

The China Factor in Pakistan

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Pakistan today confronts two key security challenges: a lethal Taliban insurgency and volatile nuclear relations with India. Although international attention has focused on the Obama administration's policies to address these challenges, the limits of American resources and influence in Pakistan require other states to collaboratively play a larger role. As Pakistan's "all-weather" friend and neighbor, China has historically enjoyed widespread credibility in Pakistan and has vital interests at stake there. Both factors could enable it to advance stability in Pakistan.

Sino-Pakistan relations naturally split into four phases. The first spans the establishment of diplomatic ties from 1951 to the middle of the decade. Pakistan was the third non-Communist state and first Muslim state to recognize the isolated People's Republic. Relations cooled in the late 1950s, as Pakistan repeatedly voted with the United States to postpone a vote on seating China in the United Nations. The 1962 Sino-India border war proved the turning point. The following year, Pakistan signed a landmark boundary agreement with China recognizing Chinese control over portions of the disputed Kashmir territory. The fourth phase of relations began in the 1990s. Since then, the militant backlash in China following the Soviet-Afghan war, particularly in the Xinjiang region, together with the post-

Cold War thaw in Beijing's relations with New Delhi, have tested the economically weak yet politically robust Sino-Pakistan relationship.

The Uighur Factor

China's counterterrorism concerns stem from its restive western Xinjiang region bordering northwest Pakistan. Xinjiang is home to nearly 9 million Uighurs, a Muslim people of Turkic origin, among whom separatist sentiment has historically run high. In the 1980s, hundreds of Uighurs crossed into Pakistan, enrolled in radical *madrassas*, or religious schools, and fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Upon returning to Xinjiang via Pakistan, they joined violent Uighur nationalist groups, even as the majority of Uighurs agitated peacefully. Although there is no evidence that Islamabad supported these groups, Uighur fighters benefited from the militant infrastructure established on Pakistani soil. The ensuing strain was clear: China halted renewal of land-based trade agreements, periodically closed down the symbolic Karakoram Highway that links the countries, and lodged strong protests with Pakistan's Interior Ministry.

China's fears were compounded with the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The Taliban and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan recruited Uighurs from Pakistani madrassas. Chinese authorities have claimed more than 1,000 Uighurs fought in

Afghanistan with the Taliban and al Qaeda. In 2002, Pakistan handed over 22 Uighurs to U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

Yet the acquittal of all 22 Uighurs from Guantanamo Bay has underscored human rights concerns over their repatriation to China (five have been resettled in Albania and four in Bermuda, with talks underway to settle up to nine of the remaining thirteen in Palau). Post 9/11, these concerns seem to be well founded. For China has capitalized on the “global war on terror” rubric to launch a “strike hard” campaign in Xinjiang with mass arrests, summary sentencing and executions. These actions have led experts to claim that China has inflated the Uighur threat to consolidate control in Xinjiang. Nonetheless, Pakistani cooperation has remained forthcoming, with Pakistani authorities closing down Uighur settlements, handing over Uighurs to their Chinese counterparts, and expressing public support for Chinese policies in Xinjiang most recently following the clashes in Urumqi in July.

Today, the Sino-Pakistan counterterrorism challenge has an internal and external dimension. Internally, China has identified the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as its principal terrorist threat. The U.S. claims ETIM has links to al Qaeda and the U.N. has labeled it a terrorist organization. While Pakistani forces killed ETIM founder, Hasan Mahsum, in 2003 in South Waziristan, ETIM

continues to plot and conduct attacks such as the alleged killing of 16 Chinese border police four days before the 2008 Beijing Olympics. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, ETIM's new head, Memetiming Memeti, is a member of al Qaeda's Shura Council.

The external dimension of the counterterrorism challenge relates to the safety of the over 10,000 Chinese workers in Pakistan who staff 60 different companies and contribute to 122 major development projects. From the Gwadar Port in Baluchistan in 2004 and the Gomal Zam Dam in South Waziristan in 2006 to the Swat Valley in 2007, Chinese workers have been targeted and even killed. There is little evidence that ETIM has conducted these attacks. A more plausible explanation is ethnic Baluch or Taliban retaliation against the government for perceived historical injustices and military offensives. In May, the Pakistani government, keen to assuage Chinese concerns, established a high-level committee headed by the National Crisis Management Cell Director-General to ensure enhanced security for Chinese workers.

China remains alarmed by the ETIM-related threat emanating from Pakistan even though the roots of its "Uighur problem" lie in its repressive policies. Sino-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation has continued through the signing of

agreements, information sharing, joint drills such as the Friendship 2006 exercise and the handing over of militants. For the moment, China will quietly apply pressure on Pakistan to act while maintaining public solidarity but this discretion may depend on whether attacks in China remain small-scale and whether steps are taken to protect Chinese citizens and prevent the use of Pakistani soil by alleged Uighur militants.

