



SINO-PAKISTAN RELATIONS AND ITS ALLIANCE AGAINST TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS IN THE SOUTH ASIAN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Pakistan and China have a unique kind of relationship in the South Asian security environment. Both the states have taken various concrete steps to fortify their ties into a strategic alignment, particularly after US presence in Afghanistan in 2001. The strategic bond between Islamabad and Beijing has been evolved due to India's factor since the cold war period in the regional security framework. This study identified the shared security and economic interests of both the countries and also to focus on the mutual consensus on core political issues in the current regional and global security apparatus. This paper analyzes the present nature of relationship between the 'All Weather Friends' particularly, after the launching of China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013 by the Chinese President Xi Jinping. This further study gives an insight of a comprehensive description of historical developments of Sino-Pakistan



relations through the prism of Cold War to US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 in the South Asian context.

Key Words: Pakistan, China Regional Security, South Asia, CPEC

Introduction

Relations among states remain stable and friendly because of similar ideologies, and they become tense because of competing for ideological affiliations. However, relations between China and Pakistan are steadily friendly partners even though diverse ideologies. Pakistan considered its bond with China as a cornerstone of its foreign policy objectives. It has always been placed its bond with Beijing as a 'special relationship' over the other countries. Over the past seventy years, both states established their diplomatic ties and evolved their relations to accomplish their strategic advantages. It is indispensable to overview this liaison, which remained steadfast in thick and thin during the last seven decades. Therefore, Mohan J. Malik describes the Pak-China relationship as akin to the U.S. relationship with U.K. or US-Israel relationship (John, 2009, p. 157).

The genesis of Sino-Pakistan Relations

Shared by common rivers and highlands, China and Pakistan are adjacent as the lips are to the teeth. "As early as 2000 years ago, the ancient Silk Road built a bridge of friendship between the two old civilizations. Zhanqian, a goodwill envoy in the Han Dynasty of China, Fa Xian, an eminent monk of the Eastern Jin Dynasty of China, and Xuan Zang, a renowned monk of the Tang Dynasty of China, have all set their feet on this land before" (Jing, 2018). Pakistan was the first Islamic state to recognize the People's Republic of China in January, 1950. "Pakistan proclaimed that diplomatic relations between the two states should be based on equality, mutual benefit, and mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty" (Karim, 1971, p. 166). Even though Pakistan did not show any enthusiasm towards newly born Communist China in those early days because of its Islamic cultural heritage, both countries started their mutual interaction with no prejudice, antagonism, and comradeship.

In contrast, the Indian leaders like Nehru maintained amicable relations with the Nationalist China of the past. New Delhi sent its first ambassador to Nationalist China in 1948, a year before the new Communist regime in Beijing. Communist China proclaimed its self-determination on October 1, 1949, after defeating Chiang-Kai-Shek's army. Then, the Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru changed his posture, immediately recognized Mao's Communist China, and supported in United Nations. However, Pakistan recognized



the Communist China than for its reasons like, projecting itself as a Liberal-Islamic state; secondly, because of India's claim of being a dominant regional power: and thirdly, of its being encircled by both India and Afghanistan over the 'Pakhtoonistan' stunt. Consequently, Pakistan did not want to see another aggressive neighbor in its proximity. The communist China needed to cultivate good ties with the Muslim World ... by using Pakistan.

In September 1950, Pakistan supported India's stance in United Nations for Communist China's seat, but Pakistan changed its stance in 1953. The course change was Pakistan's defence equipment related alignment with Washington and entered into U.S.-sponsored military pacts like SEATO and CENTO. However, China showed its concerns to Pakistan over joining these pacts, but Pakistan assured China that it was not against it but for its security need against India. Dr. Muhammad Yunus discusses that the Soviet Union did not accept Pakistan's explanation of alignment, while China found no difficulty comprehending Pakistan's position (Yunus, 1986). The Bandung Conference in April 1955 opened the options for both the countries to establish their relationship on mutual trust and benefit. Prime Minister Muhammad Ali and Chinese Premier Chou-en Lai met for the first time and clarified their misunderstandings about joining military pacts with the West. In this regard, "Prime Minister Zhou Enlai stated in the political committee on April 23, 1955, that the Prime Minister of Pakistan clarified that although it was a part of a military treaty, it was not against China. It had no fear that China would commit aggression against her" (Yunus, 1986, p. 129). Afterward, in 1956 Prime Minister H.S. Suhrawardy toured China, and in the same year, Chinese leader Zhou-En-Lai paid a visit to Pakistan. While in the 1950s, Pak-China relations were not up to the mark due to favoring U.S. policies in the region then.

