

Understanding Pakistan-China Relations



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Abstract

The establishment of diplomatic relations in 1951 between China and Pakistan provided the desired building blocks to lay the foundations of bilateral relations. The two neighbouring countries negotiated colonial complexities of border demarcation, resulted in the signing of the border agreement in March, 1962. The border agreement turned out to be an edifice on which the two countries built a relationship at both levels i.e. people to people and government to government. In fact, the bilateral relationship is more robust than before and this ‘special’ relationship has found a distinctive place in the foreign policies of neighbouring states. It is thus, no surprise that an insight at the region, reflects Pakistan and China, standing beside each other, especially during difficult and challenging periods. Pakistan’s crucial role as a ‘bridge’ for the United States (US) and China to acquaint with each other reflected the trust that China reposed in Pakistan to break the strangle hold of isolation. The neighbourhood in which Pakistan and China are situated is not without its challenges; both the countries dealing with India — a neighbour with which peace on the horizon seems far more distant than they would expect.

Keywords: Pakistan, China, Sino-Pak Relations, India, US, Border Issues, Peace.

Introduction

Pakistan, India and modern day China's emergence on the world map was no less than a global education on the freedom struggles; countries under colonial rule and those fighting neo-imperialist forces, use a variety of means that reflect the aspirations of the people clamouring to attain 'real' independence. Multi religious stalwarts of the independence movements led the people to wage a political struggle which ultimately forced the United Kingdom (UK) to promulgate the Indian Independence Act of July, 1947. This act of the British Parliament in August 1947 partitioned British India into two states — Pakistan and India both independent dominions. During the same period, the world witnessed the emergence of modern-day China in October 1949 through a people led Communist revolution. China is no stranger to the world, as it has a thousands of years of recorded history of an impressive culture and trading. China fought Japanese colonialism. "With the help of the western allies, China managed to launch a successful offensive on August 14, 1945 at Zhejiang. This was a big blow to the Japanese who had been winning consistent victories... Japan's official surrender to the allied powers was signed on September 2, 1945, aboard the USS Missouri battleship."¹

True to Quaid's word and his philosophy, "Our foreign policy is one of friendliness and goodwill towards all the nations of the world,"² Pakistan reached out to the Peoples Republic of China in 1950, the path to an 'all weather friendship' was being laid and Pakistan was one of the first countries to accord recognition to China as well as the first Muslim state to do so. Formal diplomatic relations were established between the two countries on May 21, 1951.³ Pakistan took this principled decision, during the raging Cold War when it was a close ally of the United States (US) and member of the Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO), the anti-Communist alliance. Developing states who were once ruled by the colonisers usually take decades to come out of that painful yoke and gain

¹ Second Sino-Japan War Totally History, <https://totallyhistory.com/second-sino-japanese-war/>

² Abdul Sattar, *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: 1947-2005* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

³ Pakistan And China Diplomatic Relations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Pakistan, Official Website.

confidence. Issues of external threat and security continue to hound these states and compel them to seek assurances under ‘alliances’ whose conditionalities if given a choice would rather spurn than join. Pakistan was one of those states who right at the outset of her independence, found a war imposed by India, a much big neighbour; it was the Kashmir War, whose embers continue to glow, despite seven decades having elapsed. Thus, Pakistan, in search of security, and facing no apparent threat from any Communist state, during the early years of the Cold War, felt was compelled in becoming a member of Baghdad Pact in 1954, renamed as Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1958 and Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1955, two prominent anti-Communist alliances. “It sought friends and allies, and assistance to strengthen the ‘sinews of statehood’ and to preserve its sovereignty and security.”⁴ This dilemma, which developing states are facing is summed up by a leading diplomacy practitioner and statesman as: “The Cold War touched every region of the world and made most of it hostage to a vast conflict of political ideas and economic systems”⁵ and “Alliances are held by fear, not love.”⁶

Even during this challenging Cold War period, Pakistan’s ‘realist’ approach to recognise China evoked a very positive response from the Chinese government. Recognition was like the ‘green shoots’ of trust. China’s response, too, was in the same spirit and welcomed it in the interest of geo-political co-existence. China while, remaining critical of SEATO did not criticise Pakistan. The same spirit of understanding prevailed in Pakistan regarding the issue of joining CENTO. Abdul Sattar, the late Foreign Minister of Pakistan summed up Chinese ‘gracious’ understanding, “it is a tribute to the wisdom and foresight of Chinese leaders that Beijing continued to show extraordinary forbearance, overlooking Pakistan’s aberrations.”⁷ The US President Johnson had warned President Ayub of dire consequences of developing ties with China. Nevertheless, “The warning had little effect. Pakistan continued to strengthen cooperation with China. Pakistan and China understood in their formative years that contiguity of borders calls for learning early of

⁴ Sattar, *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: 1947-2005*, 33.

