

Pakistan-China Strategic Relationship 1950 - 2012: Traditional or Unique

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The Pakistan-China relationship has been the subject of not just traditional international relations analysis, but also as a curiosity that seems to defy the norm of alliances. Whichever way one examines this relationship, the conclusion is more or less the same: that it is a strong strategic partnership that has survived major internal developments in both countries as well as definitive alterations in the structures of global and regional politics as it has adapted to these changing circumstances. As Rajshree Jetly put it: “In the world of contemporary international politics, Sino-Pak relations stand out as one of the few enduring friendships that have withstood the pressures of time and shifting geo-strategic conditions.”¹

Background

Pakistan was the first Muslim state to recognise the People’s Republic of China in 1950 and diplomatic relations were established between the two in May 1951.² However because of Pakistan’s inclusion in US backed defence pacts of CENTO and SEATO – both targeting what was then seen as a communist monolith including the USSR and China – the Sino-Pak relationship developed slowly and with a few hiccups along the way.

The Bandung Conference in 1955 established the first high level contacts between the leadership of the two countries – with Pakistani Prime Minister Bogra meeting China's Zhou Enlai and reassuring him that Pakistan's membership of CENTO and SEATO was not directed against China but was with India in mind as far as Pakistan was concerned. Pakistani Prime Minister Suhrawardy visited China in October 1956 and Premier Zhou Enlai came to Pakistan in December 1956. But relations plummeted in 1959 after Suhrawardy's visit to the US in 1957 where the Pakistanis went along with the US anti-communist world view. When Hajis from Taiwan were given official meetings in Karachi, China accused Pakistan of furthering the US agenda of two Chinas.³ Even border clashes took place between Pakistan and China in September 1959 and Pakistan floated the idea of joint defence to India which was rejected by Nehru. It was then that Pakistan sought to negotiate the border issue with China.

The sixties signalled a reversal of the downward trend in Pakistan-China relations with Pakistan voting in favour of the People's Republic of China taking the China seat in the UN in December 1961. By early 1962, China showed a willingness to start negotiations on demarcation of the Pak-China border, but it was the Sino-Indian conflict in October 1962 that got things moving at a fast pace, culminating in the historic 1963 border

agreement signed between Pakistan (Z A Bhutto) and China (Marshal Chen Yi).

The 1963 Border Agreement reflected the unique and accommodative nature of the evolving Pakistan-China relationship. It specifically acknowledges the disputed nature of Jammu and Kashmir in Article 6 and takes this into consideration in the Agreement: “The two Parties have agreed that after the settlement of the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India, the sovereign authority concerned will reopen negotiations with the Government of the People’s Republic of China, on the boundary as described in Article Two of the present Agreement, so as to sign a formal Boundary Treaty to replace the present agreement: ” The peaceful demarcation of the Pak-China border with the built-in flexibility to account for the final settlement of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute saw the Pak-China relationship take off on a fast track – primarily in the military- strategic realm, bolstered by diplomatic support for each other’s positions in international fora. The significance of this diplomatic support was reflected in 1972 when China used its UN Security Council veto for the first time to deny the recognition of Bangladesh as an extension of support for Pakistan.

Strategic Conventional Military Cooperation

Both Pakistan and China see each other as strategic allies. For the former, China has

evolved into an indispensable ally, especially in balancing the India factor exacerbated in the wake of the Indo-US strategic alliance and in the face of an increasingly unreliable US. For China, Pakistan has also served a number of important strategic objectives, beginning with the access provided for China to the Western world during the period of the Cold War. Now Pakistan provides a bridge to the Muslim World of West Asia, especially the energy-rich Gulf states and Iran. As the present Pakistani Ambassador to China, Masood Khan, put it: "We are also a conduit for China to reach out to the Muslim World."⁴ Additionally, even though the Sino-Indian relationship has been growing, especially economically, Pakistan does offer China a useful counterbalance to Indian hegemony in South Asia – a means to indirectly check India's growing presence and influence. Also through Pakistan, China can attempt to limit US influence in the region, especially post-9/11. Although both the US and China regard Pakistan as a strategically important state, the manner in which the two have dealt with Pakistan is very different. While the US has proven itself to be an unreliable ally, often targeting Pakistan (especially in terms of terrorism and on the nuclear issue), China has rallied to Pakistan's support especially in terms of crises. For instance, after the controversial Obama raid by the US, with Pakistan's credibility in question internationally, it was to China that the Pakistani leadership turned with Prime Minister Gilani's visits to China the same

month (May 2011). Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao called for Pakistan's "independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity" to be respected; and he assured the Pakistani leadership that China would continue to be a friend despite a fluid international environment.⁵ In the joint statement on this occasion, China acknowledged Pakistan's efforts and sacrifices in fighting terrorism while Pakistan stressed that it would never allow its territory to be used for attacking another country but would continue to support international cooperation in the field of counter terrorism.⁶

