
Pakistan's marriage with China – a divorce from the USA

“Pakistan and the US married very early. They filed for divorce three times but on all three occasions, geostrategic compulsion forced them to live together. If that is the destiny, we might as well live happily forging stable relations”.

With these words the Minister for Planning, Development and Reform, Ahsan Iqbal outlined his vision for the future of the US-Pak relations at the United States Institute of Peace in 2017. According to him, Pakistan was recently expressing an interest in stabilizing its liaisons with the United States (US), in a corresponding manner to its historically benign ties with China. Nevertheless, such desire for ameliorating their relationship comes with a surprise, considering Pakistan's favourability for the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially since Beijing is seen as a vital element for the accomplishment of Islamabad's foreign strategic objectives.

This article explores the ongoing processes of socio-economic and political development of the Sino-Pak and respectively US-Pak relations while it examines the genesis of these ties and provide a historical overview, which unravels the security deficiencies experienced by Pakistan, the self-interest of both Beijing and Washington in promoting a stable Pakistan, and the future impact of those trilateral ties on the South Asian and international scene.

Historical background of Pakistan

The establishment of Pakistan was a consequence of the Indian Muslims' demand for an independent country post-factum the British secession from the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The 1973 Constitution of Pakistan is the supreme legal framework, which proclaims that all existing laws shall comply with the injunctions of Islam as laid down in the Quran and Sunnah, and no law shall be stipulated which is contrary to such provisions. Therefore, the country is often regarded as unique, since it has been created in the name of the Islamic religion. Having the 6th biggest army in the world, a population of 188 million, nuclear weapons stockpile and a strategic geographic location, its political and economic importance has been noticed not only by the US, but also by current big player countries that are neighbouring it. The country is bordered by India on the east, Afghanistan on the west, Iran on the southwest, and China in the far northeast, respectively. The post-independence history of Pakistan is marked by severe ethnic tensions and conflicts, which on one side stem from the Pakistan's State frontiers and distinguished Muslim identity, which are both dividing factors among the social groups. On the other side, its powerful military state governance is further responsible for innumerable human rights violations, low levels of accountability and widespread endemic corruption. Moreover, such conditions of political turmoil and domestic struggles makes the country susceptible to a growing insurgency led by radical Islamist and extremist groups, and creates a safety velvet for these terrorist

organizations. In addition, the country continues to suffer from alarming issues such as poverty, famine, illiteracy and gender inequality.

History of the US-Pakistan Relationship

The American foreign policy towards Pakistan has been characterised with politico-economic opportunism and utility. The US was one of the first nations that acknowledged the independence of Pakistan in 1947 and sought establishment of close relations. Although in its first years, Pakistan desired to portray itself as a non-aligned member of the international community, soon it realised that the support of a superpower would be in its own advantage. Prime Minister Ali Khan endeavoured to forge positive relations with both the Soviet Union and the US, yet the Soviets rejected the demanded military aid on behalf of Pakistan, because they had previously orientated themselves to India. After this rejection, on 3 May 1950, the Prime Minister paid a 23-day visit to the US, which is seen as the rudimental event towards strong defence ties with the Americans. Nevertheless, American expediency was clearly manifested through President Truman's demand for the placement of a Central Intelligence Agency on the territory of Pakistan, in order to watch carefully the Soviet Union – a plan which eventually did not live up. The US saw Pakistan as an integral component and important ally in the fight against Communism, which explains their excellent support for the Pakistani armed forces. During the dictatorship of Ayub Khan, who was firmly pro-US, the two States enjoyed numerous joint ventures. For instance, the U-2 "*spy-in-the-sky*", which was launched by the Americans in order to monitor and gather intelligence against the USSR, kicked off with Ayub Khan's permission for the Pakistani Air Force at Peshawar Airport, which was earlier improved with American capital, to be used by them. In general, during the '*honey moon*' period of the US-Pak relations, Washington willingly invested millions of dollars with minimum accountability in armed forces and undercover operations against the Soviets. Once America identified Pakistan's essential role in the defence of the region and containment of Communism, it was the military establishment and not the political leadership of Pakistan, which was seen as a reliable partner.

The 1971 Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China and the subsequent visit of Richard Nixon in 1972, which both led to the amelioration of the ties between the US and the PRC, were initially initiated through discovering the friendly relations between Pakistan and China. The China-Pakistan ties were pivotal to Nixon's wish to tilt American policy towards Pakistan, to a certain degree to show Beijing that Washington would backup its allies. At the same time, Pakistan was also used as a proxy of American foreign policy towards China.

