

China-Pakistan Relations: Factors of Durability

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In spite of divergent socio-political systems, cultures and ideologies, China and Pakistan have maintained a durable, consistent relationship for decades. Over a long period of time, a lot has changed within these two countries, in the region and the world at large, but their relationship not only has remained stable, but also has deepened and enlarged, bringing a wide range of areas of cooperation into it. By taking a historical approach, this article enlists the factors on which this relationship is based. Arguably, the congruence of national interests is at the center of this relationship. The prophetic saying that in international relations there are neither permanent friends nor enemies but national interests explains, to a great extent, the rationale of this friendship. The compatibility of interests is defined by a host of factors; some that are traditional can be found in other state-to-state relationship; there are, however, some distinct features which seems special to it.

Geographic Proximity

The first and the foremost factor which defines the contour of the China-Pakistan relationship is geography. The two countries share a border of 523 kilometers long, which makes them neighbors. Pakistan's northern part, Gilgit-Baltistan (former Northern Areas) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir are connected with China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. This geographic proximity, after border demarcation in 1963, emerged at the center of future

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relationship. The Chinese side argues that it attaches even greater importance to the geographic factor; countries with common borders get better attention in foreign relations than those at distance. Exponents of this school of thoughts argues that this policy is rooted in Chinese history and culture. Since ancient times, Chinese emperors maintained friendly relations with neighbors through exchange of gifts, a tradition called the tribute system.¹

Geographic proximity provided a foundation for Sino-Pakistan relationship and will continuously influence the relationship

Leaders of modern China continued this policy. China's settlement of border disputes with most of its neighbors, including with Pakistan, owed to this policy. Thus, geographic proximity coupled with China's policy of paying more attention to neighbors provided a foundation for Sino-Pakistan relationship. Since geography is a permanent factor, it has and will continuously influence the relationship.

Pakistan's Geostrategic Location

Pakistan occupies an important geostrategic location in the region.² Besides China, it shares a border with India that runs 2,912 km, with Afghanistan that runs 2,430 km, and with Iran that runs 909 km, in addition to 1,046 km that runs along the coast of the Arabian Sea.³ It is at the crossroad of three important regions – South, West and Central Asia, and close to the energy-rich Central Asian and Middle Eastern countries, with important lines of communication, such as roads, railway, air routes and the proposed energy pipelines traversing it. This geostrategic location drew US attention during the Cold War for containing the so-called Communist expansion, during the 1980s for defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan and in post-9/11 War on Terror (WoT). Those developments had a direct bearing on China. In the wake of establishing entente cordiale with China in the early 1960s, Pakistan began to benefit China with its geostrategic location. The construction of the Karakoram Highway during the 1970s and modernization in 2010 which made it open round the year has

added new dimension to this relationship. The recently announced China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is based upon this geographic location. If implemented successfully, the corridor will serve the two countries' economic, political and strategic interests. Thus, geography emerges at the center of the two countries' relationship. Since it is a permanent factor that cannot be changed, it will continuously influence the relationship.

The Indian Factor

Many Western and Indian analysts argue that the Indian factor – India as a “common enemy” of China and Pakistan – is the main *pillar* on which this friendship is based. From this perspective, the myth of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” dictates this relationship. The fact that Sino-Pakistan entente emerged only in the wake of the 1962 Sino-Indian Border War reinforces this argument. Since India has enduring political and territorial disputes and has separately fought wars with them, this draws Beijing and Islamabad into an anti-India bond. China's support to Pakistan on Kashmir, tilt towards Pakistan during Indo-Pakistan conflicts, supply of weapons, assistance in nuclear and missile program, all were India-centric. China followed this policy from the early 1960s to 1980s. During the 1980s, China's new South Asian policy began to evolve under which Beijing started taking relatively balanced policy towards the Indian subcontinent. This policy further matured in the following decades. Over a long period of time, China has separated its relations with Pakistan from its relations with India and has started dealing them, to a great degree, independent of each other. China's current policy towards the subcontinent is to stabilize relations with India without compromising ties with Pakistan. This new Chinese policy has changed the role of the Indian factor in Sino-Pakistan relations from its origin in the early 1960s when both had shared security concerns vis-à-vis New Delhi. To argue, the Indian factor gradually began to move from central to peripheral position, at least from the Chinese perspective. Meanwhile, a wide range of areas of cooperation, as discussed in the article, have emerged, thus expanding the base of this relationship. However, since India continues to have territorial and political disputes with

China and Pakistan, the Indian factor continue to unite them against their common foe.

