

Prospects for Pak-China Relations

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Abstract

South Asia is in focus of global geopolitics since the advent of the 21st century. China is an economic giant and outreaching towards West through Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). CPEC (part of BRI) has brought Pakistan in streamline in regional geopolitics. United States (US) is worried about China's rise, for its national interests are in danger in Asia so, it perused 'Pivot to Asia' strategy to counter China in Asia while manipulating India. This situation has increased Pakistan's importance for China. The article will assess Pak-China cordial relations and answer the following questions. Will Pakistan be helpful to China in addressing the challenges to regional peace? How will Pak-China cooperation counter Indo-US strategic partnership? What are Pak-China mutual efforts to curb terrorism?

Key Words: Pak-China counterterrorism narrative, Enhancing economic relations through CPEC, Instability and conflict in Pakistan–Afghan region, Indo-US growing strategic ties.

Introduction

With the advent of the 21st century global focus shifted from Europe and the Middle East to Asia. Asia is economically and geostrategically pivotal region. South Asia has attracted attention of various countries and major global and regional powers with the announcement of Chinese economic venture China Pakistan Economic Corridor in Pakistan. Indo-US strategic partnership and China-Pakistan-Russia trio alliance are evolving, advancing new geopolitical game in South Asia. (Thokar & Singh, 2017).

Pak-China relations are founded on trust, mutual respect and geopolitical cooperation. Their political, diplomatic, and strategic ties are growing stronger since 1955. Pakistan was the first Islamic country to recognise People's Republic of China. Their diplomatic relations started in 1951. Pakistan joined the, US led military pacts Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) on September 1954 and later, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in February 1955 in a desire to strengthen itself against Indian threat. It assured China that its intentions to join the pacts are not against China. Pakistan favoured Chinese bid for permanent seat in United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 1961. Pakistan left SEATO and CENTO after China-India war in 1962 because of American military support to India. Relying on the phrase, enemy of an enemy is a friend, a new era of close and trustworthy Pak-China friendship started. China favoured Pakistan in 1965 war and warned India to end war. (Rehman, 2011).

Pak-China ties further reinforced when they peacefully concluded their boundary agreement on March 02, 1963. Pakistan conceded 5,000-km Shaksgam Valley to China including top of Azad Kashmir (Unnithan & Krishman, 2015). Pak-China mutual interests forged their friendship into

cordial entente. Pakistan's historical role in reducing tensions between the US and China. It arranged a secret visit of Henry Kissinger and later followed by President Nixon's visit to China in 1970 (Smith, 2011). It always helped China in improving ties with the Muslim world.

China helped Pakistan militarily and economically after Indo-Pak 1971 war and used veto power to ban admission of Bangladesh in UNO till Bangladesh released Pakistani prisoners of war of 1971. It assisted Pakistan to become nuclear power after Indian first nuclear test in 1974. It made Pakistan self-sufficient in conventional weapon system and aided for improving defence through super projects, i.e. the Heavy Rebuild Factory for T-59 tanks, and the F-6 Aircraft Rebuild Factory to strengthen its defence system to counter their common enemy-India (Rahman, 2011).

They are now giving priority to social, economic and cultural relations. The article will evaluate prospects for Pak-China relations while exploring the areas which must be addressed by them to fortify their natural alliance like terrorism, threat of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) in Chinese Xinjiang province, internal insecurity in Pakistan, efforts for peace in Afghanistan for security of CPEC and regional peace, containing Indian role in South Asia and Indo-US strategic friendship.

Pak-China Counterterrorism Narrative

China is facing challenge of separatism in its western region viz Xinjiang. The riots in Xinjiang in July 2009 increased the seriousness of China about ethnic issue. Xinjiang borders South Asia and Central Asia so, China believes that terrorism can spread towards Xinjiang from neighbouring countries. China provided evidences that the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and other nationalist groups who are against China, have sanctuaries along Pak-Afghan tribal regions (Kumar, 2019).

The Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is a largely Muslim populated area (about 21 million) in the northwest of China. 47 ethnic groups are residing in Xinjiang, only a few are mentioned here e.g. the Uighur, Han, Kazak, Hui, Mongolian, Kirgiz, Xibet, Tajik, Uzbek, Manchu, Daur and most of them of Central Asian kinship. The Uighur are the most populous ethnic group with Turkic and Sunni Muslims ethnicity. Xinjiang is an important region as it provides China access to Central Asia and the Middle East (Fayaz, 2012).

China has increased collaboration with Pakistan for security and stability of Pakistan and its own western region (Xinjiang) since 2001. Its efforts are to disrupt Uighur separatists from its western region and disconnect their link with extremists hidden in northern areas of Pakistan and other adjacent countries (Price, 2011). China is worried about Chinese Uighur separatists hiding in Pakistan's tribal areas. Incidents of a series of bomb blasts and knife attacks in Hotan (Xinjiang) in July 2011 annoyed China because the Muslim militants announced the responsibility. China provided evidence of the attackers trained in the Pakistani tribal areas (Zeb, 2014).

Pakistan army commenced several arm operations since 2001 to abolish radicals like Operation Zalzal (2008), Sher Dil, Rah-e-Haq, and Rah-e-Rast (2007–2009) and Operation Zarb-e-Azab in the northern areas of Pakistan. The missions were to eliminate all the militants and separatists' groups including leaders of ETIM (Khan, 2014). Hasan Mahsum a prominent leader of ETIM was killed in 2004 and many other Uighurs extremists were handed over to China.

Pak-China mutual anti-terrorism exercise, "Friendship 2004" was conducted in 2004 to develop counterterrorism skills. Their 200 soldiers took part in it. In "Friendship 2006" military training 400 troops joined. China approached Islamic parties in Pakistan i.e. the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and the Jamaat-e-Ulema-e Islam (JUI) in 2009 to help in eradicating ETIM fraction from areas along Pak-Afghan border. The leaders of these parties assured their full support to Pak-China friendship and denied any support for militants and separatists (Price, 2011).

Pak-China counterterrorism collaboration increased after the Chinese President Xi Jinping initiative China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2015. Pak-China Warrior military exercises were held in December 2018 in Pabbi (Punjab-Pakistan) just after two weeks of a terrorist attack on Chinese consulate in Karachi. The exercises were aimed to enhance the capabilities of both the countries to counter terrorism challenges. The chief of the Pakistani Army Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa visited China in the start of 2019 and guaranteed security and full cooperation in all respects. Pak-China joint efforts in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) are aimed to achieve regional security and stability (Panda, 2019).

In trilateral dialogue in November 2019, China, Pakistan and Afghanistan committed to eradicate ETIM and its supporters from the region. They are determined to cooperate for regional peace, security and counterterrorism (Sidique, 2019).

Enhancing Economic Relations Through CPEC for Peace

China initiated a strategic economic project CPEC, a central piece of its grand global strategy of economic development, BRI. Its objective is regional connectivity for the economic progress of Pakistan and China. Chinese President Xi Jinping initiated it in 2013 with US\$46 billion investment in power projects, infrastructure plans including rail, roads, highways, bridges, Gwadar Port and communications, fibre-optic networks, oil and gas pipelines and hydropower stations, industrial and agriculture sectors (Wijeratne, Lyn & Rathbone, 2017).

CPEC will connect Gwadar Port (Pakistan) with Xinjiang (China) through a network of roads, rail, oil and gas pipelines, and fibre optic cables. CPEC would provide route to Kashgar to Arabian Sea. Special economic zones and energy projects will be built to progress economy of Pakistan. Hence, CPEC is a game-changer for Pakistan and an important part of BRI for China (Latif, 2019). It is projected as a 'game changer' due to the benefits Pakistan, China and bordering regional countries can avail from it. It will enhance regional cooperation for economic growth, trade, and industrial progress. It will connect Central Asia with Indian Ocean for trade and they will get rid of dependence on Russia for oil and gas transport (Hussain, 2016).

