**Iron Brothers celebrate seven decades of solidarity**

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Eminent American historian Stephen F. Cohen, after a seminar was asked, which two countries in the world enjoy the closest relationship? The audience was expecting him to name the US and Israel but were taken aback when the learned academic said “China and Pakistan”. He went on to define the parameters of the deep relationship between the two, which are beyond transactional, defence or economic needs but are based on principles, mutual respect and have withstood the test of time evolving into a special bond, which we now recognize as: “Iron Brothers”.

May 21, 1951 will be remembered by the two nations as on this auspicious day, seven decades ago, the People’s Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan entered into formal diplomatic relations. The celebrations for this major landmark commenced on March 02, with an article by His Excellency, Wang Yi, State Councilor and Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China’s opinion piece titled, ‘An ironclad friendship growing stronger in the new era’ carried by a local English daily. Simultaneously, an Op-Ed by Pakistan’s Foreign Minister, Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, titled ‘Celebrating 70 Years of Pakistan-China Friendship’ carried by “Global Times” of China, commemorated the jubilations of the epoch making milestone.

The Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister reminds us of the words of late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, who stated that “Friendly exchanges between the Chinese and Pakistanis can be traced as far back as the dawn of history. Over 2,000 years ago, China and Pakistan were already connected by the ancient Silk Road, when our peoples visited each other amid echoes of camel bells. In the extended course of history thereafter, the friendship has steadily grown stronger and deeper.”

Coincidentally, Shah Mahmood Qureshi penned something similar: “Connected by geography, history, and Asian identity, the ancient linkages between Pakistan and China predate the establishment of formal ties. Since times immemorial, many Chinese monks and ascetics like Faxian and Xuanzang braved the treacherous mountains of the Great Himalayas and arrived at the famous Buddhist seminaries of Pakistan and learned the traditions and teachings of Buddhism.”

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The fact is that both nations have stood by each other in their moments of trial and tribulation. Interestingly, the Chinese side usually narrates the support provided by Pakistan to its strategic ally in its hour of need, rather than the large-heartedness depicted by China, whenever Pakistan needed it. Our Chinese brothers do not tire of reminding us that the Occident had refused to recognize People’s Republic of China, when it declared independence in October 1949 and had instead established diplomatic ties with “Republic of China”, the tiny island of Taiwan, where the Kuomintang had sought refuge after being defeated by the People’s Liberation Army. They were even given a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, making a mockery of the system. For nearly a quarter of a century, the millions of Chinese residents of the mainland, who had fought alongside the Allied Powers to defeat imperialist Japan and the Axes Powers, were left to fend for themselves, sans food, medical supplies, technology or any other logistic support even on humanitarian grounds. Their only crime was that they were Communists. In those bleak years, Pakistan stood by its Chinese brethren, providing a window of opportunity. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) was the first and only foreign airline operating between China and Pakistan. It was Pakistan that organized the 1971 clandestine visit of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to visit Beijing and lay the grounds of US President Richard Nixon’s historic 1972 visit, which broke the impasse and resulted in the establishment of formal Sino-US diplomatic ties and reinstatement of People’s Republic of China at the UN Security Council. The Chinese narrate with pride how when the great earthquake hit in the Sichuan Province of China in 2008, Pakistan donated all its tents in reserve besides sending medical teams and supplies. They remind us that Islamabad has always expressed solidarity with Beijing whether it was standoff with India in 1962 or the Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, South China Sea or Uighur issues.

On its part, Pakistan can never forget how the Chinese stood by us during our wars with India. When the US, despite being Pakistan’s ally, following the 1965 and 1971 Pakistan-India wars, placed an embargo on both protagonists, sealing off defence supplies. India was least affected by it since all its weapons originated from the USSR but Pakistan was badly hit since all its weapon systems came from the west. China came to Pakistan’s rescue, offering whatever it had, from its own rudimentary defence industry. It went a step further, assisting Pakistan establish defence production industries and provided transfer of technology, to make it self-sufficient.

This scribe first visited China in 1974 to pick up defence equipment from Urumqi, capital of Xinjiang in PAF C-130 Hercules air transport aircraft. Scores of visits as a PAF officer in subsequent years make me an eyewitness to China’s monumental development. My first visit to China, after my retirement from the PAF and as a journalist was in December 2010 as part of the 60th Anniversary celebrations of Sino-Pak diplomatic ties. Successive visits as an analyst, writer, academic and researcher have resulted in numerous books on China: China’s Stories—China’s Success; How China Transformed itself in the last Forty Years; Gleaming Gems of Chinese Culture; The Road to Leadership—President Xi Jinping; and now my latest ­100 Years of Communist Party of China—The Best Example of Selfless Service.

The way both countries stood by each other during the global pandemic of COVID-19, ensuring that the CPEC, flagship project of President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative does not lag behind due to the Corona Virus and meets fruition and being one the first recipients of five hundred thousand doses of the Sinopharm vaccine to protect the lives of our frontline health workers, speaks volumes for the depth of the relationship.

The world in general and Pakistan in particular can learn a lot from China’s miraculous eradication of total poverty. The celebration of seven decades of solidarity between the iron brothers will indeed usher in an even brighter future of Sino-Pakistan relations.

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