The downturn in Pak-China relations was a trait of H.S. Suhrawardy tenure as a Prime Minister. He paid an official visit to the U.S. and charted the line of Washington. He said, "We have thrown our lot with you, and we have severe apprehensions about Communist domination, infiltration, and aggression" (Sherwani, 1980, p. 72). Moreover, Pakistan supported the U.S. motion in United Nations against communist China's entry issue. Though China conveyed its annoyance to Pakistan over this issue but all over again, Beijing understood Pakistan's position for its need for military and economic assistance from a capitalistic superpower. In 1958 again, Pak-China relations were going down, and anti-Pakistan feelings were heightened in China because Pakistan questioned China's assertion on the Taiwan issue and claimed that Taiwan was a vital issue as Kashmir problem to Pakistan. In 1958 military takeover in Pakistan, and Ayub Khan took charge. However, China was critical of Ayub Khan's policies because he adopted a pro-western posture towards dealing with China in its initial phase.



In April 1959, Ayub Khan played an important move in offering the idea of a joint defence pact to India. “The Pakistani chief told Nehru that an agreement on joint defence could be achieved through goodwill and understanding on both sides: a formal pact would not be necessary. If differences between the two nations were resolved, Ayub argued that Indian and Pakistan forces presently facing each other could be released to defend against aggression from a third party” (Choudhury, 1975). In response, the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, turn down Ayub Khan’s offer. He ironically responded by saying, “let us have a joint defense”-against whom? (Choudhury, 1975).

On this crucial move, China inquired Pakistan about this account, while Pakistan replied differently and claimed it supported her Kashmir policy. Another downhill slide in Pak-China relations had occurred when Pakistan’s foreign minister received a group of Chinese Nationalist Muslims. The Chinese government registered a formal protest and accused Pakistan of intruding into China’s internal affairs. Peking Review discloses that on July 1, the Chinese Embassy in Karachi made representations on the mission, but the Pakistan government continues to connive at the activities of these agents (Rai, 1981).

The early 1960s consolidated the Pak-China relationship and brought them close. The events like Pakistan changed its stance in United Nations over China’s seat in 1961, India’s rejection to sign a joint defence pact with Pakistan, the Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962, United States massive military aid to India against China in the 1962 war, and Pakistan’s disappointment from its allies. With the commonality of interests and a shared sense of the strategic environment of the South Asian region, Pakistan and China signed a momentous border arrangement in the decade of 1960s. This border agreement further opened the venues of cooperation between the two states and signed trade and air transport agreements. T.V. Paul argues that “the alliance relationship became more apparent in June 1963, when premier Zhou-En-lai openly declared that China would defend Pakistan throughout the World” (Paul, 1994, p. 118). However, in February 1964, Chinese premier Zhou-En-Lai paid an official visit to Pakistan and expressed his support for the Kashmir problem in favour of Pakistan. Then, Pakistan also helped China cultivate its relations with the Muslim World Earlier; the superpower tried to isolate her in the World community. In March 1965, President Ayub Khan officially went to China; during his visit, Chinese leadership assured Pakistan that it would assist in a war with India (Ganguly, 2001).

China played its part in giving unconditional backing to its friend in India-Pakistan war of 1965 and even issued an ultimatum to India. It provided military and diplomatic support during times of crisis. Even after that, it assists her by supporting through economic and military aid to recover from war losses. China showed its reservations on



Tashkent Declaration between India and Pakistan in 1966. It is expressed as this agreement as a plot designed by both the superpowers to contain China. “The Chinese government stated that they characterized the agreement as a product of joint U.S.-Soviet plotting to weaken the united struggle against imperialism in Asia and Africa” (Mehmood F. , 1991, p. 309). Later on, in the latter part of the 1960s decade, the Soviet Union offered Pakistan to join the scheme of collective security mechanism. “President Yahya Khan turned down the Soviet offer because the scheme’s purpose was to counter China. Therefore, Pakistan did not take a risk to antagonizing her time-tested friend China. Pakistan foreign ministry later stated that Pakistan would not be a party to any economic and military arrangement aimed against China” (Choudhury, 1975, p. 194).