The industrialization process will speed up in Pakistan due to infrastructure expansion and in long run will develop construction business. Industrial parks and economic zones will be constructed under CPEC project along its route. People of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan will benefit from it (Zulfiqar, 2016).

China fulfil its energy demands from import of 80% of oil from the Arab World. CPEC and Gwadar Port provide secure flow of oil from the Middle East through the Indian Ocean to China, due to their closeness to 'Strait of Hormuz'. Thus, giving Pakistan upper hand against India at sea and land (Rashid, 2017).



Figure: CPEC

Source: <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/target-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-cpec/>

The economist Hollis B. Chenery suggests that countries can develop their economy by introducing foreign investments. CPEC has facilitated a high-quality incentive for Pakistan's economic development. 9 completed projects of CPEC are accomplished while 13 are under construction, with a total investment of US\$19 billion in January 2019. It has generated Pakistan's annual economic progress by 1% to 2% (Mengsheng & Jingfeng, 2019).

Instability and Conflict in Pakistan–Afghanistan Region

Pak-China friendship is facing a challenge of continuous instability and violence in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The extremism spill over from Afghanistan into Pakistan and destabilizing Balochistan and Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) (now merged in KP) region creating a chaos in Pakistan which is a threat to security of CPEC and Xinjiang. Chinese strategic goals are to play a major role for peace in Afghanistan to secure and stabilize Pakistan and Xinjiang. It wants to prevent any chance of spread of militancy from Afghanistan to Xinjiang (Sharma, 2010).

Balochistan is an important province of Pakistan as Gwadar is located here. Gwadar Port and CPEC passes through Balochistan. The province is facing violence and separatism movements. Some of the nationalist groups are the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Tigers (BLT) and United Baloch Army (UBA) who demands self-governance (Rumi, 2015). Few militant groups are even demanded liberation from Pakistan. However, they are funded and trained by the Indian intelligence organization RAW and the US CIA via Afghanistan, to sabotage CPEC and Gwadar Port projects. The chaotic situation in Balochistan is insecure for development projects and regional and international peace. In addition, common Baloch people see China as exploiting resources of their province and depriving locals from benefits (Ahmad, 1992). Baloch insurgency is a security challenge for Pakistan as well for Chinese work force in Pakistan.

Professor Li Xiguang from Tsinghua University said that Pakistan, China and Afghanistan should cooperate on military and economic strategies to bring social stability, economic progress and regional development. Their collective efforts can eliminate terrorism from the region (Kumar, 2019).

The violence and riots in Xinjiang since July 5, 2009 and attacks on Chinese nationals in Balochistan, provoked China to take concrete steps against ETIM and other terrorist groups which are behind all unrest and terrorists attacks. Therefore, China wants Pakistan's support to curb ETIM and Islamic militants and separatists groups through counter terrorism policies (Xinhua, 2015). Pakistan connects China with West Asia. It helped China to tackle Taliban issue and oust other terrorist groups from Xinjiang (Kumar, 2019).

China foresees stable Afghanistan vital for securing Xinjiang, Balochistan, northern areas of Pakistan and success of CPEC. China wants to prevent any spill over of terrorism from Afghanistan to bordering countries. Pakistan and China support Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process. They believe it will end in an inclusive deal resulting enduring peace in Afghanistan. They want to include Afghanistan in CPEC project for economic progress because economically strong country is stable (Siddique, 2019).

The US-India Growing Ties

Pak-China cordial entente has another challenge to face viz Indo-US strategic partnership. The geopolitics of Asia is viewing rapprochement between South Asian democratic power India and global democratic power United States. Indo-US strategic partnership is because of their mutual anxiety about Islamic militancy, Pakistan's nuclear deterrence and China's economic and military power (Ejaz, 2011). The Indo-US strategic partnership is progressing because of convergence of interests. Their concerns about combating terrorism and promoting democracy are similar. They are working together for regional and global security and condemn nuclear proliferation (Nazir & Bhat, 2014).

