

# ISAS Special Report

No. 23 – 6 May 2015

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## **Pakistan in China's Eyes: Pawn, Pivot or a Pointer to its World View?**

*China's engagement with Pakistan serves as a pointer to the way Beijing is likely to deal with the rest of the world as it redefines its pivotal global position.*

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Verbal grandiloquence or flowery terminologies are never in short supply when Chinese and Pakistani leaders choose to describe their bilateral relations. In his maiden trip to Beijing as Pakistan's Prime Minister this time round, Nawaz Sharif, drawing from an analogy in nature, described these as "higher than the mountains, deeper than the seas". Not to be outdone, the Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during a visit to Islamabad this February, citing a musical simile, said: "If 'One Belt, One Road' is like a symphony benefitting every country, then the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is the sweet melody of the symphony's first movement". Some observers, unfamiliar with the linguist-culture of politics in the East, may tend to dismiss such expressions as mere hyperboles. But these metaphoric pronouncements, especially when they involve China, are often fraught with deep meaning, as the actual unfolding of the China-Pakistan bilateral relations so amply demonstrates.

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The ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative referred to above, and attributed to Chinese President Xi Jinping, is the centrepiece of his foreign policy. It depicts the Old Silk Route connecting China with Central Asia, and then with Europe beyond, and the new Maritime Silk Road, linking up the ports of powers friendly to China, combining together to provide a thrust to China’s ‘westward march’ in search of trade and resources in a drive to render China (and the entire region, as the Chinese would argue) stable and prosperous. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is an off-shoot of the Initiative that comprises a 2,000-mile stretch of infrastructural projects including roads, rail-links and pipelines, linking northwest China, far from Chinese coastal waters, with the warm-water port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, in the province of Baluchistan in Pakistan. Conceptually the corridor is where the ‘Belt’ and the ‘Road’ actually meet. Also, it aims at relieving China’s nervous dependence on the narrow Strait of Malacca for shipping, seen as vulnerable to enemy interdictions at times of conflicts or war. The Chinese would provide US\$ 46 billion for the projects along the Corridor, US\$ 35 billion of which would be devoted to the energy sector to fill the gap of Pakistan’s critical power needs. In the cities and villages, Pakistanis have been known to suffer electricity supply cuts for as long as 14 hours a day! There has been some criticism in Pakistan that the path of the Corridor may have been tweaked to respond to Nawaz Sharif’s fraternal feelings for his brother Shahbaz Sharif, the Chief Minister of Punjab, and his fellow Punjabis, at the expense of the poorer province of Baluchistan. In South Asia generally, those in power sometimes see such benefits as being due to them because of their position, but the Pakistani Government vehemently denied these “allegations”. The Pakistani government is taking all the necessary precautions. Just in case some Baluchi tribesmen, often given to armed uprisings, try to show their discontent by attacking the Chinese workers, Islamabad decided to raise a force of 12,000 personnel.

The industrial plan is to add 10,400 megawatt of electricity to the supply capacity at a cost of US\$ 15.5 billion by 2018. This would, coincidentally, though some might contend this point, also be the time when Nawaz Sharif would be seeking re-election, and since the project would fulfil one of his major election pledges, the prospects of his return to power, with a bit of help from China, would be bright. Thereafter, 6,600 megawatt more would be added, costing another US\$ 18.6 billion, doubling Pakistan’s current production level of power. Understandably, Pakistan’s Planning Minister, Ahsan Iqbal, was ecstatic: “For Pakistan, it would be a game-changer,” he enthusiastically gushed, and most would agree. The amounts spent would not be in the form of traditional development aid, but as commercial credits and

loans, by Chinese banks to Chinese companies and entrepreneurs. The fact that in the past Chinese loans have often been written off, have many a time warmed the cockles of the recipients' hearts.

