

Sino-Pakistan Relations and the Challenges of Post-Cold War Era

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Abstract

China has emerged as the world's second largest economy, and the largest exporter of goods with 9.6 per cent of the global share. Moreover, the last two decades have seen China emerging as an international and regional power of the 21st century. Thus, in order to continue with the economic benefits, China wants peace and stability as well as to play an active role on international and regional fronts. On the other hand, Pakistan, the world's sixth most populous country, is a major power of South Asia. While having a developed infrastructure and vibrant political and security institutions, Pakistan is nevertheless currently facing many challenges on the economic front, including political instability and religious extremism. This paper is an attempt to analyze the challenges faced by both China and Pakistan in the post-Cold War era.

Keywords: *China, Pakistan, South Asia, religious extremism, terrorism, Xinjiang, Taliban, "war against terrorism", regional approach*

JEL classification: *F51, F52, F59, H12*

1. Introduction

Sino-Pakistan relations have a long history, which started from the 1950s till today. On the international front, both have supported each other in all regional and international fora. Domestically, in the areas such as the military and economy, China helped Pakistan a lot in developing extensive economic and military projects. On the other hand, during the Cold War era, especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian War, Pakistan outrightly supported China on crucial issues, such as China's claimed sovereignty over Taiwan and Tibet, and sensitive issues such as human rights. In the words of Shangli Lin, "The friendship between the Chinese and Pakistani people has a long history as early as 2000 years, as the Silk Road has linked the two sides together." (Lin, 2001: 13)

It is true that in the post-Cold War era, China has secured the status of a major player of international politics by identifying three areas of development. Firstly, focusing primarily on economic development, China acquires the largest foreign exchange reserves in the world more than the worth of four trillion dollars. Indeed, China has emerged as the world's second largest economy, and the largest exporter of goods with 9.6 per cent of the global share.¹ Secondly, in order to sustain its growth, China has to become an active player of international politics. A major proportion of oil and other natural resources and raw material that China needs to feed its growing economy are imported from Latin America, Africa and Central and Southwest Asia. These regions are the emerging markets for Chinese products, making them profoundly valuable. Finally, sustained economic growth within China depends on a stable security and peaceful environment in its neighborhood.

Truly speaking, after the 9/11 incident, the chemistry of international relations has been changed, with the emergence of new challenges and prospects. In the changing geo-political reality in the region, both Pakistan and China have been steadfastly supporting each other for their political and military interests. Against this background, this article analyzes Sino-Pakistan relations with reference to the emerging security challenges at the regional level in the post-Cold War era, particularly after the 9/11 incident.

2. China, Pakistan and South Asia

In the context of South Asia, one of the poorest yet strategically important regions of the world, India and Pakistan are two neighboring nuclear countries while China, though not geographically located in the region, is a very important player in South Asian politics. Thus, there is a triangle in South Asia, politically and strategically dominated by these three states. However, the United States of America (US) also has a great influence in the region. The South Asian region is confronted mainly with two problems. Firstly, the war against terrorism has been fought in the region. Secondly, extra-regional actors are directly involved in the region which has further radicalized the politics of the region. Moreover, India and the US have developed their relations in the field of nuclear technology. An agreement was signed between India and the US. According to it, the US will transfer civil nuclear defense technology to India. Pakistan and China have criticized this deal on the ground that it would disturb the balance of power in the region (India supported the National Missile Defense announced by the then president George Bush in May 2001) (Mutahir, 2002: 23). It shows the intentions of India and the US to counter the influence of China in the South Asian region.

Moreover, China also reacted sharply to the extension of the US military assistance to Taiwan. China has reason to be concerned over the deployment of the US National Missile Defense for its allies (*ibid.*). In this backdrop China sees the civil nuclear agreement with great concern. However, on the other hand, as far as the economic front is concerned, China follows the policy of engagement with India. Although a border dispute resulted in a war between the two countries in the past and clashes also took place between the two armies in Arunachal Pradesh and Chumar in Ladakh in September 2014, such conflicts were however resolved later on peacefully through dialogue.² In the same month, the president of China, Xi Jinping, visited India and signed billions of dollars of trade and investment agreements. In this regard, the Chinese president also announced that China would invest 20 billion dollars over the next five years in India's railways, industrial parks and nuclear power projects (Huma Yousuf, 2014).

