

# A Case Study on Strategic and Geopolitical Impact of PLA-Pak Military Strategic Partnership and Security Implications for India\*

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## Introduction

Diplomatic relations between Pakistan and China were established in 1950, shortly after the defeat of the Republic of China (present day Taiwan) in 1949.<sup>1</sup> While initially ambivalent towards the idea of a Communist country on its borders, Pakistan hoped that China would serve as a counterweight to Indian influence. The Indian Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru also hoped for closer relations with the Chinese. However, with escalating border tensions leading to the 1962 Sino-Indian war, China and Pakistan aligned with each other to confront India jointly. One year after China's border war with India, Pakistan ceded the Trans-Karakoram Tract (measuring 5180 sq km) to China to end border disputes and improve diplomatic relations.

Bilateral relations between Pakistan and China have evolved from an initial Chinese policy of neutrality to a partnership that links a smaller but militarily powerful Pakistan. Pakistan is dependent on China for its economic and military strength, with China attempting to balance competing interests in the region. Diplomatic relations were established in 1950, military assistance began in 1966, a strategic alliance was formed in 1972 after Pakistan facilitated American rapprochement with China (shuttle diplomacy of Henry Kissinger)<sup>2</sup> and economic cooperation began in 1979. Since then, China has become Pakistan's largest supplier of arms and its third-largest trading partner. It would not be incorrect to conclude that Pakistan is a 'client state' of China.<sup>3</sup>

The fulcrum of Pakistan's foreign policy rests on the premise of very warm relations with China. In 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao called Sino-Pakistani ties "firm as a rock," and his Pakistani counterpart echoed the sentiment. "To test a friend whether true or not, it needs time and means under crisis," Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told China's state-run media in May 2011.<sup>4</sup> To bolster this argument, it is relevant to note that historically, China supported Pakistan's opposition to the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan and is perceived by Pakistan as a regional counterweight to India and the United States.<sup>5</sup> The 'Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good Neighbourly Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan'<sup>6</sup> signed in April 2005 is of historical significance.

## China - Pakistan Military Nexus

**Deep Military Bond.** China's role as a major arms supplier for Pakistan began in the 1960s and included assistance in building a number of arms factories in Pakistan and supplying complete weapons systems. "Until about 1990," wrote South Asia experts Elizabeth GM Parker and Teresita C Schaffer in July 2008 CSIS newsletter, "Beijing clearly sought to build up Pakistan to keep India off balance."<sup>7</sup>

**Missiles and Tanks.** Pakistan Army's majority arsenal, both short and medium range ballistic missiles, such as the Shaheen series are modifications of Chinese imports. Shaheen I (M 11) is a single stage solid fuelled missile with a range of 290 km while Shaheen II (M 9) range has a range of 2000 km.<sup>8</sup> Though technically M11 did not violate the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR) (while M9 clearly does) it has the capability of being able to deliver a 500 kg payload over 300 km. The Main Battle Tank Al Khalid (T 90 II) tank, which was a fructification of a deal was signed in 1990, would constitute approximately forty five per cent of MBTs being produced in the world<sup>10</sup> along with type T 98 of China and T 90 of Russian Federation.

**Aircraft.** The current fleet of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) includes Chinese interceptor and advanced trainer aircraft, as well as an Airborne Early Warning and Control radar systems. Pakistan is producing the JF-17 Thunder<sup>11</sup> multi-role combat aircraft jointly with China. The aircraft, fitted with Beyond Visual Range missiles, PL 12/SD 10 with a reported effective range of more than 100 km<sup>12</sup> will definitely bolster the capability of PAF. According to latest reports, Pakistan is seeking to buy thirty six J-10 aircraft,<sup>13</sup> which would make Pakistan the first recipient of one of the most advanced weapon systems in China's arsenal. The addition of these aircraft would enable PAF to raise two fighter squadrons and further sharpen its combativeness. It has also been reported that Pakistan is likely to procure drones<sup>14</sup> from China. It can be reasonably presumed that Pakistan will vie for a capability of these drones to operate over sea ostensibly in the garb of anti-piracy operations to monitor the Indian Navy's presence in the North Arabian Sea.

