



Changing Geo-Political Dynamics Of China-Pakistan Relations

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Abstract: In the 1940's, China emerged as a new country on the world map. Pakistan was founded two years earlier than China. The geopolitical dynamics brought the two countries together ever since. While facing their own internal or external challenges, the two sides developed a close partnership in culture, society, and ideology, setting up a unique example of mutual understanding and cooperation. This article gives a detailed discussion and analysis on the relations of the two countries from a geopolitical perspective from 1950s to 2020s, a span of 70 years. The article starts with the diplomatic relations between the two sides in the 1950s, when the first generation leaders developed the diplomatic ties in a positive way. The friendship moved forward with frequent official visits, the building of the Karakorum Highway, the secret channel Pakistan played for China to establish diplomatic ties with US, mutual support on international issues. In the 21st century, the two sides enhanced their relations to all weather strategic relations under the background of BRI and CPEC. The article draws the conclusion that China's elevation and economic preeminence is shaping a new, prosperous and vibrant region. South Asia's demographic and huge economic potential are promising. The two countries can join hands together to make this dream of a prosperous, secure and peaceful region by aligning with those who wish to win the race, leaving losers behind.

Keywords: geopolitical, international relations, support, mutual interests, BRI, CPEC

Begging of the Relations: 1940s-1950s

In the 1940's China and Pakistan emerged as two new countries on the world map. This was the time when the Second World War ended, leaving a trail of immeasurable destruction. Both countries were passing through a critical phase. Communist revolution was transforming China while Pakistan was meeting the challenges of partition.

A journey of a new partnership began between two countries which were divergent in culture, society, and ideology, setting up a unique example of mutual understanding and cooperation. Cultural interaction between the people dates back in history when the Chinese monks visited Taxila and Swat valley to study Buddhism, but Himalayas stood in the way acting as an obstacle to forge closer contacts. These challenges were overcome when Pakistan became the first Muslim country to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1950. Diplomatic relations were established in May 1951.

The situation took a turn as China got involved in the Korean war and Pakistan was subjected to an aggressive Indian stance, denying transfer of military and financial assets, restricting river water flows, and illegally occupying the territory of Jammu and Kashmir which led to a military conflict in 1948. Pakistan's military and economic vulnerability made it a candidate seeking support from the West. Being militarily and economically weak, Pakistan looked to the West for support. Pakistani leaders "stressed their allegiance to the anti-communist cause and emphasized Pakistan's desire to join free world's defence team"^[1]. Pakistan and the US signed the first defence agreement on 19 May 1954. Pakistan joined SEATO and CENTO in 1954 and 1955, respectively.

Commonalities of interest and historical colonial experiences created an empathy for both countries towards each other. When Pakistan joined the Western security alliances, Chinese leadership showed understanding of its security concerns. They fully understood how Pakistan and China contributed to each other's strength despite a difference of stance. These principles helped to establish an exceptional relationship of mutual trust and not based on mere geo-political calculations.

An important factor was that India's non-aligned status, as compared to Pakistan's alliance with the West created a soft image for India through the Chinese perspective. China and India therefore maintained good relations in the early 1950s. The Chinese leadership did not lose sight of Pakistan's importance. The Chinese Foreign Ministry was given handwritten instructions by Chairman Mao to strengthen relations with Pakistan. Selection of General Geng Biao, as second Chinese ambassador to Pakistan in 1956 was a testimony to Pakistan's stable partnership with China despite divergence of approach. Chairman Mao instructed the ambassador that "communications between Pakistan and China have a history of more than thousand years and



they (Pakistan) are very friendly to China. The South Western gate holds a significant strategic position and you must protect it well^[2]. “Both had mostly been careful not to antagonize each other”^[3].

In 1951, Pakistan supported the conclusion of a Peace Treaty with Japan and attended the San Francisco Conference. But on the question of China's representation, Pakistan supported her. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sir Zafarullah Khan voiced regret over the absence of China when the majority voted against her^[4]. Furthermore, decisions like refusing to contribute a military contingent during the Korean War, despite US pressure, reflected Pakistan's independent foreign policy and was duly acknowledged by China. In hindsight, it was a prudent decision as otherwise Pakistan's troops could have been involved in fighting against the Chinese forces which entered Korea after the UN decided to extend the war into North Korea^[5]. So despite having a different world view, both Pakistan and China were sensitive to maintaining a balance in their relationship.

In 1955, the Afro-Asian Conference was held in Bandung in which leaders of both countries participated. Premier Zhou Enlai met with Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra at his request. They met twice. Pakistan explained that its membership of SEATO was not directed against China while China assured that it desired good relations with Pakistan. During the Summit, Pakistan's Prime Minister declared that “China is by no means an imperialist nation and has not brought any other country under her heel”. Zhou Enlai publicly acknowledged Bogra's statement and stated that “through these explanations we achieved a mutual understanding”^[6]. Both sides agreed to enhance their exchanges and bilateral cooperation. As a result of this renewed understanding, first ever visit of Pakistan Prime Minister to China took place. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy visited China in October 1956 met Chairman Mao Tsetung and held four rounds of talks with his counterpart. The Pakistan Prime Minister was accorded a red-carpet welcome and the visit was declared a success.