⁵ Richard Nixon, *Beyond Peace* (Random House, New York, 1994), 5.

⁶ Richard Nixon, *Beyond Peace*, 119.

⁷ Sattar, *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: 1947-2005*, 70.

the importance of practising ‘co-existence.’ The US proceeded to ‘re-examine its relations with Pakistan.’⁸

Support to a New Neighbour

China is a ‘trusting’ neighbour’ proved to be a helping friend to Pakistan whenever there is difficult time on the latter. Even before the establishment of formal ties between the two countries, the ‘revolutionary’ government of China responded to Pakistan in a most humane manner to its new southern neighbour. The devaluation by India of its currency in 1949, negatively impacted on Pakistan and the bilateral trade between Pakistan and India stopped. Pakistan faced a dilemma to find an alternative source of import of coal to run its emerging industries. At this challenging period, “China soon signed a coal for cotton trade deal with Pakistan.”⁹ One could attribute to India’s myopic understanding of foreign policy and statecraft that its decision to undermine a trade agreement with a neighbouring state was in fact stoking fire to the winds of bilateral mistrust. This sad event was no surprise, as at the dawn of independence in 1947, Pakistan was unfairly treated by India. Neighbouring states, at times find little leeway, but to ‘co-exist’ peacefully, reflecting, as generally stated, ‘the tyranny of geography.’ For Pakistan and India, whose leaders and their populations had so much in common and ‘differences’ could have been persuaded by their leaders right at the outset to preach and practise the importance of ‘co-existing’ and trust. In fact, trust is the glue that keeps such states together; going back on agreements and understandings are unacceptable and undesirable.

Multilateral Wisdom

This journey of trust, gathered pace, when Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra met Prime Minister Zhou Enlai of China at the Afro-Asian Summit Conference at Bandung in 1955. Bogra availed this opportunity to assure Chou En Lai that Pakistan’s membership of SEATO was not directed against China. The Chinese ‘Statesman’ in the spirit of trust, readily accepted this sincere assurance. Bandung Conference which

⁸ Sattar, Pakistan’s Foreign Policy, 83.

⁹ Riaz Ahmad, Hong Mi and Lloyd W Fernald, “Revisiting the Potential Security Threats Linked with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC),” *Journal of the International Council for Small Business*, vol.1, issue no.1 (2020): 64-80.

ended with confidence building between both Pakistan and China. “From the Bandung conference of 1955, when Zhou Enlai and Mohammad Ali Bogra of Pakistan together improved the status of relations, the association evolved through a series of high-level exchanges, contacts in the cultural and scientific fields.”¹⁰ Zhou, the statesman, understood the dual significance of good neighbourly trust and co-existence, also visited Pakistan in 1956. The message he gave in the Joint communiqué was: “They are happy to place on record that there was no real conflict of interest between the two countries.”¹¹ In the same context, defying the US pressure, Pakistan in 1960 supported China in its bid for the UN membership.

Window to the World

The Peoples Republic of China for a number of years, depended upon Pakistan International Airlines in order to stay connected with the outside world, “an air transport agreement was signed authorising each other’s airlines to land and operate along with other services. The two countries commenced their relations and won hearts and minds of people.”¹² Year 1964 proved significant, as it witnessed Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) commencing its flights to Shanghai and attaining the privilege to be the first non-communist country airline to fly to Shanghai. This ushered a new era of linkages between the two countries, “On April 29th, 1964, with a Boeing 720B, PIA earned the distinction of becoming the first airline from a non-communist country to fly into the People’s Republic of China. PIA’s first service to China was from Karachi to Shanghai via Canton.”¹³ This historic milestone also reflected an early ‘bilateral trust.’ Pakistan proved as a window for China to interact with the rest of the world. Chairman Mao’s advice to his newly ambassador to Pakistan has been recorded by one of Pakistan’s leading diplomacy practitioner as: “Look after Pakistan;

¹⁰ Kanti Bajpai and Amitabh Matoo, eds., *The Peacock and the Dragon* (HarAnand Publications Pvt Ltd, 2000), 303.

