

Pakistan and China: cooperation in counter-terrorism

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Introduction

The Pakistan-China strategic relationship is based on multi-faceted bilateral cooperation in diverse fields. During the last six decades, this cooperation has continued to grow and expand in response to new challenges and strategic compulsions, embracing new areas vital to the peace and security of the region and progress and prosperity of the two countries. One of these areas is counter-terrorism in which the two countries have been cooperating with each other for over a decade. The two countries are reinforcing their close cooperation with both short term and long term objectives by giving top priority to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism. During his recent visit to China's Xinjiang region, President Asif Ali Zardari vowed to work more closely with China to combat terrorism.¹ Earlier, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar, during her visit to Beijing, stated that Pakistan and China will seek "more robust" ties on counter-terrorism through existing cooperation and mechanisms.² What are the short term and long term goals of counter-terrorism strategies pursued by Pakistan and China? How is Sino-Pakistan cooperation in counter-terrorism linked to regional integration and economic development? How could counter-terrorism cooperation between Islamabad and Beijing be more productive, effective and successful? These are some of the questions that this paper would attempt to answer while reviewing the counter-terrorism cooperation between Pakistan and China.

Sino-Pakistan cooperation in counter-terrorism: a brief review

As a member of global coalition against terrorism, Pakistan entered into partnership with a number of countries, including China, to fight the menace of international terrorism. For Pakistan and China, however, there were some

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compelling reasons to strengthen their bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism. The two countries are focusing on expanding their economic and trade relations and promoting connectivity with a view to providing a more solid foundation for a long term strategic partnership and sustainable friendship. This objective, however, could be achieved only in a peaceful environment. The deteriorating law and order situation and insecurity in Pakistan undermines the long term, comprehensive and strategic cooperation between Pakistan and China. The forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism represent not only internal

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threats to peace, security and prosperity of the two countries; they also tend to undermine their long established close friendship and strategic cooperation. In view of Pakistan and China embarking on a path towards greater cooperation in economic, trade and investment fields that include energy, agriculture, industry, science and technology, infrastructure development, water management, mineral development and construction, this issue becomes particularly pertinent. Acts of terrorism committed against the Chinese workers and engineers in Pakistan are in fact aimed at sabotaging the fast growing Pakistan-China cooperation in the development sectors. These attacks began in 2004, a year before Pakistan and China signed, during Premier Wen Jiabao's visit to Pakistan in April 2005, a number of agreements and MoUs for cooperation and joint ventures in a large number of areas. From 2004 to 2010, there were four separate terrorist attacks on the Chinese workers engaged in the development projects in different parts of Pakistan. In these attacks 12 Chinese lost their lives.³

Both Pakistani and the Chinese authorities felt extremely concerned about these terrorist acts. Both concurred that the terrorist acts were aimed at undermining growing Pakistan-China cooperation in the development areas, particularly, which related to the development of Pakistan's economy. The Chinese were worried that deteriorating law and order situation in Pakistan, particularly attacks on the Chinese workers, would deter the Chinese business community from investing in Pakistan. The Chinese leadership, therefore, advised Pakistan to improve law and order situation in the country and review its security policy, and for that purpose the Chinese President Hu Jintao even

offered the visiting Pakistani Prime Minister, Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani, Chinese help in 2009.⁴

The disclosure by the Chinese authorities that the terrorists responsible for a recent series of bomb blasts and murderous attacks on the civilians in Kashgar city of Xinjiang region of China had received training for making explosives in the tribal areas better known as FATA of Pakistan underlines the need for the two countries to further intensify their cooperation in counter-terrorism. Both the countries regard terrorism as a common threat, have similarity of views on the nature of this threat, have been cooperating at various levels to eliminate this threat and have time and again reiterated their firm resolve to jointly fight the terrorists, extremists and separatists. From Pakistan's perspective, any attempt to destabilize Xinjiang will have an adverse impact on the prospects of trade with China. As President Zardari, during his recent visit to Xinjiang said, the development in the region would provide the Pakistani entrepreneurs an opportunity to expand trade with China. He also underlined the strategic importance of Kashgar as an intersection for facilitating and promoting communication between Pakistan and China, Central Asia and beyond.⁵

