

The dynamics of the Sino-Pakistani strategic partnership from its formation in the 1960s to the present

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Abstract

Chinese President Xi Jinping's global Belt-Road Initiative (BRI), the most significant part of which is the £40bn investment to modernise Pakistan's infrastructure, underlines the growing importance of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in international affairs. Whilst many analysts have seen the PRC's outward investment through an economic lens in the context of a global trade war or a new Chinese imperialism, this paper argues, through an analysis of the basis, dimensions and historical trajectory of the Sino-Pakistani entente, that the Pakistani component of the project ought to be understood in the context of Beijing's long-standing political and strategic interests in South Asia, which are a central part of its aspirations for great power status. This research demonstrates that the entente, which has demonstrated a remarkable durability and dynamism since the early 1960s to the present and survived many tumultuous events within each country and reconfigurations within the geo-political order, represents a striking and paradigmatic example of how state power considerations, rather than culture, ideology, economic interest or composition of ruling elites, can determine foreign policy behaviour – as conceptualised by the Neo-Realist school of International Relations (IR) theory. Although highly divergent societies and polities with conflicting views on central global issues, Beijing and Islamabad have nonetheless discerned through realist calculations a shared advantage in entering into a balancing partnership to counter and contain their mutual Indian foe and curtail its ability to concentrate its forces solely on either state in a conflict situation. Informed by a neo-realist perspective that also takes into account features of state identity, this research demonstrates that with the unlikelihood of settlements regarding Chinese and Pakistani territorial disputes with India in the medium term and a wider mounting rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi for, ultimately, global hegemony, it is expected that the balancing partnership against India shall continue to remain an unyielding feature of the PRC's foreign policy.

Keywords. China, Pakistan, Neo-realism, International Relations, India, Belt-Road Initiative, Kashmir.

Introduction

According to Garver (1993), the PRC's entente with Pakistan has been the most resilient aspect of its foreign relations since the State's foundation and has constituted its most cordial relationship with a non-communist country. Beijing entered into the entente in the early 1960s after the previously friendly relations with Nehru's India broke down and descended into war over territorial disputes and Chinese resentment of perceived Indian interference in Tibet. Courting India's principal adversary, Pakistan, and providing it with diplomatic and military aid was seen as a prudential and economical way of

hemming in Indian power within the subcontinent, presenting Indian strategists with the troubling prospect of a war on two fronts against Beijing and Islamabad. As China and India have increasingly become economic and political rivals on the global stage, Beijing derives a less tangible but significant moral gain from Indo-Pakistani antagonism: the equation in the estimation of Western leaders of India with Pakistan (Garver 2001). This helps to generate a perception of the PRC as a power in a higher league than the two warring South Asian states (Ibid.).

Pakistan has since its inception possessed fewer resources than India and has always sought to align with other states to supplement its internal capabilities and avoid being coerced into becoming part of New Delhi's sphere of influence. In the mid-1950s, Pakistan aligned with the US. However, it became profoundly disillusioned by American refusals to unequivocally support it in its conflicts with India and on the pivotal Kashmir issue. Consequently, Pakistan realigned its foreign policy towards Beijing from the early 1960s. Unlike any of its other allies, China saw India as a threatening power and also concurred with Pakistan in rejecting Indian claims to Kashmir. The strategic partnership is the centrepiece of Pakistan's foreign policy and its strategy for containing India. Despite Washington having provided significantly more aid to Pakistan than the PRC since the mid- 1950s, Pakistan's affinity with Beijing is greater.

The '*Hindi-Chini, bhai, bhai*' period

The early relationship between the nascent PRC and India was characterised by a great deal of mutual respect and goodwill following Nehru's recognition of the PRC as the legitimate government of China in January 1950. The amity that was encapsulated by the official slogans in India of '*Hindi-Chini, bhai, bhai*',¹¹ was able to occur despite there being a lack of ideological agreement between the conflicting paths for the development of post-colonial states they respectively recommended; Mao championed revolutionary change, while Nehru extolled a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism (Hagerty 2002:3).