This gesture of Pakistan was reciprocated when Premier Zhou Enlai paid a return visit to Pakistan in December 1956, as part of his eight countries trip of South and South East Asia. He visited multiple cities apart from Karachi. Zhou Enlai visited Hyderabad, Peshawar, Lahore and Dhaka; where he was given a rousing welcome by cheering crowds at all places. This was the beginning of a “new form of relationship” between two nations. Premier Zhou Enlai visited Pakistan in record five times^[7]. He made a lasting impact on Pakistanis who regard him as a great friend. In the same leg, when he was in India, Premier Zhou Enlai declined an invitation to visit Srinagar, thus refraining from recognizing India's claim over Kashmir^[8]. This decision reflected China's sensitivity to Pakistan's concerns in the hey days of Sino-Indian relationship. (This was the era of Hindi-Cheeni Bhai Bhai).

History of Pakistan China relations contains phases where some uneasy moments were witnessed. Pakistan was under pressure from the US to adopt a different approach on China. An interesting fact is that Pakistan supported China's claim for representation at the UN. In April 1959, President Ayub Khan proposed a joint defence pact with India against major invasions from the North, a reference to both China and the former Soviet Union^[9]. Nehru rejected the offer.

Mutual Support on Historical Issues

It is worth mentioning that the Chinese side used great wisdom in overlooking these aberrations and Pakistan also conducted a review of its policy towards China. While the US and China experienced conflict of interest on multiple issues, regional changes started to take effect, namely the Sino-Soviet split and Sino-Indian tensions in 1960s due to India's support for Dalai Lama and the border dispute. China now began to develop a better understanding of Pakistan's problems with India. In the words of Andrew Small, 1959 was a pivotal year in the unraveling of Sino-Indian relationship. This was the beginning of the distrust which characterizes their relations even today.

During this time, China endeavoured to resolve its boundary dispute with India. The Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai proposed a comprehensive settlement in 1960 which Nehru rejected. India's rigidity led to Sino-Indian border conflict in 1962. The basic issue arose over the interpretation of colonial history. Chinese forces broke through the Indian defences and after making significant gains declared a ceasefire. The United States extended assistance to India against China while Pakistan was asked not to open a front against India in Kashmir at the time of its engagement with China. It asked Pakistan to make a “gesture of assurance to Nehru”^[10].

At a time when Pakistan desired a security shield against India through SEATO and CENTO, the United States did not meet its expectations. Apart from pressure, Pakistan was offered small assistance as both President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles abhorred displeasing India. Notwithstanding Pakistan's position, the United States started offering massive assistance to India, at the same time cutting back aid to Pakistan^[11]. “The Sino-Indian conflict clearly established that the US was completely supportive of India at the risk of alienating Pakistan, a treaty ally. Pakistan was justifiably “dejected and broken-hearted”, even regretting that it had joined in a defence agreement with the United States^[12].

Pakistan's frustration was twofold; India's intransigence to resolve the Kashmir dispute and lack of US support. US Ambassador to India Galbraith stated in April 1963 that American aid to India was not dependent on a settlement of the Kashmir issue. Nehru confirmed this understanding in the Lok Sabha^[13].

The conflict of 1962 was a watershed in Sino-Indian relations. Chinese-Indian relations were at the lowest ebb while a new spirit of warmth was visible in Pakistan-China relations. It is remarkable that Pakistan and China reached an understanding for demarcation of their border just nine days before the war broke out between India and China. The agreement was signed

in 1963. Contrary to Indian assertions, “it involved no transfer of territory from the control of either country to the other. Pakistan remembers with gratitude that some grazing lands historically inhabited by Hunza people were aligned to China but on Pakistan's request, Premier Zhou Enlai generously agreed to amendment of the boundary so that an area of 750 square miles remained on the Pakistan side. The Indian allegation that Pakistan ceded a part of Kashmir to China was unfounded”^[14].

This is also corroborated by Andrew Small who states that the border settlement was on terms favourable to Pakistan. China would transfer 1942 square kilometers it controlled to Pakistan. Pakistan transferred none of the territory under its control to China^[15]. Sino-Pakistan border treaty infuriated India which even today claims that Gilgit-Baltistan are Indian territory. A new trend could be witnessed in the American perspective on its relations with Pakistan and India. It could be seen in early 1960s, that the United States was trying to isolate China and luring India into its sphere of influence, considering Pakistan as an obstruction. Pakistan's border treaty with China, when many of China's boundaries were undemarcated and militarized, as well as the 1964 Aviation Agreement when PIA became the first airline from a non-communist country to land in China, were seen as a tilt in Pakistan's policy towards China. As a consequence, USA became dismissive of Pakistan's concerns over Indian military build-up as well as an on Kashmir.