Both Pakistan and China have been aware of the fact that separatists involved in violence in the Chinese region of Xinjiang have had links with some militant groups based in FATA. The announcement by local authorities appearing in *China Daily* of August 2, 2011, claiming that a leader of the group involved in terrorist attacks in Kashgar had received training in Pakistan, is not the first one to point out a link between Uyghur separatists and FATA based militant groups. In May, 2008, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, while talking to members of Pakistan Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Islamabad had disclosed that that elements involved in separatist and terrorist activities in Xinjiang had received training in the tribal areas of Pakistan during 1980s.⁶ Pakistan had taken prompt steps to apprehend the terrorists on its soil who were responsible for planning or carrying out terrorist activities in China. A number of Uyghur separatists were captured and extradited by Pakistani authorities in 1997, 2002 and 2009.⁷ This irritant has not been able to mar ties between Pakistan and China. In fact, relations between the two countries have shown an upward trend during the last three years. The increased interaction between the top leadership of Pakistan and China is indicative of strong desire by the two countries to expand bilateral cooperation. The Pakistani as well as the Chinese leaders have reiterated their determination to carry further the process of expanding cooperation in multiple areas, including counter terrorism. Making it clear that Kashgar episode will not be allowed to adversely affect Pakistan-China relations, a statement by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said:

“Pakistan and China have forged excellent cooperation in anti-terrorism. China would continue to boost cooperation with Pakistan, and, jointly crack down the three evil forces of terrorism, separatism and extremism.”⁷

The statement clearly reflected the Chinese policy of pursuing anti-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan. A few days later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued another statement, which appreciated Pakistan’s contribution to war on terror. In response to a question how China looks at Pakistan-China cooperation on counter-terrorism, the spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry said:

Pakistan, as an important frontier of international counter-terrorism campaign, makes prominent contributions to combating terrorism. Being friendly neighbors, China and Pakistan conduct sound cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism. China will strengthen its cooperation with Pakistan to jointly crack down on the "three forces" and safeguard peace and stability of both countries and the whole region.⁸

From Pakistani side, the reiteration came on the eve of Prime Minister Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani’s visit to China in May 2011. In a joint statement issued on the conclusion of the visit, the two countries termed terrorism, separatism and extremism serious threats to regional peace, stability and security and reaffirmed their resolve to undertake “substantive cooperation” under bilateral and multilateral frameworks, and jointly fight the three forces. The joint statement followed an agreement in a meeting between Prime Minister Gilani and Chinese President Hu Jintao to strengthen collaboration in defence and counter-terrorism and to work on a comprehensive strategy on security related issues. According to the media reports quoting Prime Minister Gilani, President Hu promised that China would support Pakistan if it devised a comprehensive strategy on security related issues.

Cooperation on counter-terrorism between Pakistan and China at both bilateral and multilateral levels has been in existence for the last about one decade. The two countries have put in place a bilateral mechanism at the level of interior ministers for mutual consultations, sharing of intelligence information, exchanging expertise and devising the ways and means to make the counter-terrorism measures more effective. Pakistan and China have also conducted three joint anti-terror military exercises in the last seven years. The last-a week long exercise participated by ground and air force was conducted in July. These joint military exercises have helped the armed forces of the two countries to cement collaboration and promote coordination between their armed forces so that they are able to undertake joint anti-terror operations and also to learn from each other’s experience in counter-terrorism strategies.

China supports and appreciates Pakistan's efforts to fight terrorism; and has provided assistance to help Pakistan in its war against militancy. This help has been in the form of diplomatic, economic and military support. China has openly recognized and praised Pakistan's contributions and cooperation with international community in war against global terror. In recognition of Pakistan's critical role in countering terrorism at inter-regional level, China helped Pakistan secure an Observer Status in Shanghai Cooperation Council (SCO).

