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## India, and the High Note in China-Pakistan Symphony

*The latest move by China and Pakistan to fashion an “all-weather partnership” – a nuanced upscaling of their all-clime friendship – raises the bar for India’s ongoing efforts at holding an all-weather dialogue with Beijing.*

P S Suryanarayana<sup>1</sup>

China’s latest act of benevolence towards Pakistan – the enhancement of their “iron friendship” to that of “All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership” – reflects the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s move to bank on Islamabad for his grand “Silk Road” initiatives. At the minimum, these initiatives are two-pronged: (1) carving out an economic “belt” that would connect China to Europe across land, with a strategic feeder-route into Pakistan; and (2) charting a “21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” from China towards Africa and Europe, past Sri Lanka and along the Indian Ocean.

As a prelude to this analysis, there is no need to overestimate Mr Xi’s latest meeting with the entire top-brass of the Pakistani military establishment in Islamabad on 20 April 2015. The significance of this meeting is self-evident, because Mr Xi is also Chairman of the powerful Central Military Commission in the long-governing Communist Party of China (CPC).

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However, there is really *nothing new* about Sino-Pakistani military alliance (which is what it is, in all but name). It was in 1955 that Communist China made its first friendly overture towards Pakistan, an ally then of the United States (US) in its worldwide campaign of ‘containment’ of communism which was spearheaded by the old Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> From the Chinese point of view, it was essential to woo neighbouring Pakistan which had already signed a security pact with the US in 1954. Indeed, that was the year in which India and China had warmly come together to proclaim the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as a new template for both Sino-Indian relations and broader international politics. Moreover, Pakistan was already having a difficult relationship with India. The violent memories of Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 were still fresh in the minds of both India and Pakistan. So, it made eminent sense for Pakistan to respond positively to China’s overtures to try and dilute the Sino-Indian warmth.

The worsening of Sino-Indian relations, for a number of reasons, was still some years away. But the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955 had already brought into the open the possibility of rivalry between India and China. Finally, after the outbreak of the brief but bitter Sino-Indian war in 1962, the time was ripe for China and Pakistan to firm up their ties through a border agreement in 1963. Thereafter, both China and Pakistan have not had to look back. Indeed, their ties were reinforced when the Pakistani military rulers, once again friendly with the US after a hiatus (for reasons outside the scope of this paper) facilitated Sino-American rapprochement in 1971.

China’s economic and military aid to Pakistan, aimed at strengthening the latter to face a complicated relationship with India, is often seen by analysts as an enduring manifestation of Beijing’s game-plan to deploy Islamabad as a proxy against New Delhi. Beijing’s benevolence towards Islamabad in the military domain covers the supply of nuclear armaments and delivery systems as well.<sup>3</sup> It is in this overarching context that Mr Xi’s latest offer of US\$ 46-billion worth of economic assistance to Pakistan acquires importance, both for Islamabad itself and for the wider region. China’s continuing effort, both open and subtle, to shore up all wings of Pakistan’s military forces is no surprise, especially during the

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<sup>2</sup> L. F. Rushbrook Williams. 1962. *The State of Pakistan*. Faber and Faber, London, pp. 120-121. John W. Garver. 2001. *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 91

<sup>3</sup> For an updated account of China’s assistance to Pakistan in the military-nuclear field, read FITZPATRICK, Mark. March 2014. *Overcoming Pakistan’s Nuclear Dangers*. Oxon: Routledge for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, UK.

ongoing tenth anniversary of the *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-neighbourly Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*. Signed in April 2005, the finer details of this presumably-privileged (or, secret) Treaty are hard to come by, although occasional references to it have embellished Sino-Pakistani diplomacy. There is, however, *no* mention of this Treaty in the latest Joint Statement issued in Islamabad after Mr Xi's talks with the entire Pakistani civil and military leadership.<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons for this significant omission is that Mr Xi – unlike his predecessor, Mr Hu Jintao, who had signed this Treaty with General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan – has often expressed preference for 'win-win partnerships' rather than alliances or zero-sum treaties with foreign countries.

More importantly, therefore, three inter-related key aspects of the latest Sino-Pakistani Joint Statement will be of interest and/or concern to India. These are: (1) Pakistan's centrality to certain aspects of China's new "Silk Road" initiatives; (2) Sino-Pakistani military cooperation in anti-terror operations; and (3) Beijing's subtle assurance to Islamabad that the two could, together, try and prevent India from becoming a veto-right-empowered Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council.