¹¹ Sattar, Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: 1947-2005, 69.

¹² Umbreen Javaid and Asifa Jahangir, “Pakistan-China Strategic Relationship: A Glorious Journey of 55 Years,” Centre for South Asian Studies , University of the Punjab, *JRSP*, vol. 52, no. 1, (January-June, 2015): 166.

¹³ As of 2021 Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) home page listed.

it is China's window to the West.”¹⁴ In fact, this proved beneficial for PIA as this ‘partnership’ reflected trust and assurance.

Border Demarcation Astuteness

Geo-political location provides leaders of newly created states either the wisdom to lay down the foundation of trust or squander the opportunity to move on the path of ‘mistrust.’ Reflecting, foresight and shrewdness, Pakistan in March 1961 formally approached China to negotiate a border agreement. China responded in a most favourable manner and both the states agreed on a formula of ‘mutual accommodation,’ this was done ironically nine days before the Sino-India border clash of October, 1962. Pakistan-China border agreement of March 1963 put an end to all major and minor acrimony which could have arisen in future between Pakistan and China; decades of continuing strong bilateral relationship, reflected border demarcation was infact a solid basis for the bilateral ‘trust.’ “Both nations showed firm consent about demarcation and reopening agreement after resolution of Kashmir dispute. The agreement yielded strategic, political and economic benefits.”¹⁵ Record of the fact reflects there is little truth in Indian allegation that while signing the border agreement, Pakistan had ceded a part of Kashmir territory to China, as during the colonial period, there was no recognised borders. In its essence, “there could be no question of any such give away. Pakistan did not transfer any territory that was under its control.”¹⁶ Pakistan’s initiative to take China in confidence in order to demarcate the border was a wise and realistic approach done in the face of possible US pressures and sanctions, “signing of the boundary agreement between the two countries in 1963 became a significant landmark which built greater trust and provided a solid foundation for forging a closer partnership.”¹⁷ In a nutshell, the border demarcation enlarged the horizon of bilateral ties. “Concurrently with the Chinese willingness to negotiate the border with Pakistan, treaties were concluded by the two countries enhancing economic cooperation.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Munir Akram, “Window to the West,” Dawn, January 21, 2018.

¹⁵ Abdul Sattar, Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: 1947-2005, 166.

¹⁶ Abdul Sattar, Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: 1947-2005, 71.

¹⁷ Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi, “Celebrating 70 Years of Pakistan-China Friendship,” *Global Times*, March 02, 2021.

¹⁸ Bajwa and Matoo, eds., *The Peacock And The Dragon*, 304.

Fifty years back, India had better ties with China than Pakistan, but Pakistan proved to be wiser. The China-India bilateral agreement of 1954 could have been the ‘harbinger’ of enlarging the relationship, but the bilateral ties suffered in the late fifties by India’s miscalculations of China’s strong stand on the issue of border demarcation and sovereignty of its territory. India’s political wrangling over the demarcation of its border with China and mishandling over the Tibet issue cascaded, leading the two countries to war in 1962 also led India experiencing a most humiliating defeat. Prime Zhou Enlai in April, 1962 proposed to his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Nehru, a comprehensive settlement of the border demarcation, an east-west territorial swap in which Chinese control over the Aksai Chin and Indian control over the southern slope of Himalayas was to be acknowledged. Not surprisingly, Nehru rejected the offer, thus India vacillated in its talks with China to demarcate the border and blundered into a war with China in October 1962. As a result, basis of ‘mistrust’ was laid and India continues to carry that ‘avoidable’ baggage and has the ‘longest unsettled land border in the world, even after more than seven decades of independence. “We were not really seeing the hard headed pragmatism of Mao Zedong, Marshal Chen Yi or Premier Zhou Enlai. We approached our immediate post-independence years fired by the zeal of an idealist. Sharply distinct from this, standing clearly apart was China’s approach of a nonsense realist. When seen against the total preoccupation of the Peoples Republic with settled boundaries, India’s relative indifference to borders is in itself a lesson in statecraft.”¹⁹

