

Report

The Strategic Importance of Chinese-Pakistani Relations

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Mr. Xi held talks with Pakistan's president and prime minister in April of last year, unveiling plans of a China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC), worth \$46 billion [Reuters]

Abstract

Of all China's neighboring countries, China-Pakistan relations are the closest and friendliest. With the kick-off of Xin Jinping's proposal, the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor", the relations of both countries have upgraded to a new level from high-level political and military relations, extending to the full range of contacts and comprehensive relations. However, China does have some concerns regarding Pakistan, particularly the problems associated with containing Islamic terrorism as well as the rising Islamic identity within Xinjiang's Uyghur minority. Nonetheless, both the United States and China have a common interest in allowing China to play a bigger in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and constrain opportunistic moves from Pakistan; and this political change is welcomed mostly by other regional players including Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries.

Introduction

Of all China's neighboring countries, China-Pakistan relations are the closest and friendliest.⁽¹⁾ The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1951, making Pakistan one of the first Islamic countries as well as the second country in South Asia after India to establish diplomatic relations with China. The two countries have remained strong allies ever since. The closeness of the relationship between the two countries can be seen from major bilateral interactions over the years. For instance, in the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971, China took the side of Pakistan against India. In addition, China supported the alliance between Pakistan and the United States against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. China also provided assistance for Pakistan to become a nuclear power in 1998, and used its Security Council veto power for the first time in 1972 to block the entry of Bangladesh into the United Nations. Pakistan

played a crucial role in the ice-breaking visit of U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to China in 1971, and was one of only two United Nations member countries (along with Cuba) to support China following the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989.(2) The two countries enjoy close cooperation in areas such as trade, borders, and their militaries, meaning that Pakistan has a unique status among China's many diplomatic allies.(3)

How can we understand the special relationship between China and Pakistan? Why have the two countries enjoyed such friendly and stable diplomatic relations across a whole range of areas over the past 65 years? If we can accurately answer these two questions, we can more fully understand the strategic importance of Pakistan both in the region and worldwide. As one of the world's major powers, China's development across a range of areas has been the subject of increasing international attention in recent years. China is widely considered to be an "emerging power" that may threaten the United States in the future.(4) Therefore, China's strategic relationship with Pakistan must be understood from an international strategic perspective, specifically the interlocking geopolitical relationships between China, the United States, India and Russia. In addition, the struggle between Western and Islamic civilisation in the context of developments in the Middle East following the 11 September attacks, in particular the global spread and diffusion of terrorism, are also crucial factors in China-Pakistan relations.

The Regional Context and Players

After the Second World War, in the context of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, China and India took a more prominent role in East Asia and South Asia. Although China is not a member of the "Non-Aligned Movement", (5) while India is one of its three founding countries (along with Egypt and Yugoslavia), both China and India took independent foreign policy positions outside of the U.S. and Soviet power blocs. As a result, bilateral relations between China and India, as well as their diplomatic relations with the U.S. and Soviet blocs have had an important impact on the strategic relations between China and Pakistan. In simple terms, although India pursued a policy of nonalignment during the Cold War, it had close military and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.(6) In addition, the tension in relations between China and India mainly arose from long-term territorial disputes along the two countries' shared border. At the same time, friendly relations between India and the Soviet Union were a thorn in the side of the Chinese whose own relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated from the 1960s onwards.(7) Therefore, within the South Asia region, China pursued a policy of alliance with Pakistan to balance against India. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has continued to maintain this policy, even as China and India tried to improve relations with each other and establish a degree of mutual trust.

