

## **Pakistan-Azerbaijan relations – reaches a new momentum, new spring**

**By Muhammad Asif Noor**

The relationship between Islamabad and Baku further blossomed when President of Pakistan Mamnoon Hussain visited Azerbaijan with a four day official visit. Love was in the air and the congeniality of relations took new shape and heights during and after the visit to the brotherly country.

Four MoUs of bilateral cooperation were signed while President Mamnoon Hussain also conferred Pakistan's highest civil award of "Hilal-e-Pakistan" upon First Lady of Azerbaijan, Mehriban Aliyeva, in recognition of her services to the people of Pakistan and continuous humanitarian work, spanning over a decade, by her organization Heydar Aliyev Foundation in Kashmir and other parts of Pakistan.

The Pakistani president was also given honorary doctorate degree in recognition of the outstanding contributions to enhancing friendship and cooperation. Ambassadors of both countries Dashgin Shikarov and Khalid Usman Qaiser also received praises for their outstanding contribution for making this visit a success, for both countries. Several high level talks were held between officials of Pakistan and Azerbaijan - business forum and discussions were done to expand bilateral cooperation in diverse sectors particularly trade, economy and strategic partnership of both countries at various levels.

The Pakistani president was accompanied by the Federal Minister for Defense Productions, senior officers of different ministries and around forty Pakistani industrialists and traders. The businessmen were from the field of energy, textile, pharmaceutical, sports, infrastructure, construction material, surgical instruments, food products and leather good. A joint declaration was issued after the meeting of the presidents.

Pakistan and Azerbaijan are having exceptional relations since the inception of relations. These are based on culture, history, traditions, political, economic, religious and strategic partnership and sense of togetherness that began when Pakistan became the second country after Turkey which recognized the independence of Azerbaijan.

Pakistan has also, in clear terms, extended its support to Azerbaijan's positions on the issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Pakistan has always condemned Armenia's hostile and aggressive policy and is not having any diplomatic relations with Armenia due to the occupation of the lands of Azerbaijan. Pakistan was also the first country to adopt a parliamentary resolution that strongly condemns the genocide committed by Armenian armed units against the civilians in Khojaly city and urged international community to fulfill the resolutions of the UN Security Council. Moreover, despite having diplomatic links with India, Azerbaijan has always been supportive to Pakistan's stand on Kashmir and has always stood by Pakistan on every international and regional forum. Both countries have always supported each other on the international arena.

Several significant headways have been achieved during the visit of the Pakistani president in the field of economics. One giant step was the establishment of Pakistan-Azerbaijan Business Forum and then later its inauguration during the visit.

The aim of the forum is meant to enhance economic linkages between businessmen of the two countries, hence having positive impact over future of relations. It was explored that there are several sectors where businessmen from both countries can come together to explore several sectors like defense equipment, oil and gas, garments, construction material, pharmacy, agriculture, and other fields.

In the joint declaration also there was a strong urge to enhance cooperation in trade, investment, transport, tourism, education and science and technology. Pakistan can learn from the experience of Azerbaijan in oil and gas sector hence improve the quality of energy sector. On the other hand, Azerbaijan can benefit from Pakistan's experience in the textile, garments and pharmaceutical sector.

A review of the history of relations reflect that it was based on solid grounds and aims of getting closer to each other through various steps including high level visits, joint ministerial meeting and establishment of Pakistan –Azerbaijan Friendship Forum. First ever high level meeting took place in October 1995 when President of Pakistan Sardar Faruk Ahmad Khan Legari visited Azerbaijan and later the then President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev paid an official visit to Pakistan in April 1996. In ECO Summit, 2000, in Tehran and 2002, in Istanbul, Presidents of both countries met and later during the 58th session of the UN General Assembly held in 2003, Prime Minister of Azerbaijan and President of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan met. Several significant agreements had also been signed between the countries to provide a framework for bilateral cooperation in all spheres, especially in the trade and commerce.

Joint ministerial commission was also established to further enhance the cooperation between the countries. Pakistan offered assistance in financial sector, particularly banking, development of textiles and micro-financing. Similarly, Pakistan could benefit from Azerbaijan's experience in energy and development of petroleum sector. As agreed, Pakistan established a subsidiary branch of the National Bank of Pakistan in Baku.

Both countries intend to increase trade volume and there is legal base for cooperation. Till today more than 30 documents on cooperation were signed between the two countries. The reason behind the low level of economic cooperation is basically the absence of direct flights between Azerbaijan and Pakistan. Governments of both sides are also working toward opening such direct links. After direct and one-to-one talks between businessmen, all options are bright and the sky is the limit when it comes to expanding cooperation at all levels of business.

Although in early years the trend for economic cooperation was not satisfactory, now it has an upward direction because of several efforts made at state level, but there is now a wide sense of urgency.

Pakistan and Azerbaijan are also cooperating in the defense field - a military cooperation agreement has been signed in 2003. The nature of relations is also strategic since both states face similar threats and challenges at various levels. This was also endorsed during the recent visit of the President of Pakistan to Baku to turn the relationship into strategic partnership. The relations between Azerbaijan and Pakistan are being successfully developed under the "Agreement on Defense and Military Cooperation" signed by the Governments of the two countries.

Universities of Azerbaijan and Pakistan have opened their admissions for students from both countries. Azerbaijan has also offered to support needy students within Pakistani Universities by providing them with financial assistance for completing their education.

Several students have also come to Baku to complete their studies in Medicine and other fields. In the field of culture and literature, visit of Azerbaijan's musical troupe in 2005 to Pakistan and their performance for the high officials of country and public in general, opened way for future cooperation.

The publication of books in Urdu and English by the Embassy of Azerbaijan in Islamabad served for the exchange of hand-writings and cooperation between the national libraries of the two countries. The activities of Pakistan-Azerbaijan Friendship Association in this regard are appreciable. Recently National Book Foundation in cooperation with the Embassy of Azerbaijan established Nizami Ganjavi Corner to exhibit the life and work of the great national poet of Azerbaijan. It is also heartwarming to see that the Embassy of Azerbaijan is also cooperating with Pakistan Bait ul Mall for Philanthropic ways of supporting the needy citizens of Pakistan. We have also seen that Azerbaijani brothers and sisters opened their hearts during the Earthquake of 2005 and later during the devastating floods of 2010 and other calamities. For these kinds of activities, Heydar Aliyev Foundation has remained quite active and supportive. The cooperation is expanding and several new fields have been explored to enhance partnerships including education.

It is said, where there is a will there is a way and since the nations on both sides have a strong urge to come closer together to cooperate and enhance partnership all will be well. There is no reason and doubt that the Pakistani and Azeri nation are one nation and one soul, they are closer to each other and will remain so by achieving various cooperation milestones. It is only the will of the people that will prevail.

We are friends, brothers, strategic partners, and will continue to cooperate for the sake of our peoples and countries, as well as regional security and stability.