China's Place in Pakistan's National Security Strategy

China has supported Pakistan not only in the traditional areas of security, but also in non-traditional security areas, such as domestic crises, natural calamities, economic bankruptcy, terrorism, international isolation and occasional US pressure. This expanded the base of relationship on the one hand and increased Pakistan's dependence on China on the other. There are various examples, but only a few are cited. In 1972, China used its first ever veto in the UN at Pakistan's request to block Bangladesh's entry. Since then, Beijing has exercised its power on several other occasions. Diplomats in Islamabad appear confident that the country could rely again and again on China during difficulties.⁴ Such expectations seem not unrealistic given the close nature of relationship.

China has also used its influence to hedge against tacit US pressure, e.g., during the 1990s over Pakistan's nuclear and missile program and recently in the wake of US operation inside Pakistani territory that killed Osama in May 2011. Amidst the tension, Pakistani Prime Minister flew to China, resulting in issuing strong statements in support of Sino-Pakistan relations, and the supply of 50 JF-17 aircraft on urgent basis. A section in Pakistan even argue that China's backing had helped deter US punitive measures as were seen in Afghanistan, Iraq and recently in the Middle East. Otherwise, Pakistan's nuclear and missile program and terrorism were enough justification for White House hardliners to consider harsh policy against Islamabad.⁵

Furthermore, China issued positive and encouraging statements on occasions when Pakistan faced myriad crises. Such statements from a big power gave Pakistan confidence to deal with challenges it confronted. For example, after joining the WoT, Pakistan faced numerous crises. The imposition of martial law, the trial of the deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif by the military government in 2000, General Pervaiz Musharraf's declaration of emergency in 2007, the situation emerging in the wake of the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, and incessant terrorism

were some of the occasions which raised concerns in some Western capitals. China's response was different; it termed them temporary difficulties and expressed confidence in the Pakistani government and people's will to address them.⁶ Likewise, during natural calamities, China proved among the first countries to extend relief assistance.

On the whole, China's support is incomparable to Pakistan's other friends from the Islamic bloc or the Western world. Some wealthy Middle Eastern states can offer economic assistance to Pakistan, but none of them has political clout in world politics. As an observer noted, "Pakistan's Middle East allies have supplied it with oil, money, a training ground for its soldiers, and massive remittances from its migrant workers. But they have had little to offer in the form of security guarantee [against traditional and non-traditional threats]."⁷ China thus appears to be the only country that not only possesses economic and political clout but has used them in support of Pakistan. It is this context which defines China a "pillar" of Pakistan's foreign policy.

"Early" and "Mutually Agreed" Border Settlement

In March 1963, China and Pakistan signed a border agreement under which the two sides demarcated the undefined part of their border on mutually agreed terms. It came into effect in less than 12 years after the establishment of diplomatic relations. This "early" and "mutually agreed" settlement left behind no territorial dispute and paved the way for a smooth and friction-free relationship. The early settlement of the border issue could be measured from the fact that many major world conflicts are direct outcomes of overlapping border or territorial claims among contending states. Immediate and relevant examples are disputes between India and Pakistan, China and India, and South China Sea maritime disputes. In fact, the Sino-Pakistan relationship which turned to be entente cordiale started in the wake of the border agreement.

The Islamic World Factor

This study argues that Pakistan's Islamic identity, big size, close ties with Islamic countries, an important role in the Organization

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of Islamic Conference (OIC), together termed in this section as the “Islamic world factor”, has played a role in strengthening Sino-Pakistan ties. By using its clout, Pakistan protected and projected China’s interests in the vast Muslim community. According

to an analyst, Islamabad provided almost unconditional support and strategic depth to China in relation to the Islamic states.⁸ While highlighting the importance of this factor, John Garver stated, “There is far more to the Pakistan-China relations than common hostility towards India. There are distinct Muslim and Middle Eastern aspects to that relationship.”⁹ From the early days of their relations, the two countries began to project their Muslim populations in advancing two-way friendship. The fact that China’s Muslim-majority Xinjiang Region borders with Pakistan alone has unique importance and adds to this factor. In 1953, China established the Islamic Association of China (IAC) that proved to be an instrument in promoting the interests of China’s Muslim with Pakistan.