**Ships and Submarines.** In its quest to counter the Indian Navy, Pakistan Navy received the last of its F-22P Frigates from China in Jan 2011. The first and second F-22P ships named as Zulfiqar and Shamsheer have already been commissioned in Pakistan Navy (PN). The new warship, christened Saif, has been built by the Hudong Zhonghua Shipyard Shanghai. Pakistan Navy (PN) has already decided to go ahead with its plans to get the fourth ship constructed at the Karachi Shipyard. The \$750 million contract also includes latest anti-submarine warfare (ASW) helicopters.<sup>15</sup> The most significant development is Pakistan's decision to acquire six Yuan (Song) Class Submarines from China. These submarines will reportedly be equipped with crucial air-independent propulsion (AIP)<sup>16</sup> systems. With plans to acquire AIP technology, PN would be in race with IN, which plans to arm its French Scorpene submarines with AIP only by 2013. It can be reasonably summarised that China is actively assisting Pakistan Navy to shift its philosophy from 'sea denial' to that of 'sea control'<sup>17</sup> with an aggressive intent to control the sea lanes leading to the Arabian Gulf.

**Nuclear Programme.** In 1983, China took an extraordinary decision to help Pakistan become a nuclear power<sup>18</sup>. This was done with a single-minded determination and tenacity, knowing that the consequences of making Pakistan a nuclear power would last three or four decades. It was a known fact that Chinese security agencies knew about Pakistani transfers of nuclear technology to Iran, North Korea, and Libya,<sup>19</sup> which was dubbed as a 'Nuclear Wal-Mart' by expert Michael Krepon. In return, Pakistan was rewarded by North Korea by transfer of Nodong (Ghauri) missile. China is accused of having long-standing ties with Abdul Qadeer Khan, father of the Pakistani nuclear programme.<sup>20</sup> A

subsidiary of the China National Nuclear Corporation contributed in Pakistan's efforts to expand its uranium enrichment capabilities by providing 5,000 custom made ring magnets,<sup>21</sup> a key component of the bearings that facilitate the high-speed rotation of centrifuges. China's assistance may have even enabled Pakistan to achieve parity or even edge past India with an estimated count of 70-90 warheads<sup>22</sup> as of 2010 with increasing stockpiles.