Actually, the Chinese policy is to focus on regional harmony and at the same time not to permit India to enter disputed territory. In this context, China reacted sharply when the Indian prime minister, Narindar Modi, visited Arunachal Pradesh, which is a disputed territory. The Chinese ministry officials condemned Modi's visit.³ Arunachal Pradesh was established largely on the three areas of Tibet in China, Monyul Layul and Lower Tsayul. These three areas are located between the controversial Macmohan Line, which China considers as illegally contrived by the colonial power in 1914.

On the other hand, Pak-China relations have strategic importance. China also uses Pakistan to contain India's geo-strategic ambitions. China invested 198 million dollars in Gawadar port in order to create a balance in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, China also seeks Pakistan's help in containing the East Turkestan Movement based in Xinjiang. For Pakistan, China is a major supplier of military hardware and nuclear reactors, and hence counter-leverage to the US. For this purpose, China adheres to a "military strategy of active defense". However, Beijing needs to boast its military capabilities to counter security threats and support its commitments to help ensure peace and stability.⁴

On the other hand, element of insecurity prevails in India because of China's close relations with Pakistan, its supplying of weapons to Sri Lanka and improving relations with Myanmar and Nepal. This leads to the Indian fear of strategic encirclement. Historically, border clashes between India and China in 1962 ended after China captured over 3,500 km borders of Arunachal Pradesh area from India which China still holds. This traditional distrust of India against China and Pakistan has led to an atmosphere of enmity and insecurity in the region. An intended function of China's support for Pakistan was the de facto confinement of India in strategic affairs in the sub-continent. Sensing such apprehensions, India was quick to exploit China's desire for a strategic dialogue, though it has been possible to resolve some of the longstanding disputes over territory and sovereignty. India now recognizes Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, and China recognizes Indian sovereignty over the former princely state of Sikkim. However, besides taking these measures both are suspicious of each other.⁵ By and large,

Chinese concerns about India's emergence as an American bulwark rationally exhibit a disinclination to be used in an instrumental manner by other powers. However, it seems that they will continue to regard each other with some caution.⁶

In order to reduce the border tensions, India and China held counter-terrorism exercises. The purpose of the joint operations was meant to open a channel of communication between soldiers of medium and low level as well as confidence building measures (CBMs) between the two countries. India sees the anti-terrorism collaboration with China as a way to highlight the threat, which both the countries have faced from Islamic militants.⁷ Actually, Chinese leadership has focused on the regional economic approach to engage its neighbors for mutual development and economic integration. In this regard, China wants to improve regional infrastructure for better connectivity. China offers help and collaboration in building better transport network including roads, motorways, railways and air-links. China is planning to develop four highways and maritime economic corridors including the Bangladesh-India-Myanmar-China economic corridor, and the one with Central Asia.

However, due to Pakistan's location, China is more enthusiastic about the China-Pakistan corridor and considers it an important part of the 21st-Century Silk Road. China regards Pakistan as a crucial partner in its own regional strategy. In this regard, China is keenly developing Pakistan's infrastructure in order to counter India especially after the 1962 Sino-Indian border war and later on India's nuclear testing in 1998 which according to Indian officials was directed towards China rather than Pakistan. As far as the economic interest of China is concerned, 60 Chinese companies are involved in 122 projects in Pakistan, and more than 10,000 Chinese engineers and technical experts are working in Pakistan (Symonds, 2009). Moreover, Pakistan is the largest purchaser of Chinese arms. According to a Pentagon report, 36 per cent of China's military exports went to Pakistan between 2003 and 2007. The Chinese technical assistance was critical to Pakistan's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. In return, Pakistan has permitted China to build a major naval/commercial port facility at Gawadar, a coastal town in Baluchistan. The port is the linchpin of Beijing's "string of pearls"

strategy to establish access for its expanding navy to a series of ports along key sea routes across the Indian Ocean and at the same time to protect civil and gas supplies from the Middle East and Africa. The US which regards China as a rising economic and strategic rival is determined to maintain its military, including naval, predominance (*ibid.*).

However, the growing Sino-Pakistan relations is facing the major challenge of rising religious extremism and terrorism in the region.