The most significant area of cooperation in the Pak-China relationship has traditionally been military cooperation. For Pakistan, post-1965⁷ the US had proved to be an unreliable ally and China offered a more viable option in terms of acquisition of military hardware and technology transfers. In 1966, Pakistan acquired \$250m worth of weapons from China, including F6 fighter planes, T-59 tanks and anti aircraft guns.⁸ These military supplies continued and the list expanded over time to naval vessels, surface-to-air missiles (Anza-2) and Red Arrow anti-tank missiles. At a time when the US had cut off supplies to Pakistan, Chinese weapon systems helped the Pakistan military sustain its strength. From 1978-2008, Pakistan had received \$7b worth of military equipment from China.⁹

Equally important, the military relationship with China had a critical modernisation

component which allowed Pakistan to keep its three services updated. Chinese investment came into Pakistan's defence industries, communications and infrastructure and joint ventures also evolved. The latter led to the two countries producing fighter planes such as the FC-1. The latest venture has been the JF-17 multi-role combat aircraft which will allow Pakistan to move away from its F-16 dependency – the only area where Pakistan is still dependent on strategic weapon supplies from the US. The two countries have also cooperated to develop the K-8 Karakoram advance training aircraft, as well as in the production of the Al-Khalid tank, Babar cruise missiles and Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS).

As the present US-Pakistan relationship has deteriorated especially in the post-Osama raid period, China expressed its support for Pakistan by bringing forward the delivery date of 50 JF-17 aircraft to bolster Pakistan's air defence as well as agreeing to deliver 36 CAC J-10 multipurpose fighter aircraft.¹⁰

Naval military cooperation with China has also helped build up Pakistan's naval capabilities. China has already supplied three of four frigates to the Pakistan Navy, as well as upgrading the Karachi dockyard. Like most of China's weapons transfers to Pakistan, technology transfer has been a substantial component. Pakistan is also planning to purchase six new submarines from China.¹¹

In the field of space technology also, China helped launch Pakistan's first communications satellite (PAKSAT-IR) in August 2011.

Nor is it just a matter of joint military production and sale of weapon systems. The Pakistan-China strategic military cooperation also comprises of high-level military delegation exchanges and joint military exercises. Pakistan has also been providing China access to its US-acquired weapon systems.

Nuclear Cooperation

Nuclear cooperation between Pakistan and China has been and continues to remain highly controversial in Indian and Western circles, especially the US despite the US itself contravening its obligations under the Non Proliferation Treaty by signing the nuclear deal with India. The Pakistan-China Comprehensive Nuclear Cooperation Agreement was signed in 1986 for an initial period of thirty years to be followed by an automatic extension for five years each time unless either side gives a notice of termination. It became operational in November 1986 and is intended for peaceful nuclear energy cooperation.¹² Article II of the Agreement states that the two sides will cooperate in “design, construction and operation of nuclear research and power reactors and associated facilities and other fields as may be mutually agreed upon.” The four Chashma power plants are also part of

this agreement. Even though the Pak-China nuclear deal was signed before China acceded to the NPT (which it did in 1992), the Chashma power plants provided under the Agreement, are subject to IAEA safeguards. When China joined the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in 2004 it informed it of its peaceful nuclear cooperation commitments with Pakistan. It is important to remember that the NSG is a Suppliers' Cartel and not an international treaty organisation. Equally important is to recall the NSG country-specific exception made for India at US insistence in 2011, so as to allow NSG members to export dual use nuclear technology to it despite NPT provisions to the contrary (NPT Articles I and II). Even earlier, NSG guidelines were violated by Russia in 2001 to accommodate transfer of nuclear fuel to India despite 32 member states stating that this was against NSG commitments.¹³

More to the point in terms of international obligations is the fact that all the Chashma plants as they become operational are subject to IAEA safeguards – as required given Pakistan and China's IAEA membership and China being a signatory to the NPT. Unlike the Indo-US nuclear deal, Chinese civil nuclear cooperation is transparent and has no military nuclear spin-offs, given the IAEA safeguards umbrella which allows for no exit provision in the safeguards agreement – unlike the Indo-IAEA safeguards agreement blueprint which contains an exit clause for India.