The India Factor

India has long underpinned strong Sino-Pakistan relations. This was not always the case and has arguably diminished since the end of the Cold War. The evolution of China's position on the Kashmir dispute since the 1950s reflects its changing relations with India, its views on regional stability and its global posture.

During the 1950s, China's Asian solidarity rhetoric and India's "*Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai*" ("India and China are brothers") slogan led China to condemn the imperial powers responsible for the Kashmir dispute and to call for its settlement outside the "U.S.-controlled UN."

However, as Sino-India ties deteriorated, the 1960s and 1970s marked a radical tilt in Chinese policy. China's explicit ultimatums to India during the 1965 Indo-

Pakistan war are telling reflections of this shift. Through its statements, the Chinese linked the Sino-Indian and Sino-Pakistan border issues. By invoking the specter of intervention, China was perceived to have helped bring about a cease-fire, generating enduring public goodwill in Pakistan.

China's gradual opening and modernization in the 1980s led to a new phase of pragmatism and passive neutrality. A brief disruption in this relative harmony followed India's 1998 nuclear tests and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's claim, in a letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton, that China was the reason for India's testing. Nonetheless, progress was made in creating a mechanism to address the border dispute and in deepening economic relations. Perhaps most indicative of the change in tone was China advising Pakistan to de-escalate during the Kargil crisis in 1999, in contrast to its aggressive support in prior crises.

Today, the relationship has entered yet another phase in which China is arguably "actively neutral" on the Kashmir dispute. The most compelling evidence of this emerges from its response to the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. China not only refrained from blocking the UN blacklisting of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (Lashkar-e-Taiba's current incarnation) but its vice foreign minister also engaged in

unprecedented shuttle diplomacy to defuse tensions following the attacks. Indeed, China's success in recasting its role as a neutral intermediary has been reflected in official statements by both India and Pakistan. Its more calibrated position, as articulated by Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei, was to "encourage both sides to find a way out through dialogue and consultation."

A host of factors may account for China's emerging active neutrality. China wants to preserve stability in a volatile region so it can pursue its own economic growth. With the Sino-Indian trade volume seven times that between China and Pakistan, China has clear economic interests in a Sino-Indian rapprochement. In addition, China's counterterrorism concerns are linked to the broader militancy infrastructure in Pakistan that has partly flowed from its policy of using militant proxies against India in Kashmir. As one senior Pakistani military official privately stated, China has never been in favor of Pakistan's "military adventurism" in Kashmir. Moreover, China also desires to be seen as a responsible global power, shouldering its share of the diplomatic burden as part of its peaceful rise.

Looking ahead, China seems likely to remain politically neutral on Indo-Pakistan relations. It may actively intervene diplomatically during crises but will continue to call for a bilateral resolution to the Kashmir dispute. Pakistan will thus have to

recalibrate its expectations of China and understand that, consistent with its changing regional and global role, China's position on Kashmir will be less one-sided.

China is, however, unlikely to expend much political capital on pressuring Pakistan to cut off Kashmir and India-oriented militant groups, as they do not in themselves threaten the Chinese. As such, Sino-Pakistan ties will irk India as India perceives Chinese "tolerance" of anti-Indian militancy from Pakistani soil. Moreover, despite China's increasing political neutrality, military sales to Pakistan for regional balance of power and commercial purposes will strain Sino-Indian relations, as will the longstanding Sino-Indian border dispute that has flared up in recent weeks.

The China Factor

In order to evaluate China's potential role in tackling Pakistan's counterterrorism challenge and stabilizing Indo-Pak relations, it is important to first examine the nature of Chinese "leverage" in Pakistan.

According to the 2009 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, 80% of Pakistanis view China as a partner (only 9% view the U.S. similarly). China's clout stems from its historic support for Pakistan vis-à-vis India and the perception that it is a non-

intrusive and non-exploitative ally. The latter is linked not just to China's softer diplomatic rhetoric but also its aid strategy. Although Chinese assistance to Pakistan over the years has paled in comparison to U.S. aid, it has made more of an impact with few strings attached. It has focused on long-term financing and large infrastructure projects instead of direct economic aid that is often squandered by the leadership or on the ground. Just last month, both countries signed a \$1 billion accord to construct twelve dams in Pakistan. From power plants to highways, Chinese aid has built lasting symbols of friendship with clear public dividend.

As such, there is an increasing recognition within the international community that China can significantly contribute to the global effort to stabilize Pakistan. This was evident in April when Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, visited China "to share views on the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan."

Turning to the counterterrorism challenge, militant safe havens in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) pose a lethal threat to Pakistan and, transitively, to China. "We will contribute to [Pakistan's] stabilization," said Hu Shisheng, a South Asia expert at the China Institute of Contemporary International

Relations. “A stable Pakistan is essential for building a stable Xinjiang. A disintegrated or dismantled Pakistan will be a disaster for us.”

