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Signs of a New Dynamic in Pakistan-China Strategic Links

China has spoken about its “deepening ties” with Pakistan while participating for the first time in the military parade on the Pakistani National Day in Islamabad on 23 March 2017. This is a significant sequel to the elevation of the Sino-Pakistani “all-weather friendship” to “all-weather strategic cooperative partnership” in April 2015. Exactly a decade earlier, the two countries had indeed signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighbourly Relations. While the Treaty has remained a rarely-discoursed bond between the two countries, China’s latest move signals a new regional dynamic which should be of interest, perhaps even concern, to Pakistan’s neighbours, India and Afghanistan.

P S Suryanarayana¹

Citing ‘China Military’ as the source, the Chinese Defence Ministry has emphasised the strategic significance of the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA’s) participation in Pakistan’s military parade on the Pakistani National Day in Islamabad on 23 March 2017. Deputy Commander of the PLA Beijing Garrison Li Jianbo headed the 72-member Honour Guard that was drawn from China’s Army, Navy and Air Force. Li said his country’s first-ever participation in the military parade on Pakistan’s National Day was “a sign of deepening ties

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between the two sides”. Li was further quoted as saying that “the Chinese military is increasingly going global to help expand the influence of the PLA and enhance friendship and mutual trust between militaries and countries”.²

‘China Military’ further quoted Pakistan’s President Mamnoon Hussain as thanking the PLA for its gesture. No less importantly, the Chinese state media outlet, *Xinhua*, cited Pakistan’s Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) unit to emphasise the PLA’s first public presence in any Pakistani parade.³ The Chinese Foreign Ministry, too, echoed warm sentiments towards Pakistan on this occasion. China’s popular female spokesperson Hua Chunying was categorical in saying as follows: “Joining the Pakistani side in its military parade this time is another vivid testament to [,] or an epitome of [,] the high-level strategic mutual trust and friendly relations between the two countries and the two military (sic)”.⁴

On the Pakistani side, ISPR quoted the country’s Army Chief, General Qamal Javed Bajwa, as thanking China for its unique gesture. Interestingly, Gen. Bajwa had called on the Vice-Chairman of China’s powerful Central Military Commission, General Fan Changlong, in Beijing exactly a week before the PLA’s public presence in Islamabad. Gen. Fan told Gen. Bajwa that “China appreciates Pakistani military’s positive efforts to safeguard the security of CPEC [the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor now under construction] and is willing to ... promote pragmatic cooperation between the two militaries in all fields to a new high”. Reciprocating, Gen. Bajwa assured Gen. Fan that “Pakistan is willing to work with China to firmly fight against the terrorist forces so as to guarantee a complete success of the CPEC project”.⁵

An Expanding Strategic Landscape

In the expanding strategic landscape on the Sino-Pakistani front, it is self-evident that China’s latest public demonstration of solidarity with Pakistan’s military establishment goes beyond

² People’s Republic of China (PRC), Ministry of Defence, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2017-03/24/content_4776438.htm (Accessed on 29 March 2017)

³ PRC, Ministry of Defence, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/DefenseNews/2017-03/20/content_4775985.htm (Accessed on 22 March 2017)

⁴ PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1448615.shtml (Accessed on 29 March 2017)

⁵ PRC, Ministry of Defence, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2017-03/17/content_4775795.htm (Accessed on 22 March 2017)

any outward symbolism. The substantive context simply is the “security” of the CPEC – an evolving matrix of connectivity-and-infrastructure projects designed to link China to the Arabian Sea (and the Indian Ocean) through the length and breadth of Pakistani territory. It is common knowledge in international circles that the “security” of the CPEC, both during its formative phase and operational life, translates into protection from attacks by motley groups of terrorists based in Pakistan, be they of anti-China or anti-Pakistan inclinations.

It is equally well-known in this context that India has, without success, continued to object to China’s efforts to carve the northern portion of the CPEC through some Pakistan-controlled areas that New Delhi regards as its own. Viewed in this Indian perspective, China’s latest public display of military solidarity with Pakistan constitutes a new dynamic whose possible implications for the future might take some time to decipher. Over the past several decades, China has maintained with Pakistan “normal defence exchanges and cooperation in military industry and trade”⁶. This standard Chinese phraseology is a thinly-veiled acknowledgment of the frequently reported sales of Chinese military hardware to Pakistan across the entire tech-spectrum. However, it is an empirical reality that China has not so far militarily intervened on behalf of Pakistan in any of its wars with India.

