A Meeting of Minds: Sino-Pakistani Military Relations

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This paper examines defence cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It suggests that both countries have a strong convergence of security perspectives which encourages continued close ties. However, along with such ties comes the risk of an authoritarian consensus among militant nationalists within these countries. With the United States now being viewed as a declining power by sections of Pakistani society, Beijing has gained considerable influence within the Pakistani military. This does not bode well for US-Pakistani relations, notwithstanding aid packages dispatched by Washington. The growth of Sino-Pakistani security ties could lead to rising tensions on the part of both countries with India, which would triangulate the already polarised India-Pakistan nuclear rivalry. Circumventing this scenario requires that the United States remain actively engaged in Asia. The Chinese and Pakistani military establishments share a common hostility towards the US and India on strategic grounds, and towards liberal democracy on ideological grounds. Since the Pakistani army is currently facing a popular backlash owing to its tradition of intervening in politics, its ties to Beijing are likely to get stronger.

Keywords: *China, Pakistan, military relations, Beijing, Sino-Pakistani, US-Paskistani, security ties*

Introduction

This article argues that Pakistani strategic behaviour is heavily shaped by presumptions of unconditional Chinese support. Although belied

in practice, such presumptions have led Pakistan to pursue adventurous policies against India despite Western disapproval. As the United States seeks to stabilise the Indian subcontinent, it would do well to identify how security cooperation with Beijing might influence decision-making in Islamabad.

The paper shares the assessment of many scholars that the Sino-Pakistani relationship is essentially a military-driven one, albeit with an economic dimension.[1] The armed forces of both countries have developed an enduring but unequal partnership in which China is the larger beneficiary. Pakistan on the other hand, has been internally harmed by its high level of dependence on China, but remains committed to its northern ally.

Reasons for such counter-intuitive behaviour have not been explored by scholars, beyond acknowledgement of the security assistance that Beijing extends to Islamabad.[2] Pakistan's nuclear program, it is widely believed, was helped by China until the 1990s and perhaps even beyond. After acquiring a nuclear umbrella, the Pakistani military in turn felt confident about affording protection to terrorist groups operating against India.

So far, most discussions about the India-Pakistan conflict have focused on Kashmir, as though that were the only source of tension between the two countries. Little consideration has been given to the possibility that, emboldened by its Chinese-supplied nuclear and conventional arsenal, Pakistan might be unilaterally ratcheting up hostilities in South Asia. An independent dynamic to the Indo-Pakistani rivalry might have come into existence, which makes conflict resolution all the more improbable.

After Abbottabad: Pakistani Emphasis on Chinese Support

Following the killing of Osama bin Laden at Abbottabad, the Pakistani security establishment faced international opprobrium. Its relations with the US were already in a downward spiral, over suspicions that its spies had assisted terrorist groups that were attacking US interests. A number of Pakistani newspapers had reciprocated this hostility by demanding that the government cease cooperation in the US-led War on Terror. China, they asserted, was a more reliable friend and partner. Crucially, China was also rich—it could afford to underwrite the Pakistani economy as much as the US had.

It is impossible to discern how far this rabble-rousing commentary

had any relevance to Pakistani government policy. What is indisputable is that Islamabad's official response to the Abbottabad raid included a telling and seemingly out-of-place reference to China's economic progress. To most listeners, Pakistan seemed to be signalling that it did not need American goodwill and could always find another wealthy patron. For a country that has traditionally been a rentier state, dependent upon Western developmental aid to keep its economy afloat, to make such a bold statement was unusual.[3]

Between 2002 and 2011, the US had provided over $20 billion in aid to Pakistan—a country that was formally labelled an ally against terrorism. Two-thirds of this amount went to the Pakistani military, ostensibly as reimbursement for counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban.[4] Yet, in 2011, the cumulative outcome of this decade-long investment was a caustic reminder that the US needed Pakistan more than Pakistan needed the US. Where did this confident assessment come from?