During the Cold War, relations between the Soviet Union and India were friendly. In addition, following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, together with the normalisation of relations between China and the United States, the United States and China followed consistent policies towards Pakistan, offering it political and military support in hopes of containing Soviet influence in Central and South Asia.(8) In this case, with the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in 1996, and the 11 September attacks, there was a structural change in the strategic situation. The main effect of this was that U.S. policy in Central and South Asia changed from its previous supporting role to a dominant role in the regional order in order to carry out its post-911 global anti-terrorism policy.(9) In recent years, there was a radical change in the roles of Russia and India from their previous animosity towards the United States and China, as both countries to some extent became partners of the United States in the fight against terrorism. The role of China was even more subtle, in particular after the 2008 global financial crisis as China's overall power advanced substantially and its political, military, economic, and even cultural influence expanded, thus changing the regional power relations in Central and South Asia.(10) These changes can be understood on the following three dimensions. First, although relations between China and India are still defined by competition in the context of great power politics, China regards India as a potential overseas market for future expansion, and therefore China-India relations have been quickly normalised.(11) Second, the above changes have not undermined the importance of Pakistan to China. This is because Pakistan has an important role in ensuring a stable regional order in Central and South Asia and preventing the spread of terrorism to China.(12) Third, even more importantly, after Xi Jinping's rise to power, China proposed the grand strategy of "One Belt and One Road." India has not offered its support, while China has announced plans to invest 46 billion US dollars in Pakistan, focused on core projects in railway construction, highway construction, energy, and infrastructure with the goal of accelerating the modernisation of industry in Pakistan and connecting China's Xinjiang to Gwadar Port in Pakistan. This "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" will continue the expansion of China's political and economic influence in Central and South Asia.(13)

The Current Status of China-Pakistan Relations

Although China-Pakistan relations have always been friendly, past cooperation between the two countries was mostly at the political and military level and had not extended to the comprehensive social, economic, and cultural exchange relations of today. This new phase in relations started in May 2013 with the visit of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to Pakistan and the official proposal of the concept of the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor." Subsequently, there was an exchange of visits between leaders and officials from both countries, including the visit of Pakistani President Mamnoon Hussain to China in February 2014 and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's subsequent visit in April 2014 which involved intensive consultations over the proposal. Finally, during Chinese

President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in April 2015, the proposal was officially finalised, including the signing of 51 Memorandums of Understanding between the two countries, the inauguration of eight projects, and the launching of five joint energy projects.⁽¹⁴⁾ Aside from the familiar infrastructure and energy projects, this new phase of relations between the two countries also included social, economic, technological, and even cultural cooperation. For example, the two countries have organised bilateral exchanges in radio and television. The Industrial and Commercial Bank of China set up a branch in Lahore, Pakistan's second city; the ministries of science and technology in the two countries jointly established the China-Pakistan Joint Cotton Bio-Tech Laboratory; Pakistan's University of Modern Languages (NUML) and Xinjiang University jointly established the NUML International Center of Education, and the China Culture Center in Pakistan has been established.⁽¹⁵⁾ If these initiatives are successful, relations between the two countries will become more closely intertwined at all levels, from high-level political and military relations, extending to the full range of contacts and relations at each level of society.

What will be the ultimate effect of the 46 billion US dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor? According to an interview given by China's ambassador to Pakistan Sun Weidong last month (June 24) to the Xinhua News Agency,⁽¹⁶⁾ at present achievements from China-Pakistan cooperation projects are focused on four areas: energy projects, transport infrastructure, Gwadar Port, and industrial cooperation. Major energy projects include construction of a 300 megawatt solar power plant by Chinese company Zonergy, and work has already started on more than half of the remaining sixteen planned energy projects. In terms of transport infrastructure, reconstruction and upgrade works of the Karakoram Highway (KKH) within Pakistan are underway, and the construction of the Karachi-Lahore Motorway also started this March. For the development of Gwadar Port, on November 11, 2015, Pakistan handed over 280 hectares of land use rights to a Chinese company for a term of forty-three years, and construction on new facilities is already underway. Finally, Chinese projects in Pakistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor already employ more than 6,000 Pakistani workers, showing that the close relationship between China and Pakistan has already moved from the policy announcement to the project implementation stage. The amount of funds involved, the depth of the exchanges, and the number of people participating are unprecedented in relations between the two countries.