## **Impact on Sino-Indian Ties**

First, Sri Lanka, under its new President, Maithripala Sirisena, is weighing his options in regard to China's "Silk Road" initiatives, which include a new project called Colombo Port City and an ongoing connectivity-project at Hambantota Port. This became evident during Mr Sirisena's recent visit to China. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Mr Xi has now made the best of Islamabad's eagerness to partner China for mutual benefit. The conventional wisdom is that the Sino-Indian relations may now swing back to the old moorings of very little or even vacuous trust. This need not be pre-ordained, though. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, likely to visit Beijing from 14 to 16 May 2015, has a chance to bring the Sino-Indian relationship back to the recent new-normal of an "all-weather dialogue".

"All-weather dialogue" is a concept this author had previously envisioned as the possible new normal in Sino-Indian engagement. The first signs of such dialogue were the candid but

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<sup>4</sup> 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, (2015-04-20), <http://www.mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php?prID=2733> (Accessed on 21 April 2015)

cordial talks that were held during Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India in May 2013. Those talks were particularly significant because the prevailing military tensions along the disputed Sino-Indian border were only slowly dissipating. These signs of "all-weather dialogue" were further reinforced, when Mr Xi and Mr Modi held candid but cordial talks in Ahmedabad and New Delhi in September 2014, precisely when trigger-ready Chinese and Indian troops were confronting each other at a few points along their disputed border.<sup>5</sup> On balance, though, pleasant summit meetings can eclipse but not erase deep differences over China's and India's core interests and concerns, unless these are suitably addressed in follow-up negotiations.

In this overarching perspective, what, indeed, are India's views on Mr Xi's new "Silk Road" initiatives and Pakistan's centrality to certain aspects thereof? Official India has hardly taken a firm position. From a negative Indian perspective, however, the planned configuration of the new "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road" can give China a chance to try and surround India on all sides.

As now designed, the "Belt" will originate in China, north of India, and turn into a branch-route in the name and style of a prospective China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to the west of the Indian "heartland". Mention must also be made of the proposed Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Corridor. BCIM is a label that emanates from the alphabetical order of the names of the countries to be connected through multi-modal transport links and perhaps some economic projects as well. In geopolitical terms, the BCIM Corridor – which India has endorsed twice, the last occasion being the Xi-Modi talks in New Delhi in September 2014 – can be negatively seen as a potential Chinese card to make inroads into India's eastern flank. Still on the drawing board, the BCIM Corridor might give China access to the Bay of Bengal, a somewhat-distant gateway to the Indian Ocean that lies to the south of India's eastern seaboard. In some kind of symmetry, the prospective CPEC will surely enable Beijing to enter the Indian Ocean by skirting the western coast of India. Should Sri Lanka finally go along with China, Mr Xi's grand vision of a "21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road" – along that island-republic's southern coastal stretch – will help Beijing to draw a line (metaphorically) to the south of India, too.

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<sup>5</sup> For the signs of all-weather dialogue in Sino-Indian engagement, read ISAS Insights No.206 (3 June 2013) *An Unusual Sino-Indian Summit and After*; ISAS Insights No. 263 (25 September 2014): *A New Defining Moment in India-China Dialogue*; and *South Asia* (A Publication of the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore), Issue No. 19A (June 2013), *All-Weather Dialogue, Now!*, pp. 24-25 – all by P S Suryanarayana (accessible at <http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/publication.aspx>)

However, two caveats will be in order, to see this possibility in a proper perspective. One, Official India has agreed to the BCIM proposal. In any case, the route of the BCIM (Economic) Corridor might roughly correspond to the route already traversed by the motorists in the Kunming-to-Kolkata Car Rally in February 2013. Two, with reference to the CPEC, it is a simple but profound strategic reality that a well-developed economic corridor – consisting of a transport network as well as energy-related and industrial projects – can be put to military use, when considered necessary, besides the intended civil purposes. However, if India should have concerns on this score, the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor (DMIC), now being carved out in India, with Japanese assistance, could stoke similar concerns in Pakistan, too. At the same time, it will be outlandish to suggest or imagine the possibility of a Sino-Japanese confrontation in South Asia on account of the CPEC and the DMIC! In all, therefore, New Delhi must address the reality of the CPEC project by *creating a stake for China in India itself*. A beginning has been made in this regard, with Mr Modi encouraging China, now keen on investing abroad, to do so in India in meaningful measure. Mr Xi has already promised to invest about US\$ 20 billion in two industrial parks and infrastructure projects in India.