Indio-US mutually introduces the UN Democracy Fund in 2005 for strengthening democratic institutions, advocate human rights, and motivate other countries to develop democracy (Piccone, 2011). The US appreciates Indian assistance to Afghanistan for reconstruction which will grow democratic institutions.

The US focussed fully towards counterterrorism after 9/11 incident. India and US cooperated in counterterrorism efforts for intelligence sharing and capacity building activities, after Mumbai attacks in 2010 (Ahmad & Najish, n.d). They decided to fight threat of terrorism and eliminate the risks of terrorist attacks. India is the only regional secular democracy which can help American against Islamic militancy (Gupta, 2005). India wants US to compel Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal for regional stability and democracy (Mazumdar, 2014).

The US is worried about Chinese and Russian efforts to shift unipolar world into multi-polar world which threatens the US hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, the US has adopted a new strategy for Asia since 2009. The US President Barak Obama announced 'Pivot to Asia' or 'rebalance' to Asia policy in 2012. He emphasised to bestow more focus to the Asia-Pacific. The 'Pivot' is aimed at diverting the US concentration to the region. President Obama confirmed the US and Indian mutual interests are related to peace in stability in Asia-Pacific region. He also advised India to play bigger and important role in Asia Pacific region (Menon, 2014). The US found India a good friend to tackle China's growing leverage in Asia especially South Asia. The US has several times announced India as an important ally in South Asia (Singh, 2017).

India has also adopted 'Act East' policy aiming at enhancing its presence in the Asia Pacific region. It has improved economic and military relationships with East Asian states. The US and Japan are backing India. Both, India's Act East policy and American's rebalance to the Asia-Pacific strategies are to counterweight China (Kaplan, 2009). China is aware of their intention and making Pakistan stronger to counter Indo-US strategic friendship in South Asia (Sultan, 2013). Pak-China further strong committed friendship can diminish US influence from South Asia and limit Indian activities.

Russia-China-Pakistan friendly rapprochement is in response to Indo-US partnership. Chinese economic power and Russian military power will boost Pakistan economically and secure militarily. Pakistan's importance has increase in new geopolitical and geo-economics shift in South Asia (Personal Discussion with Raja Faisal Mahfoz, a senior journalist in TT News Agency Sweden & freelancing with International News Agencies, June 13, 2020). The Russia-China-Pakistan trio partnership is cooperating in economic, defence, strategic and energy sectors. Russia desires to unify Eurasian EU with CPEC for trade. Russia started arms deals and LNG sale to Pakistan to meet its security and energy requirements (Andleeb & Khalid, 2018). Russia and China favoured Pakistan's inclusion in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). They are determined to use SCO platform for mutual efforts to eradicate terrorism from the region and reduce the US influence (Khan, 2019).

China has naval base at Djibouti which can solve the security issues of Pakistan. China would keep check on the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Indian islands. Therefore, Pakistan will be safe

from any challenge from Indian navy. Chinese military presence at Djibouti secures Gwadar Port and CPEC because for marine security Pakistan can utilize Chinese naval intelligence abilities (Chaziza, 2018). Pak-China military exercises enables them to counter any aggression or security challenge from India alone or Indo-US mutual move in the Indian Ocean, Indian aggressive actions or Indo-US conspiracies (Singh, 2017).

Conclusion

To conclude with popular slogan about Pak-China friendship i.e. Pak-China friendship is higher than mountains and sweeter than honey. They are all weather friends and their friendship flourished throughout the history while undergoing many ups and down. They remained consistent and the most trusted friends. The relationship has bright future as Andrew Small (2015) quotes in his book *Pak-China Axis* that in wake of terrorism and BRI project, Pakistan is more important for China than ever. Both are cooperating in eliminating terrorism from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Xinjiang to prevail peace and stabilize the region.