Issues with China's Muslim Minority

However, the relationship between China and Pakistan is not without worries. First, in the past the Chinese government held suspicions that Uyghur terrorists were operating in Pakistan and running terrorist training camps in the country, and that these terrorists had a direct relationship with terrorist incidents in Xinjiang.⁽¹⁷⁾ Second, in recent years, fundamentalism has spread very quickly within Xinjiang, and a large number of terrorist

incidents have occurred. As a result, the Chinese government has been extremely concerned about Pakistan's willingness, ability, and determination to fight Islamic terrorism.(18) Finally, China is also concerned about the continued failure of the United States to successfully rebuild Afghanistan's political order, especially the ambiguous role played by Pakistan in the country, which in theory supports the political order constructed by the U.S.-led alliance, but is also surreptitiously supporting the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Therefore, China has recently expressed a desire to participate in peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, meaning that due to its powerful influence over Pakistan, it may be better qualified than the United States to play the role of mediator in delivering peace to Afghanistan.(19)

The above concerns stem directly from the serious issues that the Chinese government is facing with its Muslim minority. These problems mainly originate from the Islamic consciousness of the Uygur population, and the creation of a national identity separate from "Chinese identity," which has led to a growth in Xinjiang separatism.(20) The Chinese government has been unable to prevent the occurrence of violent resistance to Chinese rule by the Uygur population for three main reasons. First, the Uyghurs are generally less educated, and receive most of their education in the Uyghur language, causing serious linguistic and cultural barriers with the Han majority.(21) Second, while Uygur Communist Party cadres often claim to support the central government's restrictions on the Islamic religion and Chinese nationalism, in reality they are opposed to the repressive rule of the Han over the Uygur people.(22) Third, in recent years, Islamic fundamentalism has spread rapidly through pilgrimages, the Internet, and underground religious schools; and there are signs that these developments have been influenced by international Islamic terrorist groups such as the Turkistan Islamic Party, Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State. As a result, attacks against government office, the military and law enforcement have become regular occurrences.(23) In response, the ruling party has adopted both hard and soft measures, combining repressive measures to maintain stability and prevent the occurrence of violent incidents with other measures to strengthen economic assistance from other provinces and cities to Xinjiang. However, these approaches offer no possibility of penetrating Uygur grassroots networks or resolving the estrangement of the Uygur group from the Han and the Hui, or promoting the incorporation of the Uygur population with its Islamic identity into Chinese identity centered on Han Chinese culture.(24)

Although they are also Muslims, the problems faced by the Hui minority are much less significant. An important reason is that the Hui also speak Chinese. Therefore, Chinese Communist Party organs can more easily penetrate into the grassroots networks of the Hui people, while also carrying out more comprehensive training and management of Imams. More importantly, the Islam adhered to by the Hui has incorporated the cultural elements from various Chinese dynasties, for example the replacement of religious

denomination with menhuan (meaning faction) and the appearance of Taoist architectural features in mosques as well as the exclusive use of Chinese versions of religious texts for preaching.(25) The characteristics described above closely match the Chinese Communist Party's movement to "Sinicize religion," which attempts to incorporate all religions under a larger Chinese identity.(26) This is true for Islam as well as other religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Finally, among other Islamic minorities, due to the small numbers, the Chinese communist party is still capable of using party-state mechanisms to stabilise the social order, which means that violent terrorist incidents of the type found in Uyghur areas are extremely rare.

How China Views Pakistan in the International Context?

