

## Pakistan-China Relations: All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership

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While Pakistan's Foreign Policy is geared towards developing mutually beneficial friendly ties with all countries of the world, the present government is focused on nurturing a peaceful friendly neighbourhood and accelerating socio-economic development of the country. In its priority plan China occupies a special central position as it meets these twin objectives par excellence.

The ties between Pakistan and China were forged in a particular context when the world was in the grip of Cold War and the ideological rift between two leading socialist states, the USSR and China, had started developing, and both China and Pakistan perceived India as a common threat. After some six decades the world has changed beyond recognition. And China itself too has been undergoing a monumental transformation. It has peacefully risen to become the second largest economy in the world, with increased military and political clout. Its relationship with USA and India, although competitive, is no longer conflictive. Meanwhile, many new issues and challenges have arisen – the menaces of terrorism, extremism, fundamentalism, separatism and global warming, to mention a few – all requiring fresh global cooperative approach.



In this flurry of kaleidoscopic changes one thing has remained constant: the abiding deep friendship between Pakistan and China. If anything, their bilateral relationship has matured from a tactical alliance to strategic partnership. Notwithstanding the differences in culture, history, religion, language, race, economic and political systems and ideological moorings, their friendship has constantly been on an upward curve. This has been possible because their relationship is based on deep mutual trust and respect,

understanding and common aspiration for peace and progress and is underpinned by the five principles of peaceful coexistence.

Pakistan and China have complete identity of views and approach on all major regional and international issues. It is well – nigh impossible to point out any instance when the two were not in lockstep with each other. This strategic congruence is reflected in ever-increasing cooperation in the political, defence, security as well as economic fields. Pakistan's vast land is dotted with complexes and projects of vital significance built with Chinese cooperation. And many more are in the works. The armouries of Pakistan Armed Forces are replete with equipment from China, some co-produced by the two countries.

The warmth and exuberance in their bilateral relations resonate in the hearts of the people of the two countries. They have stood by each other through thick and thin. To describe this relationship as “all-weather” is not an empty cliché. Enmity with India no longer constitutes the main determinant of their mutual bond.

There has, however, 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 are not commensurate with their strong political and security strategic ties. According to the IMF 'Direction of Trade Statistics' the level of bilateral trade stands at a low figure of roughly US\$ 15 billion, with the balance of trade heavily tilted in favour of China. Foreign Direct Investment from China and Hong Kong has been gradually increasing 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 with yearly visit of 100-member youth groups to each other's country. However, all this falls far short of the full potential. Full use should be made of the Free Trade Agreement to further boost the bilateral trade volume. Among other possible measures, China could focus on its high-tech industries and relocate the intermediate level industry to Pakistan as joint ventures with buy-back arrangements and export of surplus produce to other countries.

China's spectacular developmental activity had so far been concentrated in the country's eastern seaboard. The focus has now shifted to bring the Central and Western China at par with the rest of the country. This opens up a new opportunity for the two countries to explore possibilities of collaboration to their mutual benefit. China's fast growing demand for secure energy sources and commercial outlet for its Western regions 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 criss-crossing trade, transportation, communication and energy corridors linking these regions in a symbiotic relationship. Herein lies the significance of Chinese President Xi Jinping's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) visionary initiative, of which China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) forms an important part.

OBOR would comprise a cluster of land corridors and a Maritime Silk Road. It encompasses 4.4 billion people, 64 countries, and a combined economic output of US \$21 trillion – roughly twice the annual gross domestic product of China, or 29 per cent of global GDP. The strategic significance of the CPEC has accordingly been sensed timely by the perspicacious leadership of both countries. Determined efforts are already afoot to realize this grandiose multi-project venture the speediest possible.

The CPEC rightly envisages a cluster of economic zones, industrial parks, infrastructure and energy projects along the route. The flagship CPEC would prove to be a game changer as it would generate massive trade and economic activity, opening new vistas of progress, prosperity and stability not only for the peoples of the two countries including Balochistan but indeed also for the entire region and beyond. In fact blossoming of the Economic Corridor holds promise of resuscitating the moribund SAARC with which China has Observer status. Pakistan's prospective full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO) will reinforce cooperation in multifaceted fields among South Asia, Eurasia and China. It goes without saying that peace, security and stability in Afghanistan, peaceful and cooperative ties between India and Pakistan and improvement of security situation in the country assuring fool proof security to Chinese workforce are essential requirements for the CPEC project to proceed smoothly. Further, local capacity building through human resource skills development and transparency in the implementation process would be essential. We also have to be vigilant against the designs of external forces who have already made known their opposition to the CPEC. Above all, care has to be taken that the political consensus in Pakistan behind the CPEC is not frayed. In other words the CPEC would have to be people-centric with its benefits trickling down to the people especially those in underdeveloped areas.

