

Changing Dynamics of Pak-China Relations: Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

Waheeda Rana

PhD Scholar

Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad & Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science and International

Relations, International Islamic University

Islamabad, Pakistan

Hasan Mahmood

Independent Researcher

Abstract

Pakistan-China friendship has often been termed as “higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the oceans”. However, following the post-Cold War era, notable readjustments took place in Sino-Indian relations. This raised many concerns regarding the implications of this for Pakistan-China friendship. This paper seeks to analyze the changing dynamics of Pak-China relations in the context of Indo-China entente. It seeks to explore that how would Pakistan figure in this configuration of growing India-China relations and will this weaken Pakistan's traditional links with China? The major conclusion of the paper is that Pakistan's significance in terms of Sino-Indian relations will remain crucial. Hence, the Sino-Indian détente cannot undermine the entente cordiale between Pakistan and China.

Keywords: Pak-China relations, Sino-Indian, South Asia, Cold-War

1. Introduction

Pakistan was amongst the first countries, which recognized China in 1950. The China-Pakistan relations started on low ebb as China was disappointed over latter's joining of the western military alliances South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). (Bhatty, 1996: 149). Pakistan had expressed its desire to foster friendly relations with China even before joining the SEATO. The Bandung Conference 1955 provided Pakistan the opportunity to dispel Chinese mistrust and to explain Pakistan's reasons for joining western alliances. Mohammad Ali, then Pakistan's Prime Minister, took the occasion to personally assure Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai that Pakistan had no fear of aggression from China (Bhatty, 1996) and it was an act to guard against Indian threat. On the occasion, Pakistan criticized Soviet Union's expansionist policies and appreciated the Chinese policies. This dispelled the Chinese government's misunderstanding and the Chinese Premier conceded that that Pakistan's membership of SEATO should no way become a hurdle to friendly relations between Pakistan and China.

Following the Sino-Indian War of 1962, Pakistan and China came closer to forge common strategic understanding. Pakistan at that time overtly condemned India as an aggressor. The American and Soviet aid to India during the war, made China realize Pakistan's significance in counterbalancing the regional and global power configurations. Thus, realizing Pakistan's geo-political importance and its historic enmity with India, China sought to cultivate and consolidate its friendly ties with Pakistan to balance off New Delhi. Moreover, the geographical proximity of Kashmir to the disputed India-China boundary has also contributed as major factor bringing Pakistan into the strategic centre stage of China's South Asia policy.

In 1963, Pakistan and China signed a boundary agreement to demarcate the boundary between Chinese region of Xinjiang and the contiguous areas, over which Indian government strongly protested saying that “there was no common border between Pakistan and the People's Republic of China”(Bhatty, 1996: 158), and described the decision as a step further in the China's aggressive aims towards India. During the 1965 India-Pakistan War, China gave diplomatic, economic and moral support to Pakistan and it was the Chinese ultimatum to India to dismantle its military works on the Chinese side of the China-Sikkim border, which led to Security Council's urgent call for ceasefire.

During the 1971 India-Pakistani conflict, which led to dismemberment of Bangladesh from Pakistan, China extended its complete diplomatic support to Pakistan and strongly condemned India as an aggressor.

China threatened to exercise its veto in favour of Pakistan and blocked the entry of Bangladesh into UN in defence to Pakistan's demand of release of 90,000 prisoners of war by India. This goal was achieved in 1973 (Bhatty, 1996: 166-168). In the Post-Cold War era, although Pakistan-China relations did undergo a slight shift, but the overall content and strategic relevance remain as significant as ever. China still considers Pakistan an important factor that can help it secure its strategic objectives.

2. Pakistan's Geo-Strategic Significance for China

Pakistan holds immense geo-strategic significance for China. Pakistan is situated at the cross road of three regions that are South, Central and West Asia and the Middle East. It provides a secure access to Gwadar which is route to Persian Gulf and Central Asia. It provides the shortest route to Chinese goods through Gwadar, Port Qasim, and Indus highway and KKH providing an easy trade access to Central and Western Asia. Currently, the most of the Central Asian states export their goods through Russia via Europe which is the longest route. The Gwadar port would be the most viable option for these countries helping them to save money and as well as time in transporting their goods. As far as significance and implications of the KKH, that runs through occupied Kashmir, for the Indian security are concerned, Chengappa (2004: 113) quotes Mahnaz Isphani:

"...No single highway has run through such sensitive territory through an area, where the borders of Pakistan, India, China, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan come close together. By traversing these lands, the Karakoram Highway and its associated routes have posed threats and presented opportunities to all states of the region...China has used the KKH as a form of 'stadium diplomacy' and simultaneously strengthened ties with the enemy of its enemy. Although the route has yet to be used in wartime, Pakistan and China have used it to send strong messages to their rivals and neighbours (Chengappa 2004).