Part of the answer might be deduced from China's own endorsement of Pakistan in the aftermath of Abbottabad. Calling upon the US to appreciate Islamabad's counterterrorist efforts, Beijing attempted to defuse much of the criticism that was being thrown at its long-standing ally.[5] In having maintained close security ties with both the US and China, Pakistan was well-positioned to play one off against the other. No other country had the same luxury, since no other country was as important to the geopolitical agendas of both powers.[6] The US needed Pakistan's help in fighting terrorism, and China needed Pakistan's help in developing its restive western provinces.

Although much has been written about the US-Pakistani relationship, little attention has been directed to the Sino-Pakistani relationship. Yet, of the two, Islamabad places greater value upon the latter.[7] It is domestically embarrassed about its ties to Washington, but loudly proclaims its affection for Beijing. Any discretion that exists in ties with China is exercised by Beijing, which prefers to let quiet diplomacy and security cooperation drive bilateral contacts.[8] Part of this reticence might be the customary secretiveness of a one-party state, and part might be awareness that the military-dominated nature of the relationship might make Chinese interests unpopular within Pakistan.

There is more than a passing similarity between the military establishments of Pakistan and China. Both are imbued with a strong sense of historical grievance against the West and its apparent regional lackey, India. Both have an inferiority-superiority complex, which

perceives that foreign powers are out to harm Pakistan/China because they begrudge its nuclear arsenal/economic progress. Both believe that authoritarian politics can provide a better governance model for developing countries than airy-fairy notions of liberal democracy. Both consist of competent fighting forces, riddled with high-level corruption.

There are also differences: the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is completely subordinate to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), while the Pakistani army is an independent power-broker within the country's political scene. The PLA has a respectable war-fighting record, while the Pakistan army has failed to win every war it has fought, despite having the luxury of initiating hostilities on each occasion. The PLA has not assisted insurgent/terrorist attacks in India for some decades now, while the Pakistan army has. These differences do not, however, act as barriers to security cooperation.

A key to understanding the continuing basis of Sino-Pakistani military relations might be a commonality of belief systems. Mohan Malik, a scholar at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies, has argued that the psychological and ideological basis for the relationship is as important as its strategic dimension.[9] Security ties between Pakistan and China might be driven by more than just pragmatic concerns about containing Indian influence within South Asia. There might also be domestic roots to this alliance, springing from internal fault-lines in both countries.[10]

At the centre of these fault-lines would be the issue of regime legitimacy. To what extent is the CCP a legitimate government, considering that it is unelected, corrupt and has flouted its own laws by not registering itself as a political organisation? As the enforcement arm of the communist party, the PLA's legitimacy is tied to that of its civilian overlord.[11] Although the Pakistani case is significantly different, in that the military functions as an independent power centre within the country, its overt interventions in domestic affairs make it just as politically vulnerable as the PLA is in China.[12] Both the Pakistani and Chinese militaries confront the unpleasant reality that their political role is resented by large sections of the population, thus requiring that it be concealed under an externally-directed threat narrative. It is on the common need for such a narrative, perhaps, that the Pakistani and Chinese armies have their strongest grounds for cooperation.

It is not clear who has copied who, or if any copying has been done at all. Yet, an argument can be made that from a very early stage, elites in China and Pakistan developed similar responses to the challenges posed by domestic political turmoil. Pakistan had to airbrush the military's colonial heritage and project it as protector of the country. China had to acclimatise itself to communist rule, which operated under endearing dictums such as 'power flows out of the barrel of a gun'. Both countries were established under civil war conditions, and therefore had to fight for control of outlying buffer states (Pakistan in Kashmir, and China in Tibet).

Their subsequent policies for internal consolidation used the army as an instrument of nation-building. Both re-settled large numbers of former soldiers in frontier areas, altering local demography to the disadvantage of the indigenous population. The military in each country developed wide-ranging business interests, ostensibly to provide for soldiers' welfare and reduce the strain on the national budget. By the 1980s, the PLA controlled almost 20,000 commercial enterprises, from luxury hotels to oil fields to pharmaceutical laboratories and arms factories.[13] The Pakistan army adopted an identical course, entering into real estate, food production and trucking, among other businesses. During the 1980s it also engaged heavily in heroin trafficking, temporarily making Pakistan the world's largest supplier.[14] The commercial identity of the army was rationalised by citing the Chinese model.[15] When China's economy began its spectacular takeoff, apologists for the Pakistani military argued that state-led economic activity, if carried out under the disciplined supervision of soldiers, could lead to societal progress.