In the early 1970s, Pakistan played the facilitator in Sino-US reconciliation. Pakistan’s President Yahya Khan played the messenger and facilitated Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to China. Strobe Talbot argued that “Henry Kissinger used Pakistan to channel U.S. Rapprochement with India’s adversary China. It was further evidence, as seen from New Delhi, Washington, on his way to becoming not only the enemy of India’s Soviet friend but the friend of India’s Pakistani and Chinese enemies” (Talbot, 2006, p. 12). Then in the follow up of American President Richard Nixon’s maiden visit to China. In November 1970, when Yahya Khan met with premier Zhou-En-Lai in Beijing, he relayed that the U.S. would like to normalize relations with China (Gao, 1996, p. 433). Then, Pakistan enjoyed the sustenance of both the Washington and Beijing. Though India sees this strategic triangle of China, Pakistan and the United States as an intimidation to its interests, and in the wake of this perceived threat, it struck a friendship treaty with Moscow in 1971. These developments evolved a new dimension in the South Asian region in the Cold War scenario. In US and China’s reconciliation, Pakistan’s role created a space in bolstering Pak-China relationship.

However, the Indo-Pak war of 1971 also influenced the Islamabad-Beijing relations. Though China facilitated Pakistan assisted militarily and economically in the East Pakistan crisis, it did not fully materialize its full support in the 1965 war because of the Soviet Union’s threat to its borders. After that, “China used its first veto power in United Nations on Pakistan’s request not to recognize Bangladesh as an independent state on the diplomatic front. Later on, China’s veto powers were helpful for Pakistan in returning prisoners of war” (Bhola, 1993). In 1974, India’s nuclear test perturbed the regional balance of power; this event gives a fresh look in Pak-China relations to expand their defence ties. On the Indian nuclear test, “Beijing reiterated its support for Pakistan and other countries in their struggle to protect their freedom and territorial integrity against intervention from outside, including nuclear blackmail and threat” (Bhola, 1993, p. 86).



Sino-Pak Relations under Deng Xiaoping Era

The year 1979 witnessed international developments like the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Soviet's incursion into Afghanistan in December. These events had immense repercussions on the region, which continued even today. Notably, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan set the alarm bells for Pakistan and China. For the reason that this invasion created two war front theatres for Pakistan, like India and Afghanistan.

At this juncture, Pakistan's time-tested and reliable partner China came again to rescue her and condemn the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan. Moreover, China also feels threatened by the Soviet's aggressive intentions; it believed that if the Soviets ran over Afghanistan, it would pose a threat to its security in the Xinjiang region. Another apprehension of Soviet invasion for China was that if the Soviets got access to warm waters, it would be at the Soviet's mercy all the time. Therefore, China interpreted the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan as the outcome of Soviet expansionist policy in the Indian Ocean (Grare, 2003, p. 62). However, Pakistan was also felt threatened by the Soviets' aggressive designs due to its ambitions to access warm waters. China gave military aid to Mujahideen through Pakistan's spy service and provided political support at international forums against the Soviet's assault.

In the 1980s, both the states continued to evolve their relationship into a comprehensive partnership. In the period of 1980s, Pakistan and Chinese leaders regularly exchanged visits. Like, former President Zia-ul-Haq went to Beijing in May 1980, and in October 1982, Chinese premier Zhao Ziyang paid an official visit to Pakistan in 1981 and 1987. President Li Xiannian visited Pakistan in March 1984. "Pakistan's Prime Minister Muhammad Khan Junejo paid an official visit to China in November 1985. Pakistan's Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto visited China in February 1989, and in the latter part of the year, Chinese President Li Peng visited Pakistan" (Mehmood K. , 2001, p. 20)

In Deng Xiaoping's period, China took a visible shift on the Kashmir issue and urged both states to resolve their outstanding problems with peaceful dialogue. China's neutrality on the Kashmir issue compels India to put its relations with China on a normal footing. However, Islamabad also supported Beijing in all matters like giving support on 'One China policy, the issue of Tibet, Taiwan issue, and issues relating to human rights. In this regard, Pakistan also stood with China on the Tiananmen Square incident and appreciated its stance. After Soviet's drawdown from Afghanistan in 1989, American administration claimed victory over the Soviet Union and its back yard, the Central Asian Republics got independence from the USSR in 1990s. In response to Pakistan's efforts in the Afghanistan



war, the United States sanctions its frontline ally for clandestinely developing nuclear weapons programs.

