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The Xinjiang-Pakistan Connection

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China borders with fourteen countries and eight of these borders connect China through its western Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (earlier called Sinkiang), which was created in 1955. Xinjiang is highly strategic region in China. It accounts for more than one sixth of China's total territory and a quarter of its boundary length. The region connects with India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Russia.

The friendly border between China and Pakistan is actually the border between Gilgit-Baltistan and Xinjiang divided by Karakoran, Kunlun, and Tianshan mountains. The border was demarcated 58 years ago that laid down the foundation stone of the cemented ties between Pakistan and China.

The border is around 523 km long and it used to be highly contested in the 1950s. It was Pakistan's desire to demarcate border with China and it warmly responded. The border agreement was signed in 1963. China ceded 1,942 sq km territory to Pakistan to amicably demarcate border. It is one of the most strategic border in the world and it sets out example for other countries. This is another unique feature in Pakistan-China ties and also it shows the significance of Xinjiang to Pakistan.

With the amicable resolution of the border between Pakistan and China, all mutual issues were easily settled down. There is a need to go through the early history to see how both countries got together to sort out differences and built lasting peace in Asia.

There is no doubt to say that there are strong and exemplary ties between Pakistan and China. When Pakistan came into being on 14 August 1947, just four days earlier a commentary was published in the China Digest by its Delhi correspondent on 10 August 1947, which was, in fact, never subscribed by Pakistan. The idea was the creation of separate State in Sinkiang on Pakistan's border. The commentary went on:

"Trends in Pakistan are likely to invite deep interest in China too. So far the leadership in Pakistan had no time to think much of affairs beyond their borders, but it is known they look upon Sinkiang as a Muslim Nation, perfectly entitled to Sovereign Scotland, as much as Pakistan has come to be. It will not be surprising if close concern develops between Pakistan and Sinkiang and if the pace of events in Sinkiang is hastened. China's diplomats must expect some hard work." (K. Arif, China-Pakistan Relations, p. 3)

Pakistan did not show any interest to the idea of Sinkiang liberation from China and creation of an independent Muslim State on the border with Pakistan during its upheavals – a move that could destabilise the newly emerged State of Pakistan itself and could create fuss in the region.

Pakistan eschewed from the question of Sinkiang separatism/liberation during the civil war in China as the founder of Pakistan Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah was opposed to any sort of interference in the internal affairs of any country. Pakistan was concerned with its north-west border to secure it rather than to jeopardize its border and security, and the fanning of separatism on its border.

At that time, Soviet Union and Mongolia shared large borders with Xinjiang and in this context the emergence of Pakistan significantly mattered, which was the only Muslim State that shares large border with Xinjiang compared to Afghanistan, which shares a tiny strip with Xinjiang. Other Muslim States (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan) emerged after the breakup of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Pakistan followed a strict policy of non-interference in the affairs of Xinjiang

from the very inception of its emergence. Therefore, besides border agreement, the policy of non-interference created the room for an expanded cooperation between Pakistan and China.

The population of Xinjiang is around 23 million, ten times lesser than Pakistan. The area (1,660,000 sq km) is double to that of Pakistan. Like Pakistan, Xinjiang is also multi-ethnic, home to Hans, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Huis, Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, Mongols, and Russians races.

Today, Xinjiang is rapidly progressing and the Chinese Government has been massively investing in building infrastructure in Xinjiang. In 2010, China allocated US\$ 100 for the development of Xinjiang. The region of Gilgit and Baltistan are greatly peaceful but they are largely underdeveloped. Five years later, after Chinese Government launched Xinjiang development plan, China also decided also to build infrastructure (energy and roads and port) in Pakistan under the cover of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to connect Gilgit and Baltistan, and Gwadar as well as the rest of Pakistan to Xinjiang. The CPEC is directly benefiting both Xinjiang and Gilgit-Baltistan to upgrade their infrastructure.

The total GDP of Xinjiang (US\$ 144 billion) is slightly half of Pakistan's total GDP. Xinjiang exports are US\$ 19 billion, slightly lower of Pakistan's exports. The annual GDP growth rate of Xinjiang has remained 10.5 percent during the past four years, compare to Pakistan's growth rate of 4 percent for the same period. Per capita of Xinjiang is recorded US\$ 2,898 compared to US\$ 1,561 per capita of Pakistan. Xinjiang is rich in mineral such as coal, oil, gas, gold, jade, and salt. Pakistan can learn a lot lessons from Xinjiang development and its economic performance in recent years.

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