## **Strategic and Geopolitical Impact**

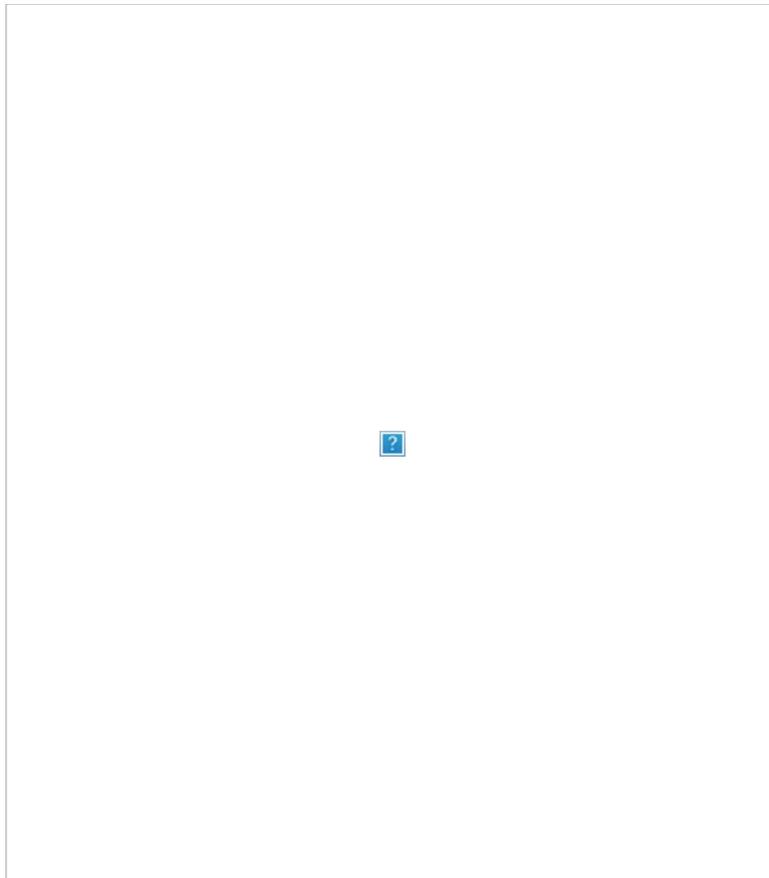
### **Strategic Impact**

**Energy Security.** The 'String of Pearls' strategy of China, which is a win-win proposition<sup>23</sup> for both Pakistan and China was first proposed in 2006 in an internal United States Department of Defence report titled 'Energy Futures in Asia'.<sup>24</sup>

China has funded more than 80 per cent of Gwadar Deep Sea Port (GDSP), which is strategically located at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz. It is viewed warily by both America and India as a possible launch pad for Chinese naval operations in the Indian Ocean. Gwadar is also visualised as becoming a regional hub, serving commercial traffic to and from the Mid East, the Persian Gulf, and China's Xinjiang province, Iran, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.<sup>25</sup> Its location at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and at the opposite end of the choke points of Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman enhances its strategic importance. Its development would definitely influence the geo-strategic environment of the region. The port is also being connected with 1100 km Makran coastal highway connecting major cities of Pakistan. Senior Chinese leaders have highlighted energy security as a critical issue for China's future. The Chinese energy debate focuses both on supply security and on the need to keep energy prices as low as possible.<sup>26</sup> By 2030, China will depend on imported oil for approximately 75 per cent of its total demand, with supplies coming mainly from the Persian Gulf. Increasing dependence on imported energy and resources, apart from the need to transport large quantities of export goods to trade partners, makes China heavily dependent on reliable maritime transportation, which in turn makes Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) through the Strait of Hormuz particularly important. China possibly estimates that that India has the potential to interdict China's energy and trade routes as they literally pass through our doorstep. Presently, the PLA Navy has only limited power projection capability and lacks the ships and overseas bases necessary to sustain a naval presence along, let alone control the SLOCs that are vital to Chinese economic prosperity<sup>27</sup>. The most visible articulation of this thinking has been President Hu Jintao's formulation of 'Malacca Dilemma', meaning that China has the potential to be greatly and adversely affected by blockages of key Asia-Pacific maritime trade routes, especially the Malacca Strait.<sup>28</sup>

### **Geopolitical Manoeuvring**

**Economic Surge.** The emergence of China and India has definitely upset the world's current geopolitical balance. The two rapidly growing countries face enormous challenges.<sup>29</sup> As India expands her horizons, the two giants are beginning to rub shoulders in different parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. New economic prosperity and military strength is reawakening nationalistic pride in India, which could bring about a clash with Chinese nationalism. In the power competition game, China has surged ahead by acquiring economic and military capabilities underpinned by a clear policy to achieve a broader strategic objective. Any attempt by India to challenge or undermine China's power and influence or to achieve strategic parity is strongly resisted through a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic means<sup>30</sup>. Interestingly, the bilateral trade has zoomed in recent times - in 2008, China became India's largest trading partner. However, the growth in bilateral trade has been asymmetric. The trade balance has gradually shifted in favour of China. The trade is likely to cross \$ 120 billion by 2015.<sup>31</sup> This is no guarantee that the two nations will not go to war. In 1914, when the World War I was imminent, Germany and France were the two largest trading partners.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 1 : India-China Bilateral Trade Balance<sup>33</sup>**