The mutual ‘mistrust’ refuses to go away and India regretfully blundered again on that same account in the same border area with China in May 2020. While seasoned Indian politicians could understand the immature handling of border management by their founding fathers, oddly enough the import of this issue escaped the eyes of Kanwar Natwar Singh, the country’s seasoned diplomat. Kanwar seem to ‘belittle’ the significance of territorial sovereignty and its outcome, the Sino-India 1962 War, “But nothing can be a more amazing folly than for two great countries like India and China to get into a major conflict and war for the possession of a few mountain peaks, however, beautiful the mountain peaks might be, or some area which is more or less uninhabited.” Successive Indian leaders, either due to sheer ignorance or swayed by

¹⁹ Jaswant Singh, *India at Risk*, (Rainlight-Rupa, New Delhi, 2013).

growing economic power used a myopic lens to look at its vicinity and have not realised that it is the only state in China's neighbourhood with which it has unsettled border issues as it is said, "Giving diplomacy a chance, China has settled its major border disputes with all its contiguous neighbours, except India." The issue remains unresolved, in its entirety and has the seeds to ignite another standoff between China and India, the two rivals and neighbours who continue to battle the challenges of co-existence.

Crucial Addition to the Bilateral Trust

Modern and revolutionary China having fought the colonisers and counter revolutionaries not only understood the significance of the right of self-determination of 'oppressed' people, but also to voice its support when needed. In a note to India in 1965, in support to Pakistan's principled stand on the Kashmir dispute which China trusted was genuine it cautioned India. "So long as the Indian government oppresses the Kashmiri people, China will not cease to support the Kashmiri people in their struggle for self-determination. So long as the Government of India persists in its unbridled aggression towards Pakistan, China shall not cease her support to Pakistan in struggle against aggression."²⁰ Even earlier, during the visit of President Ayub Khan to China in March 1965, China had repeated its support to the principled stand of Pakistan on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, "It reaffirmed that the Kashmir dispute should be resolved in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir as pledged to them by India and Pakistan."²¹

Regarding, standing with Pakistan in any aggression by India, China kept its word, when India attacked Pakistan on the September 6, 1965 termed it as 'naked aggression' in an official note on September 16, 1965 the Government of China's shared its firm position in the following words: "So long, as the Indian Government persists in its unbridled aggression against Pakistan, China will not cease supporting Pakistan in her just struggle against aggression. This stand of ours will never change however many helpers you may have, such as the US, the modern

²⁰ B R, Deepak, *India and China: Beyond the Binary of Friendship and Enmity* (Springer, 2020), 82.

²¹ Sattar, Pakistan's Foreign Policy: 1947-2005, 83.

revisionist and the US controlled UN.”²² China also gave Pakistan defence equipment, and these acts reinforced the ‘mutual trust.’ China’s support to Pakistan in the 1965 crisis was expected and left an indelible impression on the people of Pakistan, “Of all the major powers, the only one that Pakistan knew would be supportive in its war with India was China.”²³ Sino-Pakistan watchers in the region, in their analysis of where China stood during the 1965 Pakistan-India War acknowledged, “More importantly, during the conduct of the war, China undertook an effective politico-diplomatic offensive against India to support Pakistan.”²⁴ This vital support by China to Pakistan reinforced with Pakistan’s policy makers, their unanimous understanding that “a friendly China not only enhances its security *vis-à-vis* India but also ensures a reliable partner.”²⁵

Kashmir Issue

The unilateral decision of the Indian government on August 5th, 2019 revokes the ‘special status’ given in the Constitution of India to the Occupied Kashmir though was a ‘fig leaf’ to cover decades of flagrant violations of the United Nations Resolutions which allows the people of that region to opt for a plebiscite, should give them the choice of their destiny which did not go ‘unnoticed’ globally. Apart from a massive outburst of anger by the Kashmiris, who have braved years of ‘bondage’ contrary to India’s claims the 5th August developments were an internal matter of India, however, China stood up for Pakistan at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), an important forum, which reflected solidarity with Pakistan. A ‘Trust worthy friend’, “Ambassador Zhang said Council members had “expressed their serious concern” concerning the current situation in Jammu and Kashmir. The Kashmir issue should be resolved properly through peaceful means, in accordance with the UN Charter, the Security Council resolutions and bilateral agreements.”²⁶ This solidarity with Pakistan which was in fact reflected in decades of

²² Bidlanda M Chengappa, *India-China Relations: Post Conflict Phase To Cold War Period* (APH Publishing Corporation, NEW DELHI, 2004), 109.

²³ Farooq Bajwa, *From Kutch to Tashkent: The Indo-Pakistan War of 1965*, (Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2014), 239.