Early Pakistani Foreign Relations

Pakistani foreign policy in the first years of the country's existence was motivated by a

fundamental objective to ensure the state's basic survival faced with a more powerful India. Pakistan's early leaders were not convinced that New Delhi had accepted its independence and believed that India was willing to undo the partition and reunify the subcontinent through forcible means. This fear was stoked by statements made by Nehru calling for the establishment of an Indo-Pakistan "confederation" and declaring the Pakistani state to be a "temporary phenomenon" (Ibid.).

Pakistan began life at a great strategic disadvantage vis a vis India, both economically and militarily. This was compounded by the war over Kashmir in 1948; the fact of being surrounded by two large states that were not then allies of Karachi¹², the USSR and China, and a wider sense of insecurity given the odd geographical structure of the state with two

¹¹ 'India and China are brothers' in Hindi.

¹² In this paper, the Pakistani state is referred to by the metonyms Karachi, Rawalpindi or Islamabad

depending on which particular city was the seat of government at the relevant time.

wings separated by a distance of some one thousand miles, making defence of both West and East Pakistan logistically complex.

India and Pakistan both claimed the disputed state of Kashmir in its entirety following the partition of the subcontinent, and went to war immediately afterwards in a bid to annex the state. The war and invasion by both Karachi and New Delhi and a subsequent UN-brokered ceasefire left some two-thirds of the state under Indian control, with the remainder administered by Pakistan. The UN recommended through Security Council resolutions that the final status of Kashmir be settled by a plebiscite. The Pakistani state, believing that the majority Muslim population of Kashmir desired to be part of Pakistan, has backed the idea of a popular referendum among Kashmiris to decide the future of the state ever since. The acquisition of the entire state of Kashmir has become an important part of the identity of Pakistanis, especially within the ruling elite and armed forces. India, however, has been reluctant to allow such a referendum to occur, fearing that the outcome may not be favourable to its official position.¹³ Moreover, additional strategic depth vis a vis India would accrue to Pakistan through annexing Kashmir, according Islamabad a greater buffer area between its major military and industrial core areas and the front line in the event of conflict with India.

Waltz, in his seminal work on neorealist IR theory, postulates that where a state perceives another state to be an adversary there are two principal ways that it can deal with this in the anarchical world of geo-politics. The state may

either choose to balance against the perceived antagonist, or else 'bandwagon' alongside it - that is ally with the other state (Waltz 1979: 126). The so-called 'bandwagoning' approach is normally undertaken by a state that is at a *considerable* strategic disadvantage vis a vis its adversary. In the absence of internal resources or guarantees from external states that are powerful enough to provide assurances against the principal rival, there is no choice but to pursue a non-adversarial path. Where the imbalance is not so marked, a state can choose to balance against the rival state, which has the important advantage of preserving its ability to act autonomously in the system, free from external pressure (Waltz 2000: 38).

Pakistan has been in the position of possessing some capabilities to balance India; yet it is fundamentally lacking in internal resources to do so successfully on its own, given the military and economic disparities between the two South Asian rivals (Rajagolopalan 1999). The Pakistani state has been reluctant to throw in its lot with India, because it has enough strength to avoid this and because so doing would likely result in having to resolve the conflict over Kashmir on terms favourable to the more powerful New Delhi. Pakistan has therefore required supplementary alliances with other states throughout its existence, in the form of 'external balancing', so as to counteract India successfully and provide a deterrent against attack. The attainment of political and other support for its Kashmir policy has been a major secondary aim. By contrast, the Republic of India's smaller neighbours such as Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have tended towards a

¹³ The position of New Delhi has been that Kashmir belongs within India, owing to the former ruler of the state acceding sovereignty to New Delhi in

1947, and because keeping hold of Muslim-majority Kashmir is an important symbol of Indian secularism.

non-balancing approach in the history of their relations with New Delhi, bereft as they have been of internal balancing potential, and largely incapable of drawing adequate support externally.

Collapse of Sino-Indian entente

The Indian stance towards Beijing's 1950 annexation of Tibet was crucially ambiguous. Independent India had harboured desires to maintain the same influence in Tibet that the British Raj authorities had enjoyed (Syed 1974:18). Nehru expressed his dismay and alarm that the PRC, rather than seek negotiations with the Tibetan leadership, had chosen to invade and occupy the country (Barnds, 1975:468). At the same time, Pakistan issued no great condemnation of the PRC's annexation (Ibid.), in large part because it favoured a Tibet within China to one that was beholden to India. The indifference in Pakistan to the invasion of Tibet, in contrast to the disquiet in New Delhi, was sympathetically noted by Chinese foreign policy makers (Ibid.).