**Border Dispute.** The most contentious issue in the normalisation of China-India relation is resolution of the land boundary. Several rounds of talks held over more than a quarter of a century (since 1981) have failed to resolve the disputed claims. China's claim over the entire Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and aggressive patrolling of the border region signify that China is not interested in maintaining the status quo. Although the border issue could be settled with fairly straightforward compromise e.g. India foregoing claims to territories lost to China and China abandoning claims on Indian territory - China does not seem to be interested in a settlement based on the status quo. China's position, furthermore is unlikely to change over the next decade.<sup>34</sup> An unsettled border provides China the strategic leverage to keep India guessing about its intentions and nervous about its capabilities, while exposing India's vulnerabilities and weaknesses and ensuring New Delhi's 'good behaviour' on issues of vital concern to China.<sup>35</sup> Should a conflict break out, the PLA's contingency plans emphasise a 'short and swift localised' conflict (confined to Tawang region, along the lines of 1999 Kargil conflict) with the following objectives in mind: capture the Tawang tract, give India's military a bloody nose, and deliver a knockout blow that punctures India's ambitions to be China's equal or peer competitor once and for all.<sup>36</sup>

### **Chinese Military Doctrine**

Over the last three decades, the Chinese military thinking seems to have undergone incremental changes, resulting in evolution of three different doctrinal templates. The first of these was the framework of 'People's War under Modern Conditions' which recognised that protracted wars of attrition were no longer suited to China's evolving interests and geostrategic environment. By the early 1990s, with the first Gulf War serving as a powerful driver, this doctrine evolved into a second one, which is commonly labelled as 'Local Limited War under High-tech Conditions' (akin to Air Land Operations). The third template focuses on the correct mix of informationalised and mechanised forces and concepts to conduct short duration, high-intensity combat in the information era. The Chinese Defence White Papers of 2006, 2008 and 2010 also put forth their views about forward deployment, use of PLA Navy as a strategic force, trans-regional mobility and changes from a defensive mindset to usher in expeditionary capabilities.<sup>37</sup>

### **Summary**

A summary of PLA-Pak military nexus and its geopolitical and strategic impact reveals that India is definitely hedged in by two very belligerent neighbours, whose intent and aim are very clear. The outline of the policy options for India holistically with a predominant thrust towards China, is given in succeeding paragraphs.

### **Engaging Strategy with Pakistan and China-Policy Options**

#### **Short to Medium Term (2012-2022)**

In this time frame, strategic prudence is essential in bilateral relations with China. Core focus should be on political and economic engagement coupled with development and preservation of military deterrence. Pakistan is grappling with the insurgency in FATA and Taliban problem which would keep its army engaged. However, it is to be understood clearly that Pakistan will continue to vigorously pursue its nuclear programme to blunt the conventional edge that India possesses.

**Pakistan.** Pakistan will continue to be leveraged by China as a suitable counter to keep India engaged. The chances of

Pakistan turning into a 'failed state' are unlikely. This is because the USA, China and Saudi Arabia have strong national interests, not necessarily complementary to each other, but with a common objective of ensuring the survival of Pakistan. It must be appreciated and factored that peace with Pakistan can never be realised as the very existence of the Pakistani state (read Pakistan Army) hinges on its anti-India posturing. A weak and divided Pakistan is therefore in India's interest and we must take all actions necessary to neutralise the Chinese sphere of influence. The recommended courses of action against Pakistan are as follows:-

- (a) Identify fault lines in the US, Chinese and Saudi national interests in Pakistan and exploit them.
- (b) Give active support to Baluchi, Sindhi, NWFP factions to keep Pakistan Army and the ISI busy.
- (c) Destabilise Pakistani economy - to do that we need to identify areas that can be targeted overtly and covertly.
- (d) Use media and world opinion to enhance Pakistan's negative image which is prevalent already.
- (e) Militarily, we need to force Pakistan into an arms race so that it takes a toll on its economy.
- (f) The Indian armed forces need to posture and remain deployed in such a manner that the Pakistan armed forces are forced to maintain a vigil to their east.
- (g) Indian embassies worldwide would have to lobby proactively behind the scenes to negate both Pakistani and Chinese influence.