Sino-Pakistan Ties in Post-Cold War Scenario in South Asian Context

After Soviet breakdown, Pakistan remained under United States sanctions for developing its nuclear weapons program. Then, China considered being the primary source of defence production for Pakistan. In 1990s, Pak-China defence ties increased manifold; it helped Pakistan develop a nuclear bomb and have missile technology to Pakistan (Bill, 2010, p. 81). At the same time, increased Pak-China security relationship and production and transfer of weapons equipment was a primary irritant in Sino-US and Sino-Indian relationships.

An Indian analyst VC Pandey argues that “there have been some significant modifications in the Sino-Pakistani entente as Sino-Indian rapprochement has developed during the post-cold war era. But the core of the old Sino-Pakistani partnership, convergent interest *Vis a` vis* India’s position in South Asia, remains unchanged” (Pandey, 2004, p. 203). Even though the United States ban on Chinese arms companies and put a lot of pressure on China to discontinue its military ties with Pakistan, China is steadfast in its commitments in dealing with Pakistan. In December 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Pakistan, and it was a historic moment in the Pak-China friendship. During his visit to Islamabad, “he spoke on carrying generations of friendly and good neighbourly relations forwards and endeavoring towards a better tomorrow for all” (Mehmood K. , 2001, p. 20). Moreover, both the states signed a series of agreements and pledged to establish a comprehensive partnership.

In May 1998, South Asia trembled by conducting nuclear tests by two regional powers, India and Pakistan. “On 11-13 May, India conducted its nuclear tests, and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee justified it by presenting the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962 and China’s nuclear threat to U.S. President Bill Clinton” (Deng, 2008, p. 112). Though, George Perkovich articulated their views about India’s nuclear tests, “New Delhi still lacked a national security and defence strategy to determine the role of nuclear weapons” (Perkovich, 1999). In response, China condemned the Indian nuclear tests and accused it of damaging the decade-long trust-building between India and China. The setback in Sino-Indian relations strengthened Pakistan’s position in China’s eyes. On the Indian nuclear tests, Beijing understands Pakistan’s security compulsions to go nuclear against its arch-rival India on May 28 to maintain a strategic equilibrium. In Kargil conflict among India and Pakistan, Beijing posits a neutral posture to the situation. It was anxious about the acceleration of tension, which would lead to a nuclear war in South Asia. China’s impartiality provides an opportunity for both Pakistan and India to normalize their



adversarial relations. Thus India acknowledged China's neutral stance and built better ties with her.

Pakistan-China Relations after September 11, 2001

“September 11: ‘A Day of Fire’ as U.S. former President George W. Bush recalled at the second Inaugural address of his presidency” (Sidey, 2006). The attacks World Trade Center in U.S. changed the geopolitical, geo-strategic, and security situation of South Asia. The United States launched an international war against terrorism to eliminate the Al-Qaeda network, which took responsibility for these deadliest attacks on the World Trade Centre and ran over Afghanistan to eradicate the terrorist sanctuaries. In the U.S.-led war on terror, Pakistan again played the role of frontline state and under U.S. pressure to reverse back its backing for Taliban's in Afghanistan. On Pakistan's role as an ally in the war against terror, J. Mohan Malik argues that “Beijing indeed looms very large in Pakistan's alliance calculations and the pendulum of Islamabad-Washington relations is likely to swing back and forth between appeasement, accommodation, and acrimony” (John, 2009, p. 168). China showed its concerns over facilitating the United States by giving the airbases and air space for operations in Afghanistan. Islamabad clarified to Beijing that at the expense of the U.S., Pakistan would not undermine the Chinese interests in the region.

