



Zardari's visits to China **By** **Rahimullah Yusufzai**

After every visit by President Asif Ali Zardari to China, his Chinese hosts start wondering about his subsequent tri-monthly trip there. They have to figure out where next to take the Pakistani leader, who is proud of fulfilling his promise of visiting China every three months.

President Zardari has visited China four times since assuming office. As noted by Wang Yang, member of the political bureau of the Communist Party of China, the President's fourth visit within one year showed the importance he attaches to China. The president of Pakistan has every intention of continuing the routine as long as he is in power. In his own words, he visits a new province every time he comes to China as he wants to learn and educate himself about the remarkable progress that the Chinese people have achieved in every walk of life.

The Chinese are good hosts. They are happy to welcome the Pakistani president and take him to at least two provinces on each of his trips to China. They will continue to do so as long as President Zardari wishes to continue the practice. They cannot say no if the president of a friendly neighbouring country insists on paying quarterly visits to their country.

However, arranging presidential visits requires time and effort. Logistics have to be provided and security needs have to be met to avoid mishap. The president is accompanied by a sizeable delegation comprising government functionaries and experts from sectors that are relevant to the visit and in which memorandums of understandings (MoUs) are to be signed. As many as 30 MoUs have been signed during the last year and 50 new development initiatives undertaken as a result of President Zardari's visits to China. It remains to be seen if these undertakings will bear fruit, though it must be said that the president has been holding special meetings to review progress on areas of cooperation that are agreed upon during his sojourns to China. Bureaucratic hurdles often divert attention away from such matters. It would be no use signing new MoUs without ensuring progress on previous ones.

Fitting a visit by the president of a country that is important to China into the busy schedule of Chinese leaders obviously requires prior planning. The top Chinese leadership would be available for meetings with President Zardari if he came on proper state visits. That they have been unable to receive him on his tri-monthly trips to China is understandable. The president, too, has been visiting the provinces instead of going to Beijing, as his visits are primarily aimed at witnessing with his own eyes the amazing progress that China has made in the fields of agriculture, industry and technology, and learning and benefiting from its experience. In October 2008, Mr Zardari had gone to Beijing on his first state visit on the invitation of President Hu Jintao.

During his recent four-day visit to China, the president went to Hangzhou in Zhejiang province and Guangzhou in Guangdong province. According to Masood Khan, Pakistan's ambassador to China, the two provinces are the largest trade partners of Pakistan with an annual trade volume of more than \$3 billion. Zhejiang and Guangdong provinces have been described as leading examples of China's spectacular economic growth during the past decades. Hangzhou, stated to be 2,000 years old, is one of the six ancient capitals of China, along with Beijing, Xian, Nanjing, Luoyang and Kaifeng. Apart from discussing serious economic issues and persuading Chinese investors to invest in Pakistan, President Zardari could also do some sightseeing by visiting historic places like Hangzhou.

During his previous visit to China in February, the President went to Wuhan and Yichang in Hubei province where four cooperation memorandums were signed with Sindh province on subjects including agriculture and water conservation. He also saw the gigantic Three Gorges Dam, considered the largest hydel-power generating project in the world. On the last leg of that visit, the president reached Shanghai, which is bound in a relationship with Karachi after the two were declared twin-cities in 1984.

However, the potential of this relationship or of Peshawar with its twin-city Urumqi, Abbottabad with Kashgar and Lahore with Xian has never been realised. Twinning of the NWFP with Xinjiang province was done in 2008, but this hasn't benefited anyone. Punjab's twinning with Sichuan province, though, has made some progress due to the keen interest taken by the two recent Punjab chief ministers, Chaudhry Pervez Elahi and Shahbaz Sharif, to strengthen the friendship and mutually benefit each other.

Though the emphasis during President Zardari's visits to China is on economic cooperation, he has also been highlighting the political aspects of the deep-rooted friendship between Islamabad and Beijing that began when Pakistan became one of the first countries to recognise China's independence. In this respect, he has been recalling

on every visit to China that the foundation of this friendship was laid by the PPP's founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He referred to it as a three-generation relationship that the PPP and the Bhutto family has had with China. A visit by Bilawal Bhutto Zardari to China last year during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics is mentioned as the bonding of the third generation of the Bhuttos with the Chinese people after Mr Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto.

However, it is the economic aspect of the Sino-Pakistani friendship that has been the focus of attention during President Zardari's visits to China. Based on their joint five-year economic plan and free-trade agreement, the two countries have been exploring further avenues of cooperation. Mr Zardari is keen for China to make use of Pakistani seaports of Karachi, Port Qasim and Gwadar, as these were nearer to the Chinese heartland than Shanghai and Hong Kong, which are busy and could get clogged as China continues its economic progress and increases its exports at breakneck speed. He also wants Pakistan to help channel energy supplies from the Gulf to China. He would like to have more Chinese investment in Pakistan and for their trade to grow. Their bilateral trade was more than \$7 billion in 2007 and an ambitious target of \$15 billion annually has been set for 2011. Chinese exports to Pakistan have increased manifold, primarily due to the machinery and equipment being sent from China for big Pakistani projects like the Gwadar seaport and in the railways and hydel-generation sector. Pakistan's exports to China are primarily cotton yarn and fabrics, followed by seafood and leather goods. Export of tropical fruits is also expected to pick up in future. However, Pakistan would have to do a lot more to diversify its exportable commodities to China to balance the huge difference in their trade. The two countries are also involved in joint ventures in both civil and military fields. The military and weaponry joint projects include JF-17 Thunder fighter aircraft, K-8 Karakorum advance training aircraft, space technology, AWACS, Al-Khalid tank and Babur cruise missile.

While Pakistan is keen to benefit from its friendship with China, it cannot ignore Chinese concerns in the region. No other issue is of greater concern to China than the separatist movement in Xinjiang and the reported presence of some Chinese Muslim militants in Pakistan's tribal areas and Afghanistan. Without making it public, Chinese leaders and scholars would want Pakistan to assist Beijing in tackling this threat and preventing the militants or arms to be smuggled across the Sino-Pakistani border. The number of the Chinese Uighur Muslim militants linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and hiding in Pakistan may not be more than 80, but for China they constitute a constant danger, more so in the backdrop of the recent violent ethnic riots in Xinjiang. China is also concerned about the growing US and NATO military presence in Pakistan as it believes some of the Uighur separatists are getting help from America and its Western allies. Another matter of concern for China is the safety of its workers employed on projects being executed by Chinese firms in Pakistan and Afghanistan. A number of Chinese workers have been killed and kidnapped in Pakistan despite stepped up security measures undertaken by Pakistani authorities.

Pakistan would thus have to do its bit to sustain its friendship with China. High-sounding statements like Sino-Pakistani relations being higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the oceans make one feel good, but the practicalities of life and the ground realities cannot be ignored in a relationship that needs to be reoriented in the changing world situation after having withstood the test of times.

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Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Zardari's visits to China," *The News*. 01-09-2009.

Keywords: Political science, Political leaders, Politics, Technology, Politicians, Democracy, International relation, Shabbaz Sharif, President Zardari, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Pakistan, Afghanistan, China, NATO, NWFP