²⁴ Chengappa, *India-China Relations: Post Conflict Phase To Cold War Period*, 101.

²⁵ Ibid., 102.

²⁶ “UN Security Council Discusses Kashmir, China Urges India and Pakistan to Ease Tensions,” UN News, Peace and Security, August 16, 2019,
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044401>

‘bilateral trust’ was a replica of China standing by Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute during the 1965 War “China’s total support to the Kashmiris in their struggle for the right to national self-determination.”²⁷

Karakoram Diplomacy

Researchers who are known to have keen interest in the region have described The Karakorum Highway as the “most potent symbol of China-Pakistan relations.”²⁸ This symbolism may be well describing the well-known slogan, ‘higher than the mountains.’ Pakistan and China decided in 1966 that the Karakorum Mountains which connects the two countries merit a visible improvement. This decision was historic in terms of its impact on the people of the region in all possible ways. It took more than 20 long years of intense labour, loss of countless lives of Chinese and Pakistani engineers in the great project of connecting Pakistan with China. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Karakorum Highway, the all-weather road is the old silk road which was a difficult and dangerous one.

The ‘beasts of burden’ have been replaced by heavy trucks which follow the ancient trans Asian invasion route that runs through remote valleys, peopled by tribes who trace part of their ancestry to the marauding armies of Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and the Mogul emperors. The highway is also vital for shipping the local farm produce of known fruits and vegetables, “The road is the most important means of earning bread and butter for the people of the area.”²⁹

Bolstering the Defence

Relationship between states in the defence sector and the quality of cooperation in this vital domain generally define the level of relationship between the states. Security of states is paramount and any assistance during challenging periods reinforces mutual trust. Pakistan-China

²⁷ Bajpai and Matoo, eds., *The Peacock and the Dragon*, 305.

²⁸ Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia’s New Geo-Politics*, (Hurst & Company, London, 2015), 99.

²⁹ Li Hao and Liu Tian, “Friendship highway leads Pakistan’s Hunza to prosperity,” XINHUANET, October 24, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-10/25/c_139464953.htm

relations defence cooperation is one of the significant features of the bilateral relationship. Pakistan's major reliance for its military hardware is on China. The cooperation in this vital domain has caused Pakistan to visibly reduce its dependence of defence equipment on other countries. In the realm of defence cooperation between Pakistan and China, Pakistan Ordnance Factories, the Aeronautical Complex stand out as having immensely benefited from this cooperation. Other notable projects, where Pakistan and China have jointly worked, include Karakoram-8 (K-8), the Basic Cum Advance Jet Trainer, four frigates for the Pakistan Navy and using Chinese technology which was shared. The improvement of the Karachi Dock Yard was also brought about as a result of Sino-Pakistan cooperation and the indigenous production of naval surface ships also took place.

Pakistan: The Trustworthy Bridge

Pakistan's pivotal role in the historic US-China breakthrough is a landmark event in the modern history. As merited, the nature of two states, who had been in a state of incommunicado for years and were eager to make amends reached out to each other away from the public glare. As agreed between the US, China and Pakistan, the whole process of negotiation was kept secret and Pakistan was that 'bridge,' both the states trusted to send and receive their messages. This process, relatively unique in the 20th century, finally brought the much desired and sought rapprochement between the US and China.

President Richard Nixon, a realist, understood the importance of China, the 'sleeping giant' and that the most populous state on the globe cannot be kept isolated. He was convinced of the 'urgency' of the US to mend fences with China and that the opportune time was when the Sino-Soviet relationship had fallen apart due to the disputed Zhenbao/Damansky Island. Chinese and Soviet forces had clashed on that disputed Island in the frozen Ussuri River where Chinese Manchuria meets the Soviet Far East. The US wanted to reach out to Beijing to alleviate America's flailing position in the Southeast Asia and enhance its position against the Soviet Union. Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, who had tried other countries known to be close to China but could not get the desired response. Nixon was later convinced that Pakistan which had developed a relationship of trust with

China shall be a wise choice. “The channel, China finally chose after months of signalling sending by Washington was through Pakistan.”³⁰