It is in this overarching context that China’s latest decision to allow the PLA troops to be seen with the Pakistani military personnel in the public domain, albeit on an essentially ceremonial occasion, acquires much regional importance. To my query whether this could be viewed as a signal for a real or potential Chinese move towards “inter-operability” with the Pakistani military establishment, a top Pakistani diplomat’s response was not dismissive. In simple terms, “inter-operability” is the ability of two or more militaries to work in concert in both table-top exercises and battle-field situations. The diplomat saw this as an “interesting” proposition in the present strategic landscape in Asia.

Such a potential scenario should be of interest, perhaps even concern, to India which has had an often-chequered equation with China and a war-ravaged relationship with Pakistan. This reading will not be affected by the possibility that the PLA may have carefully chosen the present moment for a public demonstration of solidarity with the Pakistani military establishment. From the Chinese perspective, the present moment is fraught with the perceived Indian adventurism of encouraging the ‘anti-China’ activities of the India-based Tibetan leader,

⁶ PRC, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1446684.shtml (Accessed on 22 March 2017)

Dalai Lama. Relevant to this line of inquiry is the scenario of India facing a two-front confrontation or even war with both China and Pakistan at the same time.

As for Afghanistan's likely interest in, or even concern, over the open display of PLA-Pakistani military bonhomie, Islamabad has, in recent weeks, raised the stakes by accusing Kabul of fomenting anti-Pakistan "cross-border terrorism".⁷ While Kabul does not have with Beijing the kind of chequered relationship that India has had with China, Afghanistan cannot be unmindful of the new public display of PLA-Pakistani military solidarity. The reason has much to do with the current state of disrepair on the Afghan-Pakistan political-strategic front.

Need for Clarity on a Treaty

Greater clarity regarding the real objectives of the PLA in being seen in the company of the Pakistani military establishment on a ceremonial occasion – something different from joint exercises – is possible if the Sino-Pakistani Treaty of Friendship is better understood. However, the finer details of the Sino-Pakistani Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighbourly Relations (2005) are not easy to come by, although China has made online references to it occasionally. Significantly, however, there was no mention of this Treaty in the Joint Statement issued after Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Islamabad in April 2015 when the two countries actually enhanced their "all-weather friendship" to "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership".⁸ Nonetheless, it is difficult to believe that the Treaty of 2005 has been annulled, considering the available indications of a continuing strategic harmony between China and Pakistan.

It is indeed well-known that the strategic ties between China and Pakistan are primarily of the benefactor-beneficiary kind. Yet, it is arguable that Pakistan might have, in its 2005 Treaty with China, held out an open or subtle assurance of no-first-use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese, whose declaratory policy in this regard indeed applies to the Pakistanis as well.⁹ But this is only one aspect of a relationship that has endured over several decades.

⁷ Accusations against Afghanistan for fomenting anti-Pakistan "cross-border terrorism" have repeatedly figured in the recent official statements in Islamabad. These can be accessed from the websites of Pakistan's Foreign Ministry and Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) unit.

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, Joint Statement between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of China on Establishing the All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership (20 April 2015), <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?prID=2733> (Accessed on 21 April 2015)

⁹ P S Suryanarayana, *Smart Diplomacy: Exploring China-India Synergy*, World Century Publishing Corporation, New Jersey, USA, 2016, pp. 97, 138 (n. 28) 166, 251

The big-picture of this Sino-Pakistani Treaty, too, requires a more transparent exposition. Without enumerating the relevant provisions of the Treaty, a Western scholar, writing in 2015, has pointed out as follows: “When [Pakistani leader, Zulfikar Ali] Bhutto, in 1974, suggested to [the-then Chinese Premier] Zhou Enlai that the two sides enter a defence pact, ‘the Chinese premier politely declined the suggestion’. It has stayed that way ever since. A treaty signed in 2005 gives some legal justification for one side to come to the other’s aid but no obligation”.¹⁰ Confidence-building for strategic stability in South Asia will be greatly facilitated if China and Pakistan elucidate the finer points of their Treaty of 2005, especially if the PLA’s latest public show of fraternity with the Pakistani military establishment is in tune with that Treaty.

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¹⁰ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geopolitics*, (Updated Indian Edition), Random House India, Gurgaon, 2015, p. 30 (citing Riaz Mohammad Khan’s book of 2010 on Afghanistan and Pakistan, for China’s refusal to enter into a defence pact with Pakistan in 1974.)