Pakistan’s role was seen both at bilateral level and from the platform of the OIC. Islamabad was instrumental in establishing China’s diplomatic ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia. Until formal diplomatic ties between Beijing and Riyadh, Islamabad facilitated Chinese Muslims for pilgrim to Mecca. Those devotees used to apply for visas at the Saudi Embassy in Pakistan which offered various services to them during their stay. Moreover, many Chinese Muslims used to send their children to Pakistan for higher education, including Islamic studies in academic institutions and seminaries.

Pakistan also acted as a facilitator in promoting understanding between the Chinese and Islamic civilizations. This role was particularly significant since a limited interaction had existed between the two sides. Beijing used to consult Islamabad about its relations with the Islamic world.¹⁰ According to a Chinese scholar, being an “atheist” country China faces the quandary about how to deal with Islamic states especially Arab rulers in the Gulf and the Middle East. It often sought advice from Pakistan to address it.¹¹ In

the same way, some Islamic countries, especially from the Middle East, lacked proper understanding of China; they used to get advice from Islamabad. A Pakistani scholar stated that the country offered to China a very natural ingress into the Islamic world which it could not have otherwise. At the same time, China projected its “special” relations with Pakistan to other Islamic countries as a model that could be emulated.¹²

Finally, Pakistan has been playing a role in preventing member Islamic states to criticize Beijing’s policies towards Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and taking the issue to the OIC. As an observer noted, “Islamabad offers Beijing [an] important diplomatic backing in the face of Muslim-majority nations who might otherwise criticize China’s handling of its Muslim population.”¹³ In Xinjiang clashes between Uyghur separatists and local authorities have taken place in the past. Some OIC members, especially Turkey, raised the issue of Beijing’s “suppressive” policies. In particular, during July 2009 riots in Xinjiang in which over 197 people died, some member countries wanted to take the issue to the OIC but Islamabad prevented such moves. Islamabad successfully lobbied to the member Islamic states that all issues, including handling of Uyghurs, should be addressed with China bilaterally, but not from the OIC platform. Had the issue taken to the OIC platform, it could have caused diplomatic setback to Beijing, even though OIC resolutions do not carry any action. Most of Chinese scholars who were interviewed referred to Pakistan’s role in this incident. Thus, Pakistan’s place in the Islamic world has attracted China’s attention and contributed to strengthening two-way relationship.

The US Factor

This study also shows that the US has influenced China-Pakistan relationship in certain ways. Pakistan’s dependence on US military and economic assistance started from its early days. Both had signed defense pacts during the 1950s, closely cooperated with each other against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan during the 1980s and joined hands in the post-9/11. Yet, they failed to develop a sustained relationship. In each phase, their relationship was prompted by a

specific strategic goal. Once that goal was achieved, relations turned lukewarm. Realistically speaking, the US and Pakistan lack long-term shared strategic vision as exists in the case of China and Pakistan. The US-Pakistan relationship is much more conditional, transitional and strategic-factor prompted. Pakistan's strategic interests in the region remain constant while those of the US oscillate. Even the current cooperation on counterterrorism was not clearly a strategic goal.¹⁴

A disruption in US-Pakistan relations often pushed Islamabad towards Beijing. A good amount of literature in Pakistan views the country's relations with these powers in a comparative perspective. The US has been found to be an "unreliable" partner who has "betrayed" Pakistan many times. Instead of helping Pakistan being an ally (during the Cold War), the US left it in the lurch. This policy was repeated time and again. The quick shifts in US policies from assistance to sanctions were perceived in Pakistan as glaring examples of expediency. Imposing sanctions on Pakistan before the outbreak of Indo-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971, delaying the supply of F-16 aircraft for 15 years for which Pakistan had already paid, conducting a nuclear deal with India (2008) while refusing a similar deal to Islamabad even though Pakistan was a crucial partner in the WoT,¹⁵ are only a few examples out of a plethora of complaints that are commonly found in Pakistani literature.

Compared to this, the majority of Pakistanis consider China a "reliable" partner that always fulfilled its commitments. Even though, the two countries did not enter into any military pact, Beijing never let Pakistan down during crises. Since the start of their entente in the early 1960s, there is no mistrust or downturn in their relations. Furthermore, most areas in which the US imposed sanctions and China extended its help are close to Pakistan's national pride: the nuclear and missile program, defense and security, and the strategic arena. Most Pakistanis hold that China pursues long-term policies rather than expediencies, treats Pakistan equally and with respect, and never dictates or interferes. This has built a strong goodwill for China in Pakistani public and polity. Given the hostile nature of Indo-Pakistan relations, Pakistan permanently needs support from big powers. In the absence of long-term shared goals

and trust between the US and Pakistan, only China can extend such support to Pakistan.

Distinct Features of the Relationship

Most of the factors discussed in this chapter can be found in other state-to-state relations. There are, however, some distinct features attributed to the China-Pakistan relationship.

First, from the very beginning China has pursued its relations with Pakistan from a long-term perspective while keeping in view the constant factor of geography. Under this consideration, it has shown restraint over some of Pakistan's unfriendly policies during the 1950s, such as Pakistan's joining of anti-Communist defense pacts with the US. China neither lodged any formal protest nor changed its policies towards India and Pakistan. This response was in sharp contrast to that of the Soviet Union, which after Pakistan joined the Western pacts, changed its South Asian policy and came squarely on the Indian side. The mistrust that Moscow and Islamabad developed during the 1950s could not shed in decades. On the other hand, China's tolerance prevented any grudges. Thus, as the two sides approached each other in the early 1960s, it did not take much time for the two sides to develop close relationship.

Terrorism is another area where China's possible restraint prevented negative impact on the relationship. Terrorism affected the China-Pakistan relationship in two ways. First starting in the late 1980s, some Pakistan-based militant groups began to facilitate separatists in China's Xinjiang region. Secondly, a series of targeted attacks on Chinese workers in Pakistan started in the 2000s. Despite seriousness of these issues, Beijing reacted with maturity, it conveyed most of its concerns privately to avoid public attention. China realized Pakistan's internal weaknesses in handling those issues. It gave Pakistan a free hand to devise a counterterrorism policy suiting its national conditions.

Furthermore, China adopted an inclusive approach in relations with Pakistan. Under this policy, it established links with Pakistani polities irrespective of their political and ideological orientation and treated all stakeholders equally and with respect. The Communist Party of China has signed MoUs with not only mainstream political

parties but also regional and religious parties. This approach created China's image as a friend of Pakistan rather than a supporter of any particular group, party or ideology. It is under this comprehensive engagement that no matter which political party ruled the country or when the army took power, relations with China remained stable.

China's distinct diplomacy is also reflected in its assistance policy both in economic and defense sectors. From the start in the mid-1960s until early 1980s, most of China's aid was based on grants. Loans were either interest-free or at very low interest rate. Pakistan often made payments in local products which increased its exports. China invested in projects which "called for minimal investment and brought quick results", provided best equipment at competitive prices and trained Pakistani technicians to use them. Chinese experts lived in Pakistan and got salaries according to local standards.¹⁶ In the early 1980s, this policy changed from grants to loans. Yet, Beijing's aid remained important to Islamabad due to its availability, flexible terms and no strings attached. Moreover, China invested in mega projects with impacts on Pakistan's economic development rather than offering hard cash to Pakistani rulers.¹⁷ Projects such as the Karakoram Highway (KKH), Heavy Mechanical Complex (HMC), Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC), nuclear power plants, roads, highways, dams, thermal power projects, cements plants, glass factories, and the most recently signed CPEC are some examples.

Likewise, in the defense sector, China entered into joint production, granted licenses, trained Pakistani technicians and transferred technology. With Chinese licenses, Pakistan produced guns, aircraft (both trainer and fighter), tanks and anti-tank missiles.¹⁸ The two countries have jointly developed an advanced aircraft, JF-17, naval frigates and submarines (under construction). Chinese technology provided Pakistan with a degree of self-sufficiency in some areas of defense. On the other hand, although Pakistan developed defense ties with the US in the late 1940s, it only maintained an alliance relationship occasionally. Yet, it could not get technology from the US.¹⁹ China's policy was distinct from Pakistan's other donors, helping create a positive image about itself

besides strengthening Pakistan's defense in real terms.

The study also finds that China and Pakistan have developed a norm to address their issues privately, behind the public eyes. According to Pakistani analysts, "Over a period of time, Pakistan and China have learnt how to isolate potential areas of conflict from the larger dynamics of cooperation."²⁰ This applies to major challenges such as terrorism as well as smaller issues, such as the low quality of Chinese technology for railway locomotives and the dumping issue. Hardly any state-to-state relationship could be free of problems. Pakistan and China's approach to resolve disputes amicably, away from the public eyes prevented media attention and avoided any negative impact.

Another salient feature of the durability of the Sino-Pakistan relationship was their strict adherence to the policy of non-interference in each other's internal affairs. The credit goes particularly to China which, despite being a bigger neighbor, has made every effort to avoid any interference in Pakistan's internal affairs. Except for China's concern at the fate of former Pakistani prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was sentenced to death by Pakistani courts as an accomplice to murder, there was no reported event of China's involvement in Pakistan's internal affairs. Even before submitting those requests to General Zia for clemency, China termed it as Pakistan's internal issue and based its requests on the plea of Bhutto's contribution to Sino-Pakistan relations. Once Zia rejected the requests, Beijing did not allow the incident to affect the relationship.

Similarly, there is no evidence China ever dictated to Pakistan on any issue, especially when it could have used its clout, being a big power and donor, to expand interests and influence in Pakistan. This becomes more prominent if compared with the US role that is full of dictation. To a Pakistani scholar, China has accepted Pakistan despite all its follies, "China has been witness to several upheavals inside Pakistan over the decades. Besides its benevolent interest, China has scrupulously avoided any move or observation that could even remotely be construed as interference in this country's internal affairs."²¹ Pakistan reciprocated in a similar way, there is no incidence of Pakistan's involvement in China's internal matters.

Islamabad at occasions acted against international trends to stand by Beijing. As noted, “[T]he crux of the [China-Pakistan] bond is based on a reciprocal policy of non-interference in domestic issues, and avoiding a clash with each other’s core national interests, at least in the public arena.”²²

Mutual Trust and Confidence

The practice of the above-mentioned norms over a long period of time has enabled China and Pakistan to build a degree of trust and reliability in each other. A good amount of literature published, and interviews conducted with scholars from China and Pakistan frequently refer to these abstract concepts, and present examples in support.²³ For instance, in Pakistan there is consensus among all political parties, including religious parties and the army, to maintain strong ties with Beijing. There is hardly any other area in internal or external domains where vying political forces of Pakistan have unanimity of views. Islamabad terms relations with Beijing a “pillar of its foreign policy”. It has become a norm for incoming political or military rulers to choose China among their first foreign visits. Similarly, because of a high level of trust and confidence in China, Pakistan consults China whenever confronted with major internal or external challenges, or while making important decisions in foreign policy.

Likewise, because of decades of Pakistan’s trust, China uses the term “all-weather friend” only for Pakistan.²⁴ China’s uninterrupted relations with Pakistan during the disastrous Cultural Revolution, standing by Pakistan on different occasions while defying Western pressure, fulfilment of commitments made with Islamabad, and transfer of technology even in sensitive areas, indicate the depth of its ties with Pakistan. Beijing also displays symbolic gestures to show its special ties with Islamabad. For example, making high profile visits, receiving Pakistani delegates with the highest frequency, and giving Pakistani incoming and outgoing diplomats special protocol. This “trust” factor was also evident in the defense sector. The three branches of China’s armed forces chose Pakistan for their unprecedented cooperation with a foreign country. For instance, Pakistan was the first foreign country whose army

conducted a military exercise on Chinese soil in August 2004; China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) selected Pakistan to conduct its first ever military exercise on a foreign land; the PLA Navy chose Pakistan to conduct "first" ever naval exercise; the PLA Air

Force conducted a joint air exercise with Pakistani counterparts in March 2011 in which for the first time it deployed aircraft on a foreign territory. China's selection of Pakistan on these occasions shows the level of its trust. As a result of this trust, both sides coined new terms to describe their special relationship.²⁵ Exponents of international relations (IR) may disagree with the role of these abstract concepts of "trust" and "confidence" in the practice of IR, Chinese and Pakistani sides strongly believe they exist in their relations.

Chinese and Pakistani sides strongly believe that trust and confidence exist in their relations.

Expansion of Cooperation

This study also finds that, over a period of time, China and Pakistan have expanded and enlarged the base of their relationship from India-centric, bilateral to multifaceted, multilateral cooperation. Diplomats of the two sides regularly coordinate with each other on relevant regional and international forums to give each other support. The UN and its organs are also venues for such interaction. The two countries have supported each other in entering the various relevant bodies. For example, Pakistan's membership of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), first as an observer and later as a full member, only became possible with China's help. While Pakistan backed China for its entry into the UN and GATT, and for its observer status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The expansion of cooperation from bilateral to multilateral forums has enlarged the base and scope of the relationship and contributed to its durability.

Two-way Relationship

Essentially, the China-Pakistan relationship is bilateral in nature. It is based on give-and-take in which both sides gain from each

other. No doubt China provided diplomatic, economic and military assistance to Pakistan, shared technology even in strategic areas and built mega projects with long-term impact on Pakistan's economy. Pakistan's support for China in return, though not in economic terms, was not less significant. In the process of developing relations with China in the early 1960s, Pakistan defied US pressure and sanctions. Islamabad helped break the isolation of China during the early phase of the Cold War, and worked for US understanding of China, Sino-US rapprochement and establishing China's links with the Islamic world. During the early phase of the Cold War, Pakistan was China's only window outside the Communist bloc. In June 1989 when China was isolated and became a victim of Western criticism, Pakistan defied international sanctions and stood with Beijing. Immediately after those events, Pakistan sent high-level delegations to China to express its solidarity. A few months later, Islamabad gave a warm welcome to visiting Chinese Premier Li Peng. This was the first visit by a top Chinese leader to another country since the Tiananmen Incident. Pakistan's help was inscribed on the heart and mind of the Chinese leaders and people as "a friend in need is friend indeed", an impression which descended to future generations. Pakistan continues to back China on crucial issues, such as Taiwan, Tibet, human rights and democracy.

In a limited capacity, Pakistan has cooperated with China in reverse engineering. Being an ally, Pakistan had access to some modern US weapons, some of which it reportedly shared with Beijing. An Indian analyst even claimed that one out of 40 F-16 aircraft Pakistan purchased from the US was apparently "transferred" or loaned to China. A Chinese scholar agreed that Pakistan enabled the PRC to look inside the F-16 aircraft.²⁶ This was the most advanced aircraft that Pakistan had received from the US. It is also reported that Beijing obtained a range of other sensitive technologies which were otherwise denied to China.²⁷

It is also reported that Pakistan which was advanced in centrifuge technology might have shared it with Beijing.²⁸ In addition, Pakistan and China's production of Tomahawk cruise missiles was the outcome of their cooperation in reverse engineering. Prior to 9/11, some of the cruise missiles US naval

vessels fired on Taliban hideouts in Afghanistan fell on Pakistani territory unexploded. Pakistani and Chinese versions of the cruise missiles were developed based upon reverse engineering.²⁹ Given the discreet nature of defense ties there might be more fields in which the two sides might have cooperated.³⁰ Pakistan's sharing of technology with China showed the level of its commitment with Beijing. Even though the magnitude of this cooperation was not very high and China no longer requires help – as Beijing's own technology has greatly advanced in most areas where Pakistani help was sought – it values Pakistan's cooperation which facilitates their two-way relationship. Thus, the relationship has evolved within a mutually supportive, interdependent framework, which contributes to its durability.

The Role of Armed Forces

The armed forces of the two countries, especially that of Pakistan, have contributed to the growth of their relationship. Pakistan's military and China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) yield considerable clout in their respective national affairs while strategic cooperation holds sway over their overall relationship. Given this fact, some analysts argue that domination of the armed forces in the two countries was one of the factors behind the continuity of their relationship.

Pakistan maintains a large army and allocates a chunk of resources for its maintenance due to perpetual confrontation with India. Its army directly ruled the country for nearly 30 years while remaining influential behind the scene the rest of the time. Resultantly, the armed forces have acquired a pivotal role in national security and foreign policy. Similarly, although in China the People's Liberation Army works under the Communist Party, it has a say in the PRC's defense and foreign policies. Since the Sino-Pakistan relationship was predominantly strategic in nature, the armed forces of the two countries helped strengthen it. As Fazal maintains, "A major arena of cooperation which has laid the basis of a close relationship between China and Pakistan has been the defense sector. Since there had been continuity in the military structure of the two countries, therefore, a persistent interaction between them

had been having a direct bearing on the continuity in the bilateral relations. Mutually beneficial relations between the armed forces of the two countries have served as an uninterrupted and sustainable factor of continuity in the overall bilateral relationships.”³¹

Regular Exchange of Visits

Another important reason behind the durability of this relationship is regular visits by the top leaders of the two countries.³² Starting from the mid-1950s, the number of visits gradually increased. On the Chinese side, except for Chairman Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, other prominent leaders all visited Pakistan. On the Pakistani side, from the mid-1950s almost all rulers, both military and civilian, visited China and most of them, several times.

During the mid-1980s, then incoming Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo set a new tradition by choosing China as the first foreign visit. He termed it as a “tribute” to the friendly relationship with the PRC. Many of his successors followed, or tried to follow this tradition. If China could not become the first overseas destination, it was at least among the first countries Pakistani rulers visited. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari (2008-13) visited China 10 times. Since the advent of the new century, the number of visits, especially from the Pakistani side, has increased significantly.

Although visits alone do not make a big difference without concrete measures, they at least provide opportunities for the two sides to review the relationship on a regular basis, remove any irritant, and add new contents in line with changing geo-political realities. As a former Pakistani ambassador put it, “Frequent visits were significant in promoting the two-way relationship especially from the Chinese side. Since it is a centralized country, decisions made during visits are usually implemented.”³³

The Role of Media

The media in the two countries have also played an important role in shaping a favorable public opinion in their respective countries. From the early days, Chinese media have been controlled by the central government which directed the media to portray

Pakistan as a friendly neighbor, highlight its contribution to China's development and focus on the positive sides of Pakistani society. The majority of the Chinese who were interviewed remembered Pakistan's role in breaking the isolation of China, helping China get a seat in the UN, promoting Sino-US rapprochement and supporting China against Western pressures. They regarded Pakistan a trust worthy friend and an "Iron brother".³⁴

Likewise, Pakistani media portrayed China as a sincere and reliable friend. They projected the simplicity and commitment of Chinese leaders to their country and people, China's resilience against foreign occupation, and the hardworking nature of the Chinese people. In fact, it has become a norm in Pakistan to remain positive towards China, ignore its negative aspects and avoid comments on its internal matters. Even though Pakistani media are far more independent, under the overall friendly policy towards China, it maintains a positive tone generally. As a Chinese scholar noted, "Pakistani media may not have remained always friendly [as Chinese media towards Pakistan], but it was never hostile." Despite the unbridled freedom of the press and proliferation of the media in Pakistan since the 2000s, China has continued to be regarded as a friendly country. As a Western analyst observed, "The media in both countries have recently assumed an important role in promoting the rhetoric and the image of a strong partnership."³⁵

Conclusion

As this study shows, a number of factors together provide an explanation of the durability of the China-Pakistan relationship. The geographic proximity and shared security concerns vis-à-vis India provided a foundation to this relationship. The strategic nature enabled the armed forces of the two sides to consolidate it. The relationship expanded and enlarged within a mutually beneficial framework in which both sides gained from each other. China provided ample economic, military and diplomatic support to Pakistan. Beijing developed relations with Pakistan from a long-term perspective, showed patience, adopted an inclusive approach to the engage with all Pakistani stakeholders, and above all adhered to the non-interference policy. In return, Pakistan

helped China break the isolation, get a UN seat, and promote its relations with the US and the Islamic world. It also backed China on the Taiwan, Tibet and human rights issues. Islamabad continues support on many of these issues. Thus, it would not be wrong to argue that the Sino-Pakistan relationship has evolved within an interdependent and mutually rewarding framework. This bilateral nature prevented the relationship from turning into pattern-client equation. The media of the two countries with guidelines from their respective governments shaped each other's image in a positive way. The relationship expanded and deepened while mutual trust strengthened to an extent that the relationship moved beyond its original rationale – the Indian factor.

¹ Interviews with Chinese scholars affiliated with different academic institutes and think tanks. They also referred to some Chinese sayings (e.g., A neighbor is better than distant relative; China's relations with neighbors is like between teeth and lips) to explain the importance of neighboring countries for China.

² As a result of disintegration in 1971, Pakistan lost its East part which became Bangladesh, the Western part continued to hold a significant geostrategic location.

³ Tourism, Government of Pakistan, http://www.tourism.gov.pk/geography_pakistan.htm.

⁴ Interviews with Pakistani diplomats in Islamabad and Beijing.

⁵ Interviews with Pakistani scholars and diplomats.

⁶ This impression is drawn from reading Chinese statements issued on various occasions in the post-19/11 period.

⁷ Robert G. Wirsing, *Pakistan's Security Under Zia, 1977-1988: The Policy Imperatives of a Peripheral Asian State*, New York: St Martin Press, 1991, p. 8.

⁸ Shalendra D. Sharma, *China and India in the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, 2009, p. 175.

⁹ John W Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001, p. 189.

¹⁰ Interview with Professor Hasan-Askari Rizvi (Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan), April 2011.

¹¹ Interviews with Chinese scholars working with institutes in Beijing and Shanghai.

¹² Interview with Professor Rifaat Hussain, Chairman of the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan, April 2011.

¹³ Christopher Bodeen, "Pakistan, China Set Sights on Arabian Sea Link", *The Street*, July 5, 2013.

¹⁴ Interview with Andrew Small, The German Marshal Foundation of the United States, December 2013. Andrew is also author of *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ As the US refused to sign nuclear deal with Pakistan, China came forward and supplied much-needed nuclear power plants disregarding US and Western concerns as well as of the members Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG).

¹⁶ Yaacov Vertzberger, "The Political Economy of Sino-Pakistani Relations: Trade and Aid 1963-82", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 23, No. 5, May 1983, pp. 644-5.

¹⁷ *The News* (Islamabad), May 20, 2011.

¹⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Arms Transfers Database. Details of Chinese arms transferred to Pakistan can be obtained by selecting China as Supplier and Pakistan as Recipient at http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Details of US arms transferred to Pakistan can be obtained by selecting the US as Supplier and Pakistan as Recipient at http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php.

²⁰ Interview with Professor Rifaat Hussain, April 2011, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

²¹ Khalid Saleem, "Pakistan-China Ties in Focus", *Pakistan Observer*, April 7, 2011.

²² Rosheen Kabraji, "The China-Pakistan Alliance: Rhetoric and Limitations", Asia Programme Paper ASP PP 2012/01, Chatham House, December 2012, p. 2.

²³ Despite divergent socio-political systems, cultures and ideologies, and profound changes in domestic, regional and international system, the two sides have constantly maintained a robust relationship. This would be impossible without trust and reliability.

²⁴ While explaining the origin of the term "all-weather friend", a Chinese scholar stated that China had close relations with four countries, namely, North Korea, Albania, Vietnam and Pakistan. Beijing provided large-scale assistance to these countries. Even though the amount of Chinese assistance to Pakistan was less than to other three allies, only Pakistan withstood the vicissitude of the times. Beijing's ties with Ponyong, Tarana and Honi have undergone different ups and downs during the last several decades. Given this context, China uses the term "all-weather friend" for Pakistan. Interview with Professor Li Xiguang, November 2013, Tsinghua University, Beijing.

²⁵ The most frequent rhetoric used to describe the relationship include "higher than mountain, deeper than the ocean and sweeter than honey," "all-weather friendship," "brothers forever," "Chinese can leave the gold not friendship with Pakistan".

²⁶ Interview with Professor Zhou Rong, chief correspondent of *Guangming Daily*, Islamabad, Pakistan.

²⁷ Dipankar Banerjee, "Not quite a triangular relationship", *The Straits Times* (Singapore), November 29, 1995.

²⁸ Interview with Lieutenant General (R) Talat Masood, eminent defence analyst, April 2011, Islamabad.

²⁹ An interview with a Pakistani analyst on the condition of anonymity.

³⁰ It is said that the possibility of slipping technology from Pakistan to China was one of the reasons behind US reluctance to provide state-of-the-art technology to Islamabad. The US conveyed those concerns to Pakistan at least at unofficial levels. In the most recent case, Pakistan demanded the transfer of drone technology which the US has been using against Taliban hideouts inside Pakistani

tribal areas. In spite of Pakistan's role in the WoT, Washington refused.

³¹ Fazal-ur-Rehman, "Pakistan's Relations with China", *Strategic Studies* (Islamabad), Vol. XIX & XX, Nos. 4 & 1 (Winter & Spring 1998), p. 60.

³² Former Pakistani military ruler General Musharraf while replying to the question about the reasons of stronger relationship between the two sides added that frequent high-level contacts "matured and enriched" the relationship. *Beijing Review*, Vol. 44, No. 22 (May 31, 2001), p. 8.

³³ Interview with a former Pakistani ambassador to China, Islamabad, July 2014.

³⁴ During field trips to China the author talked to a wide range of people, including scholars as well as taxi drivers, vendors and shopkeepers, and asked them about Pakistan. The majority of them regarded Pakistan as a friend of China, although most of them did not know much about it.

³⁵ Kabraji, "The China-Pakistan Alliance: Rhetoric and Limitations", p. 2.