By the mid-1950s, the situation had taken a turn for the worst with a community of Tibetan exiles in the northern Indian city of Dharmasala who had fled Chinese military persecution organising resistance to Beijing on Indian territory (Hagerty 2002:4). For New Delhi, the increasing Tibetan repression "severely shook [its] sense of security" and "led to fears of China's intentions along the border" (Gittings 1968:110), prompting Nehru's decision to allow the Tibetans to mount their independence struggle from India. The policy proved to be a watershed in Sino-Indian relations. In 1956, the US Central Intelligence Agency, helped by Taiwan-based Kuomintang nationalists, arrived in northern India to fund and train Tibetan

dissidents in guerrilla warfare against the Chinese state (Hagerty 2002:4). A large-scale rebellion erupted in Lhasa in 1959 followed by further brutal clampdowns that sent many more thousands of Tibetans into India for asylum (Ibid.). They were headed by the leader of the Tibetan struggle, the Dalai Lama, who was publicly welcomed by the Indian leadership (Ibid.). China reacted furiously, charging that New Delhi had colluded with its major adversary, the US superpower, to support subversion in what it regarded as its sovereign territory (Barnds, 1975:470).

The 1962 Sino-Indian war, the climax of border tensions in the late 1950s, was brief but intense. The British-drawn 'McMahon Line' that had delineated the border between India and China since 1914 was disputed by Beijing, which argued that the contemporary Chinese authorities had not been consulted when the British established it (Guang 2004:403). The PRC claimed two regions that are under Indian sovereignty (Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh), arguing that they constituted the southern part of Tibet. Nehru refused to accept negotiations and moved Indian troops to the Line in the late 1950s in order to force Chinese acceptance of its legitimacy (Ibid.). Mao responded by ordering a People's Liberation Army (PLA) attack on the troops in October 1962. During the month-long battle, the more numerous and better-equipped PLA soldiers drove Indian forces away from the border, and crossed over into Indian territory proper. China then announced a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew to where it regarded the border was before Nehru's troop movements (Ibid.).

The lasting lessons of 1962 for China's foreign policy mandarins were that India is an untrustworthy and troublesome state that will only respect China's national sovereignty through "a firm policy based on a position of strength" (Garver 1996:346).

Beijing's forbearance of the US-Pakistan alliance

Pakistan had accepted the PRC as the legitimate government of China on January 4th 1950. In so doing, Pakistan became the first Muslim country to recognise the PRC and only the third state outside of the Communist bloc to do at the time (Aneja 2006:1). While India and China enjoyed cordial relations during most of the 1950s, Beijing did not deem Pakistan, India's principal foe, as a hostile state. The PRC's conciliatory attitude towards its Muslim neighbour can be seen as notable, given the fact that during this period Chinese foreign policy behaviour was inimical to states that were aligned with the US, particularly ones whose internal political configurations were diametrically opposed to the revolutionary conception of political society championed by Mao. Pakistan, a largely feudal society governed by a military-civilian oligarchy, undoubtedly fitted the Marxist notion of a reactionary state.

The Chinese were anxious about a direct American threat, and Mao feared that the US was also pursuing a policy of encirclement of China by enlisting Asian states into anti-communist alliances (Barnds 1975:470). Although Chinese state propaganda disapproved of Pakistan's decision to enter the US orbit, it did so in a way that was, according to Syed, "remarkable for its moderation" (Syed 1974:55).

There are several reasons that account for the lack of Chinese hostility to Karachi during this period, despite Pakistan's 'reactionary' internal political structure and its membership in the anti-communist US defence pacts. Pakistan did not share US fears about global communism. Accordingly, Pakistani diplomats went to great lengths to persuade the Chinese that Karachi would not be party to a US endeavour to encircle the PRC, nor would it permit other states to use Pakistani territory for anti-Chinese activities (Barnds 1975:468).