The visit, which saw as many as 50 accords signed, was not only about economics and trade. Military issues also figured. China offered to sell Pakistan nine conventional submarines. Their addition would double Pakistan's current fleet, though some of their ageing craft could be retired before the new procurement is in place. Analysts have said, inspired by Israeli example, Pakistan may be seeking to place nuclear-tipped missiles on these conventional sea-based platforms. Thereby, Pakistan would shore up its second-strike capability in the case of any nuclear exchange. In strategic parlance, this is the capacity to be able to absorb a first-strike by an adversary, and have enough weapons left over to mount a massive retaliation. Submarines help this scenario in two ways: First, their mobility render them a difficult target to locate and destroy, and second, because submarine-based weapons are by nature less-precise, and imprecision of a weapon is a reason for the enemy to be extra-cautious in engaging in a conflict (as there is no telling what the nature of the collateral damage would be!) The Chinese could argue that by assisting Pakistan in developing a second-strike ability, it would actually be stabilising nuclear deterrence in South Asia.

In any case, Pakistan, which has the fastest-growing nuclear armoury in the world – currently 100 to 120 warheads compared to India's 80 to 100 according to some calculations, with the potential of the numbers rising to 200 by 2020 – has already been taking steps towards acquiring the second-strike capability. It is doing so by dispersing and concealing its weapons, a process that began during the tenure of President Pervez Musharraf, and hardening the silos where the arsenals are stored. This would make it well-nigh impossible for any rival to take out all the weapons at one-go, ensuring that some of these survive to continue the conflict. Again, in theory at least, the acquisition of a second-strike capability should make Pakistan feel more secure, and consequently, less trigger-happy.

In the times when China actually viewed Pakistan as a counterpoise to India – it is arguable if that is any longer so – it was no secret that China actively assisted Pakistan in achieving nuclear-weapon capability. This was particularly true in the 1980s and 1990s. China also provided ballistic missiles to Pakistan as delivery vehicles for such warheads, and also assisted Pakistan in their designing and manufacturing. The idea was to keep India engaged

westward as China went ahead with advancing its own capabilities, not just in regional, but in global terms.

On the civil nuclear side, China helped Pakistan construct at least six reactors. This cooperation could actually benefit the Chinese through their access to Western, particularly European, nuclear technology that Pakistan possessed, such as centrifuges, but it is unlikely that the Chinese have actually taken advantage of that. China accords the same treatment to Pakistan as it perceives the US and its allies as extending to India in civil nuclear supplies. This is significant because both Pakistan and India are outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and, therefore, of some concern to the international community. Interestingly, Pakistan singlehandedly is holding up the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty at the Conference on Disarmament (CD) in Geneva, on the grounds that India's ability to obtain fissile material for civilian use from the NSG would free the raw-material for manufacture of weaponry.

Cooperation in addressing terrorism is another objective of the Pakistan-China partnership. China is deeply concerned about extremism in its Muslim-majority Xinjiang province, especially among the ethnic Uighurs, and is well aware of the possibilities of the support they might be able to attract from Pakistan-based Islamists. But instead of laying blame and responsibilities on Islamabad's door, China has acknowledged, and expressed empathy for Pakistan's own terrorism issues, and chosen to articulate its desire to work closely with Pakistan on this subject. In fact, it is at Pakistan's urgings that the Chinese had made direct contacts with Mullah Omar and the Taliban, and reached an agreement with them whereby the Taliban assured them that the territory controlled by them would not be used for attacks directed at Chinese soil. That agreement has held to date. Indeed, apart from Pakistan, China is the only country that has maintained continuous contact with the Taliban since 9/11, thanks to Pakistan's support. There is an ironical parallel in that Pakistan was also the bridge that linked the United States and Pakistan in 1971, an event that radically changed global politics since.