After 9/11, the United States made a paradigm shift in its policies towards the South Asian region and started its engagement with New Delhi strategically to contain China. Therefore, the Bush administration made a tactical alliance with Pakistan on war against terror and, on the other hand, developed a strategic partnership with India. However, in that scenario, Pakistan and China decided to enhance their strategic cooperation at the highest level to balance the growing Indo-US nexus. In May 2001, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited Pakistan and boosted the Pak-China relationship. Both the states signed bilateral agreements in economics and trade, and China also showed its keen interest in developing Gwadar port in Baluchistan. “President Musharraf and Chinese premier Zhu Rongji issued a joint statement that, despite whatever geo-strategic and global political changes might occur, Sino-Pak friendship would remain strong and unbreakable” (Pandey, 2004, p. 206). During Musharraf's visit to China in December 2001, he supported the Chinese campaign against the Uighurs separatists and their East Turkestan Islamic Movement in China's restive region. He assured the Chinese that it would not allow its territory to use against China.

During Musharraf's visit in 2003, “Chinese President Hu Jintao issued and signed a Pak-China Joint Declaration of Bilateral Cooperation; bilateral relationships are based on five principles of peaceful co-existence” (Vang, 2008, p. 196). This agreement paved the



way for expanding bilateral cooperation in different fields, and it gave a direction for mutual relations in the 21st century. In December 2004, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz trip to China, where both the states inked agreements regarding economic and trade and other developmental projects. “In April 2005, Chinese premier Wen Jiabao paid an official visit to Pakistan. Pakistan and China signed a historical document of friendship, cooperation, and good neighborly relations during the visit. They gave unconditional support to defend its sovereignty, independence, and integrity” (Dawn, 2005). This agreement contains the formal declaration of Pak-China strategic alignment. Due to this new development, Pakistan’s strategic importance in the eyes of China again reinforced and made further a close collaboration with its ‘all-weather friend Pakistan. In February 2006, President Pervaiz Musharraf visited China to celebrate the 55th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China. President Musharraf and Chinese President Hu Jintao reiterated to expand their strategic relationship at the highest level. Both the states signed 13 bilateral agreements and a framework for economic and trade agreements. During his visit, Pervaiz Musharraf also presented Pakistan as a transit facility for China’s access to the Arabian Sea through the development of Gwadar port and up-gradation of Karakoram Highway. In the later part of the year, in November 2006, “President Hu Jintao was officially in Pakistan to sign 18 bilateral agreements and MOUs in the military, economic, infrastructure development projects and, most importantly, to sign the Free Trade Agreement (FTA). During his visit, Hu Jintao said that Pakistan is an ‘indispensable partner’ for cooperation in the international arena” (Dawn, 2006). Later on, former President Pervaiz Musharraf and President Hu Jintao reiterated that the treaty of friendship is a legal basis of Islamabad-Beijing strategic cooperation and a continued security relationship between Pakistan and China. Furthermore, the Chinese President had glorified the Pak-China friendship by saying that we could give up the gold. “Still, we cannot give up our friendship with Pakistan, and our relationship is higher than the Himalayas, deeper than oceans, and sweeter than honey” (John, 2009, p. 157).

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz visited China in 2007 to develop the bilateral economic and political cooperation among the two states. The states attached great importance to a five-year development program on economic cooperation and agreed to establish a Pak-China joint investment company. In April 2008, President Musharraf visited China to bolster the bilateral ties. Chinese high-ups also put up the issue of Chinese workers’ security in the restive areas of Pakistan. Like in Baluchistan, where Chinese engineers are working on developmental projects like Gwadar port, many Chinese were killed in the last few years injured from terrorist activities. Moreover, China expressed its full support to promote Socio-economic development in Pakistan.



Former President Zardari's visit to China was a pivotal moment because in early October 2008, India and United States signed the landmark nuclear deal. Pakistan also signals the United States that if Pak-US relations get a setback, Islamabad chooses to arrange with its 'all-weather friend' and security guarantor China.