The Chinese government, though ideologically committed to an official policy of the 'export' of revolution to other countries whose governments were part of the capitalist system headed by the US, was inclined to subordinate such socialist idealism to the expediencies of national self-interest, as classical realist theory, such as that of Morgenthau, might predict (Morgenthau 1978: 4-15). Roy argues that Beijing's foreign policy at this stage amounted to backing anti-government rebels "in countries that were US allies and/or did not diplomatically recognise Beijing" (Roy 1998:25). Thus, the PRC did not expend any effort or expense in supporting insurrection in friendly Pakistan, as it had in all Asian states that were deemed to be 'anti-China' (Barnds 1975:464). Maxwell sums up the *realpolitik* of the revolutionary PRC's relations with other regimes: "It's not what you are, it's the way you act" (Maxwell 1970:273).

Bhutto's reorientation of Pakistani Foreign Policy

The main architect of the country's entente cordiale with China was Z. A. Bhutto, a young nationalist politician who first came to prominence in the early 1960s. Bhutto's ideas

were to determine the course of Pakistan's foreign policy for decades to come. As Foreign Minister, Bhutto persuaded the military leadership that Pakistan's best interests would be served by having a much less dependent relationship with Washington (Mahmud 1991:4). Pakistan would have to widen its external balancing options by developing closer ties to Muslim states, as well as the PRC, Soviet Union and the smaller Communist countries of Eastern Europe and North Korea (Burke and Ziring 1990:416).

Bhutto sensed an opportunity to seek an alignment with Beijing on the basis of mutual hostility to India, which he regarded as the only state that threatened Pakistan (Cohen 2004:141). It was extremely unlikely, in Bhutto's view, that China would ever come to see Pakistan as an adversary if Karachi were to maintain its policy of refusing to allow external powers to use Pakistan as a proxy against Beijing. Bhutto believed that Sino-Pakistan conflict was improbable for two principal reasons: Pakistan, unlike India, had no great power pretensions that would lead it on a course to balance and rival China, and the limited and remote Chinese border area with Pakistan made it unlikely that Beijing could easily take an aggressive stance towards the Pakistanis even if it wanted to (Sayeed 1965:257).

With the benefit of hindsight, Bhutto's analysis of the future of Pakistan-China relations was prescient in identifying the central importance of India to melding that relationship, but far too optimistic in stating that geography could somehow prevent future conflict between Beijing and Islamabad; the PRC's ascent to great military power status from the end of the

20th Century means that it now has the capability to overwhelm Pakistan irrespective of the limited border area. More importantly, Bhutto failed to take into account the possible significance of the long-disaffected Muslim-majority Xinjiang province as a hindrance to the entente. Whilst there is no reason to assume that Beijing's systematic mistreatment of the Uighur community (Sudworth 2019) presents a current threat to Sino-Pakistani relations, it is not inconceivable that it could become so in future, potentially causing harm to the entente between Islamabad and Beijing in much the same way that the deteriorating situation in Tibet did to India's relations with the PRC from the 1950s.

Formation of the entente

A border settlement between Beijing and Pakistan was reached in December 1962, in the immediate aftermath of Sino-Indian war, and signed and ratified in March 1963. It delineated an international boundary between Pakistani controlled Kashmir and China's Xinjiang province along a frontier some 300 miles long. Pakistan gained some 750 square miles of territory from which the PRC withdrew its military forces and personnel. In return, Pakistan ceded some 2,500 square miles of the barren and unpopulated Aksai Chin area of Northern Kashmir to China (Barnds, 1975:471). While the land given up by China was integrated into Pakistan, the agreement stipulated that the Aksai Chin accession to China was provisional and subject to further negotiations until a permanent settlement of the Kashmir issue had been arrived at by Pakistan and India (Ibid.).

Pakistan's Kashmir policy had received a substantial boost from the agreement. Though

the PRC had never accepted New Delhi's view that Kashmir properly belongs to India, even during the 'Hindi-Chini, bhai, bhai' years (Garver 2001:191), Pakistani officials feared that this policy might change over time. Beijing was now, however, on record as rejecting Indian claims to Kashmir, and moreover had now effectively become a party to the Kashmir dispute itself. India, for its part, immediately condemned the agreement as illegal and launched a strong diplomatic protest to China and Pakistan. New Delhi's case was that all of Kashmir, including the part occupied by Pakistan, was legally part of the Republic of India and neither Pakistan nor China had a right to negotiate possession of it (Barnds 1975:471).