During the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, which took place alongside the liberation war of East Pakistan, current Bangladesh, assessing the dangerous hostile environment, Washington pushed Islamabad to restrain its military forces and threatened to suspend its delivery of aid, in order to prevent escalation of war. What the US feared was a socialist Indian supremacy of the new political landscape of the subcontinent, which ultimately would have strengthened the position of the USSR. Additionally, an independent Bangladesh could have led to the breakdown of West Pakistan and the potential loss of an important ally in the Cold War, which the US was not willing to give away.

The US' pragmatic policy towards Pakistan could be seen through the endorsement of the latter's military dictators, including those who engaged with violent conflicts and wars, and were guiding the State away from the principles of democracy and closer towards those of radical extremism. This could be illustrated through Nixon's act of turning a blind eye to the genocide in Bangladesh during the Pakistani Civil War, as he did not intend to ruin his positive relations with Yahya Khan and aimed to safeguard his open channel to China. However, Nixon's support of Islamabad, did not secure a victory and India overpowered its rival in the Indo-Pakistani war.

During the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the US-Pak relations significantly cooled down. Carter was not conforming to the democratic socialist visions of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was a firm proponent of left-wing politics. The latter's policies opened the door for the Soviet Union to negotiate with Pakistan. Carter's presidency desired to impose a ban on nuclear weapons and Bhutto had to face the embargo, which was entirely against his political agenda. This triggered Bhutto's openly aggressive and acute diplomatic offensive on the US and the Western world over the nuclear '*blackmail*'. Eventually, Bhutto succeeded in secretly purchasing the necessary equipment and sensitive components for the elaboration of his nuclear proliferation campaign. After discovering these hidden manoeuvres, America's attempts to cease the arms race between itself and the Soviet Union were further hindered. As a response, when Pakistan requested the US to impose sanctions on India after it launched nuclear weapons tests near their shared border, Washington '*shrugged shoulders*' and advised Bhutto to alter his objectives if he seeks an Indo-Pak resolution.

Changes in the political climate occurred only after Bhutto's death. With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the US-Pak affair reached the apex of its love-hate relationship. Opposing the Soviet regime was a common goal of both countries. Billions of dollars flew from Washington to Islamabad intended to assist the threatened national security of the region. Many of them were fuelling the undercover military training of anti-Soviet rebel groups, known as '*Mujahedeen*', who later established the fundamentalist Islamic movement of the Taliban, which ironically the US is fighting currently as part of its '*War on Terror*'.

Reagan's presidency greatly differed from Carter's as he was pro-nuclear proliferation and warfare trainings. His strong Soviet antagonism overpowered the fear from nuclear technology acquisition. Yet, this did not last for long as after the Cold War the US-Pak relations again worsened. India's nuclear threat, the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan, were factors that made Pakistan distance itself from the US. Additionally, the Kargil war deteriorated the situation.

However, the US self-interest in Pakistan emerged once again with George W. Bush's '*War on Terror*'. Pakistan's support for the Americans was rewarded with debts relief, the lift of sanctions, major non-NATO ally status and a great deal of financial aid. As US Ambassador Nancy Powell stated:

"The forgiveness of \$1 billion in bilateral debt is just one piece of a multifaceted, multi-billion dollar assistance package. The new relationship between the United States and Pakistan is not just about September 11, it is about the rebirth of a long-term partnership between our two countries".

In return to their financial support, Pakistan undertook the arrest of hundreds of members of Al Qaeda and provided military bases and equipment to the American troops. However, as a result of this engagement and the fight with terrorism, Pakistan suffers till present day from internal turmoil, fleeing refugee population, and the creation of favourable ground for the flourishing of radicalised groups. Despite some ostensibly persuasive rhetoric all attempts for a strategic ‘*marriage*’ between Pakistan and the US hamper the healthy course of their relationship because of their deficit in trust and American short-term demands. For instance, Barack Obama’s 2009 speech was barely taken seriously by the Pakistani population that was facing the aftermath of the fight with its own Frankenstein’s monster:

“In the past, we too often defined our relationship with Pakistan narrowly. Those days are over... The Pakistani people must know America will remain a strong supporter of Pakistan’s security and prosperity long after the guns have fallen silent so that the great potential of its people can be unleashed”.

In general, the wider Pakistani population, regardless of class and education differences, believes that US interests do not collide with their national objectives or national ethos. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny that the economic and political support of a superpower would be beneficial in numerous ways. Pakistani politicians and policy makers are in a deadlock situation, since publicly they indeed admit the animosity towards America expressed by the general public, yet behind closed doors need to take a different standpoint. Therefore, the decision making process is organized within a closed elite circle, which produces subjective results, rather than an institutionalized and transparent course of action. Such autocratic leadership, which lacks accountability, inevitably invokes resentment and anger on behalf of the common people, who lack involvement in the national interests’ discussions.

