

# Indian Council of World Affairs

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## View Point

### PM Gilani Visit to China: Symbolic or Substantive?

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The four-day state visit by the Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousef Raza Gilani to China from 17 to 20 May 2011 received more than usual attention in the international media primarily due to its timing. The visit was scheduled in advance in the context of the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China and celebration of 2011 as China-Pakistan year of friendship. Coincidentally, the strained Pakistan-US relations on account of the Abbottabad incident provided the space for the opinion that Pakistan also has other options.

Since the Abbottabad raid of May 2, 2011 in Pakistan, China has expressed a high level of verbal support to Pakistan on the counter-terrorism issue and has highlighted the so called 'sacrifices' made by Pakistan. This was further endorsed in the Joint Statement signed by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Pakistani PM Gilani on 20 May 2011. The Chinese side reiterated that Pakistan's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity should be respected and Pakistan efforts to promote peace and stability in South Asia should be recognized and supported. It is significant that the Joint Statement also notes: "Pakistan reiterated that it would never allow its territory to be used to attack any country and will continue to support international counter- terrorism cooperation". What is more important today is that the signatories to documents, also assure each one about the serious commitment to the compliance with the letter and the spirit of the statement. It has been a consistent

demand by India that Pakistan must not allow its territory for terrorist acts against India.

The PM Gilani visit triggered a debate about the strategic balancing role in the region by China and Pakistan against the US and a view that the visit to China is a move to seek Beijing's support amid the growing tensions in the Pakistan-US ties. However as Sun Shihai, Vice Director of the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has noted, the Gilani visit has hardly any implications for Sino-US relations because 'all parties have their own [role] to play for regional stability'.

China agreed to provide 50 JF-17 thunder aircraft to Pakistan on easy loan terms. The value of the deal is more symbolic than substantive. The aircraft is currently jointly produced by Pakistan and China in their respective countries, but it was reported that 50 aircrafts may be equipped with more sophisticated avionics. Moreover, the fact remains that China has been Pakistan's biggest supplier of conventional arms and defence cooperation is a major aspect of Pakistan-China relations.

There is a view in China that the US presence in Pakistan also serves Chinese strategic interest. China's ethno-religious separatist problem in the Xinjiang region is increasingly being connected with the network of cross border and trans-national terrorism as acknowledged by the Chinese government from time to time. It is in the interest of China that the US Drone strikes continue in Pakistan since some of the strikes in the past were directed at the training camps of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic Jihad Union in the Waziristans, which were also training Uighur terrorists from the China's Xinjiang region.

Chinese netizens and bloggers at *the Global Times* even noted that China-Pakistan strategy this time is to secretly send Chinese special troops to Pakistan for protecting nuclear installation against any US takeover. However, the Chinese government approach has been cautious enough not to strain their relationship with the US by discussing any such proposal with PM Gilani.

Economic cooperation and trade also received attention during PM Gilani's visit and it was proposed that the bilateral trade should be increased to US\$ 15 billion in the next two years compared to US\$ 8.67 billion in 2010. However, the balance is very much in favour of China and Pakistan's trade deficit is more than US\$ 5 billion. Both countries had concluded negotiations for Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with special onus placed on reducing Pakistan's trade deficit in bilateral trade. Both sides are also in negotiations for a currency swap agreement. The two sides signed three agreements on cooperation in the field of economic assistance, finance and mining during the visit.

Du Bing at the South Asia Centre, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, has noted, "Economic cooperation is the mainstay of China-Pak friendly relations". According to agreements signed in 2010, China was to invest around US\$ 30 billion in next five years in Pakistan. However, during this visit China announced a modest economic package of US\$ 400 million with some projects for the expansion of infrastructure in Pakistan.

While the phrase 'all weather strategic partners' was reiterated by both leaders, China was cautious enough to avoid any remarkable substantive move such as increasing its economic assistance to Pakistan significantly or providing additional military assistance that may hurt Sino-US relations in any significant manner. Moreover, it was also reported that China suggested to Pakistan to 'mend its fences' with all its neighbours including India and expressed its concerns over terrorist centers in Pakistan. This is certainly a reason for optimism for regional stability.

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