On balance, though, there is another significant aspect of Indian concerns regarding the proposed CPEC, with no possibility of matching or symmetrical concerns in Pakistan regarding the DMIC project in India. The CPEC is the strategic feeder route designed to branch out of the proposed China-Europe on-land “Belt” of Mr Xi’s “Silk Road” initiatives. As conceived, the CPEC, a four-dimensional project, will link China to the Pakistani port of Gwadar on the shores of the Arabian Sea, which is a somewhat distant but clear gateway to the Indian Ocean. In addition, from Official India’s standpoint, the route-map of the proposed CPEC covers Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (Azad, or Free, Jammu and Kashmir, in the standard Pakistani usage). In fact, when China signed a “temporary” boundary agreement with Pakistan in 1963, it was categorically stated that the issue could be reopened after a final Indo-Pakistani settlement over the “ownership” of Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>6</sup> With the modernisation of the Karakorum Highway (an immensely strategic Sino-Pakistani link) being an integral, or just a parallel, activity of the CPEC project, India knows that a deeper Beijing-Islamabad equation is now very much on the cards.

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<sup>6</sup> The finer nuances of Sino-Pakistan boundary agreement of 1963, as stated in this paper, are well-chronicled in China’s diplomatic documents of that period. *Diplomacy of Contemporary China*. Hong Kong: New Horizon Press, Hong Kong, 1990, pp. 187-188

Should India lose sleep over this? Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as the leader of an emerging power, has an opportunity to re-engage with Mr Xi during the forthcoming visit over Sino-Pakistani issues of concern to India. Indeed, Mr Modi need not necessarily be strident about India's discomfiture over Mr Xi's decisive move to go ahead with projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir despite his own concerns over the safety of Chinese personnel and installations in that area. Mr Modi has been less inclined than his predecessors to project Pakistan as a fly in the Sino-Indian ointment of dialogue (as it were). He can, therefore, seek to raise China's stakes in India much higher than at present instead of expressing displeasure over the new high in Sino-Pakistani relations. Mr Modi has already given room for Mr Xi to develop a stake in India by welcoming his offer of at least US\$ 20 billion in industrial parks and infrastructure projects. Mr Xi had made the offer during his visit to India in September 2014 because of China's latent urge to invest abroad extensively in order to shore up a slightly-sluggish domestic economy under its "new normal growth rate". At the same time, it was obvious that Mr Modi, too, had reckoned that investments, backed by a still-robust Chinese economy, should be welcomed in the absence of a dismal situation on the bilateral front. In sum, Mr Modi's upcoming talks with Chinese leaders will take place in a dual context of assertion and contestation. There has been a clear upswing in India's diplomatic engagement with the United States. Beijing, while being supportive of Pakistan, still harbours doubts about its ability to rein in anti-China terrorists. As for the US-related aspect of this dual context, President Barack Obama's visit to India on its Republic Day (26 January) this year had raised the prospects of a closer Indo-American strategic entente of possible interest and concern to China. Mr Obama and Mr Modi had agreed on a Strategic Vision Statement that commits India and the US to work together to ensure peace, stability and prosperity in a wide arc that would include Beijing's front-yard of South China and East China Seas. Moreover, America's new assurances of enhancing India's military profile, through co-research and co-development of next-generation knowhow for aircraft-carriers and jet engines, would have been no music to the Chinese ears. These and other aspects, like US-India cooperation in the civil nuclear domain etc., were amplified in the official documents released after the Modi-Obama talks in New Delhi on 25 January 2015. The other aspect of the dual context of Mr Modi's upcoming talks in Beijing – China's lingering doubts about Pakistan's ability to rein in anti-China terrorism – brings us to India's second key concern over the outcome of Mr Xi's recent visit to Islamabad.