Basis of the partnership

The essential basis of the China-Pakistan entente from its inception to the present day is a mutual need to pool together resources to contain perceived Indian aspirations for hegemony over South Asia. Both China and Pakistan regard the entente as necessary to maintain a balance of power in the subcontinent favourable to themselves against an India that is believed by both Chinese and Pakistani strategists to be an expansionist power that occupies land regarded as properly belonging to Beijing and Islamabad, respectively and that is intent on expanding further.

According to Mearsheimer's neo-realist theory of IR, a state may choose to 'pass the buck' of balancing an adversary state to a state that it has sought security cooperation with, thereby freeing up more of its limited resources to counter other perceived foes within the international system (Mearsheimer 2001: 267). As Mearsheimer explains:

"(T)hreatened states sometimes opt for buck-passing rather than joining a balancing coalition. In other words, they attempt to get other states to assume the burden of checking a powerful opponent while they remain on the sidelines." (Mearsheimer 2010: 76)

This strategy fits the pattern of Chinese support for Pakistan, with the latter acting as a strategic proxy to contain Indian influence over South Asia, without the forging of a formal coalition. The entente came into existence at a time when scarce Chinese resources were devoted to countering the formidable superpower foes of the US and USSR. However, because no state can fully trust another in the anarchical world of power politics, prudence requires that a state develop its own means to counteract the threatening state, in case the balancing partnership breaks down. For that reason, China has devoted a great deal of its own internal resources to countering India over the decades.

The subcontinent is of far greater significance to the PRC's national security than many other regions such as Africa, the Middle East or Central and South America, in view of its being adjacent to the often restive Chinese provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang (Barnds 1975:465). No Chinese leadership can afford to be complacent or indifferent to the possibility that a hostile state in the subcontinent could weaken its hold over its South Western provinces. China's concerns about the security of its borders mean that it can pursue one of a number of paths to reduce the prospect of an infelicitous situation developing (Ibid.). The first and arguably preferable strategy for Beijing would be to develop a close or at least a non-adversarial 'proper' relationship with India, which would decrease the likelihood of the latter destabilising Chinese rule over Tibet. The

Chinese pursued such a policy until the late 1950s; however, as discussed previously, the entente irrevocably broke down. When relations with India soured and the two countries became overt rivals for power in Asia, an alternative option for Chinese strategic mandarins was to establish cordial relationships with the superpowers so as to lessen the likelihood of their furnishing India's anti-Chinese policies with succour. However, Beijing would prefer to orient its policy towards the superpowers around issues that are a central part of its global strategic agenda, rather than its comparatively less salient South Asian interests (Ibid. 466).

Consequently, China has few viable alternatives available to it other than employing a willing Pakistan, New Delhi's most militarily capable and significant adversary over a lengthy period of time, as a strategic proxy to hem in Indian power.¹⁴ Given Islamabad's historical lack of interference in Chinese internal affairs and its reliance on the PRC to enhance its position vis a vis India, the Chinese leadership derives a great deal of confidence about continued Pakistani fidelity to the partnership. Owing to the Chinese strategic need to counter India, Beijing has over a long period of time shown itself to be willing to overlook, ignore or forbear divergences with Pakistani policy positions on secondary issues.

Were Pakistan to be overwhelmed and forced to seek alignment with India, Chinese policy makers would be faced with a subcontinent under effective Indian hegemony, probably

forcing the PRC to disengage from what would rather quickly become an Indian area of special interest. Garver argues that such a state of affairs would hamper China's quest for Asian and, ultimately, global great power status, and make it a hostage to the vicissitudes of Indian goodwill not to interfere along its sensitive borders, rather than more assuredly constraining Indian actions through a determined and independent Pakistani counterpoise (Garver 2002:46).

From the perspective of Indian national security, the partnership between Beijing and Islamabad purposely stokes one of the most disquieting scenarios: the prospect of a war on two fronts. Because of the close relationship between its principal adversaries, India is palpably constrained from concentrating its military forces against merely Pakistan or China in the event of a conflict situation with either state. Indian leaders of necessity must factor into any decision to go to war with either Pakistan or the PRC the likelihood that the other party in the partnership will intervene to strengthen the position of its ally, and possibly 'settle historical scores' of its own (Garver 2001:187). This requires that India must divide its military forces between its two northern borders, thereby attenuating its overall military power against either party (Ibid.).

