



NAWAZ SHARIF'S CHINA VISIT: EXPANDING COOPERATION

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The Prime Minister of Pakistan Muhammad Nawaz Sharif paid an official visit to China at the invitation of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang from July 3-8, 2013. This was Nawaz Sharif's first overseas trip after taking oath of office and followed by Chinese Premier's visit to Pakistan in May 2013. These successive visits, in a short period of time, reflect the positive desire of both countries to further reinforce the existing 'brotherly' and 'time-tested' China-Pakistan relationship. Reaffirming the bond, Nawaz Sharif said that the relationship between the two countries was 'sweeter than honey'. During the visit, Nawaz Sharif met with President Xi Jinping, held talks with Premier Li Keqiang, and also met with Mr. Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China.

It is interesting to note that Nawaz Sharif chose China for his first official visit instead of Saudi Arabia, which was home to the Sharif's family while they were in exile from 2000 to 2007. The trip to China was indeed a prudent step and has expanded the scope of Pakistan's strategic partnership with one of its most trusted allies. The trip was significant for Pakistan, as it faces several domestic challenges and China is the only country which can help Pakistan to overcome many of its problems without any collateral costs.

The two countries signed eight Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) and Agreements to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties. One of the important agreement includes ‘Pakistan-China Economic Corridor’, to be built at the cost of US\$ 18 billion, which will link Pakistan’s Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea and Kashghar in Xinjiang in northwest China. Under the project, Beijing is expected to add a railway line, optic fibre link and a petroleum pipeline across the Karakorams. It would also involve the development of industrial projects along the Corridor and construction of a massive special economic zone in Gwadar. According to Nawaz Sharif, the Corridor project is a ‘game changer’ for the whole region. However, there are a number of challenges including the security of the Corridor, as it would pass through the Taliban infested territory in the north-western Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). At another level, the nationalists in Baluchistan view it as an attempt by the ethnic Punjabis to strengthen their control over the desert region and plunder its natural resources.

In recent years, economic cooperation between Pakistan and China has seen significant expansion. The bilateral annual trade has touched US\$ 12 billion for the first time and more than 120 Chinese companies are doing business in Pakistan. The pro-business and investment friendly Nawaz Sharif government has welcomed Chinese investment to facilitate and revive its moribund economy beset by inefficiency, corruption, political instability and chronic energy shortages. Nawaz Sharif assured the Chinese that he would create an investment- friendly environment in Pakistan.

Both sides also discussed the issue of security in the Xinjiang region. While Pakistan is closely cooperating to help China curb a Muslim rebellion in the restive Xinjiang region, recent deadly attacks by Islamic Taliban on foreign tourists, which included two Chinese nationals, have been a cause of concern for Beijing. The Chinese officials have urged Pakistan to enhance safety of Chinese nationals in Pakistan and to crackdown on insurgents from China’s Muslim Uighur minority who have taken refuge in Pakistan’s northwest region.

Pakistan is currently facing its worst energy crisis that has led to violent protest in some parts of the country. Nawaz Sharif also sought assistance from China to ease the country’s energy crisis and has resolved to eliminate all the bottlenecks leading to investment in the energy

sector. The issue of cooperation in the field of civil nuclear technology was also discussed. Pakistan has installed two 300 MW nuclear power plants with Chinese assistance. Both countries also signed agreement for hydro-energy, solar energy and coal-based power projects and discussions were held on the Neelum-Jhelum and Diamer-Bhasha hydropower projects. Further, the two countries also agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation in the field of maritime security, search and rescue and disaster relief, combating piracy, maritime scientific research, environmental protection and blue economy.

The current trends in the deepening of Pakistan-China relationship stem from uneasiness in Islamabad's diplomatic relations with the US. Pakistan views China as an important counterweight to the US, which provides to conduct their counter-terrorism campaign have also strained ties between the two countries. Consequently, Pakistan and China are being drawn closer.

From the Indian perspective, the growing Pakistan-China relationship raises two concerns: first, China's growing presence in the Pak-occupied Kashmir (PoK) region and their expansive range of developmental projects currently underway that has security implications for India; second, Beijing's renewed commercial/naval engagement in the Gwadar port. A Chinese state-owned company has recently taken over the complete operation of Pakistan's strategically important Gwadar port that could facilitate a base for the Chinese navy to operate in the Indian Ocean.

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