China has economic and strategic interest in Gwadar. Gwadar is expected to play a key role in Beijing's development plans and will serve as a gateway for western China because Xinjiang lies 4500 kms from China's east coast but just 2500 kms from Gwadar. Pakistan can act as "a transit facility" giving China access to Central Asian markets and energy sources" (Khan, 2006). China is much concerned about the possibility of disruptions in the movement of oil and gas tankers to China from the Gulf and Africa through the Malacca Straits due to attacks by pirates and/or terrorists. For this reason, China wants to reduce its dependence on the Malacca Straits and is making eminent efforts to develop alternate routes (Joseph, 2005).

Presence in Gwadar will allow China not only access and basing facilities in the Indian Ocean but also the chance to control the Straits of Hormuz to ensure smooth energy supplies from West Asia (Kapila, 2002). This would help China to acquire a strategic presence in this region. Pakistan has also agreed to let China set up a "Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Gwadar, exclusively for the use of Chinese industries manufacturing goods for export to Africa." (Raman, 2007). This would help reducing the manufacturing and transport costs for Chinese goods. Pakistan can provide China an access to Indian Ocean, where India considers China its competitor. According to analysis of a retired Indian Brigadier:

"The Sino-Pakistan joint venture of Gwadar seaport is meant to provide logistic base to the Chinese navy and would enable China to maintain its presence in the Indian Ocean" (Memon, 2004: 91).

3. Pakistan-China Strategic Partnership

Pakistan and China have signed a defence pact with the focus on joint defence research and production. Exchange of high-level defence visits continues. In 1989, during the visit of Chinese Premier Li Peng, China entered into agreement with Pakistan "to assist with the installation of a nuclear power station" (Bhatty, 1996:183). Pakistan and China signed 'The China-Pakistan Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-neighbourly Relations', on April 5, 2005, ratified on January 4, 2006, which binds the two nations to desist from 'joining any alliance or bloc which infringes upon the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other side'. It also forbids actions of similar nature by both that include the conclusion of treaties of this nature with a third country (Rajan, 2006). As a clear sign that the treaty would continue to occupy a key position in future bilateral relations, the Joint Statement issued at Islamabad at the conclusion of Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Pakistan, 23-26 November 2006, described it as one providing 'an important legal foundation for the Strategic Partnership' (Rajan, 2006) between Pakistan and China.

China has been associated with Pakistan's economic development now for decades. The projects completed with Chinese assistance include the KKH, the Chashma-I nuclear power station, the machine tool factory, and many others. The projects now underway with Chinese assistance include the Chashma-II nuclear power, the second phase of the Gwadar port, the Saindak copper mines development, the GomalZam dam and several oil and gas exploration schemes. On the whole, China is involved in more than 100 on-going projects in Pakistan. In the defence field, they have jointly developed the JF-17, a fighter aircraft, while MiGs, tanks, artillery, frigates and other Chinese arms form a significant part of Pakistan's armoury (Khan, 2006). The Chinese Government encourages its public and private sector to actively take part in projects based in Pakistan. China's public and private sector is undertaking over 250 projects in Pakistan from mega to small and from strategic to regular businesses. At present, over 60 Chinese companies have already permanent offices in Pakistan (Khan, 2006).

4. Issues of Convergence between China and Pakistan

Pakistan and China both share security, military and economic concerns. Promoting and strengthening traditional and cooperative relations with China is an important element of Pakistan's foreign policy from the security perspective. China and Pakistan have common perceptions on the international scenario and global strategic trends. China is the only major power that shares Pakistan's concerns regarding Indian regional ambitions. Both have concerns regarding India's nuclear policy. Pakistan fully supports China's vision of multipolar world. Both support a just equitable international economic order and reform of the international financial system. Although a smaller nation, Pakistan rivals India in unconventional weapons. Above all, it has tied down 500,000 to 700,000 Indian troops in the Kashmir Valley for the past fifteen years. By keeping hundreds and thousands of Indian troops engaged in Kashmir, Pakistan indirectly helps ease India's challenge to China's defences on their disputed borders. Given the reality of India-Pakistani suspicion and hostility, a strong Pakistan means that India must keep the bulk of its armed forces deployed on its western border (Garver, 1996: 80). Thus, the primary rationale for China's entente with Pakistan is also sustaining Pakistan's power in order to prevent India from concentrating its might against China.

