

China, the missing piece to the Pakistan puzzle?

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It is puzzling why India would pick a battle with China outside of its own neighbourhood, when it benefits India to engage China in promoting infrastructure and fighting terror in the neighbourhood.

Of all the casualties from the Pathankot attack, perhaps the one least spoken about was the India-China dialogue. By calling off his visit to Beijing that was due at the beginning of January, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval may have sent a signal that dealing with the crisis at hand with Pakistan was more important than the next chapter of the protracted border talks with China. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. For a number of reasons, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's engagement with China is not just more connected than ever with its Pakistan outreach, it is a natural consequence of his desire to connect with all of South Asia.

The first reason is that the Pakistan-China bond, often termed an "all-weather friendship", is deeper than ever before, reinforced by the concrete to be used in their biggest infrastructural initiative, the \$46-billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) announced in April 2015. Second, China is involved closely in other subcontinental developments, such as the Afghanistan-Taliban talks, that will have a bearing on India-Pakistan ties. Third, the biggest source of tensions between India and China, the border issue in Jammu and Kashmir, is geographically linked with Pakistan. And fourth, on the subject of terrorism, it is China that has had a higher rate of success in controlling the levers in Pakistan that run terror groups than most other countries.

New axis in the making?

However, despite all those reasons, 2015 saw a strain in India-China ties grow. Paradoxically, this is not a strain in bilateral ties, but borne of their ties with other players in the region. The year began with India heralding a decided shift towards the U.S., signing the joint vision statement for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region with the U.S. when U.S. President Obama visited New Delhi. The agreement was the first of its kind, committing India to ties with the U.S. outside of South Asia, specifically mentioning "ensuring freedom of navigation and over flight" in the South China Sea as a goal. China did not react well to the snub, and just a few months later, and a few weeks before Prime Minister Modi's visit to China, unveiled the CPEC, making the road through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and Pakistan an integral part of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) plan. Significantly, maps issued in 2014 had no mention of Gwadar port in Pakistan, but mentioned Kolkata as a possible stop, but since India remained cold to the OBOR/Silk Route initiative in 2015, a new line through Pakistan connecting Gwadar port to the Maritime Silk Route has become much more visible.

Indian strategic ties with the U.S. and Japan, both allied against China on the South China Sea issue, also got closer. The year began with President Obama's visit and ended with President Shinzo Abe's visit. Trilateral talks and military exercises were institutionalised among the three countries, which China has always read as an attempt at its "containment".

Balancing the gains

While India's move to the U.S.-Japan corner will no doubt win it strategic power in one respect, it must also consider what it could lose. China today is a close friend to Russia, controls much of the Asian economy, and has most of Europe in its debt. It also remains India's largest trading partner. China is also involved too deeply with each of India's neighbours, including Afghanistan, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and especially Pakistan, for it to be cut out of India's equations with them. Afghanistan's decision to trust China as a guarantor for its talks with the Taliban, or the agreement between China and Nepal for fuel supplies and the opening of trade routes and port access after the stand off between India and Nepal, should only underline that point. It must be remembered that even the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline will draw from reserves developed by Chinese loans.

The truth is that while China is seen as a hegemonist power by its maritime neighbours, it is seen as a stabilising force that invests in long-term development by its neighbours on land in South and Central Asia. It is puzzling why India would pick a battle with China outside of its own neighbourhood, when it benefits India to engage China in promoting infrastructure and fighting terror in the neighbourhood. It also makes little sense to unite Pakistan and China in their antagonism to India, when previous decades have shown that it is possible to appeal to China to use its influence with Pakistan for peace in the region. In his superb discourse of the relationship in his recent book, *The China-Pakistan Axis*, Andrew Small gives a detailed account of the Chinese role in forcing General Pervez Musharraf to withdraw troops during the Kargil war (1999), its push for peace during Operation Parakram (2001-2002), and its Vice Foreign Minister's "shuttle diplomacy" after the Mumbai attacks.

Given all of the above, Mr. Modi might find that a new push to Beijing is worth making in a year India hopes to push for the elusive UN Security Council seat, and also given his desire to pursue the spirit of May 2014, when he invited leaders of all SAARC nations, including Pakistan, to his swearing-in ceremony. "A distant relative may not be as helpful as a near neighbour," Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had said during a visit to Delhi in 2013. The Prime Minister may well find that eastern neighbour helpful when considering its vexed relations with India's western neighbour as well.

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