3. The Challenge of Religious Extremism and Terrorism

It is true that the major mutual security challenge to both China and Pakistan is the rise of religious extremism and terrorism in the region. In the case of Pakistan, the major security challenge is emanating from its tribal areas of FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) where major terrorist groups, such as the Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Al-Qaida, have their sanctuaries, despite the Pakistan military's launching of several security operations, including the on-going Operation Zarb-e-Azb. It is noted that the lawless FATA region also provides shelter to foreign terrorist groups, which unleash terrorism in their respective countries as well.

For China, the major security concern is of the presence in the Pakistan's FATA region of Uighurs, who carry out terrorist activities in its Xinjiang province, where violent riots took place in the decade of 1990s that caused ethnic tension and instability. It has been reported with concern that the activities of some two hundred activists of Pakistani religious parties were engaged in propagating their brand of religion in Xinjiang. The Chinese authorities describe this phenomenon as interference in its internal affairs (Mutahir, 1992: 80). Moreover, China also claimed that the Taliban had trained Islamic fundamentalists and provided them arms.⁸

Since the beginning of the 1990s availability of small arms and light weapons had been accessed through different routes and sources. Weapons began to move into China causing ethnic tensions and instability in Xinjiang. Violent clashes took place and left more than

eighty people dead and hundred injured (Moonis Ahmar, 1997). In this connection ethnic riots again broke out in 2009. On 5 July 2009, at least 197 people were killed and 1,600 were wounded in ethnic riots in Xinjiang. Hundreds of rioters had been arrested after the Uighurs took to the streets of the regional capital Urumqi, burning and smashing vehicles and confronting anti-riot police. According to Chinese authorities the unrest was the work of extremist forces abroad. They blamed the violence on the World Uighur Congress and other separatist groups to split Xinjiang from China. Highlighting the severity of the crisis, then Chinese president, Hu Jintao, cut short his trip to Italy for the G8 Summit – observers said it was an unprecedented move – to tackle one of China’s worst flare-ups of ethnic tension in decades.⁹ But exiled Uighur groups adamantly rejected the Chinese government’s claim of a plot. They said that the riots were an outcome of the policies of the Chinese government.

Xinjiang has long been a tightly controlled hotbed of ethnic tension, fostered by an economic gap between the Uighurs and the Han Chinese, and government controls on religion and cultural activities. Additionally, Han migrants are the majority in urban centers and control the markets. Strategically, Xinjiang, bordering Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, has abundant oil reserves and is China’s largest natural gas-producing region.¹⁰ Thus, it is natural that Chinese authorities would deal with the matter with an iron hand.

The background of this violent instability can be seen in the context of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. The violent phase of Chinese Muslim unrest has a direct correlation with the US-China-Pakistan-Saudi Arabian axis to support the Mujahideen’s Jihad and to bleed the Soviets in Afghanistan. Later on, when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan, Mujahideen infighting started in order to gain control of Afghanistan. However, the division among the Mujahideen and the spillover effect of their infighting could easily be visible in the neighboring countries including China’s Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region occupies a pivotal position in the region with its borders touching Mongolia, Tajikistan,

Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan and Kashmir. In Xinjiang, the Han Chinese constitute 37 per cent of the population and the Uighur Muslims 47 per cent. Increased trans-border trade and traffic between Xinjiang and the adjoining regions of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Pakistan via the KaraKoram highway passing through Azad Kashmir have resulted in greater interaction between the Turkic speaking Uighurs and their ethnic counterparts and co-religionists in Central Asia, Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Warikoo, 1996). Furthermore, with the exposure which they had during the Afghan Jihad with the full support of the Chinese state and later on when Taliban took control, these Uighur Muslims tasted a new phenomenon of life which revolved around a particular brand of religion. Historically, the Uighur Muslims were the single largest community constituting about 7.2 million of China's 18 million Muslims and they were mainly concentrated in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (Sawran Singh, 2002: 409).

Moreover, Xinjiang has become a primary source of energy for the Chinese economy. At Xinjiang's boundaries, there are three oil basins, the Turpan, Junggar and Tarim. The Tarim Basin is reportedly the largest unexplored oil basin in the world with some estimates of its potential reserves amounting to as high as 147 billion barrels (Chin, 1994: 1, cited in Mamdoub, 1995-96: 139).

