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CHINA ACTS WEST

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The Chinese Foreign minister Wang Yi had recently paid an official visit to three Asian countries, namely Pakistan, United Arab (UAE) and Iran. The official tour was in response to the invitation of Advisor to the Pakistani Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs Sartaz Aziz, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Destination Pakistan:

Sino-Pakistan relations is popularly referred as an “all weather friendship” that has stood the test of time irrespective of incidents at the regional and the international realm. During the recent visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hailed the country’s amity with China as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. A significant outcome of the visit was the confirmation of President Xi Jinping’s tour to Pakistan at an early date. Although no specific date of the visit has been suggested as of now yet a much speculated word doing the rounds in the official corridors of Pakistan is the presence of President Xi Jinping as the guest of honour on Pakistan’s national day (March 23rd).

The visit of President Xi would be extremely significant in light of two facts:

- Firstly, this would be the first visit of a Chinese President to its “iron brother” in nine years. President Hu Jintao made the last official tour in 2006.
- Secondly, the attendance of Xi as the chief guest of Pakistan’s National day would be in stark contrast to US President Barack Obama’s presence as the chief guest on India’s Republic Day. This



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in a way highlights the strategic alliances that have emerged in South Asia in the twenty first century.

In his official tour to Pakistan, Wang Yi's rendezvous with the leadership was guided by few key issues. Foremost being the restoration of Afghan stability. Although China had isolated itself from the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan for a long time, yet today it seeks to play a "constructive role" in the region.ⁱ This shift in Chinese stance is mainly motivated by its desire to secure its investments in the mineral industry of Afghanistan as well as its concern of growing unrest in the Xinjiang province.

Further, a chief concern of China is the internal stability of Pakistan as there is much likelihood of the ongoing terrorist activities in the region to spill onto the Chinese soil. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a terrorist outfit that operates in Pakistan and supports the cause of Xinjiang's independence, is a chief irritant in this context.ⁱⁱ Not only did Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain offer assurance to Wang about Pakistan's keenness to cooperate with China for the reconstruction of Afghanistan but also Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif briefed him about the country's efforts to curb terrorist strongholds in its tribal areas under Operation Zarb-e-azb.

Apart from deliberations on security concerns, a key focus of Wang's visit was also the setting up of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is part of the larger projects of China's Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road. The CPEC underscores the development of an integrated trade network through the construction of infrastructure.

The bonhomie between the two countries was further demonstrated by the declaration of 2015 as the Pakistan-China Year of Friendly Exchanges. On the auspicious opening ceremony of the event held at the Pak-China Friendship Centre in Islamabad, Wang Yi was invited as the guest of honour. Wang had also inaugurated the Confucius Institute in Faisalabad and Chinese Consulate-General in Lahore.



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Destination UAE:

The next leg of the official tour was Wang's visit to UAE. Here he met the Prime Minister of the country and the ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum. The engagement between the two leaders was one of warmth and friendship whereby Mohammed articulated the importance of the Sino-UAE relations and expressed keenness to act as a portal for China offering it access to develop relations with the Arab and Gulf countries. Further, an initiative by the Chinese government to promote UAE, as a tourist destination and a site for investment in China would be a welcome step. ⁱⁱⁱ

The dialogue also asserted the significance of the ancient Silk Road which had forged a relationship of cooperation between China and the Arab world. In this context Mohammed also expressed his solidarity to China's construction of the "One Belt One Road". Simultaneously, UAE also revealed its keenness to gain experience from the Shanghai World Expo held in China, in an attempt to conduct the 2020 World Expo successfully.

In the course of the talks between Wang Yi and his counterpart in UAE Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Wang appreciated the country's "spirit of openness and inclusiveness" and the momentum at which the relationship has witnessed growth inspite of differences in their respective cultures and societies.

Hailing UAE's keenness on the development of the "One Belt One Road", Wang proposed that the growing proximity between the two countries could be further boosted through the intensification of economic relations by cooperating in the development of high-speed railways, telecommunications and nuclear power amongst other sectors.^{iv} The two sides pledged to develop long-term political and strategic relationship. China anticipates that UAE would play a constructive role in promoting the free trade zone dialogue between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and China.^v



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Destination Iran:

The last stop of Wang Yi's official tour was Iran. During his conversation with Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Wang spoke of Iran's unique status in the region and highlighted its influence in the regional and international affairs, in particular the Non-aligned Movement.

The necessity to promote the bilateral relations between the two countries was underscored in the meeting. Mutual political trust through high level exchanges, a joint endeavour to construct the "One belt One Road", seeking industrial cooperation and cooperation in terms of combating terrorism –were identified as key principles guiding their relationship.

As regards Iran's nuclear issue Wang drew attention to the significant progress that had already been made but claimed that the "last kilometre of the marathon of negotiation" which was left, was the most critical and complicated.^{vi} The successful completion of the nuclear issue talks is critical to Iran as it implies safeguarding its interests and legitimate rights, which include the peaceful usage of nuclear power and maintenance of regional stability and harmony.

The discussion ended with an emphasis on China's righteous stance and constructive role in the negotiation of Iran's nuclear issue whereby the former had stressed on the mechanism of dialogue instead of imposing sanctions to solve the case.

Thus, amidst the ongoing speculations regarding China's "peaceful rise" and its attempts to counterbalance the US pivot on Asia, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's trip to Pakistan, UAE and Iran is extremely significant. It is a shift from China's 'Look West Policy' to its 'Act West Policy'. The rising dissatisfaction in Pakistan and Iran towards the West has led the Chinese to believe that this is the opportune moment for them to gain allies in the region. The unanimous acknowledgement of all three countries to participate in the "One Belt One Road" program is another successful outcome of this official tour. Such a program would not only offer economic benefits but would also have political implications. Official tours such as this would enable China to project itself as a responsible stakeholder in the regional and international sphere.



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ⁱ “China vows stronger economic, security ties with Pakistan”, Dawn, 13 February 2015.

Available at : <http://www.dawn.com/news/1163270>

ⁱⁱ Tiezzi Shannon, “China, Pakistan Renew ‘Iron Brotherhood’”, The Diplomat, 14 February 2015.

Available at : <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/china-pakistan-renew-iron-brotherhood/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

Available at : http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1238327.shtml

^{iv} “China, UAE agree to boost cooperation, ties”, Xinhua, 15 February 2015.

Available at : http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-02/15/c_127496838.htm

^v “China, UAE agree to boost cooperation, ties”, Xinhua, 15 February 2015.

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^{vi} Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China.

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