

China-Pakistan Relations: Evolution of an ‘All-Weather Friendship’

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Abstract

The paper examines the evolution of what is now viewed as an ‘all-weather relationship’, the bilateral linkages between China and Pakistan. It seeks to demonstrate the nature of this partnership that has withstood the test of time and what is the impact on it of certain recent international developments like the death of Osama bin Laden, and the resultant strains between the United States (US) and Pakistan. It argues that these events have raised the implications of Sino-Pakistan relationship from a regional to a global level, with the likelihood that the matrix on which it will be played out will now be wider.

Introduction

An enduring feature of international relations in contemporary times has been the high level of bilateral connections between China and Pakistan. Initially, they were strange bedfellows; one a socialist state and the other Muslim-majority, one a Western ally and the other a significant member of the Eastern Bloc. Yet, driven by perceived mutual common interests they managed to

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achieve such close proximity that the relationship now appears to have become deep-rooted, multi-dimensional and sustainable. President Hu Jintao has described it as ‘higher than the mountains and deeper than the seas’. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani has matched the poetic parlance by describing China as ‘the most beloved of all nations’. A recent Pew Survey of Pakistan’s public opinion showed that 84 per cent of those polled had a favourable view of China and 16 per cent of the US. That says it all! This rendered Pakistan the most pro-China country in the world. Unsurprisingly, both China and Pakistan describe their bilateral relationship as an ‘all-weather friendship’, in their political grammar, the highest in the pecking order of any type of bilateral linkages.

History of Evolution

In 1950, Pakistan became the first Muslim country and the third non-communist state to recognise the People’s Republic of China. Throughout the 1950s, China’s relations with both India and Pakistan moved on an even keel and when Zhou en-Lai visited both countries in 1956, he tried his hands at balancing when he spoke with equal fervour of ‘Hindi-Chini *bhai bhai*’ and ‘Pak-Chin *bhai bhai*’. Though, when the relations with India soured by 1962 followed by the war, and ‘*bhai bhai*’ became ‘bye-bye’, the relations with Pakistan, perhaps due to that very reason, grew and the borders were quickly settled. The Pakistan International Airlines linked China to the outside world. Pakistan, technically a Western ally as a Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and a Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) member, became a conduit connecting China with the US and facilitated, former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger’s and, former US President, Richard Nixon’s visits to Beijing in the early 1970s. During the 1980s, Pakistan helped both the US and China to supply arms to the Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviet Union, to whom Pakistan had never felt close, partly for its ties with India, its stated position on Kashmir and for a sense of perceived betrayal in some Pakistani quarters during the Tashkent Agreement in 1966 (that concluded the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War). In 1986, Beijing and Islamabad signed a Comprehensive Nuclear Cooperation Agreement and it is widely believed that China’s support was critical in Pakistan achieving nuclear weapon capabilities. Finally, in 2007, China became Pakistan’s biggest arms supplier with no strings attached and their true ‘strategic partnership’ began.

Some Ruffled Feathers

Occasionally, along the way there have been some ruffled feathers. Pakistan was not always satisfied with the reasons why China never militarised the strong verbal support during the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 or 1971. This was particularly true, during the Kargil conflict in 1999, when China appeared to take a neutral position between India and Pakistan, and had asked the visiting Pakistani Foreign Minister, Sartaj Aziz, to ‘settle disputes peacefully through dialogue and negotiations’. Indeed in 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin did cause some ripples of surprise in Pakistan, when he asked that India and Pakistan build a cooperative relationship and set aside the ‘difficult issues’. The reference to Kashmir was not specifically mentioned but widely understood. In fact, China had always been a bit uncomfortable on the continued stress on Kashmir by Pakistan. As a principle, ‘self-determination’ could have adverse ramifications for, say, Tibet and nationalism based on religion was unpalatable, due to ramifications for the Chinese Muslims of Xinjiang. Also, on the part of China, there was some unhappiness over, the former Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf’s leanings towards the US. Over time, Pakistan, it seems, began to understand the subtlety and compulsions driving China’s postures. Eventually, Musharraf also turned to China and was able to get Beijing to criticise certain US actions in Pakistan. When there was some opposition to holding the Olympics in China in 2008, the Pakistanis showered flower petals on the procession carrying the torch through the country. China continued its generous economic and military backing to Pakistan and, in turn, Pakistan supported China on all issues of importance to China. These included questions of China’s sovereignty over, say, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, and other sensitive issues such as human rights, just as China has lauded Pakistan’s ‘counterterrorism’ role in the face of some negative vibes from the US.