Moreover, the PRC gains a subtle wider political advantage vis a vis New Delhi by virtue of sustained Indo-Pakistani antagonism since this serves to undermine India's aspirations towards great-power status by 'dragging' the

¹⁴ Garver records that Beijing has in the past also "encouraged any anti-Indian tendencies in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan" (Garver 1987:1205). However, as noted earlier, the

capacity of these small countries to balance India has always been considerably less than that of Pakistan.

Indians down to Pakistan's much less significant 'Third World' geo-political level, whilst enabling China to present itself as 'above the fray'. Thus, India's strategic aim of being regarded as Asia's leading power is significantly undercut by its enmity with Pakistan because that antipathy leads to a comparison, especially in the minds of Western observers, of India with Pakistan, rather than analogies between India and China (Ibid. 188). The invariably hostile situation between the two Asian states enables the PRC to be "left apart, [...] on a higher moral plane" or, increasingly, within the "category of a greater power" (Ibid.).

From Pakistan's point of view, the Chinese, though they have been possessed of less economic, political and military clout than the great powers during the era of 20th Century superpower rivalry, nonetheless have enjoyed the status of a redoubtable regional power within Asia during the period of bi-polar hostilities, with the added advantage of sharing Pakistan's view of India as an adversary, and considering Kashmir a disputed territory. Unlike the USSR previously or the USA, China is deemed to be a "nonexploitative" power, which does not demand that Pakistan follow its dictates or adopt its ideological positions (Syed 1974:9). In contrast to the USA, whose interest in alignment with Pakistan has waxed and waned over the decades according to the exigencies of its strategic interests, the PRC's sustained non-friendly relations with New Delhi make it a stable, 'all-weather' friend to Pakistan. As China has risen to the status of a great military and economic superpower in the early 21st Century, it has become an even more attractive partner to Islamabad's eyes – raising the alluring prospect that the PRC could

ultimately replace an untrusted and disliked USA as Pakistan's principal benefactor.

However, the strategic partnership is an asymmetric one. While China has a profound interest in sustaining a South Asian environment that is not threatening to its national security, Beijing places a far higher priority on its relations with the states around its Pacific coastline, and also its own bilateral relations with the superpowers (Garver 2002:8). Whereas, the stakes for Pakistan are much higher since Islamabad's need for sympathetic allies to help it balance India is central to its perceived fight for national survival. The value to less internally capable Pakistan of external balancing against India means that it needs China more than the latter needs Pakistan.

Beijing's roles in Indo-Pakistani conflict

The PRC played an important, but very different, role in both of the two major Indo-Pakistani wars since the formation of the entente; in each instance seeking to bolster Pakistan's relative position on the battlefield against New Delhi through either diplomatic or limited military means, whilst mindful of international opinion and the particular context of superpower rivalry.

The 1965 Pakistani war plan involved sending insurgents from Pakistani Kashmir across the ceasefire line into Indian Kashmir with the objective of creating a mass uprising against the Indian rule that would be aided by Pakistani troops (Garver 2001, 76). Beijing provided substantial support to Pakistan during the war, which included training Kashmiri insurgents and Pakistani forces in Maoist guerrilla warfare tactics. (Ibid. 197). The PRC stated that India

was solely responsible for the war, repeating Pakistani claims that an indigenous uprising of Kashmiris had occurred against “the brutal rule and communal persecution by the Indian reactionaries” (Ibid.199).

As the war raged on, however, it became clear that a large-scale uprising in Indian Kashmir would not occur. On September 6th, 1965 the Indian army attacked West Pakistan, advancing to Lahore. In order to improve the Pakistani position, China tied down Indian soldiers in the North East and issued repeated threats to India that it was ready to attack. Beijing threatened “grave consequences” for India should it not desist (Syed 1974:114).

