

# Stable ties with China

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FOR someone who has followed Pakistan-China relations for over four decades, a recent visit to China has been especially meaningful. This is because even informed observers tend to believe that behind the protestations of traditional friendship being as warm as ever, there have been paradigm shifts in global and regional perceptions, following the traumatic events of 9/11.

China's new alliance with the US in the war against terrorism, and the fast improvement in Beijing's relations with New Delhi are cited as developments that could not but affect China's ties with Pakistan.

Perhaps the most valid argument against this view is that terrorism is not given the importance it has acquired in the agenda of the US where a unilateralist president has used this attack to justify a preemptive doctrine. The menace of terrorism and other manifestations of extremism are recognized, and the need for coordinated action to counter these is acknowledged.

However, China takes a principled position on retaining an international order based on international law and the recognized norms of international relations. China has backed the position of most major powers in favour of "cooperative multilateralism", and opposed the unilateralist approach behind the war in Iraq.

While avoiding a confrontation with the US, which could endanger its economic programme, China has continued to adhere to well-known norms, best summed up in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and set an example of seeking a peaceful settlement of disputes. Indeed, the major initiative it has taken to promote six-power talks over North Korea's nuclear ambitions has been welcomed even by the US.

One of the factors cited to justify scepticism about the cordiality marking Sino-Pakistan relations is the rise of religious parties, that won their highest ever representation in parliament in the 2002 elections in Pakistan. The fact remains that the government of President Musharraf has taken a bold position against religious extremism that only sparks religious and sectarian tensions. He has become a leading exponent of "enlightened moderation" in order to fight the menace of terrorism. It can be stated that the alliance against terrorism has become another common factor in the "comprehensive" relations between Pakistan and China.

Naturally, Pakistan has been sensitive to Chinese concerns over agitation among segments of the Muslims in China that was fuelled by the accession of the Muslim majority republics of the former Soviet Union to independence. All political parties

in Pakistan realize the need to follow the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, notably those of China, which has consistently honoured this principle.

An objective analysis of the recent evolution of Sino-Pakistan relations would confirm the view that they have gained in depth and substance with each passing year. Following the end of the cold war in 1989, the US clamped sanctions under the Pressler Law, and most other western countries placed restrictions on the transfer of sensitive technology to Pakistan. It was China that agreed to provide nuclear reactors for power generation in 1989 and 1996. Indeed, with additional sanctions imposed on Pakistan in 1998 over nuclear tests and in 1999 over the military takeover, China was virtually the only source of military hardware to maintain our deterrence against the

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threat from India.

The celebration of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2001 was memorable on account of the fillip received by economic and technical cooperation with China. Premier Zhu Rongji announced credits exceeding \$1 billion for such mega projects as the construction of the Gwadar Port, the installation of coal-fired power stations in Sindh, and the modernization of the railways. The two countries are cooperating in building state of the art equipment for the armed forces, at costs we can afford. There has been agreement of additional credits since 2001 that will further increase economic cooperation.

The writer's recent visit to China has enabled all-round discussions, during which responsible Chinese leaders have reiterated the assurances about their country's "all-weather" friendship with Pakistan, a phrase that is not used for any other country. It is a friendship marked by a high degree of trust and confidence "that will never change despite changes in the region and the world". There was readiness to constantly expand the "comprehensive cooperation" that has been built up over the years.

In presentations by scholars and persons in authority, the improvement of relations with India has been presented as a development that would be to Pakistan's advantage. It was emphasized that relations with India

would never be improved in a manner detrimental to Pakistan. Indeed, China was among the powers urging India to enter into dialogue with Pakistan. The role played by high level visits from both sides was mentioned, especially in facilitating consultations and concrete cooperation. The president and prime minister of Pakistan had paid multiple visits, as had Chinese leaders, leading to new agreements to increase cooperation, and to broaden the base of friendship. Good state-to-state relations needed to be backed by people to people contacts, notably among the younger generation.

The recent terrorist incident at Gwadar, in which three Chinese engineers died, was mentioned, and the need to improve law and order stressed. Although the Chinese government has announced that the work proceeding on the projects would not be affected, we have to take firm measures to encourage Chinese investors as well as tourists to visit Pakistan. China had agreed to include Pakistan among favoured tourist destinations, but the Chinese organizations that were preparing to organize tours in Pakistan have postponed their visits, since they feel that the security situation has to improve before foreign tourists visit Pakistan. The potential of tourist traffic from China is truly enormous, as prosperity spreads and millions of Chinese want to see the world. Last year, a million Chinese tourists went to Thailand alone.

Discussions with Chinese think tanks revealed a high degree of convergence on regional and global affairs. With China's growing interaction with the world, and involvement with key issues affecting Asia in particular, contacts between Pakistani and Chinese institutions and scholars are highly rewarding. The plans to increase student exchanges will benefit both sides, though one felt the difference in the intellectual environment between the two countries. Given the size of the Chinese market, businessmen need to explore the avenues available, notably in exporting fruit, and in joint ventures.

With Chinese entrepreneurs becoming increasingly active in small and medium sized industries, it was suggested to us during the visit that there was enormous scope for increased trade if owners of our medium and small industries could get into the market. With a common border, crossed by a major highway, and with expanded air services, our traders and chambers of commerce can help themselves, and their country by capitalizing on the friendship and goodwill that have acquired deep roots.

Seeing the attitude of the Chinese, from high officials to ordinary citizens, one draws reassurance of having a powerful neighbour, which appears to accord a higher place to the time-tested friendship with Pakistan, than to any other relationship.