Underlying these explanations were latent tensions about how the military was to legitimise itself with the populace. Following the creation of Pakistan in 1947, its military leadership consisted of a Westernised and upper-class elite. The colonial roots of this elite made it suspect among some of its own officers. In 1951, a handful conspired to seize power, believing that the country was being run by British-appointed puppets. They wished to expunge all Western influence from Pakistan, so that the country could pursue a truly independent security policy. Interestingly, these officers are also thought to have been sympathetic to communist ideas. (The conspiracy was detected and foiled).[16]

During the 1950s, the Pakistani army undertook several studies of People's Warfare, at the urging of the United States. What began as an effort to sensitise the military establishment about the dangers of communist subversion had an unintended side-effect: it made Pakistani strategists appreciate the positive contribution that subversion could make in degrading an enemy's war-fighting potential.[17] Admiration for communist China started from this point onwards. In the latter half of the decade, Pakistan surreptitiously opened an air corridor for its northern neighbour, allowing Beijing to bypass an international trade embargo.[18] Thus, Sino-Pakistani cooperation pre-dated the 1962 Sino-Indian War. Whether this was because China and Pakistan realised what India did not—that peaceful coexistence amidst conflicting territorial claims was impossible—is unclear. Quite possibly, Pakistan's political trajectory had merely taken it onto a course that would drive it away from the West, and towards the rising power of the East.

The 1960s saw two developments that accelerated this trajectory. First, in keeping with generational change in recruitment patterns, increasing numbers of army officers came from middle class backgrounds in poorer areas of Pakistan. The aristocratic land-owning classes, who dominated the top ranks of the military, had to work with these younger officers, who came with strong socio-economic grievances and were susceptible to Islamist ideas. As part of this accommodative process, the army refashioned itself from a secular, Westernised institution into a religiously-devout, Arabised one. Army journals began publishing articles on the 'Arabic' soldiering tradition of Pakistan, in an effort to set the country's military apart from both its Western mentors and its Indian adversary.[19]

The second major development was the political rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, a populist civilian politician with strong leftist sympathies. Bhutto reportedly urged Pakistan's military dictator, Ayub Khan, to attack India in 1962, when the Indian Army was preoccupied with responding to a PLA attack from Tibet.[20] Under pressure from the United States, Ayub Khan resisted this advice. He did however, open talks with Beijing over the status of Pakistan's own disputed Kashmir frontier with China. A settlement was quickly reached, resulting in the removal of what was then the only major irritant in the Sino-Pakistani relationship. In reaching this settlement, Pakistan backtracked on its own stand that the status of Kashmir should be decided between India and Pakistan, before any consideration was given to Chinese territorial claims.[21]

Bhutto was the leading advocate of closer Sino-Pakistani cooperation, from the Pakistani side. He was already inclined to be sceptical of the alliance with the United States, and projected its decision to supply military aid to India in 1962 as a betrayal. Encouraged by the Indian army's poor performance against the PLA, he strongly supported Pakistan's 1965 military offensive into Indian Kashmir. During the subsequent war, he allegedly referred to Indians as 'dogs'—an indicator, perhaps, that Maoist-style rhetoric about 'running dogs of capitalism' was starting to influence official Pakistani views of India.[22]

The failure of Pakistan's 1965 offensive brought home the harsh reality that outside help would be needed to fight India. With the West having imposed an arms embargo on both countries and Pakistan having already aligned against the Soviet Union, the only plausible candidate was China. For its part, owing to the Sino-Soviet split, Beijing too was in need of allies. During the active phase of Indo-Pakistani hostilities, it had provided rhetorical support to the Pakistani attack and made signs of opening a second front along the India-Tibet border. Although Chinese assistance never went beyond words, Pakistan's security establishment became permanently obliged for it nonetheless.