China is actively involved in Afghanistan reconstruction and peace process but after withdrawal of the US troops From Afghanistan, it will need Pakistan more to play influential regional power role in Afghanistan and for success of CPEC and BRI. Indo-US strategic alliance can be countered with their mutual efforts. The US policy shift from Middle East towards Asia is to contain China and Pakistan is a reliable friend to counterweight Indo-US intentions and limit India in South Asia.

Though Pakistan has stabilized FATA with military missions but now it would need to priorities law and order situation in Balochistan and carve policies to lessen grievance of Baloch people for success of CPEC. It should provide full security to Chinese projects and workers to satisfy China. China desires of launching CPEC is for regional connectivity to gain regional and transregional economic integration. Pakistan should keep this in mind and cooperate with China to enjoy the fruit of this mega project (Hussain, 2016). The government of Pakistan should plan more vigorously to bring peace in Balochistan and reduce grievances of Baluch people. This will secure Gwadar and CPEC from militant's attacks and Chinese will work safely in these projects.

China is very active in regional and global politics through regional organizations such as SCO and BRICS and global institutions like UNO, shouldering its great power responsibility. China is committed for stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan through successful US-Taliban peace agreement (Lee, 2016). CPEC is China's largest investment abroad and will be main reason of vigorous cooperation between China and Pakistan. It is a game changer for the whole region and will bring prosperous economy for all. China needs Pakistan for improving regional leverage for success of CPEC. Therefore, Pakistan needs to improve security situation, maintain political stability, ensure protection of Chinese nationals on its own land and provide conducive environment for foreign investors.

Pak-China cooperation will enhance to counterbalance Indian influence and hegemony. India desires security proportions to improve military power through defence cooperation with states in Southeast and Central Asia. So, its strategic partnership with US supports its dreams and desires. Hence, Pak-China cordial entente will further strengthen to counterweight challenge of Indo-US strategic partnership. Pak-China mutual efforts can maintain regional balance of power which is at risk due to Indo-US strategic friendship.

In the next 10 years, 75 % of China's energy needs will be met through oil and gas pipelines passing through the Indian Ocean and the straits of Malacca. Since India seems to keep its naval presence in the Indian Ocean, such high level of dependence on the Indian Ocean may endanger Chinese energy supplies in a hostile environment. In such a context, China can use this corridor as

an alternative transit route. This marks rationality of the part of the Chinese state with respect to having an alternative to the Indian Ocean. The corridor is also part of China's "go west policy" to bring the benefits of its economic growth to the restive province of Xinjiang (Din et al. 2009). Regionally, the entire region alongside the corridor would benefit from the corridor in economic terms. For instance, CPEC can promote regional trade and economic integration. The corridor is the shortest possible route to the Indian Ocean for Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. The corridor is expected to attract 25 % of national and international chain by 2020. It will have sociopolitical effects as well. The economic interdependence will result in political interdependence Among the neighboring states of the region. Hence, all the states will become partners in peace (Sabena 2014). In addition, CPEC is an alternative energy route to states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These countries are dependent on Russia for their oil and gas exports through the Black Sea pipeline network. Russia enjoys economic superiority over these countries by charging them above the market prices for transportation to the world markets. Therefore, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor is an alternative route to such states. Moreover, the corridor is also significant for the Persian Gulf states, particularly Oman. These states can benefit from the corridor through trade with China and the Central Asian republics. The corridor will also provide showcasing services, trans-shipment, storage, transportation and manufacturing for Pakistan and China to the world market. Besides, different economic sectors will develop as a result of the corridor. This includes services, banking, travel services, electrical, recreation and shipyard sectors. These sectors can generate massive economic activities. The development of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor will generate new employment opportunities to a burgeoning population of the region.

The success of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor depends on certain factors which should be handled skillfully. The law and order situation in Balochistan and FATA is a potential challenge which should be taken as a top priority by Pakistani government. It is necessary that the government of Pakistan should take all the stakeholders on the board such as the government of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and people who live along the corridor. Moreover, religious extremism and political instability apparently hinder the construction and successful implementation of the Corridor. It seems that Pakistan has realized such issues and working in the direction of chasing certain militant organizations such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

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