

Pakistan Today

Islamabad

24 May 2017

Recapping Prime Minister's Visit to China

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Pakistan and China enjoy a historic closeness. Their economic ties have entered into a new phase under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) when President Xi visited Pakistan in April 2015. At that occasion, in order to alleviate economic ties between the two countries, China offered a massive economic package of US\$ 46 billion to address Pakistan electricity woes and build its physical infrastructure. The CPEC is now yielding positive turnarounds and helping in boosting Pakistan's economy. After many new agreements have been drawn, the package has already exceeded to US\$ 62 billion.

On the invitation of President Xi, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif undertook an official seven-day visit to China on 12-18 May to participate in the Belt and Road Forum (BRF) for International Cooperation held in Beijing. He also visited Hangzhou and Hong Kong.

Prime Minister Sharif met with President Xi and his counterpart Premier Li as well as meeting a number of world's leaders who participated at the BRF. He addressed the Plenary Session of the BRF on 14 May. He lauded the CPEC and the progress made therein. He said that "The CPEC is a project owned and nurtured by all citizens of Pakistan. It is also fully compatible with our own Vision 2025, which invests our resources in multiple corridors of regional cooperation, including energy, industry, trade and transportation. In pursuance of this vision".

Prime Minister Sharif also participated at the Roundtable of the world's leaders on 15 May and said that "connectivity is not just about connected countries and businesses; it is mainly about connected peoples and nations. As we connect Xinjiang with Gawadar and Karachi, we are not only connecting two nations, but on a much broader scale, two regions, which in turn will provide links to the Middle East and Africa on one side and Europe and the rest of the world on the other."

Prime Minister Sharif was accompanied by the four Chief Ministers, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, Planning, Development, and Reform Minister Ahsan Iqbal, Railways Minister Saad Rafique, Commerce Minister Khurram Dastagir, IT Minister Anushay Rehman, and Adviser on Foreign Affairs Sartaj Aziz.

Ahead of the BRF, Pakistan signed six agreements worth US\$ 500 million. They included: Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative; agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation (1.5 billion RMB for Gawadar Airport etc.), framework agreement on implementation of up-gradation of ML-1 and establishment of Havelian Dry Port in Pakistan; MoU on implementation of ML-1 and establishment of Havelian Dry Port in Pakistan; agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation (0.8 billion RMB for Gawadar Airport); and agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation (1.1 billion RMB for East Bay Expressway).

Ahead of the visit and during the visit, two unfortunate but deliberate developments also occurred. In the first incident, ten labourers were killed in Pishgan Gawadar district to send a powerful message to China and the world community to be gathering at Beijing next day that Pakistan is not a safe country for CPEC projects. Second incident was related to the Dawn leak that irresponsibly questioned the wisdom behind the CPEC. It tried to sensationalise CPEC initiative. Corporate farming goes back to Pakistan's investment policy in the 1990s. At that time, Daewoo Company had shown interest in corporate farming in the Punjab and Sindh. Criticising the Chinese companies for the same, makes no sense.

Chinese participation in agriculture corporate farming will enhance per yield production and convert Pakistan's agriculture on modern and efficient patterns of farming. Corporate farming is an essential part of Government investment policy of the 1990s. Visa facility also falls in the same category.

Dawn leak tried to damage the business and investment environment created under the CPEC. Chinese enterprises and culture have flourished in many Western countries, Australia, and Japan. Dawn tried to put effort to make Chinese business controversial in Pakistan.

Pakistan follows the most liberal investment and business policy to attract investment for the past quarter century. It is only China that came up to positively respond to our liberal investment policy in every sector of the economy. In this context, there is no point of criticising China or any other country that would like to take the benefits of Pakistan's liberal investment policy. This policy is rapidly converting Pakistan into an emerging market in Asia.

During his visit to China, Prime Minister Sharif also visited Hangzhou to lure Chinese investment and met with the Chairman of Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, to invest in Pakistan's e-commerce to digitalise the economy. Alibaba Group has also spread its network to rural economy, micro-financing, marketing, public welfare, life sciences and traffic control with 33,000 stations operating across the globe, providing 100 million jobs. The Group signed a MoU with the Trade Development Authority of Pakistan (TDAP) to support development of SMEs and financial services.

On the third leg of his visit, Prime Minister Sharif visited Hong Kong SAR for three days. He became the third Belt-and- Road leader to visit the Hong Kong SAR after Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Indonesian President Joko Widodo. Prime Minister Sharif addressed the "One Belt One Road Pakistan Investment Forum" attended by leading businessmen. He also discussed infrastructure projects with the Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying and his successor, Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, who will take over in July. Chairman of Shandong Hi-Speed Group Corporation and Chairman of ZTE Corporation also held meetings with Prime Minister Sharif.

In short, Prime Minister Sharif's visit to China was mainly business-oriented to seek more investment from China and the Hong Kong SAR and enhance the participation of their businessmen under the umbrella of the CPEC and emerging new opportunities. The BRF authenticated the already turning around economic ties between Pakistan and China and showed unflinching resolve in the CPEC.

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