This is not to say, one must add, that the Chinese would prefer a Taliban take-over in Afghanistan at any time in the future. China is too pragmatic for that. It knows that such an eventuality could destabilise Afghanistan, and the region, which cannot be to China's advantage. China has been able to create a situation with Islamists outside China that the Chinese territory, would not for them, constitute a prime target. China's policy in the Middle

East has been carefully crafted to that end, playing a low-key role, avoiding taking sides, and not rushing in where angels would fear to tread, unlike some of its other Security Council counterparts. For instance, while Western states were egging on the Saudi and coalition bombings of Yemen that were causing mayhem, Xi Jinping called King Salman and urged both calm and talks. This was immediately after Pakistan turned down a Saudi request for military assistance. Soon afterwards, Saudi Arabia and allies called off the bombings, declaring “goals have been achieved” (‘Mission Accomplished?’) despite continued rebel Houthi advance. The Pakistani and Chinese moves were much too back-to-back to discount some calibration, at least consultation.

The ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative, in which Pakistan fits in so neatly, can be placed on the backdrop of Xi’s ‘China Dream’ or ‘*Chunguo Meng*’. This entails equality in relationship with the other big power, with each retaining its characteristics (example, the United States), ‘win-win’ cooperation with all countries (including India), and ‘strategic partnership’ with ‘all-weather friends’ (Pakistan) stimulating benefits for them as also China. *Chunguo Meng* is posited domestically on the ‘Four Comprehensives’ i.e. building a moderately prosperous society, deepening reforms, administering in accordance with law, and strictly governing the Communist Party of China. *Chunguo Meng* embraces the idea of a broader global footprint for China, complemented by domestic stability and prosperity. In dealing with foreigners, the general dictum of “finding common grounds and avoiding differences” applies, but this by no means implies any concessions by Beijing on those differences. Any such idea would be a grave misreading of the Chinese mind.

This year’s 10.1% increase announced in March of China’s defence expenditure, above the last year’s figure of US\$ 130 billion is designed to respond to afore-stated objectives. As Chairman of the Central Military Commission since late-2012, Xi has issued at least 22 sets of “decisions” (*jue ding*), far more than any of his predecessors. These encompass ‘proposals’ (*fang an*), and ‘regulations’ (*gui ding*) on a wide range of military issues, and have run simultaneously with his cleansing the military of corrupt and incompetent senior officers (“tigers”). Xi’s aim is to enable the 2.3-million strong Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) to play an effective role in allowing China (whose people had, in Mao Zedong’s words in 1949, “have stood up”) to do so on the contemporary strategic, political and economic arenas. This would include a two-layered navy with a high-end Near Seas component and a limited low-end capability beyond, though most analysts believe, focussed entirely on contested areas

close to home. Without continually belabouring the same point about Western or established powers' non-recognition of new realities and accordingly reforming global institutions which is never easy (as India is discovering with regard to its aspiration for a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council), China is setting out to create new institutions, as evidenced in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. It has replicated the Geneva-based World Economic Forum, with its own Boao Forum for Asia, and also the World Peace Forum (to which the author is a regular invitee). The Chinese leadership use these platforms to sound out global policy makers with their new ideas. The Chinese would be the last to claim the creation of a new world order (they do not even own up to 'China's rising', which they prefer to call 'China's peaceful development'!), but the world would be unwise not to watch out for it.

China's view of Pakistan is a metaphor of how it views the world. Pakistan, to the Chinese, is an entity that is usefully utilised at every stage of China's involvement with the rest of the globe. It began with linkages created in the early-1960s (for which credit would be owed to the Pakistani strongman Ayub Khan and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai) when Pakistan was still a formal US treaty ally, through the 1970s when Pakistan was a conduit to the United States, through 1980s and 1990s as counterpoises vis-a-vis the then Soviet Union and India, and now as a plank to contain radical Islamists and provide access to the West and warm waters. At each stage, a particular relevance was identified and emphasised. This is also the case now, with the just-concluded visit by Xi to Islamabad.