5. Sino-Indian Rapprochement followed by Transformation in Global and Regional Scenario: Implications for Pakistan

Sino-Indian relations have remained estranged in the past and have undergone through many ups and downs. But in the post Cold War era, both the countries have realized the need for cooperation for their long-term goals of security and economic development. China now does not consider India a threat and both are cooperating in a number of avenues. India and China have understood that their relation should not be held hostage to the past or any third state. In April 2005, during Wen Jiabao's visit to India, a joint statement was issued which stated:

"We have agreed to establish a strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity and it codifies the consensus between us that India-China relations transcend bilateral issues and have now acquired a global and strategic character." (Ghanta 2005)

As regards the implications of Sino-Indian rapprochement for Pakistan, Pakistan being a mature member of the comity of nations, believes that improving Sino-Indian relations would be conducive for achieving the goal of establishing regional peace and stability. It is likely to open new avenues of cooperation for all the South Asian countries. However, at the same time, looking at the antagonistic attitude of India towards her throughout, Pakistan has its own concerns. Some analysts have opined that the growing Sino- Indian relationship would shift the balance of power in Asia and this may raise serious concerns for Pakistan. Now the question arises that how would Pakistan figure in this configuration of growing India-China relations and will this weaken Pakistan's traditional links with China? Different people analyze it differently. One view is that over the long term, a growing Sino-Indian relationship would inevitably have an effect on the Pakistan-China ties. The other more dominant view is that the improvement in Sino-Indian relations cannot overwhelm the geopolitical value of Pakistan to China, as a local balancer against India, a gateway to the Islamic world, and a valuable partner in a volatile region where China has many strategic interests.

Despite the fact that India continues to raise serious concerns over China-Pakistan relations, China has maintained convivial relations with Pakistan. Pakistan and China have always expressed determination to further elevate their all-weather friendship and strategic partnership. Cooperation between Pakistan and China continues to deepen day by day and the tradition of frequent high-level visits continues.

Pakistan was the most active advocate supporting China's entry into South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SAARC)¹. Both have a commonality of views on international and regional issues. They are committed to combat all forms and manifestation of terrorism and to adopt comprehensive measures. They are committed to cooperate and coordinate to work especially at the United Nations and in other multilateral fora to promote global peace, stability and for the just resolution of conflicts and disputes in various parts of the world. Pakistan is quite confident that China, its all-weather friend, will never further relations with India at the expense of its traditional friendship with Pakistan. In this regard, Tang Jiaxuan's statement, then Chinese Foreign Minister, on 24 July 2000, as quoted in Reuters 24 July 2000, is very important, that is: "Sino-Indian relations are Sino-Indian relations. Sino-Pakistani relations are Sino-Pakistani relations." In other words this clearly indicates that China-India normalization will not be at the expense of China's long-established friendship with Pakistan. Pakistan's then Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz paid an official visit to China at the invitation of Premier Wen Jiabao, from 16-20 April 2007. At the conclusion of the visit a joint statement was issued by Embassy of People's Republic of China and Islamic Republic of Pakistan in which both sides reiterated that:

"The time-honoured and traditional friendship between China and Pakistan is a model of friendly co-existence between developing countries and between neighbouring countries. Pakistan firmly upholds the one China policy and considers Taiwan an inseparable part of the People's Republic of China. China is firmly committed to support Pakistan's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence."

Though there are some issues, like Kargil and Kashmir, where a slight tilt in China's Pakistan policy may be noticed but overall this has been time-tested, all-weather friendship. A shift in China's Kashmir policy was noticed in 1996 when Jiang Zemin in his address to Pakistan Senate suggested that Pakistan set aside the Kashmir issue for a more rewarding economic cooperation between the two countries. Since then China is steadfast in following a quite neutral Kashmir policy, which was also seen during the Kargil conflict, and later military standoff between India and Pakistan (Panda, 2003: 24-25). As far China's cautious attitude regarding Kashmir issue is concerned, realistically seeing this is not because of its perceived closeness to India, but because of the changed international and domestic scenario. At the domestic level, China is confronted with the Tibet issue and the unrest in Xinjiang. Since territorial integrity is important for China, it is really hard for her to support the secession of Kashmir or any territory within India (Joseph, 2005). Pakistan's strategic alliance with China, otherwise, stands unchanged.

The military cooperation between China and India has made the security condition in the region challenging for Pakistan. China and India have held joint exercises. Cooperation with China will give India access to much desired industrial and military technology. India is already one of the world's largest armed forces, twice the size of Pakistan's. It is indigenously producing tanks, armoured vehicles, jet fighters and advanced naval vessels. Realistically seeing, this may put Pakistan in a weaker position as compared with India in the security arena. Following Sino-Indian rapprochement, China is appreciating Pakistan to resolve disputes with India and build cooperative relations in economic and development sectors. Thus, there are apprehensions that China may force Pakistan to change its stance on Kashmir. Sino-Indian trade which reached the set target of \$40 billion by 2010 is likely to boom to 100 billion by 2015 (The News Online, 2014). The intensifying trade and commerce would naturally raise the stakes for China in its relationship with India. With booming economy, strong armed forces India will be in a position to exert force on Pakistan much easily after having China as a neutral player in South Asia. India has an edge in Information Technology sector. Its thriving economy has potential to draw more foreign investors. So politically, economically and militarily rising India may be a direct threat to Pakistan security and development.