**China-Cooperative and Engagement Strategy.** Given the present disparity with China, there is a need to engage in cooperative strategies. This will ensure that we are able to consolidate our position and challenge the Chinese threats on equal footing. There will be a need to engage China in all sectors since we would be competing for the same resources and strategic space in the global arena. As a part of engagement strategy, water sharing negotiation should be an essential part of diplomatic initiative.

(a) **Geopolitical Issues.** There are areas of significant convergence between India and China on geopolitical issues, which include greater democratisation of international institutions, WTO and issues related to climate change.<sup>38</sup> The possibility of strategic partnerships with countries in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) rim and those with similar strategic compulsions should have matured. This should include the possibility of basing rights in the IOR<sup>39</sup>, South China Sea, and the Philippine Sea.

(b) **Trade.** Growth of bilateral trade has been beyond expectation in recent years, with China surpassing the USA as India's largest trading partner in 2008. However, existing policy to exclude Chinese investment in strategic sectors and measures against anti-dumping should continue. The recent controversy of Huawei Telecom is a pointer to the security concerns.<sup>40</sup>

(c) **Military Cooperation.**

(i) **Cooperation on Piracy in IOR.** The PLA Navy and IN are presently operating independently in the IOR to counter threats of piracy off the coast off the East Coast of Africa. There could be a possibility of synergising these operations and India could take on a lead role.

(ii) **Bilateral Exercise and Port Calls.** Existing bilateral exercises of Navy and Army should be continued. There is a need to increase the frequency of port visits, exercises and invitations to the PLA Navy. This would neutralise to an extent, the rich harvest that Pakistan has made in 'AMAN' series of exercises.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, interaction of the Indian Army and IAF with the PLA and PLAAF, could also be continued keeping the overall aim of 'engaging' but revealing very little.

(iii) **Protection of Chinese SLOCs.** The IN could offer to protect Chinese SLOCs within the IOR. This would also serve the dual purpose of allowing the Chinese to know that the IN can easily cause disruptions.

(iv) **Humanitarian and Disaster Relief (HADR) and Anti-Terrorism Exercises.** Bilateral anti-terrorism exercises should continue. Such exercises should include HADR scenarios also. These exercises involve all the three services and hence a 'joint' plan would need to be evolved.

(v) **Exchange Visits.** The number of officers and courses subscribed by the armed forces as well as those offered to the PLA could be increased. However, this must follow norms of reciprocity.

(vi) **Joint Working Group (JWG) Meeting on Border Dispute.** JWG meetings on resolution of the boundary issue needs to continue exploring various options. Rhetorical peaceful gestures, through bilateral meetings, must continue to protect India's territorial claims. Here, we need to tread very cautiously; reason being that India presently is in no position either geopolitically or militarily, and also in terms of Comprehensive National Power (CNP)<sup>42</sup> parity, to resolve the boundary dispute on terms favourable to Indian interests.

## Hedging Strategies

**Shaping Geopolitical Environment.** India's geopolitical environment consists of immediate neighbourhood, intermediate and outer periphery. The strategy is enumerated as follows : -

(a) **Untangling Sino-Pak Nexus.** The current radical movement<sup>43</sup> in the Xinjiang Uyghur province, along with Pakistan being identified as the epicentre of Islamic terrorism, provides India with a window of opportunity to play up this fault line to untangle the Sino-Pak nexus. Based on the premise that Karakoram pass could become not only a one way conduit for arms and ammunition from China to the South; but also a means to export fundamentalism from the

South to the North. The Xinjiang Uygur province is a resource hub of China; and potential destabilisation in the province has a larger economic implication for China than Tibet which is just a buffer state. There may be some linkages between Pakistan based Islamic organisation and the Uyghurs which need to be 'invested or played' up.

(b) **Tibet Card.** Presently, the very mention of the 'Tibet Card' rests uncomfortably amongst India's diplomatic circles. There is a need to exploit this issue. If nothing else, at least 'silence and ambiguity' should be maintained by India on this issue.

