion was struck.

This time, Wang Yi is visiting Pakistan and the focus of his visit is Pakistan-Afghanistan relations and internal situation inside Afghanistan besides discussing matters of bilateral interests between the two countries. The *CGTN* quoted as saying that the "Chinese mediation between Pakistan and Afghanistan is a step in the right direction and it could ease the rising tensions between the two neighbors."

The premier Chinese news agency *Xinhua* quoting Wang Yi said that "tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan are not conducive to their stability and development as well as regional cooperation, calling on both countries to meet each other halfway so as to improve bilateral ties." Wang Yi also said that "China supports the two sides in seeking to establish a crisis managing mechanism as quickly as possible so as to properly deal with contingencies and to form a trilateral meeting system among foreign ministers of

China, Afghanistan and Pakistan in order to enhance dialogue and cooperation in all areas.”

The Pak-Afghan ties are largely deteriorated at this point in time when Wang Yi is on a trip to the region with renewed blasts inside Kabul and border areas of Pakistan and incidents in Balochistan. Wang Yi told Afghan President Asraf Ghani that he would ask Pakistan to control Taliban and the Haqqani Network. Pakistan might influence both on the Taliban and Haqqani Network as the piece of advice has come from China and Pakistan has showed willingness in this regard and we would call for practical steps," Wang Yi said.

We are ready to help in the improvement relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, Wang Yi said. China is also seeking help from Afghanistan against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a separatist front in Xinjiang. Pakistan has already extended its help against the ETIM to China and handed over a number of Uyghur separatists during the war on terror. China lauds Pakistan efforts to purge the ETIM. Afghanistan also needs to follow the suit to clear the region from separatists and militants.

On his arrival at the Noor Khan Airbase, Chief Minister of the Punjab Shehbaz Sharif welcomed Wang Yi. He also held talks with Sartaj Aziz, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs and Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Pakistan welcomed the Chinese initiative to improve ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) Astana perspectives and take full advantage of peace talk mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Coordination Group of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States and adopt active and flexible measures to promote the peace process in the region.

Aziz said that Pakistan is willing to intensify communication and improve relations with the Afghan side and to support the political reconciliation process in Afghanistan as these are in line with both countries' common interests.

The stability and progress of Pak-Afghan ties are central to Chinese policy toward Afghanistan from the prism of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of which the CPEC is the pilot project. Kabul had been located at the centerpiece of the ancient Silk Road and a branch of the Silk Road used to go into rest of the Sub-continent.

Today, Pakistan lies in the center-stage of connecting the branch of Silk Road between Afghanistan and India. If ties continuous to deteriorate between Kabul and Islamabad and ties did not improve between New Delhi and Islamabad, the ideals of the new Silk Road would be scratched.

Then Pakistan and China might go for an alternate of bypassing Kabul on the western flank of the Silk Road and eastern flank toward New Delhi. The choice belongs to both Kabul and New Delhi whether they would be a part of the greater Asian connectivity or not. Without their participation, Silk Road in the form of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would be in the offing, linking Pakistan via Xinjiang in western China with the five Central Asian Republics and Russia and Mongolia.

Wang Yi is still looking for the first option for the revival of the ancient Silk Road from Kabul to Islamabad and onward to New Delhi. This will be new mechanism of defusing tension between the three countries and also to make South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) practical. However, postures of rulers in Kabul and New Delhi are still not supportive of China-Pakistan political and diplomatic efforts in this perspective. Kabul and New Delhi must avail the opportunity provided by the CPEC as an integral part of the New Silk Road for the 21st century. Hope Wang Yi's message of peace and connectivity would go through.

The writer is Director of the China-Pakistan Study Center at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad. He writes on East Asian affairs.