Current Bilateral Ties

Strategic

The father of the Pakistani nuclear bomb, Dr A.Q. Khan, was a great friend of China. Indeed, China has always been a source of support and inspiration to Pakistan’s nuclear programmes. When stringent export controls imposed by Western countries rendered procurement of uranium enrichment equipment difficult for Pakistan, the China National Nuclear Corporation reportedly provided 5,000 ring magnets, key components to the bearings that facilitate the high-speed rotation of centrifuges. China also designed and supplied heavy water for a Khushab reactor,

which aids production of plutonium, key for building smaller tactical theatre weapons. This is important for Pakistan to build a possible first strike war-fighting deterrent of miniature battle-field tactical weapons, to be mounted on the recently tested Hatf-IX missiles with only a 60 km range and with a radiation fallout restricted to the battlefield. It has been claimed that this has already been achieved. Of course, Pakistani scientists provided enormous intellectual backup in these endeavours. Today, Pakistan probably has the fastest growing nuclear armoury in the world – somewhere between 90 and 105 warheads, or 70 to 120 by another account – a source of satisfaction to Pakistanis and worry to many other nations.

China is the source that largely equips Pakistan's military, a powerful element in Islamabad's policymaking. For the Pakistani Army, apart from small arms purchases, a joint venture project produces the Al-Khalid MBT-2000 tanks. Since 2007, for the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), China has been producing the multirole fighter aircraft JF-17 Thunder Fierce Dragons, (known in China as FC-1 Xiaolong) of which Pakistan has probably already inducted 22, while testing eight more and eventually looking to procuring 150. The PAF already has a fleet of Chinese aircrafts, including F-7 PGs and A 5s. When Gillani visited Beijing in May 2011, following the US incursion into Pakistan that led to the killing of Bin Laden, the fast delivery of 50 JF-17s to Pakistan was agreed upon. At the end of the visit the Pakistani Defence Minister announced that Islamabad was requesting China to build a naval base for Pakistan in Gwadar, where Tianjin Zhongbei Harbor Engineering is already working on a US\$1.6 billion project. While a Chinese spokesman has denied it, it is significant that to the Pakistani Minister it appeared like a cherished aspiration that he perhaps wanted fulfilled. Since 2009, China has also been supplying the Pakistan Navy with F-22 P frigates.

Economic and Trade

China is investing heavily in infrastructures within Pakistan. Apart from nuclear power projects, the Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway along the ancient silk route, which began in 1966, there are several mega-projects in which China is involved – particularly in the sensitive province of Balochistan. Next to the port, the China Harbor Engineering Company is building an international airport. In the same region, China's Great United Petroleum Holdings is developing a US\$13 billion oil refinery. Though, the political turmoil in Pakistan and economic challenges have led to decrease in foreign direct investment, which in fiscal year (FY) 2010-11 shrank by 28 per cent to US\$1.23 billion in the 10 months leading up to April 2011. The Asian Development Bank has predicted that the Pakistani economy will grow by a moderate 2.5 per cent in 2011 and

3.7 per cent in 2012. In the struggling economy of Pakistan the consumer prices are still high and the budget deficit is growing to 5.5 per cent of the gross domestic product above a 4.9 per cent target for FY2011-12. Wa Gang, China's Minister for Science and Technology, has said, 'should growth improve, so will investments'. In 2010, bilateral trade grew 27.7 per cent over the previous year to US\$8.67 billion, with China exporting US\$6.94 billion, and importing US\$1.73 billion. During the Gillani visit, there was talk of raising those figures to US\$15 billion by 2015.