However there is the military dimension of strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China – but in the nuclear and missile field if there was such cooperation it ended after China acceded to the NPT and later became part of the NSG. Since Pakistan is neither a signatory to the NPT nor a member of the NSG or Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) it has broken no international obligations in missile cooperation with other countries. Post-1998, Pakistan has put in place export controls including on missile technology in keeping with MTCR controls and China has also reiterated time and again that it is abiding by MTCR rules. Despite all this the Clinton Administration imposed sanctions on China in 1993 for allegedly transferring some M-11 missile equipment to Pakistan but these were removed later for political reasons.

Pakistan's nuclear weapons and missile development has been largely indigenous including its cruise missile development – although some Chinese scientific inputs may well have been there in the early years.

Other Areas of Strategic Cooperation

The Pakistan-China strategic cooperation is not just about conventional weapons production, development or civil nuclear cooperation. It extends to other areas as well, including the sensitive issue of terrorism. This is an issue that has gained importance as extremism has risen in Pakistan. For China the issue centres on Xinjiang province

bordering Pakistan where the major ethnic group are the Muslim Uighers. There have been violent incidents including in July 2011 causing international embarrassment for China. But Pakistan has consistently seen to it that this issue does not become a means for undermining its critical relationship with China. During the Musharraf regime, strong action was taken against the separatist groups and important leaders of the militant East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) including Hasan Mahsum were eliminated.¹⁴ Also, joint anti-terror exercises were held by the Pakistani and Chinese forces between 2004-2011, the first one being held in Xinjiang; and Chinese forces captured as many as 10 ETIM militants with the help of the Pakistan military in July 2011.¹⁵ In December 2007, Pakistan and China signed an extradition treaty which came into force in January 2008.¹⁶ In December 2011, Pakistan and China signed three Memoranda of Understanding to bolster military cooperation, communication and intelligence-sharing to eliminate terrorism.

Pakistan's mainstream religious political parties have also been interacting with the Chinese to reassure them that nothing would be done to harm Chinese interests. Jamaat-i-Islami's former leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed led a delegation to China in February 2009 for a week-long visit on the invitation of the Chinese Communist Party. Also, Pakistani authorities have suspected that behind the targeted attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan there were Uigher separatist

elements¹⁷. Such attacks have raised questions about Pakistan in Beijing and are seen as efforts to undermine the Pakistan-China strategic alliance which is why former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz had declared that the killing of Chinese nationals in Pakistan was “an international conspiracy”.¹⁸ Unfortunately, with the Taliban and Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan, this issue of extremism will continue to remain an area of concern for China in its relationship with Pakistan as well as Afghanistan. However the joint military exercises and technical cooperation between Pakistan and China specifically in relation to anti-terrorism has established a formal structure to effectively take up and deal with issues relating to terrorism in a cooperative framework. This has been a critical step to prevent long term damage not only to the military-strategic partnership between the two countries, but also to Chinese economic investments in Pakistan.

Present Situation and Future Course

Official and civil society circles in Pakistan have not fully understood the changes that have taken place in China over the last few decades. At a very basic level, the old Chinese leadership that had seen the special relationship evolve with Pakistan is now gone and in its place is a new leadership which is aware of China’s history but has also seen China move into the international mainstream with growing economic ties with the world,

especially the US, ASEAN and India. In other words, Pakistan is “not needed” as the opening to the rest of the world. Under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 a new pragmatic approach replaced traditional idealism in China’s approach to the world. As part of this new approach, China adopted a more neutral stance towards South Asia, especially towards the dynamics of the Pakistan-India relationship. Certainly one can discern a shift in China’s approach to Pakistan but both countries are still coming to grips with the perceptual shifts needed. For instance, with the advent of Deng and the reformists, there was a toning down of the declaratory support to Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. Also it became evident that China would not always side with Pakistan in the latter’s conflicts with India. This was the time when high level visits of Indian leaders took place to Beijing.¹⁹ On Kargil also the Chinese position left some Pakistanis wondering about the future of the “special” strategic Pakistan-China relationship. However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan again brought China and Pakistan close together within the parameters of traditional international politics. Through Pakistan, China provided covert military supplies to the Afghan Mujahideen to the tune of \$200 million.²⁰

In 2006 China introduced the concepts of “Harmonious Society” and “Harmonious World” in its discourse on future policy and at the 17th Communist Party Congress these ideas were institutionalised as underlying

China's domestic and foreign policies' thrust.²¹ Under Deng, China sought to downplay its leadership role that was actually emerging in the international system. However, post-Deng Jiang Zemin moved to proactively interacting with the international comity of states in order to develop China as a power in order to build a new international order. This developed further under Hu Jintao when China developed a proactive foreign policy as its pre-eminence in world politics grew. Central to this approach was to seek lowering of tensions with neighbours and to create a stable strategic environment in China's vast neighbourhood. The notion of maintaining a "zone of peace" around China was critical to this new policy.²²

Pakistan also saw a strategic shift in its external policy when its military leader dragged it into the US strategic loop post-9/11 – a relationship that never stabilised and continues to be erratic with each side perceiving the other as unreliable. However Pakistani leaders realised early on, the need to sustain their strategic alliance with China despite the new "romance" with the US. However perceptual gaps continue to prevail both in China and Pakistan about each other. For instance, Pakistanis do not understand why China has not issued any statement condemning CIA drone attacks for violating Pakistan's sovereignty despite Pakistan's official protests to the US. Again, the Chinese did not understand why Pakistan issued no statement condemning the July 2011 riots in

Xinjiang when they had done so in the case of Tibetan riots in 2008.