6. Policy Recommendations for Pakistan

Pakistan-China relations are holistic covering all facets. Pakistan-China relations in diplomatic, political, economic, trade, defence, nuclear power generation and education are exemplary and are strengthening all the way. The Pakistan-China strategic alliance did not emerge as a matter of convenience. It emerged out of strategic compulsions of both Pakistan and China and the ensuing strategic convergences. Despite the changes in global and regional power configurations, the content of strategic relations between Pakistan and China has remained unchanged.

¹ China became observer member in SAARC in 2006.

Friendship between Pakistan and China has always been a positive factor in the South Asian region and has served to create regional balance and equilibrium of power. Although, economically Pakistan is no match to booming economy of India and China, but from the point of energy security, Pakistan provides China an effective counterbalance force to counter Indian ambitions. Presently China is pursuing a balanced foreign policy towards India and Pakistan, however, this shift is a result of India's growing importance as an economic and military power in Asia.

In the light of transforming global and regional scenario, Pakistan needs to take certain measures to fortify its relations with China. Unfortunately, despite their time-tested friendship on the political and diplomatic front, economic co-operation between China and Pakistan remains insignificant. Pakistan needs to play its cards prudently. Pakistan should pay special attention towards strengthening of its traditional relations with China. It is trade and economics where this relationship needs to be strengthened. Both economies are complementary and thus have a great scope for promotion and expansion. Pakistan needs to take measures to get China engaged more and more economically. It should seek for a substantial upgradation of trade ties. The country needs to exploit its potential market location, demand, cheap labour, investment-friendly climate and many other incentives. The remaining of Gwadar port construction should be resumed as soon as possible. It will help further strengthening Pakistan-China ties. More attention should be given to the promotion of people-to-people contacts, exchanges in cultural, educational and sports areas as well. This will help creating awareness about Pakistan among the new generation of China. Pakistan needs to seek maximum infusions of Chinese technology and investment in the infrastructure.

Pakistan should expand its cooperation with China in counter-terrorism and take the necessary measures to allay the Chinese fears about the security and law and order situation in the country to create more attractions for the Chinese investors. Besides, in the realm of foreign affairs, while persisting in our policy of friendship with China, we need to broaden our options at the regional and global levels. Anwar Hussain Syed (1974: 155) put it in following words: "Given the relative insufficiency of her military capability and her foreign connections, Pakistan will have to strengthen the political and other non-military elements of her defense." (Syed, 1974). A coherent regional policy should be central element of our overall foreign policy. Pakistan must pragmatically consider alternative ways of thinking about the triangular relationship as well as a potential Chinese role in the subcontinent.

There are areas too, where both countries still have competing interests. China suspicious of the warming ties between India and the United States, which are seen as an attempt by Washington to contain China's political influence as its massive economy gives it ever more weight. Thus, despite cooperation in a number of areas, Beijing and New Delhi remain on their guard against one another, realizing that as regional giants they appear fated to be economic and possibly political competitors. China needs a balancer and counterweight against India to dilute the effects of its hegemonic aspirations and emergence, and to pull back India, if needed. Only Pakistan is the country in the region which can act as that balancer. In this scenario, China is well aware of the worth of Pakistan card and will not make any move which may lead to the loss of this card. In the words of Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti (1996: 183):

"In the unfolding scenario in which the West may be inclined to exploit the Tibet issue, and to use India for exerting pressure on China, the importance of Sino-Pakistan relations is likely to increase rather than diminish."

7. Conclusion

Thus, China and Pakistan enjoy time-honoured friendship. Cooperation between the two countries continues to deepen day by day. The relations between the two countries in diplomatic, political, economic, trade, defence, nuclear power generation and education are deepening all the way. The pragmatic answer to the question we raised in the start of this paper that whether India can ever wean away from Pakistan, is negative one, at least for some time to come. Pakistan welcomes the improvement in China-India relations, viewing it a positive development towards global and regional peace and development. China is well aware of geostrategic importance of Pakistan. Pakistan's significance in terms of Sino-Indian relations will remain crucial. The Chinese have assured Pakistan on many occasions that their improved relations with India will never be at the cost of China's friendship with Pakistan. Hence, the détente between China and India cannot undermine the entente cordiale between Pakistan and China. China is likely to maintain close ties with Pakistan as it needs balancer if India becomes too strong.

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