China has the unique opportunity to leverage its goodwill across the Pakistani political spectrum to generate support for a robust counterterrorism policy. One way in which China can bolster Pakistan’s capacity to combat domestic militancy is through its economic policies in the tribal belt. China could, for example, increase investment in development and energy projects in FATA as a means to undercut Taliban recruitment of impoverished and uneducated youth. Security concerns, however, pose a major challenge to such endeavors, as reflected by China’s recent decision to suspend construction of Pakistan’s largest oil refinery in Baluchistan.

China also has an effective track record in overseas civilian policing. Using its experience in Haiti and East Timor, it could increase training programs for Pakistani police and counterinsurgency units to complement the \$280 million in scanning equipment for law enforcement agencies already pledged. At a diplomatic level, China could host a Friends of Pakistan meeting, demonstrating its regional leadership and commitment to Pakistan’s long-term stability.

Any such endeavor, however, faces a number of obstacles. First, China's primary concern is the ETIM, not the broader array of militant groups operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It may not be willing to push a broader set of targets, squander its political capital, and risk retaliation. Making such a distinction, however, would be shortsighted because the geographical focus of regional groups has the marked capacity to evolve. The evolution of *Lashkar-e-Taiba* is a good example of this, as seen in the targets and tactics of the November 2008 Mumbai attacks. Indeed, a noted *Lashkar* publication entitled, "Why Are We Waging Jihad?" specifically references the plight of Muslims in China.

A second obstacle is China's wariness of American presence in the region. On May 8, Lou Zhaohui, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, publicly stated that China was "concerned over increasing U.S. influence in the region" and that, "[U.S.] policies and the high number of foreign forces were 'issues of serious concern for China.'"

In terms of the Indo-Pakistan dynamic that shapes Pakistan's counterterrorism and force posture, Sino-American collaboration may be an important part of the solution for stabilizing South Asia. Building on its shuttle diplomacy after the Mumbai attacks, China and the U.S. could jointly engage in regional crisis

management, as recently noted by former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. The coordinated Sino-American response to Pakistani requests for aid last year, diverting it to the IMF, is a potential precedent for such collaboration. China could also use its political capital to help refocus the Pakistani army away from India and towards combating extremism.

On Kashmir, however, China will likely avoid playing an overt or active role in terms of facilitating a settlement. Ideologically, China's policy of non-intrusion, particularly in light of its "separatist" concerns in Tibet and Xinjiang, precludes such engagement. Moreover, Indian sensitivities regarding China's possession of disputed portions of the Kashmir territory will further limit Chinese engagement.

Nonetheless, tackling the Indo-Pakistan dynamic is crucial. Attempts will continually be made to disrupt the relationship through terrorism. This will place intense pressure on New Delhi to react militarily, even if only symbolically, with dire regional consequences. The conclusion of the Indian election paves the way for resuming back-channel talks on Kashmir that made great strides under the Musharraf regime but that have been on hold since his resignation and the Mumbai attacks. Their resumption may well be helped by third-party encouragement including from China.

To tackle such sensitive yet critical issues, China may want to operate within a larger diplomatic consensus. President Barack Obama called for creating just such a consensus in a speech on March 28 that unveiled his administration's new "AfPak" strategy: "Together with the U.N., we will forge a new Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan that brings together all who should have a stake in the security of the region—our NATO allies and other partners, but also the Central Asian states, the Gulf nations and Iran, Russia, India and China."

Such a Contact Group may help facilitate meaningful Chinese involvement in the region. In light of existing envoys to the region from the U.S, the U.K., France, Japan and Germany among others, China's appointment of a Special Envoy for Pakistan, Zhou Gang, is a welcome step in enhancing policy visibility and coordination.

Since establishing diplomatic relations 59 years ago, Sino-Pakistan ties remain firm despite China's evolving relations with India and counterterrorism concerns. Yet, as Pakistan confronts its twin challenges, China remains on the sidelines with little clarity as to what concrete role it might play in the region. Indicative of this is a Feb. 23 op-ed in the China Daily by President Asif Ali Zardari:

“As Pakistan grapples with the threat of terrorism, China can help in this area too... Indeed terrorists have specifically targeted some of our Chinese friends who were working in Pakistan to drive a wedge between the two countries and peoples. The sacrifice of these Chinese citizens for Pakistan’s cause is an abiding reminder to us Pakistanis of China’s friendship with our country.”

The op-ed fails to mention the specific role China may play in helping Pakistan address its security challenges. It sharply contrasts with the myriad appeals for aid, equipment and diplomatic support to Washington made by President Zardari in U.S. media outlets. Despite this, China can and must do more in bolstering Pakistani will and capacity on the counterterrorism front and in advancing regional stability. China’s all-weather friendship demands it, as does its national interests.

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