It is interesting to note that the year Sino-Pakistani military cooperation began in earnest (1966) also coincided with the start of the Cultural Revolution in China. After having killed anywhere between 30 and 45 million Chinese through sheer administrative incompetence during the 'Great Leap Forward' (1958-61), the communist regime was being consumed by factional warfare.[23] Rival cliques were destroying the reputations of CCP stalwarts, in a bid to find scapegoats for leadership failure. Helping Pakistan to confront India—a wounded adversary that was growing militarily more powerful from its 1962 nadir—would have seemed a logical course of action at this vulnerable juncture. It would buy security along China's exposed Tibetan frontier at little direct cost.

A Common Sense of Grievance Against the West and India

Before studying how Pakistan and China have sought to reinforce each other vis-à-vis India, it is useful to look at their larger assessment of India's role in South Asia. In particular, India's relations with the Anglo-American led 'West'. To the best knowledge of this writer, no research has yet been conducted on how far Chinese and Pakistani historical narratives converge in their portrayal of the West. However,

the internal discourse of both countries is directly relevant to studying their foreign policy, since it creates a populist dynamic that spills over into external relations. From first appearances, there are two key similarities between Pakistani and Chinese interpretations of history. Both tend to over-estimate the past political cohesiveness of each country, and both blame the West for undermining this cohesiveness.

According to Pakistani school textbooks, for example, the country came into existence in 711 CE with the arrival of Arab Muslim conquerors in the Sindh region of India.[24] From this small base (essentially a 'liberated zone' in Maoist terms), the Muslims gradually came to rule the entire Indian subcontinent. Their benign political and military supremacy continued uninterrupted for centuries, until the arrival of British colonialists in the 1600s. Working together, the British and their indigenous allies, the Hindus, set out to destroy the Mughal Empire, because it represented Islamic might in the region.

The key turning point was the 1857 anti-British Revolt. In its aftermath, Hindus connived with the British to repress Muslims, who were unfairly blamed for the revolt. When the British finally left 'Pakistan', they rewarded this loyalty by mostly handing power to the Hindus and doing their best to damage the reborn, present-day state of Pakistan.[25] Thus, the 'West' (a blanket term, applied by many Asians to Anglo-Saxon countries) and present-day India share a common and inherent antipathy towards Pakistan.

Fantastical though this interpretation might sound, it has caused alarm both within and outside Pakistan, over the radicalising effect it can exert on students. Analysts have commented on the religiously-defined dehumanisation that permeates history curricula in the country. However, despite this interest, no parallel has yet been drawn with an identical process that has been ongoing in China. Ever since the pro-democracy uprising of 1989, the Chinese Communist Party has made political indoctrination of the youth a top priority.[26] In 2001, its propaganda department announced that it would rewrite Chinese history up to 1840, to explain why the CCP's rise was inevitable.

The result has been a xenophobic narrative that emphasises Western aggression against China, starting with the First Opium War of 1839. (Coincidentally, as in Pakistani history, the principal aggressor in this case also happened to be Britain.) For the next 100 years, according to this narrative, the West and Japan ravaged China. The Middle Kingdom fell from its exalted status as the richest and most culturally developed region in the world, into enslavement. Regions that had his-

torically been part of China broke away after sensing the weakness of the central government. It was only when the Communist Party took power that matters returned to normal and China once again became politically united, as it had previously been for over 2000 years.[27]

Some Chinese scholars have disputed the very basis of the CCP's historical narrative—that China has a long tradition of political unity. They point out that, if one considers the last two millennia, China might have been united for only about 45% of the time. Furthermore, even this estimate would only apply to the Han-dominated eastern half of China, and exclude western provinces such as Xinjiang and Tibet. If examined in totality, the territory of modern-day China has previously only ever existed as a single political unit for a total of 81 years.[28] Its demise, however, coincided with the start of the First Opium War, thus providing the CCP with a convenient storyline about 'foreign aggression' and 'subversion' to sell domestically.

