**An unfortunate error**

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Wednesday, Jun 29, 2022

In a surprise move, the Chinese government opted to leave out Pakistan from a major global event on development – the High Level Dialogue on Global Development – that it was hosting. When questions were raised, several explanations came forth. From Pakistan's official sources, the reason given was that it was a BRICS event and guests could have been invited only by consensus. Subsequently, the Foreign Office gave a public statement that one country, implying India, prevented China from inviting Pakistan. This was followed by an unrelated self-congratulatory statement that Pakistan was qualified to attend any global event on development.

Meanwhile, the Chinese response to the criticism came in the form of an answer to a question during the Chinese foreign ministry presser. Per the ministry spokesperson: "The decision to hold the High-Level Dialogue on Global Development was based on consultation among the BRICS countries." What did this mean? This was a Chinese event based only on consultation among BRICS members. Clearly his Pakistani counterpart had said more: that it was a BRICS event. The spokesperson went on to make some laudatory statement for Pakistan, the usual talk about friendship between the two countries – that China and Pakistan “are all-weather strategic cooperative partners, that China highly values the important role of Pakistan in promoting global development” etc.

Both Islamabad and Beijing's spokespersons had choreographed their response to the inevitable question: why not Pakistan? After all, about 14 non-BRICS countries – including Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Cambodia, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan – had been invited.

In Pakistan, among unofficial circles, various explanations were put forward in responding to the question of China not inviting its key partner in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The inevitable response to the news about Pakistan not having been invited was: how, by virtue of leading the BRI’s cornerstone megaproject CPEC, could Pakistan not be part of any Chinese-hosted high global development dialogue? Answers of course were coloured by political orientations. If you belonged to the PTI camp, the explanation was simple: naturally the Chinese were angry about ‘regime change’ and in protest did not invite the new government to participate. Straight and simple. PDM supporters insisted that China had been prevented by India from inviting Pakistan – since it was a BRICS event. And then there was a third group which felt that Pakistan had brought this upon itself by creating the internal mess that it is in today – that indeed a complaining China (regarding CPEC etc) would be justified in not inviting Pakistan. Based on the facts, none of these explanations is true.

Some facts now: this event was not a BRICS event. Having researched all the documentation on the event, it is clear that the event was held on the sidelines of BRICS. Since when are sideline events meant to get clearance from the organizers/members of the main event? Never. For example, when has an OIC event held on the sidelines of the UNGA be cleared by the UN secretary-general or by all UN Security Council members? Never.

Clearly, the High Level Dialogue was not a BRICS event. The Chinese spokesperson also only confirmed that the event was “based on consultations with BRICS members"; he did not clearly state it was a BRICS event. Significantly, after the BRICS summit which ended on June 24 a declaration was issued. Nowhere in the summit declaration was there any mention of the June 25 global dialogue as a BRICS event. It is indeed perplexing that the Pakistan FO spokesperson would say that before the event China explained the situation to Pakistan regarding one BRICS country blocking Pakistan’s participation.

If this is not a mere afterthought for damage limitation, then indeed a more serious question arises: how did Pakistan find the Chinese explanation that India had vetoed Pakistan participation in the event acceptable? Certainly this is a strange excuse coming from China – given that this was not a publicly labeled BRICS event and even more that China had multiple compelling reasons to insist upon Pakistan’s participation. Was Pakistan, in its extra cautiousness regarding US ‘sensitivity’ okay being left out of a Chinese event ? Unlikely. Then how would Pakistan accept the Chinese explanation? Equally: how could India dissuade China from inviting its key strategic partner? This is not the Chinese way, and never has been especially within the Pakistan-China context.

All is not alright with the explanations given out by Islamabad and Beijing. Why then harp on about a development which does not materially impact the strategic Pakistan-China relationship? Simply because it raises several important questions. Three are specifically important. One: does China seek to signal publicly on issues that it should, as it always has, discuss privately. Two: what caused the surprising ‘moment of weakness’ for China to be persuaded by India on Pakistan's participation? Is this newfound strategic unity on Ukraine and the Russian oil issue? The practical manifestation of this convergence is the mutually reinforcing act of buying excessive amounts of oil in the face of attempted global censure. Three: is there some misunderstanding in Beijing that, given the difficulties within Pakistan, the country will overlook being denied its rightful place at the high table convened by its strategic partner where countries with lesser stature and lesser relevance are present ? By virtue of the bilateral geo-security and geo-economic architecture that the two have constructed over the years, Pakistan remains an indispensable partner for China and vice-versa, which also translates into mutual respect and trust.

Clearly, the Pakistan-China friendship is indeed deep, and will always remain so. Strategic relations between the two countries remain, at varying degrees, the cornerstone of Pakistan and China’s national security policies. In the most testing times they have stood by each other. Last week, when India and the US jointly moved to list Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba's deputy chief as a global terrorist under the UNSC 1267 Committee, China prevented this for at least six months by putting the matter on a “technical hold.” Pakistan meanwhile has remained steadfast about not joining the global criticism chorus regarding China, saying: "we don’t criticize friends in public, we discuss issues in private". More recently, Pakistan did not attend US President Joe Biden’s Democracy summit primarily as a mark of solidarity with China.

While China has the right to raise substantive issues like implications for bilateral relations of the much talked about ‘reset’ of Pakistan relations with major powers, the slow progress on many CPEC projects, undermining security of Chinese personnel, so does Pakistan on issues like Gwadar-plus, the absence of a senior Chinese diplomat as ambassador to Pakistan, the IPPS etc. Constructive, closed-door dialogue will yield positive results. Missteps, however small, breach trust and mutual strategic faith – and must be avoided at all costs.

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