

Pakistan-China relations: some thoughts

Khalid Akhtar

Much has been said about Pakistan-China relations. Suffice it to say here that they have been one of the best relationships in history. During the Pakistan media delegation visit there was the customary warm and firm reaffirmation on the part of both sides to further strengthen this historic relationship.

Pakistan has been pleased and happy to note the tremendous progress made by China. Similarly, Beijing is extremely satisfied with Pakistan's recovery in the economic field and is keen to extend all possible help to speed up and consolidate this process.

However, there is much that Pakistan can learn from China and its varied experiences. Briefing the Pakistan delegation Liu Yunshan, Member of Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPC, said that despite the ravages of weather China's growth rate last year was 9.1 per cent. And by June this year the growth rate has jumped to 9.7 per cent.

The Chinese are not afraid to discuss the grey areas. Liu Yunshan admitted that the economic development in the country has been unbalanced, faster in urban areas, but slower in rural plains. Likewise, he conceded that the distribution of national wealth has been equally imbalanced.

China faces no big problems. There is unity in the nation, the secu-

rity environment is top class and development activities going on in top gear. At the international level China is gaining added weightage with the passage of each day. However, Liu Yunshan cautioned that if smaller problems were allowed to accumulate, they would become big problems. The Chinese approach is to deal with the smaller and bigger problems with equal urgency and efficiency.

Liu Yunshan's observation has a lot of merit. Pakistan's main problem is that it has allowed to accumulate small problems since inception, and today they have become insurmountable hurdles. Imagine, the country is still groping how to proceed with family planning, living with the illusion that equality, progress and enlightenment would flourish under the shadow of feudalism, and that democracy and dictatorship can co-exist, and take the country forward and so on. The list is disturbing and a long one.

China has been quick in tackling problems. They are worried that 40 per cent of the country's youth are given to smoking. They would soon come out with a strategy to counter this menace among the youth. They have brought down the population growth to 1.3 per cent. It has been a remarkable achievement. In implementing the one-child policy the Chinese government has been considerate. First, the one child policy is not applicable to minorities and secondly, in the Chinese case where a child dies or has some medical deficiencies, the families are allowed to have a second child.

There is a visible impact on people of the economic growth the country has achieved over the years. Not only their living standard has improved considerably, but more than 20 million Chinese go as tourists to foreign countries. The number of tourists visiting China is 17 million to see some of the most magnificent historic sights. China today is the second largest user of Internet facilities showing how very well it is linked to the prevalent trends the world over.

Coming back to Pak-China relations one cannot help but point out that the vastness and depth of their relationship is not manifested in trade, and probably other spheres as well. Last year the two countries had a bilateral trade of 2.4 billion dollars, by any yardstick peanuts, considering the exceptionally warm and close ties the two neighbours have. The trade volume should have been manifold than the existing figures.

In comparison the Sino-Indian trade volume has grown rapidly in a short time with the two countries' bilateral trade going as high as 7.4 billion dollars last year. Why this dichotomy. It is not that the Chinese are more keen to do trade with India than Pakistan. Beijing, of course, would like nothing better than to have maximum transaction with Islamabad. The fault apparently lies some where else. It appears that India has responded more speedily to cash the trade opportunities with China than Pakistan. And this is despite the fact that Pakistan has a better and shorter trade route with China than compared

to India.

Recently the Karakorum highway, the main land trade route with China, remained closed for 15 days due to the strike of truck drivers. Did any one calculate the loss the strike caused due to suspension of delivery of trade consignments? More importantly why the strike was allowed to prolong? The solution that was found on 15th day could have been applied much earlier and the road opened for normal traffic. Almost all the departments of the government, whether they may be located in Islamabad or elsewhere, are victim of lethargy and bureaucratic wrangling at the cost of the state exchequer. Speed and swiftness is the key to set the trade going. Sooner the Pakistani bureaucracy learns this better it will be for the country.

Pak-China relations are certainly all weathered, time-tested, higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the Indian Ocean. All this has not been mere rhetoric, but a reality. The two countries have proved this time and again. However, with the passage of time new factors creep in and new challenges emerge. There is certainly no threat to Pakistan-China relations. However, it must be ensured that the substance should speak for the relationship than the high words surrounding them. This should guide Pakistan in the coming days.

(Concluded)

The writer is a staff member
khalid_akhtar10@hotmail.com