Viewed from their own perspective, both China and Pakistan see themselves as having been wronged by the West, and remaining at risk of further aggression and intrigue. These views tend to be reinforced by recent history: Pakistan feels aggrieved that the West has never fully supported its 'just' cause vis-à-vis India in Kashmir, while China feels that the United States seeks to obstruct its rise through geo-strategic containment. Crucially, both countries see India as a Western proxy. As early as the 1950s, Chinese communist propaganda described India as a bourgeois state, ruled by Western-controlled lackeys.[29] Although Pakistan did not express similar sentiments, its military elite suspected that the West would have preferred to ally with civilian-ruled, democratic India in the Cold War. Membership of anti-Soviet pacts was only extended to Pakistan as an afterthought, once India had declined to join. Ever since that time, there have been doubts within the military as to whether Pakistan should have allied with the United States at all, since the latter was too distant (in every sense of the word) to be a credible patron.[30]

The single event that removed barriers to Pakistani criticism of the West was the end of the Cold War. Although public sentiment in the country had been taking an anti-Western slant from the 1970s onward, with the 1979 storming of the US embassy in Islamabad being an example, this had been capped by the military leadership for higher strategic purposes. American aid was crucial to the health of the Pakistani economy, allowing it to grow at an average of 6% per annum. However, once this aid was suspended in 1990 over US concerns that Pakistan

was developing nuclear weapons, economic growth was halved.[31] In return, restraints on anti-Americanism loosened, and the growing influence of Saudi Arabia in Pakistan's cultural life ensured that visceral views from the Arab 'street' on US-Israeli relations were transplanted onto Pakistan's own streets.

For its part, during the early 2000s China grew alarmed by the United States' increasing defence cooperation with India—a country that it considered a precocious rival.[32] In response, Beijing intensified its diplomatic support for Pakistan and explicated its contempt for Indian claims to great power status. India, in its view, lacked any basis to compete with China, and was only led to do so by a cynically manipulative West. Moreover, it regarded India's open aspiration for South Asian hegemony as itself an act of political aggression, since it connoted subordination of Chinese interests in the region. The Chinese viewed India as an insecure and insignificant power, whose military strength was mainly derived from Western patronage rather than indigenous achievement.[33] Naturally, Pakistan shares this view.

A Common Economic Objective: Making China Richer

The most important link between the militaries of China and Pakistan is also economic—the 1300 kilometre long Karakoram Highway. Construction began in 1966, one year after Pakistan's abortive military offensive against India, and opened in 1982. Less than a year later, Pakistan cold-tested a nuclear device and subsequently acquired blueprints for a nuclear bomb from China. Beijing supplied nuclear-capable missiles to Islamabad via the Karakoram Highway, besides outfitting the Pakistani army with conventional weaponry.[34] It is interesting to note that this period (the early and mid-1980s) coincided with the beginning of massive and systemic Pakistani support to insurgent groups in India's Punjab province.

The Karakoram Highway was crucial in augmenting the Pakistani military's strength and enabling Islamabad to pursue a covert war against India. Beginning in Punjab, this war expanded to Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in 1989 and, if one accepts Indian interpretations, to the rest of India in 1993, when multiple bombings took place across Mumbai. Indian analysts argue that, once it had acquired a nuclear umbrella and substantial quantities of cheaply-priced Chinese weapons, Pakistan lost all inhibitions about escalating hostilities through proxy warfare. There might be some merit in this argument, since virtually all

terrorism-related crises between India and Pakistan have involved Pakistani nationals crossing into Indian territory. To date, there has not been a high-profile instance of cross-border terrorism in the opposite direction.[35]

Despite its military character, in recent years the Karakoram Highway has taken on the additional role of being an economic connector. Islamabad is seeking to strengthen the relationship with Beijing by serving as a physical and political bridge between energy-hungry China and energy-rich Muslim states in West and Central Asia. Since 1993, when China became a net importer of oil, securing access to energy supplies has been an overwhelming priority for Beijing. Pakistan, with its strong ideological connections to regimes in both regions, is well-poised to assist China's efforts.

In return, it has obtained Chinese investment in infrastructure development. The Karakoram Highway is currently being maintained in part by Chinese engineering troops based in Pakistani territory. At least 16 tactical airstrips have been constructed along the highway, which is being expanded from its current width of 10 meters to 30 meters. In the event of a war with India, Pakistan's strategic airlift capabilities would be enhanced by these upgrades. China is also in the process of building two other highways in Pakistan, which would strengthen connectivity between the two countries.[36] All of these measures serve to tighten Pakistani control over the Northern Areas of Jammu and Kashmir, which remain a disputed territory like the rest of J&K. By strengthening Islamabad's military infrastructure in the Northern Areas, Beijing has implicitly conveyed that it recognises the Pakistani claim to Kashmir and not the Indian one.