A highly secretive back channel diplomacy was launched that is of sending messages from the US to Chinese leadership and vice versa through Pakistan. Pakistan ultimately arranged for Kissinger to take a flight from Islamabad to Beijing in July 1971. This was a journey shrouded in total secrecy and thus began the US-China process of normalisation. This was by any standard, a highly significant milestone in modern diplomacy and that too, during the height of the Cold War, when warming up by the US to the other camp was a taboo. President Nixon, during his trip to China in January 1972 shared his thoughts to the media in Beijing on his visit to the Great Wall, “As we look at this wall, we do not want walls of any kind between peoples.”³¹

Having contributed a momentous role, it is a lament that historians generally do not credit Pakistan of its crucial contribution to global peace, at a period, when the West and East were jostling to enlarge its influence. It is again Pakistan to be credited to have brought the US and China, ‘out of the cold.’ Kissinger, with his first-hand experience of having led the ‘secretive mission’ to China concedes the significant impact of this momentous event to global peace, “The United States and China are both indispensable pillars of world order.”³² Kissinger in one of his memoirs amplified this argument of the importance of US-China relations even better, “And we recognised that China’s foreign policy was dictated by its perception of its national interest and thus depended on the Chinese assessment of our ability to preserve the global balance of power.”³³

CPEC: The Ultimate Fruit of Mutual Trust

Since the 1998 Nuclear Tests by Pakistan, an act to strike a strategic balance, as India having taken the initiative to test its ‘nuclear’ powers, globally, a fact what the world already knew, the US initiated a series of

³⁰ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger* (Simon & Schuster2005), 338.

³¹ “The Week that Changed the World: How China Prepared for Nixon,” BBC, June 10, 2018.

³² Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (Allen Lane, 2014), 226.

³³ Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal: The Concluding Volume of His Memoirs*, (SIMON & SHUSTER, 1999), 894.

sanctions on Pakistan, “President Clinton announced, on May 13, 1998, that he was imposing economic and military sanctions mandated by Sec. 102 of the Arms Export Control Act (AECA).”³⁴ Living in a highly ‘insecure’ region, with all its neighbours embroiled in one crisis or the other, which impacted on Pakistan in a negative manner, the US sanctions aggravated Pakistan’s economic security. Pakistan in a manner ‘limped’ as not only the US itself starved Pakistan from vital economic assistance, but also influenced the IMF, World Bank and IDA for or against supporting Pakistan. “Particularly, relations with the US worsened after the imposition of sanctions under the Pressler Amendment at the US Senate. We expect that IFIs’ lending to Pakistan depends on variations in the country’s bilateral economic and political relationships with major shareholder countries.”³⁵ Therefore, for many years Pakistan was unable to focus on its infrastructure and the dire need to modernise it. The post 9/II period was a brief respite, when Pakistan was a non-NATO ally, the US assistance even in that period was at best ‘selective’ India continued to receive from the US, a far better treatment. Pakistan could not have continued to live in this ‘state of uncertainty’ and had gradually started to lean more on China, its far more reliable neighbour and ‘trustworthy’ partner. The China- Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) announced by Pakistan and China in 2015 was like the ‘much awaited rain’ to a parched land or the ‘fruition’ of 70 years of ‘solid trust,’ “China-Pakistan friendship has grown into a towering tree with deep roots in the heart of the two peoples.”³⁶

CPEC is an extraordinary series of projects which shall not only connect Pakistan with China, through roads but railways, fibre-optic cables, the energy projects, and the all-important operationalisation of the Gwadar deep-sea Port under the CPEC project but has larger connectivity at regional and global level. China’s assistance to Pakistan includes constructing highways, motorways and early completion of other mega

³⁴ “India-Pakistan Nuclear Tests and U.S. Response,” EveryCRSReport.com, November 24, 1998, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/98-570.html>

³⁵ Mumtaz Anwar, “The Political Economy of International Financial Institutions Lending To Pakistan,” *Pakistan Economic and Social Review*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Winter 2006): 163.

³⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People’s Republic of China, Remarks by State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi At the Launch Ceremony in Celebration of the 70th Anniversary of China-Pakistan Diplomatic Relations, March 2, 2021.

projects. Projects of CPEC fall into three different phases: short-, medium- and long-term projects. The early harvest projects related to communication infrastructure and transport include the construction of Lahore Orange Line Metro Train, upgrading the railway existing track. CPEC also include the construction of the new rail link, roads and establishing Special Economic Zone and Gwadar seaport. First, the essential component of CPEC is to improve the roads link between Pakistan and China and this challenge has already began, even though a ‘herculean task,’ as it consists of massive tunnels in the Karakorum Mountains which divide Pakistan from China and the roads and highways leading from to the vital Gwadar seaport of Pakistan, “The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China’s 15-year, US\$62 billion investment in Pakistan and the flagship project of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), took the five-decade long strategic alliance between the two countries to the economic sphere in 2015. CPEC is best seen as the economic peg in the wider strategic relationship between Pakistan and China.”³⁷

No one can deny that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a US\$62 billion accumulation of energy and infrastructure projects, have provided a dependable economic lifeline for Pakistan, China has been magnanimous and generous in becoming the ‘lender-of-last-resort’ to Pakistan, for which Pakistan continues to appreciate this assistance at a crucial period. Pakistani’s trust in China is reflected in the employment opportunities which shall open on them, almost 1.1 million people can come out of the poverty trap in Pakistan. Better transport infrastructure will help Pakistan increase trade. It has been predicted that Pakistan’s trade can increase by 9.8 per cent if it implements reforms well in addition to transport infrastructure under CPEC and visibly improve job prospects, “CPEC projects will create nearly 700,000 new jobs and add up to 2.5 per cent to Pakistan’s annual growth rate and the implementation of SEZs can also revolutionise the job sector and create new opportunities for entrepreneurship which can be the key sector to accommodate the youth bulge as more than 60 per cent of Pakistan’s

³⁷ Tarun Chhabra etal., eds., *Global China: Assessing China's Growing Role in the World* (Brookings Institution Press, June 22, 2021).

population is under the age of 30, the PPP senator said while highlighting the benefits of CPEC for Pakistan.³⁸

Conclusion

‘Geographic contiguity’ provides neighbouring states an opportunity to strengthen ‘friendly strong fences or the temptation to burrow deep trenches of discord. Pakistan chose a ‘sociable’ way to reach out to China, its big northern neighbour, by its flexible approach to the border demarcation, as this was a left over from the colonial period. The 1963 Pakistan-China border agreement laid a solid basis to commence a unique journey of bilateral relationship standing by each other in difficult periods. Although the relationship was disproportionate, China was stronger as well as bigger in every aspect, yet both states have reposed trust in each other and shall continue to do so in future.

In 2005, China and Pakistan signed a landmark ‘Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation’ whereby they committed that neither party will join any alliance or bloc which infringed upon the sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of either nation. Neither leadership in either China or Pakistan nor the continued shifts in the global foreign policy contours brings any visible change in the bilateral relationship of these two neighbours “Despite swinging regional and global conditions of world politics in 21st century, these two ‘time-tested’ friends not merely stood firm in the rocky pathway, but also strived hard to expand their ‘strategic partnership of 2005’ thereafter.”³⁹ It was some years back, that leaders of Pakistan and China spoke about the bilateral relationship in a most gratifying manner, “Geography and history and, above all, the pure and true sentiments of friendship and brotherhood between our peoples impel us to march forward, together, to realise a glorious future for China, Pakistan and Asia as a whole.”⁴⁰ Even though, it sounded as an exaggeration,’ but Premier Wen Jiabao voiced a similar sentiment during

³⁸ “Parties Vow to Ensure CPEC Progress, Guard it Against Threats,” *Dawn*, August 21, 2020.

³⁹ Javaid and Jahangir, eds., “Pakistan-China Strategic Relationship: A Glorious Journey of 55 Years,” 158.

⁴⁰ “News Bulletin,” Embassy of People’s Republic of China in Islamabad, Vol.1 (Dec 2009), http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/sgxx2_1/P020100511646832195851.pdf

his own visit to Islamabad, “China and Pakistan are brothers forever,”⁴¹ he gushed. And that sort of language seems to be the norm for one of China’s most enduring strategic relationships, often described as an ‘all-weather friendship.’⁴² Even Indian scholars reluctantly acknowledge that Sino-Pakistan relations has roots which has permeated deep amongst the people, “ Most Pakistani characterisations of China are that of a loyal friend who helps out at times of acute crisis, by diplomatically pressuring the opposing side or by providing moral and material support without attaching any caveats.”⁴³