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Economically, China has provided Pakistan more than 500 million US dollars to strengthen Pakistan's capacity to fight terrorism. The Chinese participation in building dams, roads and other infra-structure in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan is also part of the Chinese strategy to help Pakistan fight militancy in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Pakistan and China enjoy a robust relationship in defence and security areas. This relationship is being reoriented towards assistance against terrorists. Pakistan has received from China explosives scanners, which can detect vehicles carrying explosive materials. These scanners have been installed at the entry points of all the big cities of Pakistan, including Islamabad.

At the multilateral level, Pakistan and China are focusing on counter-terrorism within the framework of SCO along with Russia and other members of the organization from Central Asia. Pakistan lent its support to the Chinese bid to get an Observer Status in South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which is collectively committed to fight terrorism in the region. The two countries also hold regular consultations with Afghanistan, Iran and other West and Central Asian countries to carry out fight against international terrorism. As members of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Pakistan and China are partners of the countries of Southeast Asia, and Far East in fight against international terrorism.

There are three compelling reasons why Pakistan and China must cooperate in countering terrorism. Firstly, Pakistan and China are both confronted by this challenge and they can meet this challenge only through close cooperation. The terrorist threat for China emanates from its western region of Xinjiang, where armed groups of Muslim population commonly known as Uyghur belonging to East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) have been responsible for bomb blasts

and attacks on local Chinese people. In July 2009, these groups targeted the provincial capital Urumqi causing about 200 deaths and injuries to more than 1700 people. Recently, the same groups carried out a series of bomb blasts and armed attacks on civilian population in the ancient city of Kashghar leading to a number of casualties. The Chinese authorities claimed that the leaders of the group learned terrorist techniques in their camps in Pakistan before they penetrated into Xinjiang. This is not the first time that China has pointed out a link between ETIM activists and militant camps in the Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Under late General Zia's vision, actively pursued and supported by some of the religious parties of Pakistan, to extend the Afghan *Jihad* into the Muslim part of the former Soviet Union, the Tribal Areas of Pakistan did become, during 1980s, the centre for imparting training to the militants from Central Asian States, including Xinjiang. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan (1996-2001) continued to pursue this policy. Now there are no camps and the religious parties have also withdrawn their support to the Muslim separatists of Xinjiang. In fact, Pakistan and China are cooperating in eliminating the challenge posed by ETIM and their top leaders have been killed by Pakistani armed forces. This was made clear by Director-General Inter-Service Public Relations (DGISPR), the official spokesperson of Pakistan's Armed Forces in a statement on August 5 that Pakistan Army had been and would continue operations against ETIM and cooperation between China and Pakistan in operations and intelligence against the common threat of terrorism would continue. The visit of chief of ISI to China reinforces Pakistani contention that Pakistan would never allow its soil to be used for anti-China activities.

The Chinese side also seems convinced of Pakistan's sincere and firm commitment to fight terrorism, extremism and separatism in cooperation with China. In a statement carried by the Chinese news agency Xinhua, on 3 August, the spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Ministry said that China would continue to boost cooperation with Pakistan and jointly crack down the "three evils forces" of terrorism, extremism and separatism. The spokesman also praised the achievements that Pakistan had made in anti-terrorism thus far saying that the country (Pakistan) was an important frontline in the international fight against terrorism and had made outstanding contributions in the area.

The second compelling reason for Pakistan and China to expand their anti-terror cooperation is that the two countries are in the process of consolidating and giving new directions to Pakistan-China friendship through focusing on cooperation in economic, commercial, trade, investment, energy, agriculture, mining, infrastructure, defence and security areas. For this purpose, Pakistan and China signed deals worth US\$36 billion during Chinese Prime Minister Wen

Jiabao's visit to Pakistan in December 2010. The deal encompassed 35 agreements and MoUs, involving both private and public sectors of the two countries. The agreements relate to energy, rail transport, construction, agriculture, culture, alternative sources of energy, banking financial sector, chemical, mineral development, livestock, fish harbor, cotton yarn, infrastructure and information.⁹ In order to ensure that this process of taking Pak-China friendship to new heights through economic and trade cooperation is not obstructed by terrorists, Pakistan and China are keen to fight the elements of these evil forces. The Chinese are particularly worried about deteriorating law and order and security situation and incidents of killing and abduction of Chinese engineers and workers in Pakistan.