President Zardari's fourth trip to China in 2009 cracked a new history bolstering the Pak-China relationship. During his stay, both the states signed a number of agreements and MOUs. Pakistan delegation mainly focuses on getting assistance from Chinese companies for infrastructural development projects in Pakistan. During the visit, "Unveiling the Economic Vision," "President Zardari invited Chinese companies to avail themselves of Pakistan's investment potential and trade opportunities owing to its unique geo-strategic and economic location in the region" (The Nation, 2009). However, China also discusses anti-terrorism cooperation at the highest level. In July 2009, ethnic violence erupted in the Chinese Xinjiang region, in which hundreds of people lost their lives. China believes that these ETIM terrorists got training in Pakistan tribal region along the Afghan border and requested Pakistan address their terrorism concerns. In October 2009, Pakistan's Prime Minister visited China to attend the SCO annual Prime Minister meeting. He also held meetings with Chinese leaders to enhance bilateral cooperation. In July 2010, President Zardari had undertaken his fifth trip to China to enhance the strategic cooperation between the two friendly states. His visit assures that more nuclear power plants will be installed in Pakistan for its energy sector. Both the states signed bilateral economic and technical cooperation agreements and inked four MOUs in different energy sectors. Furthermore, in November 2010, President Asif Ali Zardari took his seventh flight to the brotherly country China. He attended the opening ceremony of the 16th Asia Games and held meetings with the Chinese corporate leaders to expand the economic ties.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao paid an official visit to Pakistan in 2010 for the second time and inked worth \$ 35 billion of agreements. During his address to Pakistan's joint Parliament session, he acknowledged Islamabad's efforts in the global war on terror. He further stated that "Pakistan has paid a heavy price in combating terrorism. The fight against terror should not be linked with any religion or ethnic group, and there should be no double standards." (The Express Tribune, 2010). During his visit, both Pakistan and China agreed to designate 2011 as 'Pak-China Friendship Year' Once again, the Chinese premier visit to Pakistan reiterated Islamabad's position in China's strategic calculations regarding its South Asia policy.

Islamabad-Beijing Cordialness in Post Osama Bin Laden Era



Osama bin Laden was executed by the U.S. Naval commando's by conducting a unilateral operation without taking Pakistan into confidence in Abbottabad near Pakistan Military Academy in Pakistan. The Osama bin Laden death episode created apprehensions in Pakistan about the U.S. drive for more unilateral actions against the alleged terrorists' sanctuaries. On Osama bin Laden death, Pakistan's reaction was slow. Its foreign office stated that Osama bin Laden death would be a setback to the terrorist organization around the globe (2011). China also backed the U.S. by achieving the high-value target of Osama bin Laden, but it supported Pakistan's efforts in the international war against terrorism. A renowned Chinese professor Li Xiguang argued that once "the President Obama was once quoted as telling a secret meeting in the Oval Office, we need to clarify that the cancer is in Pakistan. But in the eyes of Chinese people, Pakistan is a pearl. Chinese people treasure the remarkable friendship between the two countries" (Xiguang, 2010).

After the Osama bin Laden death episode, the United States raised questions over Pakistan's military alleged connection with the terrorists' network. Also, it showed its concerns about the government's inability to detect the most wanted person in the World. Though, U.S. also declared that it would go for further unilateral actions if we find another high-value target in Pakistan. However, China again backed Pakistan and warned Washington that it would be interpreted as aggression against China if the U.S. planned to attack Pakistan. The ultimatum was delivered at May 9 Sino-US strategic dialogue in Washington (Anjum, 2011).

In a press briefing on May 19, "Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Jiang Yu stated that, Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected" (Dawn, 2011). After the United States military stunts Pakistan to kill the high-value target Osama bin Laden and violate Pakistan's sovereignty. In this regard, Pakistan's Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani paid a quick visit to China. During his visit, both the states showed their firm determination to strengthen their strategic partnership at the highest level following the treaty of friendship. During the visit, "Premier Wen Jiabao endorsed Pakistan's response to the U.S. Special forces raid in Abbottabad that killed Osama bin Laden. He reiterated that no matter what changes might take place in the international landscape, China and Pakistan will remain forever good neighbours, good friends, good partners, and good brothers" (The Express Tribune, 2011).

More importantly, from the strategic point of view, Pakistan also requested China to build a naval base for enhancing Pakistan Navy defence capabilities. In August-September 2011, Former President Zardari undertook his record 8th trip to China for participation in first China-Eurasia summit in Urumqi. During his visit, he said that the Xinjiang region played a strategic role in strengthening bilateral relationships. In an interview with China



Daily, he said that “the region is the closest point to my border, and it is where the future of Pakistan and China meets” (Daily Times, 2011).