## Shades of Terrorism

It is significant that the Sino-Pakistani Statement of 20 April 2015 mirrors Mr Xi's earlier concerns over Pakistan's anti-terror credentials with specific reference to China. In a candid conversation with Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Beijing on 8 November 2014, Mr Xi had emphasised that "China hopes that Pakistan could continue to take all effective measures to ensure the safety of Chinese people and institutions in Pakistan".<sup>7</sup> Given that China had already come to regard Pakistan as an "iron friend", Mr Sharif was left with no option but to assure Mr Xi that "Pakistan will make every effort to ensure the safety of Chinese enterprises and personnel and continue cracking down on terrorist forces such as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement [ETIM]".<sup>8</sup> It is common knowledge that Beijing sees the ETIM, suspected to be operating from out of Pakistan, as the main separatist group that fomented terrorism in China's Xinjiang province. The context in which China had secured such a Pakistani assurance in 2014 has not disappeared. Indeed, the Chinese side has now quoted Mr Sharif as assuring Mr Xi that "Pakistan is willing to work closely with China and try its best to guarantee the safety of Chinese personnel in Pakistan".<sup>9</sup> Mr Sharif's latest assurance, too, pertains to the planned CPEC project. Equally important is that the entire focus here is on Pakistan's anti-terror agenda exclusively in regard to China's interests and concerns.

While India should have no objection to such a Sino-Pakistani bilateral exchange, Mr Xi's latest comforting words to the top Pakistani military leaders reveal his willingness to let Islamabad be selective in its overall counter-terror operations. Mr Xi has told these interlocutors that "*China firmly backs Pakistan's efforts in safeguarding its independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and in promoting its counter-terrorism strategies in accordance with its own national conditions*".<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis added). From India's perspective, it requires no clairvoyance to recognise that the criterion of "national conditions" is but a life-line that will allow Pakistan to adopt a negative attitude towards India, while being positive

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<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, 2014/11/08, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/ytjhzzdrsrcldrfzshyjxghd/t1209091...](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/ytjhzzdrsrcldrfzshyjxghd/t1209091...) (Accessed on 18 November 2014)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan, and Both Sides Decide to Upgrade China-Pakistan Relations to All-Weather Strategic Partnership of Cooperation (2015/04/21), [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/xjpd bjstjxgsfwbfdnxyxylfdrhwhl...](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpd bjstjxgsfwbfdnxyxylfdrhwhl...) (Accessed on 22 April 2015)

<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping Meets with Military Leaders of Pakistan (2015/04/21), web address as in Note 8 (Accessed on 22 April 2015)

towards China, in pursuing a counter-terror agenda. Obviously, China and India are not on the same page regarding terrorism that affects them and is suspected to emanate from Pakistan. It is in this context that Mr Sharif has now reaffirmed his assurance to Mr Xi that they could make common cause to fight anti-China terror emanating from Pakistan. This does not, however, imply that Mr Xi has encouraged Pakistan to pursue an anti-India terror agenda.

## **Global Stakes**

The Chinese President Xi Jinping has indeed implicitly endorsed Pakistan's opposition to India's aspiration to become a veto-right-empowered Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council. This, the third aspect of India's interest and/or concern in regard to the latest Sino-Pakistani Joint Statement, is somewhat subtle but quite substantive. Now, Pakistan and China have, in a more-or-less conclusive manner, indicated that they share a common interest in shifting the goal-post for India to become a global power in China's league at the UN. The relevant part of the latest China-Pakistan Joint Statement is transparent in this regard. "The two sides believe that the [UN] Security Council reform should increase the representation of developing countries and [that they] engage in democratic consultations to seek a comprehensive solution that accommodates the interests and concerns of all UN Member States and enjoys extensive support".<sup>11</sup> Pakistan, as a member of the so-called UN "Coffee Club" of countries that oppose selective admission of new Permanent Members, is a well-known opponent of India's bid. Now, India's aspiration is bound to suffer further if the Sino-Pakistani consensus gains traction in regard to such criteria as "a comprehensive solution" and "interests and concerns of *all* UN Member States". There is, however, a possible counter-strategy that India could usefully explore. It is inconceivable that Beijing, even with a veto right in the UN Security Council, will stand in India's way, if the Chinese develop a deep stake in India, its economy, and science-and-technology prowess. So, the Asian diplomatic games are far from over. India's China-watchers can ignore the significance of the forthcoming Modi visit only at their peril.

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<sup>11</sup> Same source as in Note 4