Thirdly, in the wake of situation created by May 2, 2011 unilateral US raid in Abbottabad city of Pakistan that led to the killing of Osama Bin Ladin, relations between Pakistan and the United States have come under strain, complicating the task of jointly fighting terrorists in Pakistan. Although Pakistan Army has vowed that it would fight terrorism with its own resources, the fact is that terrorism is an international phenomenon and fight against it requires an effort at global level. It is for this reason that Pakistan has always appealed to international community to not only recognize Pakistan's contributions as a partner of anti-terror global coalition but also render it possible help as the country has suffered huge losses both in the form of human casualties and damage to economy in war against terror. China has always recognized the key role of Pakistan in fighting terrorism as well as asked the international community to do the same and come forward to assist Pakistan. In his address to the Joint Session of Parliament during his visit to Pakistan in December 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao lauded Pakistan's efforts to battle Al-Qaeda and asked international community to endorse and support Pakistan's anti-terror efforts.¹⁰

Pakistan-China cooperation in countering terrorism can be, from Pakistani perspective, beneficial and more

Pakistan-China cooperation in countering terrorism can be, from Pakistani perspective, beneficial and more productive in a number of ways. Pakistan-China relations are free from any friction and there is complete trust between the two. The Chinese involvement in Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy, therefore, would not invoke the kind of suspicion and resentment that has been in the case of Pakistan-US cooperation against terrorism.

productive in a number of ways. Pakistan-China relations are free from any friction and there is complete trust between the two. The Chinese involvement in Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategy, therefore, would not invoke the kind of suspicion and resentment that has been in the case of Pakistan-US cooperation against terrorism. The people of Pakistan would fully own the war against terrorism in association with China because it would be a help from a friend in whom the people of Pakistan have complete faith. China follows a pragmatic and innovative approach in its counter-terrorism strategy- relying more on development and consultation with friendly countries. In its province of Xinjiang, the Chinese are trying to isolate the militant groups by accelerating development works and addressing the pressing problems of the people. Pakistan can learn from the Chinese experience on countering militancy on its soil. Similarly, Pakistani experience can be valuable assistance to China in similar ways. Pakistan has a critical role to play in clearing the FATA region from militants and their foreign accomplices. Being Muslim country, Pakistani government and its political parties, especially religious parties can play a positive and constructive role in reaching out to Muslim separatists in Xinjiang and persuading them to shun their separatist plans. The visits by the chief of Jamiatul Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), Maulana Fazlur Rehman and Amir Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), Qazi Husain Ahmad to China at the invitation of the Chinese government can be viewed as efforts in this direction.¹¹

There are, therefore, strong imperatives for strengthening cooperation between Pakistan and China to jointly fight terrorism, extremism and separatism. This cooperation has the prospects of being more effective and more productive, because the two countries have unanimity of views on the issues relating to the security and stability of the region. The two countries also have similar perspectives on the issue of terrorism. They perceive terrorism not only as a threat to regional peace, security and stability; they are also concerned about the spread of foreign influence in the region because of terrorism.

Notes & References

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 - ⁵ "President assures China cooperation in fighting terrorism," *The News* (Lahore), 31 August, 2011.

⁶ *Dawn* (Islamabad), 8 May, 2008.

⁷ Mushahid Husain, "Kashgar must not mar ties," *Nihao-Salam*, Pakistan-China Institute, 14 August, 2011, <http://nihao-salam.com/article-detailphp/id=M1/Losangeles.china-consulate.org/eng/conference/t846265.htm>

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⁹ Deals worth 36 billion signed with China," *Dawn* (Lahore), 19 December 2010.

¹⁰ *Dawn* (Lahore), 20 December 2011.

¹¹ Ghulam Ali, op. cit.