



Premier Li Keqiang's Visit to Pakistan

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Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's two-day state visit to Pakistan on 22-23 May 2013, has been greatly hailed as successful by the governments of the two countries. There is no dearth of generous adjectives to describe the bilateral relationship. The 'all-weather friends' have also been referred as 'weatherproof' partners and 'iron brothers'. There is hardly any doubt that the relationship is special and strong, however, the rhetoric and limitations of the relationship is also evident.

Premier Li had a wide range of talks with various stakeholders in the government of Pakistan. He met the outgoing President and Prime Minister of Pakistan, Prime Minister-elect Mr Nawaz Sharif, Chief of Army Staff General, Mr Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, along with the other services chief, and the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. Further, Premier Li gave a speech at the Senate of Pakistan.

The Joint Statement issued during Premier Li's visit to Pakistan highlighted to deepen 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. A total of 11 agreements were signed between China and Pakistan including: Agreement on Boundary Management; Agreement on Border Ports; MoU on Cooperation for Long Term Plan on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; MoU on Maritime Cooperation; and Agreement on Establishment of Confucius Institute at Karachi University.

Agreement on Boundary Management System between Xinjiang and Gilgit-Baltistan, a part of the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), and MoU for economic corridor which will pass through PoK are inimical to India's national interests. Pakistan and China have agreed to establish an interface between China's strategy to develop its western region and Pakistan domestic economic development. To achieve the goal, the two sides would strengthen cooperation in trade, investment, energy, agriculture and finance. Through its 'Western Development Programme', launched in 1999, China has tried to develop its western provinces including Xinjiang, which are least developed compared to the coastal and central region.

There is no denying that the core of the Sino-Pakistan bilateral relations is strategic. China is Pakistan's biggest supplier of conventional arms and defence cooperation is a major aspect of China-Pakistan relations and the Joint Statement affirms 'the two sides agreed to further enhance cooperation in defence technology and production'.

China's strategic alliance with Pakistan also ensures stability of the Xinjiang region. The Joint Statement points out that the two countries regard East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a common threat and reaffirmed their resolve to continue their cooperation to jointly combat the so-called three evils namely 'extremism, separatism and terrorism'. Today, China's greatest domestic security concern is ethno-religious and separatism in Xinjiang. However, there is a possibility that 'instability in Xinjiang that can be traced back to Pakistan could turn out to be the real chink in the rhetorical armour of the relationship with China'.

Since the Abbottabad raid of 2 May 2011 in Pakistan, China has extended support to Pakistan on counter-terrorism. This was further endorsed in the Joint Statement and the Chinese side also reiterated its support for Pakistan's 'independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity', possibly referring to the growing discomfort in the Pakistan-US relations. However, there is a view in China that the US presence in Pakistan also serves Chinese strategic interest. The US drone strikes in Pakistan, some of them in the past, were directed at the training camps which were also training Uighur terrorists from the China's Xinjiang region. Significantly, there was no statement expressing concern on terrorist centers in Pakistan during Premier Li's visit to

Islamabad, although such concerns were raised by China during Prime Minister Yousef Raza Gilani's visit to Beijing in May 2011.

In his meeting with the Chinese Premier, Mr Nawaz Sharif (who will form the next government), sought China's assistance in overcoming Pakistan's worsening power crisis and urged him to further expand cooperation in the civil nuclear technology sector. China's civil nuclear cooperation with Pakistan has been a contentious issue for violating the relevant norms of Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Nawaz Sharif also expressed his eagerness to avail Chinese expertise to develop power and port infrastructure in Pakistan. Nonetheless, Pakistan's ability to protect Chinese investments and assets has been a great concern for Chinese investors. For instance, China's *Kingho* Group withdrew from mining project worth US\$ 19 billion over security concerns in 2011.

China's policy towards its neighbours is closely linked with its leaders' objective of economic modernization of the country. Sino-Pakistan economic relations largely favour China. The volume of bilateral trade reached US\$ 12 billion in 2012 and the two sides plan to increase it to US\$ 15 billion within the next three years. However, Pakistan's trade deficit is more than US\$ 4 billion. The China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed in 2007 has benefitted China far more than Pakistan as Pakistan's goods face tough competition in the Chinese markets. Premier Li's call for a 'dynamic trade balance' with Pakistan will go unfulfilled unless concrete measures are taken by China to reduce the trade imbalance.

Premier Li Keqiang voiced the slogan *Chin-Pak dosti zindabad* (Long live China-Pakistan friendship) and assured 'every support and assistance' to boost bilateral cooperation. However, Premier Li was cautious and did not announce any substantive economic assistance package (which Pakistan needs at this moment) or additional military assistance, and skipped any discussion on Pakistan's role in sponsoring terrorism. Although China-Pakistan relationship portrays solidarity and depth, the inherent contradiction and conflict of interests pose challenges to the relationship.

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