1971 dismemberment: limits of the entente

The origins of the war lay in the disaffection of large sections of Bengali society in East Pakistan with the West Pakistan dominated central government. Following the refusal of the military regime of President Yahya to uphold the victory of the Awami League in the November 1970 general elections, the League leadership declared that East Pakistan would become an independent sovereign state. In order to stop the secession, Yahya’s government ordered a brutal crackdown on Bengalis deemed to be its supporters throughout 1971. Many millions of Bengali refugees escaped the persecution and civil war by crossing over into India’s West Bengal state. Bengali insurgents who had taken up arms against the Pakistani military and its allies in East Pakistan were provided with weapons and training by India. Finally, India invaded East Pakistan in late November 1971, and with the aid of Bengali insurgents, took power and declared a state independent of Islamabad’s control. By mid-December, the Pakistan military

had surrendered and India had conferred recognition on the nascent People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

Although couched in the language of humanitarian intervention, the essential objectives of the Indian state intervention to ‘liberate’ East Pakistan from the regime were to increase New Delhi’s relative power over Pakistan and China. K. Subrahmanyam, a leading Indian foreign policy strategist, outlined India’s aims (in Garver 2001:205). For Subrahmanyam, the ultimate purpose of New Delhi’s dismemberment of Pakistan was the end of opposition to Indian domination of South Asia. The dismemberment would tilt the balance of power in South Asia squarely in New Delhi’s favour since Pakistan’s population would be halved, leaving the total population of the leftover Pakistan to be around only one tenth of that of India. The PRC’s strategic agenda of containment would be adversely affected since it would now be very difficult to utilise a demoralised Pakistan “as a countervailing power against India” (in Garver 2001:213). Deeply concerned about Islamabad’s external balancing pacts, Indian strategic planners seized the opportunity to “cut it down to size” and “severely curtail” its value to other states as a “proxy” (Ibid.). With the end of the Sino-Pakistani balancing entente, India’s “due role as a major power in the international scene” would be more easily realised (Ibid.).

With the stakes seemingly so high, why did the PRC fail to intervene militarily in a war whose outcome increased India’s relative national power over Pakistan? The reasons concern the differences between the strategic environment that existed in 1971 in comparison to the earlier decade, and China’s belief that the Pakistani

state had made catastrophic errors in its East Pakistan policy. The war had placed Beijing, in Syed's words, "on the horns of a most disagreeable dilemma", (Syed 1974:149) for whilst the PRC was opposed to the willingness of the Bengali rebels to act in concert with India, it also disapproved of the Pakistani military's crackdown as wrong and counterproductive (O'Leary 1980). As noted above, the PRC wished to project an image of itself to the world as a "principled actor". Consequently, it would have been on no account easy for Beijing to endorse the bloody campaign by a military regime to crackdown on a popular national movement, particularly given that the repression was also targeted at pro-Chinese Bengalis.

Though China's 'moral' identity reduced prospects for military intervention on this occasion, more compelling and decisive reasons for keeping out of the conflict were due to the realities of power politics. In August 1971, New Delhi had signed a mutual security pact with the Soviet Union. The treaty committed both parties to defend the other in the event of a conflict with either state. Three years after the Russians had led an invasion of Czechoslovakia, Beijing feared the prospect of a Soviet attack (Barnds 1975:480). Any participation of the PLA in the war against India would have greatly increased the odds of Soviet attacks against China.

Once the dismemberment seemed inevitable to Chinese analysts, their main objective was preserving the independence of West Pakistan and the maintenance of the strategic entente

with it in order to continue to counter India (Ibid.). Though it recognised that a truncated Pakistan would be less preferable to the previous status quo, China was well aware that the bulk of the Pakistani defence capability, hardware and manpower, was situated in the Western wing and would largely survive the defeat. With the benefit of hindsight, Subrahmanyam's analysis, though correct in identifying that Pakistan has been weakened by its 1971 defeat, was far too optimistic in predicting that this would lead to the subjection of the remainder of Pakistan to India, and the abandonment of Pakistan by Beijing.

