**Understanding Sino-Pak proliferation nexus through Indian ports**

---

**Introduction**

The China Pakistan nexus of cooperation in the nuclear domain recently came to light when Indian security officials intercepted a Karachi bound merchant ship named CMA CGA Attila carrying 'Dual-use Consignment' and forced it to halt earlier on 23 Jan 2024 at Mumbai's Nava Sheva port. The equipment seized was a Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machine which was made by an Italian company. CNC machines have been actively utilized by North Korea in its nuclear program. Upon further investigation, this item was found to be shipped by Taiyuan Mining Import and Export Co Ltd. and the end user has been identified as Cosmos Engineering in Pakistan. Cosmos Engineering has already been accused of acquiring Italian made thermoelectric instruments through the same Indian port.[1] Now officials are suspecting the role of China in providing covert assistance to Pakistan in terms of getting access to restricted technology or products from Europe or United States. We see this proliferation is being done time and again nearer to Indian ports and hence strong measures need to be taken in this regard as it directly affects India's national security.

**Why Sino-Pak nexus through maritime routes?**

China and Pakistan are India's strategic adversaries. So why do both China and Pakistan constantly use maritime routes, nearer to the Indian ports, when they are aware of the fact that Indian ports, customs and security officials are vigilant and are hence, not safe for this type of transfers? There are few reasons. The obvious simple reason is the distance and time factor. The distance between Chinese and Pakistani ports is very short, they save time in travelling around the Indian peninsula, thereby giving them faster time to transfer items. So, they are tempted to go through maritime route. One would argue that why do China and Pakistan not opt for a road or interstate highway-based transfer through the 1300 kms Karakoram highway (KKH)?

There are quite a few reasons to avoid that route. First, it's not an all-weather road, meaning this road poses problems to drivers though harsh winter weather and low visibility. The highway also needs constant maintenance as it is prone to landslides. There are issues of driver error because some sections of the roads are really steep with sharp gradients and the vehicles can fall in deep gorges and ravines. Then there is an additional risk of torrential rains that cause landslides. The air is thin and hence the low level of oxygen can be dangerous for transport staff causing health problems like nausea, headache, dizziness, altitude sickness, etc. Finally, there is lot of traffic congestion through the KKH and the time of transportation is significantly longer than what one would get from the maritime route.[2] These make the maritime route preferable for China and Pakistan for proliferation activities.

**Past proliferation incidents:**

The Indian authorities in the past also have seized Chinese consignments carrying weapons of mass destruction related components. For example, in the year 2020, India detained a Chinese merchant vessel called 'Da Cui Yan' at the Kandla port in Gujarat. Upon investigation by DRDO, it was found that this vessel was carrying an autoclave and the vessel had declared it as an industrial dryer. The autoclave is a dual-use item which has military applications, especially in development of ballistic missiles or satellite rocket launches.[3] At that time, the Chinese foreign ministry strictly denied the proliferation claims and stated that the so-called autoclave

was a ‘heat treatment furnace shell system’, a non-dual-use item under non-proliferation and export control.[4] But in reality, autoclaves are used to manufacture composites, cure and strengthen materials. Autoclaving process involves extreme heat and pressure which improve overall quality and strength of materials which can be further used to manufacture aircraft parts, missiles and ballistic missiles.[5] Hence the Chinese statements cannot be taken on face value.

In 2022, a Pakistan bound shipment was intercepted in the same manner at Nava Sheva port in Mumbai. It was found to be carrying Italian made thermoelectric instruments.[6] Now we are aware that thermoelectric devices convert heat to electric power. They are useful for military applications too. Similarly, as expected, this time China and Pakistan both have denied the Indian allegations of China-Pakistan proliferation nexus. Pakistan’s foreign ministry stated that the equipment seized was a commercial lathe machine. They condemned Indian actions citing that, Indian high handedness disrupts free trade and violates international norms and laws.[7]

**Why Sino-Pak proliferation still continues?**

Although some experts are perplexed as to why this sort of proliferation is occurring even when China has been successful in providing Pakistan with all the technologies it needed for its ballistic missiles and nuclear program, we have certain takeaways.[8] If such dual-use transfers are still occurring, then it’s still possible than Pakistan’s missile program is still underdeveloped or it wants to upgrade/refine its missile technology which is old and outdated in the contemporary times. For example, autoclaves could be useful for developing a heat shield for missiles which Pakistan’s current missile inventory has. This could imply that Pakistan’s current ballistic missiles heat shields may lack the ability to withstand high temperature at re-entry phase which can destroy the warhead before it reaches its target. They can be also used for the production of rocket motors for ballistic missiles.

In the last couple of years, Pakistan’s missile test launches have been a failure and a cause of embarrassment and concern for Pakistan. In 2020, Babur-2 missile suffered its second consecutive test failure when it crashed within 2 minutes of launch.[9] In 2022, a missile fired from test range in Sindh failed to launch properly and was seen crashing near Thana Bula Khan near Sindh province.[10] In October 2023, according to Pakistani media, Shaheen-3 missile crashed and fell over a nuclear facility in Dera Khan Gazi city in Punjab province.[11] In the same month, an Ababeel missile having a range of 2,200 kms was test fired but it crashed in the Phelawagh area Dera Bugti in the Balochistan province.[12] Based on these events, it can be inferred that Sino-Pak proliferation nexus will continue to progress through the maritime routes for correction in missile technology.