Beyond its potential for hydropower generation and mineral exploration, the Chinese are probably not interested in Kashmir itself.[37] Rather, Beijing's intention is to obtain road access via Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, in Baluchistan province, and thence to the oil-rich Persian Gulf states. Gwadar lies 400 kilometres east of the Straits of Hormuz, through which 40% of the world's oil supplies pass. Its value as a Chinese maritime base is obvious: the port, when fully operational, would cut down sea travel between China and the Gulf by 19,300 kilometres. It would shorten shipment time for oil supplies by a month, and reduce transport fees by 25%.[38] For this reason, the Chinese government has underwritten 70% of the development costs of the port, and taken over its administration from the Singapore Port Authority.[39]

What is not quite so clear is the Pakistani game plan. Policy statements by government officials suggest that Islamabad expects to serve as an energy corridor for western China, which would entitle it to receive transit fees. Better road connectivity would also increase Pakistani access to Central Asia through Xinjiang. Beijing would have reason to be grateful to Islamabad for helping develop China's remote western provinces, which have long been plagued by ethnic unrest. Lastly, linking China with Western and Central Asia would also allow Pakistan to receive Chinese investments in civilian infrastructure, particular for electricity production, which the country cannot afford by itself.[40]

These benefits are in the realm of the theoretical, however, and have yet to translate into practical manifestations. At present, bilateral trade via the Karakoram Highway has provided short-term benefits to Pakistan and long-term benefits to China. It has created a huge trade imbalance, with Chinese exports to Pakistan outnumbering imports by 4:1. So far, Beijing has extended generous credit to its southern ally, but this is unlikely to continue indefinitely. Pakistan's own export industries have not benefited in any substantial measure, since China is a direct competitor with all sectors where Pakistani businesses are attempting to expand their limited international market share.

In the final analysis, it would appear that the only real convergence of economic agendas between China and Pakistan is a common desire to make China more prosperous. Although Beijing has been sympathetic to Pakistani requests for greater equity in bilateral trade, in practice it is China that benefits commercially from the Karakoram Highway. Pakistan's reward is overwhelmingly confined to the military sphere, as China continues to strengthen Islamabad's hard power resources vis-à-vis New Delhi. Chinese firms are currently working on approximately 30 infrastructure projects in the Pakistan-Occupied Northern Areas of Jammu and Kashmir.[41] These initiatives certainly benefit Pakistan from a narrow security-centric view, but they have little direct impact on the economy. For its own development and sustenance, Pakistan still has to depend upon the West.

Ironically, if newspaper commentary is any indication of public opinion, sections of Pakistani society are jubilant over the West's economic troubles.[42] In their estimate, the United States is in terminal decline while China is on an unstoppable rise. One editorial even boasted that, just as Pakistan helped bring down the Soviet Union, so too could it destroy the American-led world order if it entered into an ideological

alliance with China.[43] Although it is easy to dismiss such views as the ranting of delusional hyper-nationalists, one must recall that elements within the PLA are inclined towards similar sentiments. They believe that the 2008 economic crisis and the 2003 Gulf War have done irreparable damage to American soft and hard power, and that the status differential between China and the US has narrowed considerably[44]. It is possible that such logic has permeated the Pakistani military through the course of official exchanges with Beijing.

Towards a 'Karakoram Consensus'?

What is most striking about the Sino-Pakistani military relationship is its potential one-sidedness. If the prospect of India launching a land-grabbing offensive is disregarded, then Islamabad has derived little benefit from its ties to Beijing.[45] Instead, it has locked itself into an adversarial posture vis-à-vis India, thus fulfilling its own prophecy of unrelenting Indian hostility. Meanwhile, China has reinforced this dynamic by using its United Nations Security Council veto to shield anti-Indian terrorist groups based in Pakistan from international sanctions. Following the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, CCP-controlled newspapers gleefully observed that the security failures of the Indian state had undermined its claims to great power status.[46] More tellingly, they also suggested that the origins of the attack lay within India's own polity, due to the failure of its governance model to meet popular aspirations. Apparently, besides realpolitik-driven strategic rivalry, India and China still remain ideological rivals, competing for the legitimacy of their respective democratic and authoritarian political systems.