As stated above, China encouraged Uighur Muslims to fight in Afghanistan against the Soviets. But when the Soviets decided to leave Afghanistan in 1989 these well-trained and well-equipped Uighurs were unable to return to China and had continued to fight for various Afghan factions including the Taliban (Stobodon, 1999).

3.1. Linkage between Taliban and Uighurs

During the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, Uighur Muslims along with other fellow Mujahideen from different Muslim countries built strong relations with the locals. Moreover, the Uighurs had also developed relations with other powerful groups called the Islamic Movement led by Tahir Yuldashev who came from Uzbekistan and based in Afghanistan (Gangadharan, 2000: 62). All these forces were closely associated with the Taliban.

The matter of fact is that the Uighurs had political, moral and material support from Afghanistan during the Afghan Jihad. The young generation of Uighurs are more militant, aggressively inspired by the international Islamic resistance Jihadist movement centered in Afghanistan during Taliban rule. This young generation of Uighurs represent ethno-religious nationalism and they corner the old generation who are secular nationalists. As a result, ideologically tough Uighurs inspired and fought the Afghan war and have brought violence inside China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. However, China deliberately sent the Han ethnic group into Xinjiang Autonomous Region in order to create balance in the region, but this was not taken as a positive step. The Uighurs are of the opinion that the Han would create problems at two levels: firstly, identity crisis for the Uighurs, and secondly, economic competition. The Han control the job market and would create economic competition for the Uighur Muslims.

In order to consolidate the Chinese authority in Xinjiang, an attempt has been made by China to turn the region into its internal colony. Three reasons have been cited in this regard: firstly, to reduce the historic vulnerability of its borderland; secondly, to avoid emboldening the separatist movements in Tibet and Taiwan by agreeing to Uighur demands for greater autonomy; and thirdly, to monopolize Xinjiang's rich natural resources (Rudelson, 1997: 3). With this background, the Chinese authorities are sensitive because Uighur Muslims have co-religionists in Central Asia, Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Chinese want to restrict foreign subversives from Afghanistan and Pakistan's Islamic groups in Xinjiang. According to diplomatic sources, China noted with concern of some 200 activities of various Pakistani groups engaged in propagating religious activities in Xinjiang. Moreover, China also claims that Taliban has trained Islamic radicals and provided them arms to assist their battle for independence.¹¹

However, the event of 9/11 has completely changed the political scenario. Pakistan, which is the front-line state in the "war against terrorism", has seriously worked out on this issue and tried to remove the misunderstanding of the Chinese authorities by taking strict action against Taliban and other radical groups. In this regard is the Lal Mosque

massacre that took place in 2007. In January 2007, Pakistani authorities took stern action against all those Mosques and Madaris which had illegally occupied land in Islamabad. During this action thirteen illegal Mosques were demolished. The management of Lal Mosque raised voice against this act of the government and demanded it to stop such an action against the Madaris and Mosques. But the government firmly stood its ground and paid no heed to the demand. Against this background, the female students of Hafza Madrasa, affiliated with Lal Mosque, kidnapped the Chinese women working in fitness centres. It was alleged that they were involved in the vulgar business. The Chinese diplomats in Islamabad took strong notice of this incident, and urged the government of Pakistan to take action against Lal Mosque. The government planned an operation in July 2007 and killed 100 terrorists. It is noted that Lal Mosque was the hub of recruitment and training center for Jihadi elements (Mutahir, 2014: 178).

According to Pakistan intelligence sources, the Uighur separatists hide mainly in the North Waziristan region, where Taliban are their host. The Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), which China equates with the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), keeps a low profile. The leader of the TIP, Abdullah Mansour, said that it was his duty to fight against China. In Afghanistan two security reports were sent to expatriates warning of attacks on a Chinese hotel, Chinese companies and other targets in Kabul. There has been no attack so far. According to Taliban sources, there are about 250 Uighur militants in Afghanistan's Nuristan and Kunar provinces.

China has stepped up security in Xinjiang after a vehicle crashed into a crowd in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on 28 October 2013 and burst into flames, killing all three people in the car and two tourists in the square and injuring the other thirty-eight. Later on, Mansour owned the killing and called it a "jihadi operation."¹²

In another deadly incident in which 43 people were killed (including 4 of the assailants) and more than 90 were injured, shoppers in Urumqi were attacked with a dozen explosives thrown from two SUVs on 22 May 2014.¹³ In response to these attacks, the Chinese authorities have launched various crackdowns.