Chinese atomic weapons assistance

India's first nuclear test in 1974 raised Pakistani apprehensions that New Delhi's possession of atomic weapons would heavily add to its relative gain over Islamabad, neutralising the deterrent value of Pakistan's conventional arms. Bhutto sought and received wide-ranging assistance from the Chinese for a Pakistani nuclear programme from the mid-1970s to counteract India's nuclear weapons development (Schofield 2014:94). Assisting Pakistan with developing a nuclear deterrent was probably intended by the Chinese government to be an important compensation for its relative strategic weakness after the loss of its Eastern wing and the dawn of Indian nuclear status, and a guarantee against a future invasion by India.¹⁵

Energy supplies and naval cooperation

As a precursor to its BRI, Beijing has financed the building of a major naval facility at

¹⁵ Pakistan is not the only Chinese 'nuclear protégé.' North Korea became nuclear-capable with Beijing's support. In each case, Beijing places

its primary Asian rivals – India and Japan respectively – under greater pressure.

Pakistan's Arabian Sea port city of Gwadar, which opened in 2005. The naval base helps to safeguard China's access to Middle Eastern oil. Gwadar is close to the Strait of Hormuz, from which some 60 per cent of the PRC's energy supplies are sourced (Ramachandran 2005). China is concerned that in the event of future conflict with the USA, which effectively controls both the Persian Gulf and the Malacca Strait, its energy supply lines could be choked off (Ibid.). The Chinese armed forces lack a blue water naval capability which could counteract possible US moves to inhibit oil imports into the PRC. Having a foothold in the Arabian Sea with the Gwadar port and transporting supplies by road transit through Pakistan helps defend the PRC's supply of natural resources as its domestic demand for oil and gas increases (Ibid.).

In addition to the economic benefits of the Gwadar port, there are distinct military advantages which accrue to Pakistan and China from this facility. For the former, it provides much needed strategic depth against India for the vulnerable chief Pakistani port of Karachi. The new port would "substantially diminish India's ability to blockade Pakistan", and allow the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to supply arms to Pakistan by air and sea in a conflict situation (Chaturvedy 2006). Beijing benefits from the use of a naval port in the Arabian Sea which would allow it to project its military force into an area in which the Indian navy conducts exercises (Ibid.).

Era of Sino-Indian rapprochement

Efforts towards improving relations between India and China began as the age of bipolar superpower competition came to an end (Garver 1996:323). In December 1988, Indian

Prime Minister Gandhi made an official visit to Beijing, the first of any Indian leader since Nehru's meetings during the Sino-Indian entente period (Ibid.). The process of Sino-Indian rapprochement has affected, but not endangered, the Sino-Pak entente. Beijing, for the sake of better relations, has taken a more neutral stance on the Kashmir dispute. Interstate relations between the world's two most populous countries have become more cordial since the end of the Cold War, but remain at a superficial level (Ibid. 324). The PRC has outstanding territorial disputes with India and continues to officially lay claim to territory within India. Beijing is irritated that India provides a haven for Tibetan leaders to campaign in international fora for greater autonomy or independence (Roy 1998:171). These issues preclude fully normalised relations between the two states (Garver 1996:337).

Conclusion

The Sino-Pakistani entente has demonstrated a remarkable durability in the face of profound adjustments in the Asian and global political system, as well as internal upheavals in both countries, ideological changes and alterations in China's attitudes towards the outside world. It represents a superlative case in the international system of how state behaviour is principally determined not by ideology or culture, but by power considerations.

With its internal resources concentrated on countering the hostile superpowers, Beijing 'outsourced' much of the containment of India to Pakistan, to which it has provided a wide array of military, financial and political support ever since. As New Delhi and China have struggled with each other for supremacy in

Asia, and increasingly aspire to great power status, Beijing has found in its sustained entente with Pakistan a profitable means of belittling the status of India in Western perceptions, drawing the country down to Islamabad's inferior position in the global league of states.

Relations between the two adversaries of India have matured to incorporate other highly significant dimensions. Nevertheless, the stability and longevity of the Sino-Pakistani partnership is the product of a common strategic objective of countering India's aspirations to regional dominance in the Subcontinent. The lack of any significant

progress on the territorial dispute, together with a belief on the part of both the Indian and Chinese ruling classes that the other is pursuing a policy of containment towards it by soliciting unfriendly states, makes it highly likely that the strategic glue that holds together the 'all-weather' partnership shall remain in place for the foreseeable future. It may also provide a specific disincentive for Beijing to play a serious role at present in mediating a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute, somewhat jarring with the PRC's self-image as a great power acting in a higher moral sphere than the two South Asian antagonists.

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