To understand China's view of Pakistan from the perspective of international politics, we must take into account Pakistan's interlocking relationships with the United States, China itself, and the Arab world. Following the military interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the efforts of the United States to reestablish the regional order in the Middle East suffered a major setback. The financial, material, and human costs gradually eroded domestic support for military intervention in the region and, following the rise of Islamic State in 2014, there was a strong wave of public opinion in the United States advocating withdrawal from the Middle East(27) with U.S. peacekeeping efforts in Afghanistan and military and political support for Pakistan coming under increasing scrutiny. For this reason, the United States has played the role of mediator for Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, generally welcoming China's enhanced role. This trend reflects U.S. concern that if efforts to reconstruct the order in Afghanistan are not sustained, there will be a power vacuum in Afghanistan, causing the Taliban, the Islamic State, and even pro-Pakistan militants to carve up political power. Therefore, if China can effectively share the burden with the U.S. and exert influence over Pakistan, it should be sufficient to stabilise the current political situation in Afghanistan.(28)

China and the United States are both aware that Pakistan hopes to hold influence over the regime in Afghanistan for the long term, and are also aware that Pakistan tries to use its influence over the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and other Islamic militants to extract political, military, and economic benefits from the West. However, China and the United States have quite different expectations. For the latter, withdrawal from Afghanistan without the threat of Pakistani blackmail, while also maintaining stability in Central Asia and containing the spread of Islamic extremism is the ideal outcome.(29) From China's perspective, Afghanistan and Pakistan act as a geographical hub between Central and South Asia, representing a strategic location for the development of "One Belt and One Road" as well as a route to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea that is not constrained by India. More importantly, the Chinese government can use its influence over Pakistan and Afghanistan to contain the penetration of Islamic extremism into Xinjiang.(30) This

illustrates that China and the United States both have an interest in allowing China to participate in the reconstruction Afghanistan and constrain opportunistic moves from Pakistan.

The calculations of China and the United States also affect the thinking of neighboring countries. For example, China has always taken a supportive position towards Iran. In fact, after Iran was subject to international sanctions in 2006 due to its nuclear weapons programme, China was Iran's main ally in breaking the sanctions.⁽³¹⁾ Therefore, Iran does not view the Chinese government's influence over Pakistan and Afghanistan in entirely negative terms. For Arab countries, in particular the Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan is viewed as a close political ally particularly for its role the joint fight against the alliance between the Soviet Union and India during the Cold War. As a result, the Gulf States have offered long-term political, military and economic support for Pakistan. However, there is a perception that these favours have not been returned by Pakistan.⁽³²⁾ This perception reflects subtle changes in recent years in relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In many international issues, Pakistan has not offered unreserved support for Arab countries. For example, after the Yemeni civil war broke out in March 2015, Pakistan refused an invitation to join a Saudi-led coalition to intervene in the conflict. In addition, Saudi Arabia has also sought to form an alliance with Pakistan against Iran. However, this request did not produce a positive response from Pakistan. On Syria, Pakistan has taken a different position to Arab countries, advocating a negotiated political solution to the civil war as opposed to the Arab countries' support for the Syrian opposition.⁽³³⁾ This also explains the previous efforts of Arab countries to strengthen cooperation with India,⁽³⁴⁾ which they hoped would provide a reminder to Pakistan that Arab support for Pakistan should not be take for granted. If Pakistan chooses to turn away from the Arab countries, the latter can respond by withdrawing their support from Pakistan and transferring it to its old enemy, India.

Future Prospects

From the above analysis we find that China is now engaged in an unprecedented close bilateral cooperation with Pakistan across a range of areas. From a domestic, regional, or international political perspective, China has shown a willingness to continue strengthening its relations with China. Aside from India, regional powers such as the United States, Arab countries, and Iran, are positive about China taking responsibility for maintaining regional order in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Therefore, for the foreseeable future, China-Pakistan relations as well as the expansion of Chinese influence in Central and South Asia will develop further as China pursues the "One Belt and One Road" initiative, gradually replacing the U.S. dominated status-quo. Following his rise to power, Xi Jinping has made major adjustments to China's international strategy. China is no longer prepared to play a passive and low-key role, and has sought great power status consistent with its own strength that can influence the international system. With the

current situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, China is able to take on responsibility for filling the power vacuum in a way that is generally acceptable to all parties involved.

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