Pakistan is a convenient instrument in this war of ideas. Its indulgence of cross-border terrorism serves Beijing's purpose of denying India a peaceful periphery within which to build economic strength and thus, attain domestic stability. Tensions with Pakistan, provoked by terrorist attacks, have limited foreign investment into India and diverted developmental expenditure to security purposes. The power differential between India and China thus continues to widen in China's favour. By urging a resumption of the India-Pakistan dialogue process, Beijing has sought to deny New Delhi any diplomatic advantage that it might have gained from not responding militarily to the Mumbai attacks. While doing so, it has of course, paid lip-service to the notion of a peaceful compromise between India and Pakistan and common efforts against terrorism.

Naturally, such benevolence is lacking when China deals with Uighur separatist groups based in Pakistan. On this issue, more than any other, Beijing's own unilateralism and the limits of Sino-Pakistani strategic convergence come to the fore. China has occasionally shut down the Karakoram Highway as a demonstration of its dissatisfaction with Pakistani counterterrorist cooperation against the Uighurs. Since the 1980s, the Highway has served as a transit route for separatists in Xinjiang to reach Afghanistan, where they received arms training. Initially, Chinese authorities believed that free movement of Uighur militants southward was a positive development, since it would lead to them getting killed by the Soviets and Afghan security forces. However, a blowback effect was felt from the early 1990s onward, as radical Islamist fighters returned to Xinjiang with proven combat skills. Since then, increasing trade links between China and Pakistan, via the Karakoram Highway, have also increased the operational space available to drug traffickers and jihadist groups based in Pakistan.[47]

China's security community has calculated that it can co-opt Pakistan into selectively targeting Uighur militants, even as all other categories of jihadists enjoy sanctuary in the country. For this reason, the PLA has cultivated Pakistani officials with known Islamist sympathies. It views them as assets in its own efforts to maintain stability in Xinjiang, since their influence with jihadist groups would serve to deflect terrorist attacks from China.[48] For its part, the Pakistani military has sought to meet Chinese expectations wherever possible, by prioritising operations against Uighur groups. It has arrested or killed a number of militant leaders and made statements in support of the Chinese government's policy towards Xinjiang.

There might, however, be some future strains in the Sino-Pakistani relationship. Notwithstanding official-level warmth between the two policy elites, China's increasing commercial presence within Pakistan has not been entirely welcomed at the public level. In Baluchistan, anger has focused on the Chinese expatriate community, who are seen as enjoying business privileges denied to local entrepreneurs.[49] Elsewhere, Chinese workers have come under threat following the storming of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007. That action was widely perceived to have been carried out by the Pakistani army under pressure from Beijing, since some Chinese nationals had been taken prisoner by Islamist militants in the mosque.[50] Although Pakistanis routinely blame the United States for terrorist bombings within the country, arguing that support for the United States' War on Terror has

undermined Pakistani security, the reality is different. It was actually Islamabad's inability to resist pressure from Beijing, not Washington, that led to jihadist violence within Pakistan and the rise of an indigenous Taliban movement.

The United States is literally picking up the tab for Sino-Pakistani military relations. Despite being Pakistan's biggest benefactor, it remains vilified by public discourse and berated in official circles for its alleged insensitivity to Pakistani interests. Yet, Washington gave Pakistan $690 million in emergency aid in 2010, to cope with damage caused by flash-flooding in the country. China, in contrast, gave just $18 million.[51] A cost-benefit analysis of the relationship between Beijing and Islamabad might therefore conclude that, if Pakistan continues to view China as an alternative to the West, it might be in for a big disappointment. Pakistan seems to value Chinese friendship more than China values Pakistan's. While Islamabad's rationale for allying with Beijing is clear—'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'—it remains uncertain whether China operates according to the same logic.[52] Perhaps the Chinese elite have another proverb in mind, while supporting Pakistan against India: 'it is good to strike the serpent's head with your enemy's hand'.[53] Only time shall tell if Pakistan will emerge stronger or weaker from its alignment with China, but the record thus far is not promising for South Asia.

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Notes

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