In northern Pakistan, there exists a code of *Pakhtunwali* that envisages three main components; hospitality, honour and revenge. Throughout the rest of Pakistan, the prevalent culture incorporates these norms or mores, in one way or another, in different pecking order and with varying degrees of importance assigned to each. It was the trait of 'hospitality' which reigned supreme when the red carpet was rolled out as Xi arrived in Pakistan, amidst unmatched pomp and ceremony. The warmth of the reception was mind-boggling for some analysts. This was helped by the way the Chinese conduct their policies in countries they seek to befriend (For instance in Pakistan and Bangladesh in South Asia) where they ingratiate themselves with every significant segment of the community, separately and collectively, such as with political parties, the bureaucracy, the military, the business, the students, the media, the workers, the civil society, and women's groups. It is no wonder that a recent Pew poll recorded that in Pakistan 78.5% of the population like the Chinese as opposed to 14% for

the Americans, despite the allure of American life and culture to the young and old, the commonality of language and over US\$ 31 billion the US has pumped into Pakistan as aid to better human lives! In Islamabad Xi received thunderous ovation at the Parliament, whose joint house he addressed, being the first foreign leader to do so, and was awarded the highest civilian decoration, the *Nishan-e-Pakistan*, that the Islamic Republic offers any Pakistani, or foreigner.

Despite the enormous package that Xi brought with him to Pakistan, the hosts did not see him as a Greek bearing gifts, the kind that caused tragedy to befall the unfortunate Trojans in the Homeric epic tale. The Pakistanis perceived the gesture as being inspired by affection (naturally with a modicum of self-interest involved on the part of the donor, as explained in this piece) that a visitor would be wont to display in their own culture. During the imperial era, Chinese Emperors often reciprocated tributes received with presents of even greater value. This was to display their superior position in the interaction. But in contemporary times, in China that is diplomatically evolved and behaviourally suave, Beijing is at pains to play by the rules of notional equality of powers, and does nothing to challenge this myth.

China's relationship with Pakistan is in many ways a metaphor for how this emerging global power will view, and even deal with, the world. Loyalty will be rewarded. "All-weather friends" like Pakistan will have a role in every stage of China's policy evolution, neither ignored, nor marginalised. But nor would they be allowed to be impediments to the unfolding of China's overall global perceptions, such as the need to build healthy, meaningful and rewarding ties with the US or India. 'Core interests' would be protected by all *possible* means, be they the sovereignty over Tibet, one-China policy, or some of its territorial claims on land and sea, though what are identified as such may subtly alter over time.

Andre Gunder Frank, before he passed on in 2005, had said the only thing to fear about a 'rising' China is the US response to it. As China quietly, and almost inexorably, moves to position itself pivotally in the globe, it takes a pragmatic and mature view of this reality. The Columbia economist Geoffrey Sachs described China as 'the most successful development story in the world history'. If this is truly so, China has achieved this position not by any aggressive implementation of its revolutionary ideals, at least not any longer, but by a resolute, but un-clamorous pursuit of its self-interest. In doing so, it has sought not to create enemies. For instance, on Pakistan, it has brought Washington around to its policies by

showing that stabilising Pakistan, which is China's goal, would also rebound to America's benefit. The same for India. That the Pakistan policy is no constraint on cooperation with India, Xi had travelled to India to celebrate Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday, and is looking to a fruitful visit to Beijing by the Indian leader soon.

"It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice" was Deng Xiaoping's wise dictum that set the tone for a pragmatic and non-ideologically inspired view of the world. When America tended to look at the globe through the lens that showed it as 'black or white', Henry Kissinger brought to bear the sophisticated European complexities of 'balance of power' in almost a ruthless pursuit of national self-interest bereft of the encumbrances of unnecessary ethical considerations, especially when these were impediments to achieving the goals. Contemporary China has great respect for Kissinger. However, today's 'balance' is more than that of military power. Numerous tangible and intangible factors come into play. Analysts may be forgiven for suggesting that today's 'New China' is taking a leaf out of Kissinger's book. It is more likely, though, that China is forging ahead at its own speed, in its own way, without any such reference in its own mind. There is an old Chinese proverb: "The helmsman must guide the boat by using the waves: otherwise, the waves would sink it", wise counsel for Xi Jinping and his close comrades.

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