The success of the Maritime Silk Road would require a peaceful harmonious South China Sea which unfortunately owing to the confrontational policies being pursued by USA, Japan, India and Australia is presently quite tense. On the other hand, it is encouraging that all 10 members of ASEAN have joined the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, one of the financial arms of OBOR, thus signalling their desire to partake in its economic opportunities. In a significant development, the United Kingdom has become a partner in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and agreed to provide \$121.6 million in grant to fund construction of Burhan-Havelian Expressway. Earlier the Asian Development Bank had approved \$327 million for National Trade Corridor Highway Investment Programme (NTCHIP). The upcoming Iran-Pakistan Gas-Pipeline could extend CPEC to Iran.

Friendship with China is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy and there is an across-the-board political and public consensus on maintaining strong bilateral ties with China, This invaluable asset has not only to be zealously guarded but concerted efforts need to be made to transfer it to the succeeding generations. In this regard it is essential that people-to-people contacts, which regrettably are presently limited, are enhanced encompassing all sections of the society. The introduction of learning of Chinese language in various educational institutions in Pakistan and the increasing interaction among research institutes, the media and parliaments of the two countries are welcome steps. While proceeding with policies and steps to cement and expand mutual friendly cooperation, the two countries have to be careful lest terrorism sweeping across Pakistan and Xinjiang autonomous region and the developments in Sino-Indian and Pak-US ties respectively do not create any misunderstanding. A joint counter-terrorism mechanism is already in place. The two countries should intensify the on-going mutual cooperation in confronting and rooting out the scourge of terrorism and show zero tolerance for it.

The upsurge in trade and investment ties between China and India should cause no alarm so long it does not impinge on Pak-China deep strategic relationship in the security and defence fields. Similarly, Pak-US collaboration should never give even hint of Pakistan in any way becoming part of US containment of China policy. Pakistan can never think of it. Apprehensions that the growing warmth in relations between China and India may result in diminution of Pak-China bond are unfounded. This is the strong message one gets from the Chinese leadership and during interaction with Chinese think-tanks and civil and military officials. It would be worth recalling that following the nuclear testing by India in 1998, the then Defence Minister of India in the BJP Government had said that their principal enemy was China and that one of the most significant provision 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.

Indeed both Pakistan and China greatly value their rock-solid ties. Former Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhoxing had told his Pakistani counterpart that "the only country with which we describe our relationship as 'all-weather friendship' is Pakistan. And "China and Pakistan were, are, and will forever be good neighbours, good friends, good partners and good brothers," said Former Premier Wen Jiabao. Pakistan likewise regards China as the most trusted and reliable friend and considers promotion of its friendly relations with China as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. The frequent visits between the leadership of

the two countries are earnest of their commitment to actualize the roadmap for a sustained “future oriented all round cooperative partnership,” laid down in the 2003 Pakistan-China Declaration on Directions of Bilateral Cooperation.

President Xi Jinping’s visit to Pakistan during April 2015, provided yet another opportunity to reaffirm the two countries resolve to elevate their bilateral relations to an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership. The US \$46 billion CPEC mega multi-project venture was launched with the conclusion of a raft of agreements allocating US \$35 billion to projects in the energy sector. Fifteen year time-line was set for completion of most of the project. Projects to be undertaken under the CPEC – early harvest, medium and long-term – have been identified and the requisite funding arranged. The two countries have wasted no time in taking practical steps to realize common development and co prosperity, the hallmark of CPEC. The scintillating history of their proven friendship, the national consensus it enjoys in both countries, absence of any discordant or inhibiting factors, and the commitment of their respective leaderships guarantee that their proverbial strategic cooperative partnership will not only endure, it will be taken to new heights. Indeed sky is the limit. Happily the invaluable stock of deep mutual trust and goodwill is now increasingly being matched by practical concrete action.

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