Yet, the Pak-China relationship still has inexplicable elements to it which have continued to survive the realism in China's policies and also the new "alliance" with the US that Pakistan ventured into after 9/11. For instance, in the immediate aftermath of the Osama raid by the US, it was the Chinese who issued strong declaratory support for Pakistan. Nor is the China-Pakistan relationship directly dependent on the India factor as many had assumed. The increasing rapprochement between China and India has not diluted the substantive nature of the China-Pakistan strategic partnership – albeit the declaratory posturing may have been toned down. For instance, in the Pakistan-India 2002-2003 military stand-off, China's "neutrality" helped in the lowering of tensions as it allowed India to be more confident of China's "neutrality" in the Pakistan-India dynamics. Yet, this "neutrality" has not stood in the way of the continuing strategic-military cooperation between Pakistan and China – as well as the growing economic cooperation between the two sides in the critical areas of energy, mineral exploitation and communication systems. An increasing focus on economic ties has added to the overall strategic depth of the Pakistan-China relationship. A comprehensive FTA (free trade agreement) was signed in 2008 allowing each side expansive market access into the other's markets. The development of Gwadar port,

again with Chinese assistance, will give China a strategic energy corridor and access to the Persian Gulf – with Gwadar being only 180 nautical miles from the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

Nor have the multi-layered strategic military ties diminished despite the changes both countries have undergone. In fact the joint production of the multi role combat plane, the continuing joint military exercises including in Chinese territory and China's continuing nuclear energy cooperation all reflect the stability and all-encompassing depth of the Pakistan-China strategic partnership. Emerging areas of cooperation in this partnership are in multiple issue areas. For instance, there is cooperation in counter terrorism including joint military exercises and intelligence sharing along with the Chinese outreach to the mainstream religious parties and their leadership. There is also a growing common perception on Afghanistan not only in terms of desiring long term stability but also of seeking energy through the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. China is also looking positively at the Pakistan-Iran pipeline project. China has also begun investing in mineral exploration and development in Afghanistan. At the same time, China cannot help but be concerned about the possibility of a permanent NATO – US presence along its border with Afghanistan. The energy sector remains crucial for both Pakistan and China and the latter is increasing its investment in

Pakistan's energy sector beyond nuclear energy and in the generation of hydro electric power.

Since 2004, Pakistan has been pushing the idea of an energy and trade corridor for China and the Central Asian states. In 2006 a framework agreement was signed in Beijing on bilateral energy cooperation, followed by the first energy forum in Islamabad the same year.²³ It was here that a proposal for a 3,300 km Karakoram oil pipeline was put up by Pakistan. This requires a 30-inch diameter pipeline from Gwadar to Khunjerab and it would be able to handle 12 million tonnes of oil per year – the costing being between \$4.5 - \$5 billion. ²⁴

While the durability of the Pakistan-China relationship is not in question, what is still baffling is whether this relationship follows in the traditional mode of realism and realpolitik or is there something intangible also that underlies it and ensures that it adjusts to new global realities while retaining its strategic nature. After all, why do all Pakistani leaders on coming to power still visit China immediately or soon after assuming office? Why do the Chinese still give supportive statements about Pakistan when the latter is under siege as happened in the Osama raid case? Why does China continue its support for Pakistan in the civil nuclear field despite pressure from the NSG and targeting by the US and India? These questions continue and the one point they all stress is that the

Pakistan-China relationship may be part of traditional global politics but there is now a strong intangible underpinning to it that is not so easily explained.

Perhaps the best way to explain this unique strategic partnership is to point out two crucial facts: One, the Pakistan-China relationship is not burdened by a shared history and colonial experience – as is the Pakistan-India relationship with all its conflicts and interplays. Two, the Pakistan-China relationship is not burdened by a shared religious-social heritage with all its expectations – as are Pakistan's relations with so many Muslim states. That is why these two countries have managed to evolve a unique strategic understanding that has evolved and grown as both countries have adapted to the constantly changing international environment.

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