**The power of cultural exchanges**

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I have made nearly 200 trips to Pakistan, during which I deeply felt the sincere friendship extended by the Pakistani people.

Premier Zhou Enlai once said that the Pak-China friendship took root as early as the dawn of history. The time-honored people-to-people cultural exchanges between the two countries can be divided into four stages. The first were the ancient times. The ancient Silk Road owned three main routes, one of which was the route from Xinjiang to West Asia and Europe via Pakistan. It was an important link for political, economic, trade and cultural exchanges between China and Pakistan and even Eurasia as a whole.

The second phase was from the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Pakistan to the end of the cold war. In May 1951, China and Pakistan officially established diplomatic relations as Pakistan broke through the obstruction of the United States and firmly supported China's position on Tibet and in the war against US aggression in Korea. Pakistan was the first Islamic country to declare recognition of the People's Republic of China and the third non-socialist country to establish diplomatic relations with new China.

From 1966 to 1978, China helped construct the Karakoram Highway (KKH), which brought the bilateral cooperation to a new height. Chinese and Pakistani road builders braved the severe cold and scorching heat and constructed the highway, laying a road of friendship, and creating a miracle in the history of world highway construction. The KKH is praised as ‘the eighth miracle of the world’.

The third phase was after the cold war and before the initiation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). By the end of the cold war, despite the tremendous global changes, people-to-people exchange between China and Pakistan witnessed full-angle development in multiple fields. In the backdrop of relentless natural disasters, the two governments and people fought hand-in-hand, creating touching stories one after another. In 1996, when an avalanche hit the mountain area of northern Pakistan, I led a Chinese rescue team; on October 8, 2005 when a 7.6-magnitude earthquake struck Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and Azad Kashmir, I was entrusted with the mission of leading a Chinese rescue convoy with 13,000 tents and other relief supplies to the affected area in time against harsh weather.

In 2008, when the Wenchuan earthquake occurred, Pakistan immediately emptied its strategic reserve tents to help us; and again in 2010, when the Attabad Lake broke out in northern Pakistan, China sent out medical supplies. The list of such stories goes on and on.

The fourth phase of our relations started with the start of CPEC. In 2013, China and Pakistan announced CPEC. During President Xi Jinping's first visit to Pakistan in 2015, he made it clear that CPEC is a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and identified the "1+4" cooperation – including Gwadar Port, energy, infrastructure construction and industrial cooperation. Thus, China-Pakistan relations have entered a new era of all-round cooperation, which also calls for stronger people-to-people connectivity.

According to incomplete statistics, the total investment reached $19 billion and drove up Pakistan’s GDP by 1-2 percentage per annum, created 70,000 jobs for Pakistani people, and gained momentum in large-scale bilateral exchanges in education, culture, medical service, think tank, employment and poverty alleviation.

Northern Pakistan, which borders Xinjiang, is a weak point in CPEC planning and progress. Due to its remote location, the local people are in great need of help. In 2016, entrusted by the CPC Xinjiang Committee and the Xinjiang government, I led a delegation of Foreign Affairs Office and other departments of the Xinjiang government to Pakistan. After the visit, we proposed livelihood assistance, such as the donation of China-Pakistan friendship schools, bilingual e-education and training centers, clinical cars, the ‘health and brightness tour’ for cataract operations, the donation of safe-drinking water, ice-breaking and snow-removal machines for KKH, solar lighting projects as well as a training programme for staff in medical, agricultural and police fields.

Through the implementation of these livelihood assistance projects, the local people got a sense of tangible gains and a deeper understanding of the China-Pakistan friendship, and consequently became more supportive of the CPEC construction and Xinjiang’s efforts to maintain stability and development.

After eight years of hard work, CPEC has seen its early harvest. However, some US and western media outlets continue to make negative reports on the achievements.

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, the two governments and people have firmly supported each other’s fight against the pandemic. At the beginning of the outbreak, Pakistan President Arif Alvi was among the first world leaders who sent solidarity to President Xi. After the outbreak in Pakistan, China immediately sent medical teams to Pakistan with anti-epidemic supplies. After China's successful introduction of the Covid-19 vaccine, Pakistan became the first recipient of the vaccine from China, and the Pakistan Army was also the first foreign army to receive the vaccine from the Chinese army.

People-to-people cultural exchanges are an important way to boost CPEC. The main content of BRI development is to enhance policy communication, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial circulation and people-to-people bonds. As one of the five major orientations, people-to-people communication is not only a goal, but also a method. The aforementioned livelihood assistance projects implemented under the guidance of the CPC Xinjiang Committee and Xinjiang government in recent years have spoken volumes of the crucial role of people-to-people and cultural exchanges in the construction of CPEC.

Standing at the 70th anniversary of our relations, we have the confidence and responsibility to press ahead with people-to-people engagements which will better serve the development of bilateral relations, the CPEC construction as well as China's reform, development and stability.

We need to establish a high-level cultural exchange mechanism between China and Pakistan. In the new era, with the sustained high-level development of China-Pakistan relations and the continuous expansion of the field of exchanges, the collision of ideas and interests will inevitably increase, and various new situations and problems will arise. The two countries should strengthen top-level design, build corresponding mechanisms as soon as possible, improve overall planning and coordination at the national level, lead high-quality development of bilateral cultural exchanges, and better serve all-weather and all-round bilateral cooperation.

There is also a need to guide social forces to participate in China-Pakistan people-to-people and cultural exchanges in an orderly manner. The civil society has its own strengths and plays an irreplaceable role. The Xinjiang assistance projects in northern Pakistan were all in the name of local government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and enterprises, and achieved good results. In fact, Western countries generally attach great importance to the role of NGOs, which is something we should learn from.

On the contrary, at present, China-Pakistan people-to-people exchanges are mainly carried out under the leadership of the government, with little independent and volunteer participation of social forces. We ought to set up corresponding mechanisms to actively guide and encourage the orderly participation of overseas Chinese, NGOs, enterprises and other social sectors.

We should also promote interactions between Chinese and Pakistani cultural industries. Ordinary people’s understanding of the China-Pakistan friendship remains at a conceptual level. The two sides should vigorously strengthen cultural exchanges. We can start from operable aspects, such as artistic performances and two-way translation and introduction of films, dramas and literary works, to enhance public understanding through practical ways that are appealing to people.

Developing sister cities is also a good idea. During President Xi's visit to Pakistan in 2015, Karamay in Xinjiang and Gwadar officially became sister cities. Subsequently, the two nearest counties between China and Pakistan – Tashkurgan County in Xinjiang and Hunza County in northern Pakistan – established sister city relations. The two cities at both ends of CPEC in Pakistan have successively established sister city/county relations with their counterparts in Xinjiang. Think tanks have rich intellectual resources and great social influence. The Xinjiang Kashgar University has a CPEC Research Center and is an excellent initiative.

History is made by the people. China-Pakistan relations have withstood changing international situations and made great contributions to the development and stability of both countries. Now is the right time to promote bilateral people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

Let us join hands and create a better future for people-to-people exchange between China and Pakistan.

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