

The Chinese are here

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First in today's article, I would like to congratulate Pakistan and China on the cooperation that has been established between the two countries. It will benefit both countries. President Xi Jinping's state visit to Pakistan this week was a great success. President Syed Mamnoon Hussain, Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, the civil service and the public and private sector's technical experts and business community must be very satisfied with it all. Nawaz Sharif's first foreign travel after he came to power in June 2013 was to China. Now, following steady preparatory work in both countries, the first fruits can be reaped, and Nawaz Sharif's government can begin delivering faster on some of the important election promises, including steady electricity supply, economic growth and development. The Chinese projects for some fifty billion dollars, according to press releases, will create many jobs, and there will be many direct and indirect benefits. Once completed, the importance of the projects will be massive to both countries and their people.

In Pakistan, we should not see the Chinese projects as development assistance, although some projects may have such elements. But I assume most of the projects are business projects with 'take and give' for both parties. This is the future format of international cooperation, indeed between countries neighbouring each other at development levels that are not too far apart.

Now then, when the Pakistani and Chinese leaders have had a couple of celebratory days together in Islamabad, we should all be happy – and perhaps also have a cautious word or two, hoping that Pakistan is not selling out too much of its decision-making power and long-term possibilities to run its own house as it pleases. I am sure debates about such issues will come from time to time in future.

Furthermore, I wish Pakistan can also enter into close cooperation agreements with all other neighbouring countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, India, yes, even that country, and others. We are free to choose our friends, not our relatives and neighbours. If we work together, we will sooner or later become friends and even like each other. Isn't that the principle and belief behind arranged marriages, too?

I believe in concrete projects of importance to one or several neighbouring countries rather than diplomatic and political statements and conferences. Climate change, water management, transport and communication, and many other fields are examples of where we must cooperate. Not all cooperation projects need to be as grandiose and launched with as much fanfare as when cooperating with the emerging superpower of China. But Pakistan and the other countries in the region are all pretty large and will only become more important in the coming generations, with growth and development benefitting its own people and neighbours.

When Pakistan and other countries establish and expand cooperation linkages with China, it seems that the main focus is on invest in infrastructure, access to natural resources, industrial development, and other 'hard fields'. Less focus seems to be given to the superstructure, notably cultural, educational, social, philosophical, religious, and other field. Yet, all countries have large historical and contemporary treasure chests and much to share with each other.

Cultural exchange is always important to deepen cooperation between countries. Aren't we all curious about China, with a cosmology of its own, and the world's most successful country is our time?

Wouldn't the Chinese be interested in learning more about other countries, too, after all they will interact closely with most countries in the world in the coming decades and beyond?

I am quite certain there will come a time when the Chinese again will give more attention to philosophical and religious issues. They have now lived through decades of pragmatism and materialism, recently also with less focus on political ideology and idealism than during the heydays of communism and Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 70s. True, the Chinese should celebrate its economic success, but life is much more than economic development, hard steel, shining glass and plastic shaped in imaginable forms. What will happen when the growth rate becomes less robust than today, a time which is bound to come? And how will the country tackle diverse opinions and pluralism? Then the importance of the superstructure will again be essential and become more visible and debated.

In cooperation between countries in fields of trade, commerce and industry, there may initially be little need for debate about the superstructure. Yet, there will soon be interest for cultural exchange, to begin with at a relatively superficial and ceremonial level. Over time, there will be a growing interest for deeper cooperation in many fields.

Even the colonialists were interested in the cultures of their far away possessions. In those times and with those relationships, the colonial powers wanted to change and dictate what was right and good. In our time, we are more tolerant and we see the value of *exchange* – of ideas, beliefs, history, how to organize our societies, and so on. That makes us today more open for learning from each other, the way true cultural exchange should be. Neighbours should always behave like that – learn, share and teach, live and let live. Besides, in our time, neighbours are not only nearby, but also far away. Yet, through modern technologies we communicate as if we live near each other.

Let me repeat my excitement over the Pak-China agreements signed this week, wishing both countries success in the immediate business cooperation, and in the broader cooperation that will follow between Pakistan and China, and with other countries in the region and further afield. If we all in the region, in Europe and America and everywhere else could rather cooperate than look at each other as threats and enemies, we could also reduce the military budgets, indeed the nuclear budgets. Then we would have much more money for business, culture and development activities. That is indeed what we should aim at.

Finally today, I would briefly like to draw attention to the immigration tragedy in Europe. This week, more than 800 people drowned as they tried to cross the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Italy. If there had been better cooperation and more equality between the continents that would not have happened. I hope the European Union, having the upper-hand, will understand that new ways of thinking about migration issues and other cooperation must be found. Hundreds of years of amassment of wealth by the countries in the North, at the expense of their neighbours in the South, must end. New and more equal forms of cooperation must be found. That is the only way to reduce the pressure on the North, and will lead to peace and prosperity in the South. Again, the key concept is cooperation. And Europe must realize that its concepts in the past were not always ideal, neither that time nor today. Hence, the other concepts are equality and the sharing of knowledge across borders.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid
