

The Pakistan Thorn in China–India–U.S. Relations

At a time when Pakistan is under intense scrutiny about its role in fighting extremism and terrorism, the world has been watching to see how Beijing decides to deal with Islamabad. Despite Pakistan's growing diplomatic isolation in recent months, China's support has been steadfast, at least publicly. Two weeks after the May 2011 U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden, Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousef Raza Gilani went to China on a four-day visit to celebrate the 60th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. Of course, there is much to celebrate in a bilateral relationship that Pakistan's ambassador to Beijing has described as "higher than the mountains, deeper than the oceans, stronger than steel, dearer than eyesight, sweeter than honey, and so on."¹

China was the only major power that openly voiced support for Pakistan after bin Laden's assassination, defending Islamabad and emphasizing that the Pakistani government may not have known about bin Laden's presence on its territory. During Prime Minister Gilani's visit, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao affirmed that "Pakistan has made huge sacrifices and an important contribution to the international fight against terrorism, that its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity must be respected, and that the international community should understand and support Pakistan's efforts to maintain domestic stability and to realize economic and social development."² Wen went on to state that

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China would like to be an “all-weather strategic partner,” and would do its best to help the Pakistani government and people get through their difficulties.

To underscore its commitment, China agreed to immediately provide Pakistan with 50 new JF-17 Thunder multi-role jets under a co-production agreement, even as negotiations continued for more fighter aircrafts including those with stealth

technology. Despite this generosity, Pakistan wanted even more from China—underscored by its expressed desire to have China take over the operation of Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea west of Karachi, in which Beijing has invested heavily in recent years and which serves an important role in the projection of China’s naval prowess in the region. Pakistan has suggested that the port could be upgraded to a naval base for Chinese use.³ China, however, immediately rejected this offer, not wanting to antagonize the United States and India with the formal establishment of a base in Pakistan.

Ever since Chinese and Pakistani leaders underscored their nations’ commitments to each other’s core security interests at the Bandung Conference in 1955, Pakistan has occupied a unique position in China’s foreign policy calculus.⁴ Their relations have been described as “arguably the most stable and durable element of China’s foreign relations.”⁵

India has been the main factor that has influenced China’s and Pakistan’s policies vis-à-vis each other. China, viewing India as a potential challenger in the strategic landscape of Asia, has tended to use Pakistan to counter Indian power in the region, while Islamabad has gained access to civilian and military resources to balance Indian might in the sub-continent. The China–Pakistan partnership serves the interests of both by presenting India with a potential two-front theater in the event of war with either country.⁶ Each is using the other to balance India as India’s disputes with Pakistan keep India preoccupied, distracting New Delhi from the task of reaching its potential as a major regional and global player.

Although some U.S. and Indian voices are asking the Obama and Singh administrations, respectively, to partner with China to restore stability in Pakistan,⁷ Pakistan’s utility for China is only likely to increase, particularly as India continues its ascent in the global inter-state hierarchy and pursues a more ambitious foreign policy posture primarily to counter China, resulting in a further tightening of the Sino-Pakistan *entente cordiale*.

Sino-Pakistan Ties: An “All-Weather” Friendship?

In 1950, based in part on their convergent interests toward India, Pakistan was among the first countries to recognize the People’s Republic of China and break diplomatic ties with the Republic of China. Sino-Pakistan ties gained particular momentum after the 1962 Sino-Indian war, when China and Pakistan signed a boundary agreement recognizing Chinese control over portions of the disputed Kashmir territory. Since then, maintaining close ties with China has been a priority for Islamabad,

and Beijing has provided extensive economic, military, and technical assistance to Pakistan over the years. And it was Pakistan that in the early 1970s enabled China to cultivate its ties with the West—with the United States in particular, becoming the conduit for Henry Kissinger’s landmark secret visit to China in 1971—and has been instrumental in bringing China closer to the larger Muslim world. Pakistan has supported China on all issues of importance to the latter, especially those related to the question of China’s sovereignty, such as Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet, as well as other sensitive issues such as human rights. China has reciprocated by supporting Pakistan’s stance on Kashmir.

China has emerged as Pakistan’s largest defense supplier, with joint projects that produce armaments ranging from fighter jets to guided missile frigates. Pakistan’s military modernization is dependent on Chinese largesse, with China supplying Pakistan with short-range M-11 missiles and helping Pakistan develop the Shaheen-1 ballistic missile.⁸ In the last two decades, the two states have been actively involved in a range of joint ventures, including the JF-17 fighter aircraft used for delivering nuclear weapons, an Airborne Warning and Control System, and the Babur cruise missile (the dimensions of which exactly replicate those of the Hong Niao Chinese cruise missile). In a major move for its indigenous defense industry, China is supplying its most advanced homemade combat aircraft, the third-generation J-10 fighter jet, to Pakistan in a deal worth around \$6 billion.⁹ Negotiations are also underway between the two for the purchase of six new submarines by Islamabad. Beijing is helping Pakistan to build and launch satellites for remote sensing and communication, even as Pakistan is reportedly already hosting a Chinese space communication facility at Karachi.¹⁰

China also played a major role in the development of Pakistan’s nuclear infrastructure and emerged as Pakistan’s benefactor at a time when increasingly stringent export controls in Western countries made it difficult for Pakistan to

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acquire materials and technology. The Pakistani nuclear weapons program is essentially an extension of the Chinese one. Arms-control advocate Gary Milhollin aptly noted, "If you subtract China's help from Pakistan's nuclear program, there is no nuclear program."¹¹ In the 1990s, China designed and supplied the heavy water Khusab reactor, which plays a key role in Pakistan's production of plutonium. China also provided technical and material support for the completion of the Chashma Nuclear Power Reactor and plutonium reprocessing facility, which was built in the mid-1990s. Although China has long denied helping any nation attain a nuclear capability, the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, Abdul Qadeer Khan, acknowledged the crucial role China played in his nation's nuclear weaponization when China gave 50 kilograms of weapon grade enriched uranium, drawings of nuclear weapons, and tons of uranium hexafluoride for Pakistan's centrifuges.¹² This is perhaps the only case where a nuclear weapon state has actually passed on weapons-grade fissile material as well as a bomb design to a non-nuclear weapon state.

On the economic front, China and Pakistan have a free trade agreement, with China accounting for around 11 percent of Pakistan's imports. The two sides are committed to achieving a trade target of \$15 billion by 2015.¹³ China's "no-strings attached" economic aid to Pakistan is more appreciated than the aid it receives from the United States (which often comes with riders attached), even as Chinese assistance is nowhere near what the United States has given to Pakistan; the United States provided \$349 million in military and economic assistance to Pakistan in 2010 alone.¹⁴ Though Beijing did provide a soft loan of about \$500 million to Islamabad to tide over Pakistan during the economic crisis in 2008, it did not end up giving a large-scale bailout package as was expected, thereby forcing Pakistan to go to the International Monetary Fund. China's economic cooperation with Pakistan is growing, with substantial Chinese investment in Pakistani infrastructural expansion, including the noted project in the port in Gwadar, which is strategically located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz. The railroad from Gwadar through the Karakoram Mountains leading into Xinjiang in western China would provide China with an alternative energy supply route (China is building this strategic transport corridor despite Indian objections to its activities in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir).

China's presence in the Bay of Bengal via roads and ports in Burma, as well as in the Arabian Sea via the Gwadar port, has been a cause of concern for India. It has been suggested that Gwadar could provide China with a "listening post" from where it could "monitor U.S. naval activity in the Persian Gulf, Indian activity in the Arabian Sea, and future U.S.–Indian maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean."¹⁵ Though Pakistan's naval capabilities do not, on their own, pose any challenge to India, the combination of Chinese and Pakistani naval

forces could indeed be formidable for India to counter. With access to crucial port facilities in Egypt, Iran, and Pakistan, China is well-positioned to secure its interests in the region.

Sino-Indian Interests and Relations

Some in the Indian strategic community have suggested that China shares a range of objectives with India including a prosperous, sustainable, and secure Pakistan that does not remain a base for al-Qaeda and its affiliates.¹⁶ The rapidly deteriorating situation in Pakistan and its long-term consequences for regional stability might, some suggest, result in greater cooperation between Beijing and New Delhi to stabilize the shared periphery between the two nations. Turbulence in Xinjiang, such as the riots between Han Chinese and the Muslim Uighurs in 2009, is indeed forcing Beijing to pay greater attention to the sources of international terrorism in Pakistan, given the prospect of Islamist extremism spilling over from Afghanistan and Pakistan into the restive autonomous region of western China. China's concerns about Islamist militancy on its western border have been rising over the past few years and the security environment in Afghanistan and the larger Central Asian region remains a huge worry. Yet, China refuses to discuss Pakistan with India in order to ensure that its privileged relationship with Pakistan remains intact, and U.S.–China cooperation on Pakistan has remained minimal.

China and India share a range of objectives in Pakistan, including preventing the rise and spread of extremism, fostering economic development in Afghanistan and Pakistan, overall political stability and social cohesion in Pakistan, and the safety of Pakistan's nuclear assets. Of all the major powers, it is China that can effectively leverage its growing economic profile in Pakistan to ensure Pakistan's security establishment cedes power to the civilians, allowing the Pakistani state to function effectively. Chinese workers and assets have been targeted by extremists in Pakistan, and Chinese plans to emerge as a major investor in Afghanistan would remain a fantasy without Pakistan reining in extremist groups in Afghanistan.

The stability of the larger Central Asian region, crucial because of its oil and gas reserves, is also at stake. In recent years, the major powers have been keen to expand their influence in the region, and China is no exception. It shares many of the interests that other major powers such as the United States, Russia, and India have in Central Asia, including access to Central Asian energy resources, controlling the spread of radical Islam, ensuring political stability, and strengthening regional economies. Continuing instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan poses a serious challenge to realizing these objectives.

Yet, China's relationship with India has been very turbulent recently, impeding the realization of these and other mutual interests. At the global level, their rhetoric is all about cooperation, and indeed the two sides have worked together on climate change, global trade negotiations, and in demanding that global financial institutions be restructured in light of the global economy's shifting center of gravity. The case for Sino-Indian cooperation has been built by various constituencies to offer a counterweight to U.S. global and regional hegemony. China is a rising power that sees the United States as the greatest obstacle to achieving its preeminent position in the global political hierarchy. As a consequence, it realizes the importance of cooperating with other major powers like India to check U.S. expansionism in the world, even if only in the short term.

India has different considerations, because it is still a long way from becoming a challenger to U.S. global predominance. Nevertheless, it has always tried to voice the concerns of the so-called developing world, strongly arguing for respecting the sovereignty of all countries and opposing the use of force in international politics. Concerns that the United States had become too powerful and unilateral, and that a unipolar U.S.-dominated world would not be in the best interests of weaker states like India, has made the idea of Sino-Indian partnership attractive to certain sections of the Indian strategic elite.

India and China took strong exception to the U.S.-led air campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999, the campaign against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003, and more recently the Western intervention in Libya, arguing that they violated the sovereignty of these countries and undermined the authority of the UN system. Both also favor more democratic international economic regimes. They have strongly resisted efforts by the United States and other developed nations to link global trade to labor and environmental standards, realizing clearly that this would put them at a huge disadvantage to the developed world, thereby hampering their drive toward economic development, the number one priority for both countries.

Nevertheless, buoyed by the perception in the early months of the Obama administration that Washington planned to make its ties with China the centerpiece of its foreign policy in light of growing U.S. economic dependence on China, Beijing has displayed a distinctly aggressive stance toward India. Even though Beijing has solved most of its border disputes with other countries, it is reluctant to move ahead with New Delhi. China took its territorial dispute with India all the way to the Asian Development Bank in 2009, where it blocked an Indian application for a loan that included development projects in the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which China continues to claim as part of its own territory.

Alarm is rising in India because of frequent and strident claims being made by China along the Line of Actual Control in Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim (the latter sits between Nepal and Bhutan). The recent rounds of boundary negotiations have been a disappointing failure, with a growing perception in India that China is less than willing to adhere to earlier political understandings on how to address the boundary dispute. No results of any substance have been forthcoming from Sino-Indian border negotiations even as the talks continue endlessly.¹⁷

Also, the suggestion by the Chinese to the U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander in 2009 that the Indian Ocean should be recognized as a Chinese sphere of influence has raised hackles in New Delhi.¹⁸ China's lack of support for the U.S.–India civilian nuclear energy cooperation pact, which it tried to block at the Nuclear Suppliers Group, and its obstructionist stance in bringing the terror masterminds of the November 2008 attack in Mumbai to justice have further strained ties.¹⁹

China's rapid economic growth in the last decade has given it the capability to transform itself into a military power. Its rapidly modernizing military and the opacity surrounding its military build-up remain a cause of great concern for India. Whatever Beijing's intentions might be, consistent increases in defense budgets over the last several years have put China on track to become the power most capable of challenging U.S. predominance in the Asia–Pacific. While China's near-term focus remains on preparations for potential problems in the Taiwan Straits, its nuclear force modernization, its growing arsenal of advanced missiles, and its development of space and cyberspace technologies are changing the military balance in Asia and beyond.

As China becomes more reliant on imported oil for its rapidly growing industrial economy, it will develop and exercise military power projection capabilities to protect the shipping lanes that transport oil from the Persian Gulf to China. The capability to project power would require access to advanced naval bases along the sea lanes of communication and forces capable of gaining and sustaining naval and air superiority. In this context, China's so-called "string of pearls" strategy of expanding its naval presence and building diplomatic ties in and around the Indian Ocean littoral is generating concern in Indian strategic circles.²⁰ China's increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean is occurring at the same time as Indian naval expansion has relatively slowed, and this could have great strategic consequences because India's traditional geographic advantages in the Indian Ocean are increasingly at risk.²¹

China's Continuing Salience in Pakistani Foreign Policy

With India's recent rise as an economic and political power of global significance, Sino-Indian ties are now at a critical juncture as India tries to

find the right policy mix to deal with its most important neighbor. Meanwhile, Chinese strategists remain concerned about U.S. attempts to encircle China and the profound effect on Chinese security of an eventual integration of India into a U.S. alliance. China, according to this view, needs to remain vigilant against the growing network running “from Japan to India” that would suffocate China.²² As India struggles to emerge as a global power with an ambitious foreign policy agenda, China can effectively scuttle Indian ambitions by continuing with its diplomatic and military support to Pakistan. Much to India’s chagrin, China has given ample indications in the recent past that it wants to follow that path.

With the civilian government of President Asif Ali Zardari under intense pressure from the United States to do more to fight terrorism emanating from

Calls in Pakistan exist to consider China, not the U.S., to be Pakistan’s strongest ally.

Pakistani soil, there are calls in Pakistan to adopt a foreign policy that considers China and not the United States to be Pakistan’s strongest ally and most significant stakeholder. China’s emergence as the leading global economic power coupled with recent attempts by India and the United States to forge a closer relationship has helped this suggestion gain further credibility. Washington has historically been accused of using Pakistan in times of

need and then deserting it for a policy that favors stronger relations with India to serve the larger U.S. strategic agenda. Pakistan remains angry about U.S. indifference after the United States used it to funnel aid to Afghan mujahideen and then turned its back on Pakistan after the Soviet withdrawal. Whereas only around nine percent of Pakistanis view the United States as a partner, around 80 percent of the Pakistani population considers China a friend.²³

The Obama administration’s July 2011 decision to suspend a portion of U.S. aid to the Pakistani military has led many in Islamabad to become even more forceful in underlining Beijing’s importance for Pakistan. Reacting to the U.S. move, Islamabad’s ambassador to Beijing, Masood Khan, was quick to suggest that “China will stand by us in difficult times as it has been doing for the past years.”²⁴ Though Beijing cannot replace Washington as an aid-provider to Pakistan, the tension in U.S.–Pakistan ties provides an opportunity for Beijing to deepen its relationship with Islamabad. As it is, China is considered a more reliable ally that has always come to Pakistan’s aid when India has been on the rise, even to an extent that China has conveniently turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s strategy of using terror as an instrument of policy against India. Not surprisingly, Pakistan has given China a “blank cheque” to intervene in India–Pakistan peace talks.²⁵ Pakistan also seems to have allowed Chinese

engineers to examine the remains of the stealth helicopter destroyed during the raid that killed Osama bin Laden—despite a direct request from the United States that China not be allowed to do so.²⁶

Forecast for the “All-Weather” Relationship

With India’s ascent in the global hierarchy and U.S. attempts to carve out a strong partnership with India, China’s need for Pakistan is only likely to grow. As tensions rose between India and Pakistan after the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, Pakistan’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee went to China to seek that country’s support, which was readily given. The visit resulted in the signing of a new agreement on military cooperation between the two nations, with Beijing agreeing to expedite the delivery of F-22 frigates to Pakistan’s Navy.

Beijing has justified its arms sales to Pakistan on the grounds that India was buying similar weapon systems from the United States (it also is buying military hardware from the Russians). China has consistently defended Pakistan’s desire for high capacity weapons systems as normal for an independent nation seeking to bolster its security.²⁷ In the years preceding the attacks in Mumbai, China blocked UN sanctions against the dreaded Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), the organizations that planned and executed the attacks, despite a broad global consensus favoring such a move.²⁸ Only when tensions surfaced between Beijing and Islamabad on the issue of Chinese Uighur separatists receiving sanctuaries and training on Pakistani territory did China agree to a ban on JuD. More recently, China has refused to reconsider its objection in the United Nations to proscribing the Jaish-e-Mohammed’s Maulana Masood Azhar and some prominent LeT operatives based in Pakistan, despite New Delhi’s presenting detailed information on them to Beijing.²⁹

With the exception of China, other major global powers such as Britain, France, Germany, and Russia supported the U.S.–India nuclear deal as they were eager to sell nuclear fuel, reactors, and equipment to India. China, on its part, made its displeasure clear by asking India to sign the NPT and dismantle its nuclear weapons. The official Xinhua news agency of China commented that the U.S.–India nuclear agreement “will set a bad example for other countries.”³⁰ Since the U.S.–India deal is in many ways a recognition of India’s rising global profile, China was not very happy with the outcome and indicated that it would be willing to sell nuclear reactors to Pakistan.³¹ It was a not so subtle message to the United States that if Washington decides to play favorites, China retains the same right.

Not surprisingly, China's plans to supply two nuclear reactors to Pakistan in defiance of international rules have gathered momentum. Chinese authorities have confirmed that the China National Nuclear Cooperation has signed an agreement with Pakistan for two new nuclear reactors at the Chashma site—Chashma III and Chashma IV—in addition to the two that it is already working on in Pakistan. This will be in clear violation of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) guidelines that forbid nuclear transfers to countries that are not signatories to the NPT or do not adhere to comprehensive international safeguards on their nuclear program. China has suggested that “there are compelling political reasons concerning the stability of South Asia to justify the exports,” echoing Pakistan's oft-repeated complaint that the U.S.–India nuclear pact has upset stability in the region.³² The decision to supply reactors to Pakistan—which has a record of dealing with North Korea, Iran, and Libya—reflects China's growing diplomatic confidence and underscores its view of Pakistan as a prized South Asian strategic power.

Recent suggestions emanating from Beijing that China is likely to set up military bases overseas to counter U.S. influence and exert pressure on India have been interpreted in certain sections in New Delhi as a veiled reference to China's interest in having a permanent military presence in Pakistan. Even though it might not be politically possible for the Pakistani government to follow through on such threats and openly allow China to set up a military base, New Delhi fears that Islamabad might allow Beijing use of Pakistani military facilities without any public announcement.³³ Indian concerns have also risen that China and Pakistan are coordinating their efforts in regard to border issues with India. The presence of the Chinese military in the Gilgit–Baltistan area of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir, purportedly to repair and upgrade the Karakoram Highway, has enormous implications for Indian security.³⁴

Islamabad's inability to curb extremism makes it difficult for China to trust Pakistan completely.

Overall, it has been rightly observed that China's policy toward Pakistan is “an object lesson in how to attain long-term national goals by calm calculation, forbearance, and diplomatic skill.”³⁵ Nevertheless, there are indeed limits to China–Pakistan ties. The relationship remains fundamentally asymmetrical: Pakistan wants more out of its ties with China than China is willing to

offer. Today, while Pakistan's domestic problems are gargantuan, China will be very cautious in involving itself even more. In September 2011, China Kingho Group, one of China's largest private coal mining companies, pulled out of what was to be Pakistan's largest foreign-investment pact, citing concerns for the

security of its personnel.³⁶ Moreover, the closer China gets to Pakistan, the faster India would move into the U.S. orbit.

Amid worries about the potential destabilizing influence of Pakistani militants on China's Muslim minority in Xinjiang, Beijing has also taken a harder line against Pakistan. The flow of arms and terrorists from across the border in Pakistan remains a major headache for Chinese authorities, and Islamabad's inability and/or failure to curb extremism makes it difficult for the Chinese to trust Pakistan completely. If Pakistan wants to keep receiving support from China, then it needs to demonstrate progress on this issue. As tensions rose between China and Pakistan in the aftermath of violence in the border town of Kashgar in Xinjiang in August 2011, President Zardari went to talk directly with local leaders and businessmen in Xinjiang, recognizing that if he was not able to mend fences with local leadership, Sino-Pakistani ties might be in real jeopardy.

China, at least publicly, has continued to emphasize that its relationship with Pakistan is far more important than isolated incidents of violence. To be clear, Chinese involvement in Pakistan is unlikely to match the U.S. profile in the country in the short to medium term, and it is not readily evident if China even *wants* to match the United States. But flirtation with Pakistan gives China crucial space for diplomatic maneuvering vis-à-vis India and the United States, and it will continue to utilize the relationship in pursuit of its larger strategic objectives. Pakistan is not going to be a common interest that binds China with either India or the United States any time soon.

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