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## Pakistan and China: Reaffirmation of Asia's 'model' relationship

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THIS April was a month of strategic reaffirmation for two of Asia's strategically most significant countries-Pakistan and China. While the strategic parameters of the Pakistan-China relationship have long been set, there are regular additions in its content.

Leaderships of the two countries reviewed and also enhanced the existing level of cooperation. Some new projects and proposals were discussed during the politically controversial President general Parvez Musharraf's six day and the Chinese Foreign Minister Yong Jiechi's two day visit to Pakistan.

New bilateral undertakings give the Pak-Sino bond its dynamism keeping this half a century old relationship current and crucial for both partners. For example five Chinese universities are now jointly initiating a Pakistani-Chinese engineering and technology college in Islamabad beginning this September.

Also to ensure systematic and regular exchanges between key policy-making and policy implementing institutions, the Chinese President Hu Jintao proposed regular exchange visits between the legislatures, political parties and the armed forces of the two countries.

This would complement the regular interaction between the top leaderships of the two countries. Such expanded exchange will improve the quality of bilateral dialogue on major regional and international issues, increase efficiency in project implementation and enhance the official stimulus for expanding cooperation.

In April, the Chinese Foreign Minister also visited Islamabad. In his meetings he reiterated the need to strengthen trade and business relations. He talked of indispensables for and the firsts in bilateral relations.

Connectivity, through road, rail, air and sea links was crucial as was energy security. It is no surprise that for Beijing-Islamabad upgradation of KKH, the rail link to China from Gwadar and the Gwadar sea links are all priority tasks.

For energy security too various pipeline and alternative sources of energy including solar, are now being explored. Pakistan is seeking to position itself as a trade and energy corridor between China and the Middle East, a prospect that greatly attracts China. Discussions are already underway on the possibility of a Gulf-China pipeline through Pakistan. Currently more than 4000 Chinese are in Pakistan working on various projects. They are working on projects ranging from the Hydro Power project over the Neelum-Jhelum river, the Saindak copper mine, the Thar coal project and the construction of the Gwadar airport.

With a Free Trade Agreement already signed between the two neighbours, a Special Economic Zone has already been set up in Lahore primarily for Chinese investors to set up industry in a secure environment. The Pak-China Joint Investment Company (PCJIC) established mid 2007 will jointly work to promote investment, launch joint ventures, project financing, asset management, housing financing, investment in banking and infrastructure projects. This initiative will also attract foreign direct investment to Pakistan. The SEC and PCJIC are harbingers of greatly enhanced industrial and financial Pakistan-China cooperation. A 15 billion US dollar target has been set up for bilateral trade by 2011.

The goodwill between the two countries translates into intangibles that create the positive energy which contributes to the strengthening of this relationship. Over dinner good will was clear conveyed through the visiting Chinese Foreign Minister's words as he spoke to a small gathering in the banquet hall of the Pakistan Foreign office. "As the foreign minister of China the most important task for me is to ensure that this relationship continues to prosper."

He carried on "at the Chinese Foreign office when someone is appointed on the Pakistan desk we always say you will have no worries that the good health of the relationship will positively affect your relationship. For Pakistanis the only word that promptly comes to everyone's mind is brother..."

The exemplary trust factor has yielded an unusual degree of comfort factor enabling candid exchange on domestic matters between the two strategic partners.

At critical junctures in Pakistan's history the Chinese leadership has advised restraint and focus; for example on Kargil the Chinese leadership had advised and on economic development total focus. Interestingly even their divergent routes in politics do not prevent Beijing-Islamabad dialogue on governance and politics. In fact the two have coordinated closely on the ideological, political and development dimensions of countering terrorism.

Politically a generally pro-stability and pro-status quo power China has often advised its Pakistani friends, as the Chinese Foreign Minister's adviser recalled over the April 25 dinner hosted by the Pakistani Foreign Minister, that for Pakistan's own well being it was best "go beyond past political differences."

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Significantly, there is no major global issue in which the two strategic partners hold divergent views; US war on Iraq, anti-terrorism, WTO, UN Reforms, inter-civilization dialogue, multilateralism, way forward for Afghanistan, the Iranian and North Korean nuclear question, to name a few. Islamabad and Beijing work closely in international and regional forums such as the UN, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

With common threat perceptions and changing strategic scenarios the two have common goals in defence leading to numerous critical joint defence projects.

When in troubled waters the two unequivocally stood by each other. There is no record of Beijing's public censure of Pakistan on any issue. Likewise Islamabad has always risen to discount international censure of China whether on issues like Tibet or Taiwan.

Most recently when China was being internationally ragged for its policy in Tibet by boycotting and disrupting the Beijing-organised Olympic flame tour, Pakistan's supportive message was categorical. "We think that politics must be kept out of sports. Sports generates brotherhood. Sports generates closeness. If we bring politics into it, then the whole idea of sports is killed," president Musharraf said.

Interestingly, the India factor in this key Asian relationship cuts many ways. Guided by international diplomatic trends, which while not ignoring security concerns are mainly focused on matters of energy security, market access, security and access to trade routes and cheap but quality joint production, the relationship, Beijing and Islamabad simultaneously seek to check India's rising conventional and non-conventional military power yet increase their commercial engagement with India; as does India.

However, how the Indo-US axis develops in the coming years will influence the three China-Pakistan-India triangular relations. While joint undertakings in multiple fields are the brick and mortar for this structure, it is the trust and a common worldview that secures this relationship structure against the tectonic changes occurring in global trade, politics and security.

It is a relationship whose impact is going to be increasingly felt beyond the two states.

Provided this relationship stays its course and Pakistan's internal politics and governance produce internal stability, Pakistan will emerge as a major Asian state influencing the continent's security, trade and political patterns.

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