The China-Pakistan relationship which dates to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1951 is historical, as each decade has deepened the bilateral ties and is proudly a dependable friendship. China is rare in the understanding of the significance of its geo-political location or in other words, ‘tyranny of geography,’ and wisely made best use of geography for its strategic benefit. It has established cordial relations with majority of its neighbours and regional countries based on common interests. Assistance of Pakistan and China was crucial and timely because China came to an understanding with the US in the early 1970s which helped China to stave off the threat from the US building its economy with the American help over the next two decades. “Over the last five decades, Pakistan has boldly defended China’s unity and territorial integrity; worked assiduously to secure China’s legitimate seat in the United Nations; resisted attempts to censure China on human rights and to denigrate its socioeconomic achievements.”⁴⁴ “For its part, China has and continues to manifest its support for Pakistan in multiple ways. “In the foreseeable future, the Pakistan-China relations will continue to remain on solid footing and will further strengthen, however, Pakistan, in keeping with its various internal problem have to learn a lot from its time-tested friend — China.”⁴⁵ This reflects Pakistan-China’s relations which is based on the premises of trust and the relationship has rightly been

⁴¹ Pakistan is our Israel, Why Islamabad has been Cosying up to Beijing in Recent Weeks, June 3, 2011 (WiC 109).

⁴² “Pakistan is our Israel.”

⁴³ Bajpai and Matoo, eds., *The Peacock and the Dragon*, 300.

⁴⁴ Rizwan Zeb, “Pakistan-China Relations: Where They Go From Here?” Centre for Muslim States and Societies (CMS), University of Western Australia, UNISCI Discussion Papers, No 29 (Mayo/May 2012).

⁴⁵ Munir Akram, “Window to the West,” *Dawn*, January 21, 2018.

described, “Higher than mountains, deeper than ocean and sweeter than honey.”⁴⁶ Pakistan-China relations continue to remain under global gaze and China’s phenomenal raise as a global economic power which threatens the US the sole super power is one such factor, over which Pakistan is put under pressure unnecessarily. Biden’s taking over the Oval Room, may not give the desired respite to China, which had suffered at the crude hands of President Trump, but Pakistan has remained under such pressures, and shall not be found wanting in its commitment to stand by its ‘all weather friend.’

Looking at the region, Pakistan, China, and India, who have been conjoined by geography for centuries, have walked for decades a ‘tight rope’ in balancing their bilateral relationship. The regional experience is also varied. Pakistan and India continue to walk the path of ‘mistrust,’ sown right from the outset at the dawn of independence and in the thick forest of suspicion, they have yet to find a way out to bury the ‘doubt.’ China too feels the pinch in her relationship with India. At times, analysts pinpoint towards Pakistan and China’s common enmity with India which has brought them together, “For China and Pakistan, their hostility towards India served as a common ground to come together.”⁴⁷ However, the relationship is much more, as the reasons were different, and the ‘common wound’ came as the regional experience which hit both the states, in the form of war forced on them by India. Thus, India, cannot blame, China and Pakistan for the continued less than normal relationship. The unsettled border issue even though is considered by many Indians as an ‘irritant,’ it is much more than that “While there were irritants of various shades of importance, the border dispute emerged as the most prominent issue between the two countries.”⁴⁸

China’s impressive global economic ascendency continues to be of serious concern to its rival India, and the US, the superpower leading the economic power. Pakistan finds this change in the ‘global chess board’ rather encouraging as China is its sole trusted friend who it can depend on during challenging periods. China’s growing influence has

⁴⁶ “Pak-China Friendship is Higher than Mountains, Deeper than Ocean and Sweeter than Honey: PM,” *Nation*, December 19, 2010

⁴⁷ APH Publishing Corporation (New Delhi, 2004), 102.

⁴⁸ Bidlana M Chengappa, “India-China Relations: Post Conflict Phase To Cold War Period,” 74.

also impacted its neighbourhood; the states in the region pay attention to what it says and advice. China's quiet role to defuse the dangerous situation between Pakistan and India, the two nuclear armed states in the 2019 Post Pulwama Crisis reflected its growing regional clout, "China may have tried to fill in the gaps to control the escalating situation and played a more pronounced role during the crisis by urging restraint as a regional power."⁴⁹ US pivotal role in defusing tensions between Pakistan and India seems to have relatively eroded. The reason lies in the US having aligned itself too close with India and was seen in Pakistan, to be at its cost, "These developments have raised concerns for Pakistan over the US role as a neutral crisis manager."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sitara Noor, Pulwama/Balakot and the Evolving Role of Third Parties in India-Pakistan Crises, Stimson, March 25, 2020.

⁵⁰ Ibid.