3.2. Chinese Responses

Keeping all these developments in perspective, it can be observed that China wants to contain terrorism because of its own interests. On the other hand, Pakistan has taken drastic measures to eliminate terrorism particularly after 16 December 2014, when 140 students were killed by religious elements in Peshawar. Moreover, Pakistan's major regional ally China will also expect Pakistan to put extra efforts in dealing with terrorism. The kidnapping of a Chinese tourist from Baluchistan coincided with President Mamnoon Hussain's visit to China. Although the president condemned the incident, China is deeply concerned about the security of its own interests in Pakistan. However, Pakistan also cannot set aside the Chinese security concerns as China has emerged as a major economic development and trade partner of the country.¹⁴

Presently, China has adopted a two-pronged strategy. One is the developmental strategy, and the other is the policy of engagement. As far as the developmental strategy is concerned, China focuses on the regional approach in which economic infrastructure, trade and investment get top priority. On the policy of engagement, China offers good offices to have reconciliation with Taliban. China has proposed a forum to restart peace talks between Afghanistan and Taliban. China proposed a "peace and reconciliation forum", which would gather representatives from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the Taliban command.¹⁵ It is hoped that this proposal would get positive response from all the concerned players especially Pakistan, which enjoys very cordial relations with China.

In October 2014, the Afghan president, Ashraf Ghani, visited China. Both countries pledged a new long-term partnership. The Afghan president's visit to China demonstrated his intentions of utilizing Afghanistan's natural resources as a trade-off for infrastructure and industry to reverse the rapid decline in economic growth. Afghanistan has an estimated three trillion dollars' worth of natural resources including copper, iron ore, silver, gold, coal, gems and metals such as chromite. The lack of infrastructure, and war did not permit anyone to extract these resources. Presently, China is also active in oil production

in the north of Afghanistan. After committing a three billion dollars deal to develop a five million ton copper deposit at Mes Aynak, near Kabul, in Loger province, the Chinese state-run consortium, Metallurgical Corporation China (MCC), pulled out its workers after they came under Taliban attack. The 2007 contract has since been renegotiated and work has yet to resume. (Lynne O' Donnell, 2014)

4. Conclusion

In a multi-polar world, international politics revolves around various power centers, which desperately try to control regional zones in order to fulfill their economic needs. In the South Asian region, the two neighbors Pakistan and India which are both nuclear powers have locked in power rivalry for the last six decades or so. Though China geographically is not placed in South Asia, politically and strategically it cannot be ignored. The Chinese interest is not to give India a free hand in the South Asian region – that is why Pakistan has a special place in Chinese foreign policy. In this context, South Asia has a triangle whose components are India, China and Pakistan. Moreover, after the 9/11 incident, international politics has shifted towards South Asia because of the US-led “war against terrorism”. The extra-regional powers are directly involved in the region which has aggravated the conflict between India and Pakistan.

Afghanistan has become the epicenter of the “war against terrorism”, whose spillover effects can be seen in Pakistan, India and China. Pakistan’s tribal areas, particularly the FATA region, and the Chinese province of Xinjiang, bordering Afghanistan, are the most affected regions. The exiled separatist leadership of Xinjiang took refuge in Afghanistan and the tribal area of Pakistan. China’s concern is to contain and eliminate these separatist elements.

In this regard, China, whose foreign policy revolves around five principles of peaceful co-existence, has brought about a change in its most important principle, i.e. non-interference in each other’s internal affairs. It is rare in its history that China is offering its good offices to negotiate with the leaderships of Taliban, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The

Taliban leadership visited China twice, the first time before the visit of President Ashraf Ghani to China and the second after his visit. Afghanistan's new leadership and Taliban's leadership have an element of mistrust vis-à-vis each other. On the other hand, both have their apprehensions against Pakistan. Thus, in this scenario, China is the only regional actor as well as the only honest broker which can play an active role with the trust of all the concerned players. Moreover, China has its own interests in Xinjiang and also its investments in Afghanistan in particular and the South Asian region in general. The matter of fact is that both China and Pakistan have a significant role to play in the South Asia region in the years to come.

Notes

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