Pakistan-US relations do not take place in a vacuum – they are both a cause and an outcome of domestic policies. Moreover, drawing on the history of US-Pak relations, American objectives have been predominantly driven by personal purposes where Pakistan appears as a tool helpful for their achievement. US reputation has been of an unreliable associate – taking advantage of Pakistan when in need and offhandedly forsaking it, when sees no gains out of it. As Dr. Hamid Hussain has abstracted the US-Pakistan love affair;

“One should never forget that when the American bull leaves the China shop, it is Pakistan who has to deal with all the broken glass”.

Thereby, after taking a lesson, it does not come as a surprise that the Pakistanis shifted towards a new superpower, namely China.

History of the China – Pakistan relations

The relationship originated in the 1950s when Islamabad was among the first countries which recognised the PRC. The cornerstone of the current very solid and supportive ties between Beijing and Islamabad was the mutual antagonism towards India. Both countries used the balance of power doctrine in order to counterbalance the potential supremacy of India at the strategic South Asian subcontinent. The Sino-Pak partnership was of mutual utility because it offered reciprocal protection

in the event of a conflict with India. Through China, Pakistan has acquired access to military equipment and advanced warfare technologies, while the ongoing disputes between Pakistan and India, diverts New Delhi's attention from expanding its capacities and control over the regional landscape, which Beijing is opting to prevent. Pakistan offered a battleground for its '*all-weather*' friend who encountered collisions with Islamic militants. The two States have brought forward civilian and military agreements, exchanged nuclear intelligence and armaments, generated joint economic projects and cooperated against their common enemies. For Pakistan, China has come forward as a replacement for everything the US has lacked offering or has failed to fulfil. The '*cordial*' Sino-Pak relationship is projected to reach even greater mutual utility in the future, with specifically India's rise in the world interstate hierarchy.

The 1962 war between China and India over the disputed territories of Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh has consolidated Sino-Pak ties. While Western actors did not approve Chinese military actions out of fear of its rising power, Pakistan had supported it throughout, since the influx of aid towards India, was threatening its national security. Meanwhile, America was on the side of India, which was widely seen as a betrayal by the Pakistanis – the first of many.

After the war, Islamabad and Beijing successfully negotiated their shared frontiers and articulated the China-Pakistan Border Treaty in 1963, which resulted in Pakistan ceding 5,180 sq km along the Karakoram Range to China and Pakistan acknowledging Chinese sovereignty over hundreds of square kilometres over Northern Kashmir and Ladakh. This agreement was not recognized by India, which also has a claim over those lands. Furthermore, as stated in the signed agreement, this Sino-Pak arrangement of ceding a part of Jammu & Kashmir is provisional, thus it will be renegotiated with China after the Kashmir conflict is resolved. Nevertheless, a near future dispute settlement seems quite unlikely since it requires India and Pakistan to give up territory, which they are not willing to do.

In 1963, China and Pakistan signed their first trade agreement, while they were in the process of the joint construction of the Trans-Karakoram highway, also referred to as the Friendship Highway, which connected the Gilgit Baltistan region (Part of the disputed State of Jammu & Kashmir) to the ancient Silk Road. The road is perceived as essential for the trade purposes of the countries. It is currently part of the strategic project of the \$54 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

In the beginning of the 1970s, Pakistan facilitated the US-China relations, specifically arranging Henry Kissinger's secret visit. Both countries have been supportive of each other's debatable sovereignty concerns – China's claims over Taiwan, Xinjiang and Tibet, and Pakistan's over Jammu & Kashmir. In the aftermath of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war, China as a member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) used its first ever veto power to turn down Bangladesh's vow for independence, viewing it simply as a Pakistani region troubled by internal insurgencies.

At the end of the 70s, the interests of the two countries overlapped once again, but this time over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. China felt intimidated by the Brezhnev doctrine and the possibility of a Communist intervention, which would expand the control and hegemony of the USSR. Its concern led to Beijing's financial support for the Mujahedeen fighters and a promise made to Islamabad, that in the event of a potential Soviet invasion, China will come to defend. Such occasion illuminated

another reason for Chinese support, namely the access to forging foreign relations with the Muslim world which Pakistan was providing. Notably, China aimed to emphasise how countries, regardless of their differences in socio-economic and political structuring, could live together, join forces and maintain harmonious relations.