Former President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari’s recurrent visits to China gestured the other major stakeholders, like India and United States. In the hostile environment of the South Asian region, if the Indo-US nexus grows and the United States puts more pressure on Pakistan to do more against the terrorist networks against the backdrop of Osama bin Laden death episode. It will push Pakistan and China to develop a mature strategic alliance against India and the United States. Moreover, China showed its concerns over the recent eruption of ethnic violence in the Xinjiang region in the last month in which many people lost their lives and got injuries. For the first time, China declared that these terrorists have safe havens and established links with terrorist organizations in Pakistan’s tribal region.

After a while, Pakistan’s high echelons paid a back to back visit to China. They assured their trustworthy friend that it would take all the effective measures to eliminate the terrorist sanctuaries that created the disturbance in the Western part of China. Later on, Chinese high echelons agreed that there is no connection of these terrorists from Pakistan’s tribal region terrorists’ safe-havens. In September 2011, Chinese Deputy Premier Meng Jianzhu visited Pakistan to extend his country’s steadfast support at all times and assured China’s help continued for her eternal friend (The Nation, 2011). This high-profile Chinese visit also sent a message to the Atlantic that China stands with Pakistan and not leaving behind in a lurch.

In November 2011, NATO and U.S. forces launched an unprovoked air attack on the Pakistani military check posts at the Pak-Afghan border. More than two dozen soldiers lost their lives. On this issue, Pakistan strongly protested and suspended NATO’s oil supply route and asked the U.S. to vacate the Shamsi Air Base in Baluchistan (Malik, 2013, p. 45). In another move, Pakistan also boycotted the Bonn Conference on the Afghanistan issue under United Nations in Germany on December 5. China was strongly backed by Pakistan and expressed deep sorrow and deeply shocked over this tragic incident. China also condemned this unprovoked attack on the Pakistan Army and showed its anger by saying that these attacks would affect the war on terror and undermine Pakistan’s efforts in this anti-terror crusade war. Moreover, along with China, Russia and Turkey also show their sympathy with Pakistan.

Strategic Transformation of Relationship between Pakistan and China during Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Era



During Nawaz Sharif's third time tenure as Prime Minister, the Sino-Pak relationship is a significant turn in their strategic partnership. In 2013, Pakistan officially given the Gwadar Port to Communist China for construction and operation. "Under the agreement, the port, which will remain the property of Pakistan; will be operated by the state-run Chinese firm China Overseas Port Holding Company" (Raza, 2013). After the 2013 General Elections in Pakistan, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Pakistan to boost their strategic relationship. He expressed his gratitude that the "two nations need to explore their rational collaboration in all areas, articulate a long-term plan for the China-Pakistan economic corridor venture, promote connectivity between South and East Asia" (China, 2013). Furthermore, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping took the initiative to promote the OBOR. Xia Liping, discusses that "China's "One Belt "refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt and "One Road "to the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The "One Belt and One Road "has become one significant part of China's approach to domestic economics and part of China's foreign policy strategy" (Liping, 2015).

Moreover, in 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping was in Pakistan for signing the agreement on China Pakistan Economic Corridor worth billions of U.S. dollars. On his landmark visit to Islamabad, "President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif signed 51 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) relating to diverse aspects of bilateral relations, including the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor worth 46 Billion U.S. Dollars" (Irfan Haider, 2015). In their article, Azeem Gul, Riaz Ahmad & Lloyd W. Fernald argued that "China's official policy of this project had made the world judge China's economic power. The total GDP of Pakistan would be US\$ 4.2 trillion by 2050, which is present US\$ 988 billion. CPEC would cover almost all the sectors of Pakistan's economy like economic development, defence, roads, security, agriculture, and infrastructure" (Azeem Gul, 2020, p. 164).

To further strengthen the strategic partnership with Beijing, the former prime minister actively participated in the One Belt One Road Forum in China held in May 2017. Moreover, at this forum, he categorically argued that "CPEC is an economic undertaking open to all countries in the region. It has no geographical boundaries. It must not be politicized" (Rana, 2017). In the following year, Former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi paid a visit to China to attend the Boao Forum Annual Conference for Asia. "He expressed his assessment about the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor by arguing that connectivity remains the foundation of our plans and is a major driving force behind our overlapping membership of regional platforms of ECO, SAARC, and SCO. We also desire to see the networks of highways, railways, energy grids, and connectivity nodes spread organically region-wide" (Hong, 2018).