**Lessons for India**

The above situation shows that China will continue to assist Pakistan to refine its missile technology. This also shows that China is well aware of the fact that India needs to be engaged on the western front so that it can infiltrate India’s northern borders. The balance of power is clearly in India’s terms vis-à-vis Pakistan, so China would like to change that, by altering and improving Pakistan’s missile and nuclear capabilities. But what steps India should take to stop such nefarious proliferation activities ? To begin with, India should continue to improve its intelligence and enhance its manpower to intercept such merchant vessels carrying banned items. Conveying concerns to China will be futile for India, as China will always deny such allegations. Instead, it should use its diplomatic heft to counter this nexus by raising such

issues in various issues like the UNSC, UN Assembly, IAEA, Wassenaar Arrangement, Conference on Disarmament, the MTCR meetings, G-20 summits etc, which hasn't been done till now effectively. Exposing China-Pak proliferation nexus with material proofs, photographs, scientific evidence will help India to pressurise China to stop such illegal activities. Additionally, both China and Pakistan need to be put under sanctions as per international laws, just like how it was done with Iran and North Korea.

**Conclusion:**

The Sino-Pak proliferation activities once again shows that Pakistan's nuclear and ballistic missile program is still in a development phase, or rather is now outdated. The sourcing of Chinese dual-use items and technology establishes the fact that Pakistan's military establishment lacks the confidence in their ballistic missile technology. Additionally, the procurement of S-400 ABM systems by India has diminished their confidence further. Therefore, India should utilize all options available through diplomatic, military and intelligence capabilities, to further dent Pakistan and China's confidence.

**Endnotes**

---

[1] TOI News Desk, 'India stops Pak bound ship from China carrying military grade items', *Times of India,* 2 March 2024, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-stops-pak-bound-ship-from-china-carrying-military-grade-items/articleshow/108160233.cms

[2] Tim Pile, 'Pakistan's Karakoram highway-ups and downs of a trip on 8th wonder of the world: stunning views, welcoming people, but landslides altitude sickness are hazards', *South China Morning Post,* 8 March 2024, https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/travel/article/3254603/pakistans-karakoram-highway-ups-and-downs-taking-8th-wonder-world-stunning-views-welcoming-people

[3] 'China ship carried dual-use item:MEA', *Times of India,* 6 March 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/china-ship-carried-dual-use-item-mea/articleshow/74503077.cms

[4] Rezaul H Laskar, Suthirtho Patranobis, 'India conveys concerns to China over equipment seized from Pakistan bound ship', *Hindustan Times,* 5 March 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-conveys-concerns-to-china-over-equipment-seized-from-pakistan-bound-ship/story-G8fWo2yWeHU9O9unH9Fo1J.html

[5] India seized Chinese made industrial autoclave bound for Pakistan', *Global Defense Corp.,* 7 March 2020, https://www.globaldefensecorp.com/2020/03/07/india-seized-chinese-made-industrial-autoclave-bound-for-pakistan/

[6] PTI, 'Ship from China suspected to contain consignment for Pakistan's nuclear programme stopped at Mumbai port', *The Tribune,* 2 March 2024, https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/india/ship-from-china-suspected-to-contain-consignment-for-pakistans-nuclear-programme-stopped-at-mumbai-port-596512

[7] Mariana Baabar, 'Pakistan, China strongly deny Indian charges', *The News.com,* 3 March 2024, https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1163863-pakistan-china-strongly-deny-indian-charges

[8] Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Once again, concerns arise about China-Pakistan WMD nexus', *The Diplomat,* 8 March 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/03/nuclear-proliferation-surfaces-again-as-india-intercepts-pakistan-bound-dual-use-items/

[9] Bharat Sharma, 'Pakistan's Babur II missile suffers seconds consecutive setback; crashes after two minutes', *Wion News,* 23 March 2020, https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/pakistans-babur-ii-missile-suffers-second-consecutive-setback-crashes-after-two-minutes-288073

[10] 'Missile test by Pakistan fails', *ANI News,* 17 March 2022, https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/missile-test-by-pakistan-fails20220317233650/

[11] Pawan Atri, 'Pakistan's Shaheen-3 missile strikes nuclear facility after failed test:Media', *Sputnik India,* 6 October 2023, https://sputniknews.in/20231006/pakistan-shaheen-3-missile-strikes-nuclear-facility-after-failed-test-media-4643189.html

[12] 'Ababeel missile test backfires, rocket falls in Balochistan: Pakistani Media, *Sputnik India,* 18 October 2023, https://sputniknews.in/20231018/pakistan-test-fires-ababil-missile-capable-of-carrying-multiple-warheads-4917279.html#:~:text=fell in Balochistan.-,The missile was reportedly test fired from a secret location,fell in the nearby fields.

**Ajay Kumar Das,** Independent Researcher and Analyst of International Affairs and Security Studies.

**Article uploaded on 02-04-2024**