A soft power that China exerts is that there are 6,000 Pakistani students currently studying in China and additional visits are being organised in each other's countries for young people. The cooperation between both civil and military officials has also been very strong. Indian authorities have noticed this cooperation and have raised a point about the People's Liberation Army engineers operating in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Drivers of Foreign Trade

While China is definitely a nation that has 'stood up' (as Chairman Mao Zedong reportedly said) and is on the 'rise', Beijing sees this as a non-threatening and a 'peaceful development' or *heping jueji*, an expression attributed to the scholar Zheng Bijian. There are certain 'original roots' in China's behaviour pattern, dating back to Mao's three-fold classification of the world, which view the 'first world' as the source of all instability. It is well known that there are red-lines that China will not allow to be crossed, such as an attack on its territory. But do current economic interests, such as the US\$3 billion investment in Aynak mines in Afghanistan, constitute as 'core' of an interest as 'territory' does? This remains the key question. Deng Xiaoping's sobering advice '*Tao Guang Yang Hui*' remains valid. It is difficult to translate, but roughly states, not to 'hide brightness, bide time and build capabilities' as Western translators have suggested. Though, it could also mean to 'keep a low profile, be modest and prudent, and seek neither hegemony nor confrontation' as many Chinese scholars insist.

Still, an increasing assertiveness is palpable, made apparent by the current US\$91.7 billion Chinese defence budget, the second largest in the world. The manufacturing of J-20 Stealth Jets and *DongFeng* 21 D aircraft carrier killing missiles added to its ambitious blue-water naval plans reflect a burgeoning capability that would logically find an expression in policy. Empirical evidence shows the river of Chinese policy meanders, but does not suddenly change course. While China will be anxious to be seen as a constructive player in the global scene, its growing economic and military strength will find fruition in endeavours to slowly place itself in a pivotal

position of international affairs. While detailing China's potentials, Stephen Roch, former Chairman of Morgan Stanley, has said, 'This is not a time to bet against China.'

For Pakistan there are constants and variables that drive its external behaviour. Pakistan has always sought extra regional linkages to narrow its power gap with its larger neighbour, India. This is its constant. The variables are the partners it turns to, initially to Western alliances and later to China. The length of its relationship with China, however, is rendering this into a constant. Pakistan's perception of India as an existential threat left it with no time or patience for idealism in foreign policy such as hobnobbing with non-alignment or *Panchshila*. H.S. Suhrawardy, a Prime Minister in mid-1950s, acidly remarked on this non-alignment in a mathematical metaphor, 'zero plus zero equals zero'. Pakistan's recent bitter experiences with the West and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization may have brought to the fore another significant potential adversary from the West. Indeed, there are those Pakistanis, including fundamentalist Islamicists, who may be beginning to feel India is the lesser adversary. The answer to this may also lie in turning to China, as the Gillani visit in May shows. A US\$5.95 billion defence budget, as the current Pakistani one is, is clearly insufficient for these objectives. This also means China for Pakistan is not just a counterpoise to the regional preeminent power but also to other pre-eminent global actors. This implies the graduation of this relationship to another level.

Conclusion

The relationship between Pakistan and China cannot just be measured in statistics. It is far greater than the sum of its parts. A practical test of how this relationship will impact on global politics will lie in the post-US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Pakistan will possibly want to see a government in Kabul that it is comfortable with. This may include elements of the Taliban. China will want its assets protected, and will appreciate a Pakistani role in this. Gillani, during a recent visit to Afghanistan, has reportedly already advised on the need for Kabul, even under Karzai to be wise and connect with Beijing. While it is too sensitive to bring Russia into this 'Great Game' yet, President Asif Ali Zardari had visited Moscow before Gillani travelled to Beijing. This was for the second meeting of the quadrilateral discussions – comprising of Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan – on the Afghan issue, the first took place in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe in July 2010. So can Pakistan also play the role of a conduit, at least in Afghanistan, between Beijing and Moscow as it once did between Beijing and Washington? With the Iranian Foreign Minister recently visiting China, can Pakistan persuade Iran, a fellow

Muslim country though with whom bilateral relations have blown hot and cold, into this set of understandings?

These are challenges that confront the diplomacy of both Pakistan and China. Next year, Pakistan will sit in the United Nations Security Council, as India is sitting now and China is a permanent member. Obviously, the two friends will have a chance to coordinate their global policies, providing a wider matrix to play out their bilateral relations. It will be important to do so because Pakistan and China have now emerged as each other's closest allies. They will also need to work through one perceptual difference. Pakistan is often in a hurry, because of exigencies. For China, on the other hand, time is not of the essence. When asked about the impact on history of the French Revolution of 1789, Zhou en-Lai famously remarked, 'It is too soon to tell!'

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