Pakistan-China Relationship during Prime Minister Imran Khan Era

Pakistan-China relations entered into a new phase of strategic partnership during the current era of Prime Minister Imran Khan. After the General Elections of 2018, he paid a visit to China for defence and much-needed economic cooperation. “He commended President Xi Jinping’s visionary Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for enhancing regional and international connectivity” (Desk, Joint Statement of PM Imran Khan’s China Visit: 'Strengthening strategic cooperative partnership', 2018). To further strengthen their relationship, Chinese President invited him to attend the second Belt and Road Forum (BRF) in April 2019. Furthermore, CPEC Authority was established in 2019 to complete the projects on a priority basis. Besides this, Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a crucial visit to China and the Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, to discuss the developments on CPEC projects and the execution of the Free Trade Agreement among Pakistan and Chinese leadership (Desk, 2019). More importantly, in November 2019, Pakistan was among the fifty-four states supporting China’s stance in United Nations on human rights issues. Furthermore, Pakistan-China relations entered into a new phase of cooperation during the Covid-19 Pandemic in early 2020. China’s unending and exceptional support via air and road comes at a critical time when Pakistan’s medical personnel struggle to treat Covid-19 patients. In March 2020, Pakistan’s President Dr. Arif Alvi visited China for the first time to show solidarity to its All-Weather friend in their battle against covid-19. He said the official visit was aimed at carrying strong support and solidarity of Pakistan towards the government and the people of China. At the same time, Beijing made persistent efforts to contain and deal with the spread of Covid-19 (2020).

Moreover, in October 2021, President Xi Jinping’s telephonic conversation with Prime Minister Imran Khan said that “it would continue to support her in its fight against COVID-19, jointly building the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor with high quality and strengthening their cooperation” (Huaxia, 2021). Furthermore, in December 2021, China’s decision to revive the Pakistan-China Joint Economic Committee (JEC) on Economic, Trade, Scientific, and Technical Cooperation after 11 years was welcomed by Pakistan. Whereas, in January 2022, Prime Minister Imran Khan launched Pak-China Business Investment Forum to promote the communication between businesses of the two states. “He said that a country’s wealth creation is impossible without industrial development while exports increase supplemented such efforts” (The News, 2022). Furthermore, in February 2022, Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan visited China to attend the Winter Olympics and held constructive dialogue with the Chinese leadership to bolster their relationship on strong footings. Ayesha Wizarat, expressed that, “Islamabad is heavily dependent on Beijing because the West did not turn out to be a reliable ally, abandoning



her and instead cozying up to New Delhi, a common foe of both Pakistan and China” (Carter, 2022).

Conclusion

Pakistan and China have shared mutual strategic interests in the South Asian region. Islamabad continues to be an important player for Beijing due to its geographical location and common strategic alignment against Washington and New Delhi’s belligerence in the area. The border settlement between Pakistan and China in the decade of 1960s’ is a turning point for the states to cooperate on shared interests. During the Cold War period, both the entities support each other on their core issues. Furthermore, in the post Cold War era, the relationship entered into a new phase of cooperation to strengthen their economic and security sphere. However, the 9/11 incident, reshape the security situation of the globe at once. US launched a War against the Non-State actors, like Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2001.

Therefore, the security landscape of the South Asia changed dramatically. In that scenario, US made only tactical arrangement with Pakistan to counter the non-traditional security threats like in the form of terrorism. On the other side of the page, Washington made a strategic alignment with New Delhi to counter the strategic influence of both Pakistan and China in the region. Hence, these strategic alignments pushed both Islamabad and Beijing to enter into a new phase of security arrangement to counter these threats from the aggressor states. In this regard, China supported militarily, economically and politically at the regional and as well as at the global forum to neutralize the belligerent states’ influence. However, the strategic partnership among China and Pakistan further deepened in the post Osama bin Laden era.

In 2013, Chinese President launched the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor under One Belt One Road Initiative. This economic corridor further paves the way for more economic and security interdependence among each other to bolster their strategic relations. Moreover, the US hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, gives an opportunity for both Pakistan and China to play as a role of a peacemaker in Afghanistan and also in the region for maintaining stability. The stable Afghanistan is a key to the regional economic connectivity through reviving the Silk route. Therefore, in the South Asian security environment, both Islamabad and Beijing can play a constructive role by connecting the region through the economic corridors for maintaining peace and stability.



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