(c) **Boundary Dispute.** It needs to be understood that even with the resolution of the boundary dispute, it is unlikely that India-China relations will be totally peaceful. However, one of the Chinese excuses for aggressive military behaviour towards India will be removed. Hence, settlement of boundary dispute will certainly be in India's interest. Our maximalist and minimalist positions must be understood with clarity.

(d) **Military Balance.** Military capability development is essential to deter aggressive adventurism originating from China. Critical gaps in military capability must be bridged by fast tracking procurement processes. Certain military capabilities which will aid the deterrence strategy at the operational and strategic levels are as follows:-

(i) **Army.** Road and logistics build-up right up to the LAC is the first prime requisite if the Indian Army is to be considered 'combat worthy' by the PLA. There can be no doubt that 'boots on ground' are the ultimate guarantor of national sovereignty and deterrence. The strength of the Indian Army opposite the Chinese formations across LAC needs further enhancement over and above the two Divisions already sanctioned. It must be realistically understood that India will never be in a position to shift any significant ground forces out of Kashmir valley if the stability of the current counterinsurgency grid is to be maintained.

(ii) **Navy.** The IN is best placed to provide strategic level deterrence which the Chinese Navy very clearly understands. The IN presently has an operational edge over the PLA Navy, solely on account of India's geostrategic location astride Chinese SLOCs in the IOR, PLA Navy's present weakness and inability to break out of the South China Sea. However, to make this threat credible, the IN requires augmentation of its force levels. China's energy vulnerability needs to be exploited and the Indian Navy's ability to interdict Chinese SLOCs need to be strengthened by induction of more fleet tankers which provide 'long legs'. The operationalisation of nuclear submarine Arihant and likely induction of aircraft carrier Vikramaditya in the foreseeable future will establish IN as the predominant Navy in the IOR.

(iii) **Air Force.** No operation of war can hope to succeed without credible Air Power. The Chinese understand this dictum quite well. If the IAF is able to maintain its sanctioned force levels of 45 squadrons, it would prove to be a sufficient deterrence against any Chinese adventurism. The procurement of Medium Multi Role Combat aircraft needs to be expedited as the competitors have been shortlisted.

(iv) **Nuclear Deterrence.** India's 'minimum credible' nuclear deterrence can only become a reality the day Indian nuclear weapons can hit Beijing with land, air and sub surface missiles. China has the entire Indian subcontinent covered by missiles like Dong Feng which have been operationalised and deployed. Presently, our nuclear deterrence is neither 'minimum' nor 'credible'. Pakistan is on par with India (or even slightly ahead). As far as India is concerned, Agni III and IV need to be operationalised in adequate numbers to signal a retaliatory or second strike capability that can reach into all provinces of China. As brought out earlier, operationalising the second strike capability will ensure deterrence.

(v) **Cyber Warfare.** It is a well known fact that China is actively pursuing this 'fifth dimension' of warfare.<sup>44</sup> A cyber war doctrine with a road map for the next two decades delineating clear cut responsibilities between various national agencies and adequate funding needs to be formulated and implemented at the earliest. This may be a classified study involving the highest security agencies viz. RAW, IB, NSCS etc.

(vi) **Surveillance.** There is a need to vastly enhance surveillance and intelligence networks. Indian surveillance capability of Chinese bases in Yunan, Lanzhou and Chengdu Military region, along with air bases and Naval facilities at Hainan Island/other ports needs to be vastly improved, so that the country is not caught unawares. Surveillance cover over the Andaman & Nicobar Islands and force levels located there need to be enhanced to prevent raids by Chinese forces in the future.

## Conclusion

India has learnt bitter lessons from its past. The present pace of economic liberalisation must not take us away from the reality of our neighbours encircling us in the long term.<sup>45</sup> The Indo-US Nuclear Deal has enhanced the status of the country by enabling nuclear commerce and also furthering India's aim of being recognised as a world power. The policy options outlined above need to be deliberated upon at the highest levels of the Services headquarters and the Government. Only a 'steel fist in a velvet glove' is respected in a world full of realpolitik. The strategy and doctrine must flow from the highest levels.

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