The two countries have a long history of political and military delegations on the territory of each other. With each transition of power, the governmental authorities of both sides have made sure that frequent visits will send a message to the global public that their ties are actively preserved. For instance, in 1983 the Chinese Foreign Minister Wu Xueqian visited Pakistan, during times when the Soviet Union was explicitly infuriated at Pakistan's support for the Afghan Mujahideen and was attempting to convince India that military actions against the Pakistanis should be taken. On the question what stance China would take in the event of an offensive aimed towards Pakistan, Wu replied: *"Pakistan is China's exceptionally friendly neighbour. If there is a war and Pakistan suffers foreign armed attack, the Chinese government and people will, of course, stand on the side of Pakistan"*. On another occasion, the Chinese Premier Li Peng was questioned by Pakistani officials about his opinion over the military conflict between India and Pakistan over the disputed Siachen Glacier region in Jammu & Kashmir. When asked if he agreed with the situation, Li answered that regardless his opinion on the conflict, Pakistan and China shared common perceptions, thus China was taking their side.

In recent times, China has also emerged as Pakistan's biggest trading partner, replacing the US. In return, Beijing has received its gains through arms sales and infrastructure, particularly focusing on the ongoing *'One Belt, One Road'* project. The Four Modernizations pillars enacted in 1978 in China, which focused on the development of the fields of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology, intended to revive the country's economy. These intentions are visible till present day through the growing foreign investments and exports. For the purposes of achieving a greater economic power, China needs new channels for this to happen and this is where Pakistan offers a key strategical position. Its access to the Arabian Sea provides favourable access to geopolitical hotspots for energy and commercial trade. The String of Pearls geopolitical concept stands for the Chinese chain of military and merchant facilities established there, which exemplifies its ascendant influence in the region. Nevertheless, the Kashgar to Gwadar CPEC project is about to induce further political tensions between India and Pakistan over the Kashmir-issue, since it is going through the disputed territory of Gilgit Baltistan, which is part of Jammu & Kashmir.

Another matter of concern is that in Pakistan many terrorist organizations have found a safe haven and China is conveniently turning a blind eye to this growing section of society that resorts to violence in order to achieve its goals. At a time when the international community is investing great efforts in combating extremism, Beijing's standpoint on the issue has been closely observed. China has been publicly defending Pakistan, regarding the assassination of Osama bin Laden, claiming that Pakistani Intelligence officials were unaware of his presence on the territory of the country. In addition, China was using its power as a permanent member of the UNSC, in order to suspend Indian intervention in Pakistan after the terrorist leader Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, who was arrested for his role in the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) led 2008 Mumbai attacks, was released from prison on grounds of insufficient evidences.

The UNSC has adopted numerous resolutions that address the need for a collective action in the fight with terrorism, yet China several times has used its veto to guard terrorist organizations and individuals. For instance, it has tried on three occasions to block efforts in adding the Jamaat-ud-Dawa (the political arm of LeT) to the list of designated terrorist groups. China has also shielded so-called network of charities and NGOs controlled by terrorist groups, such as the Al-Akhtar Trust, which is technically an offshoot of Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM). JeM used the organization for delivering arms and ammunition to their members, or members of Al Qaeda concealing it as the provision of humanitarian aid to refugees and people in need.

China is well informed about the ties that bind the aforementioned groups with the Pakistani Army and their Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), although Pakistani authorities have manifestly renounced any claims of supporting any such organizations. China's support for Pakistan's approach towards terrorism clearly illustrates its intention to establish a strong relationship, yet being on the side of the aggressor does not always come without consequences. For example, one of the most high-profile cases has been the raids during the Siege of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad where many Chinese citizens have been attacked, some fatally. Chinese-run massage parlours were a target after being accused of operating as brothels, and the women working there have been kidnapped as alleged prostitutes who were engaging in vicious anti-Islamic activities.

Conclusion

The foreign policies of the US and China towards Pakistan might differ, yet they are fashioned through a balance of power principle, since the destabilised State of Pakistan requires someone to play as a gyroscope that counterweights the tilted scales and establishes an equilibrium. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that China has happened to develop the most long term vision that predicts the importance of Pakistan in the global interplay. Since it is also pursuing new objectives as a result of its tremendous economic growth, Pakistan appears a fundamental ingredient for China's rise through its provision of alternative energy supplies, transportation routes and national security. Considering the rise of extremism in Pakistan and the alleged support to it by its military establishment along with the growing realization of the US that Pakistan played a *'double-game'*, some may ask – for how long?



EFSAS

EUROPEAN FOUNDATION FOR
SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES
EXCELLENCE, GENUINENESS & AUTHENTICITY