During President Ayub Khan's visit to China in March 1965, Chairman Mao expressed appreciation for Pakistan's support to China, particularly as Pakistan helped China to establish its contacts with the outside world. In the Joint Communiqué, Pakistan denounced “Two China's policy” of the United States^[16]. It is clear that Pakistan had by then taken a calculated policy decision to develop its relations with China. The defining moment in the upswing of their bilateral relations was 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. Numerous accounts attest to China's unstinted support for Pakistan in the war. It is noteworthy that while Pakistan's standing had improved due to its even-handed approach with three contending powers i.e., USA, Soviet Union and China. India had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of China thus negatively impacting its repute in the international world. Prime Minister Nehru's letter to President John F. Kennedy in 1962 war frantically requesting US military assistance against China was a slap in its face given its so-called non-aligned status.

Pakistan and India had clashed in the Runn of Katch in Sindh prior to 1965 September war. Pakistani military subdued the Indians, also taking a few of them as prisoners. Despite a treaty ally, Pakistan received a protest from the USA over the “use of American equipment in the fighting”^[17]. India's defeat in the Runn of Katch clash was another humiliation after 1962 Sino-Indian war for which the Indian government faced lot of criticism at home.

The US depicted partiality towards India in comparison to Pakistan, thus adding to Pakistan's frustration. On top of that it increased its assistance to India after the Sino-Indian conflict. In response to Pakistan's representations, the US conveyed the following to Pakistan: (i) India would not attack Pakistan (ii) If it did, the US would come to Pakistan's help, and (iii) it has been ensured that equipment given to India would be used only against China^[18]. As subsequent events showed, the US reneged on its pledge to help Pakistan in 1965 war. In fact, it imposed a ban on the supply of equipment to Pakistan, whose main reliance was on the USA.

When the skirmishes had started in Kashmir in late August-early September, Chinese Foreign Minister Marshal Chen Yi was in Karachi on 4 September 1965 and met Foreign Minister Z.A. Bhutto. (It may be recalled that at that point, Chinese forces were engaged in Vietnam). Chen Yi assured Bhutto that China stood firmly with Pakistan. To relieve Indian pressure on Pakistan, China had lodged a strong protest with India on 27 August, accusing her of aggressive action along the Sikkim and Ladakh border. That was followed by a warning on 8 September 1965 and the Chinese troops were put on alert. One week later on 16 September, China gave a three-day ultimatum to India to dismantle its military infrastructure on the border. This ultimatum was extended for another three days since the UN Security Council had by then ordered a ceasefire. After the ultimatum, the US told Pakistan that it was imperative that the conflict should be stopped. Earlier on 12 September, China in a statement did not “approve of depriving the Kashmir people of their right of self-determination or that she can approve of Indian aggression against Pakistan”^[19].

A positive response was received from China on Pakistan's request for assistance. It provided much needed ammunition and spare parts for the Army and offered its aircraft carrying these items. In view of the arms embargo imposed by the US in 1965, China agreed to provide equipment for two divisions as well as the MIG aircraft. It also extended \$ 60 million for development assistance in 1965; another \$40 million in 1969 and \$200 million for the next five year plan. Coming from a developing country facing internal upheaval due to cultural revolution, this aid was not only timely but also generous from any standard^[20]. Subsequently, China helped Pakistan by establishing the Heavy Mechanical Complex, the Heavy Rebuild Factory, the Kamra Aeronautical Complex and several other plants. This was meant to make Pakistan self-reliant in heavy industrial engineering through transfer of technology.

Pakistan had undertaken a comprehensive policy shift by mid 1960s, especially after the 1965 war with India and one-sided attitude of the United States. A reflection of this change was the strategic decision Pakistan and China took in 1966 to build the Karakorum Highway (KKH), which is rightly described as the eighth wonder of the world, passing through 15,800 feet top Khunjerab Pass. It took almost 12 years to complete this 1032 km road through the treacherous Karakorum mountains, linking Kashgar with Gilgit. About 22,000 Chinese nationals worked on this project in different phases with 20,000 Pakistani

workers. About 1000 lost their lives in the construction phase. The cemetery of Chinese nationals in Gilgit reminds us of the eternal bonds which tie the two countries together.

The journey of friendship between Pakistan and China is full of interesting events, particular an anecdote worth narrating for the readers. In 1968, Pakistan sent a gift of mangoes to China. This was a time of the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao distributed the mangoes amongst CPC cadres. China was swept up in a “mango fever” engineered by Pakistani gift. Replicas of mangoes, badges and platters of mangoes were created and distributed all across^[21]. Mango diplomacy helped in further warming up of cordial ties.

Another building block and a historic development of far-reaching global implications was the rapprochement between the United States and China, where Pakistan played a key role. Dr. Henry Kissinger’s secret visit to China arranged by Pakistan in 1971 was a feat unrivalled. Both US and China acknowledged Pakistan’s pivotal role. Obviously conscious that the US had not fulfilled its part of the bargain, Premier Zhou Enlai reminded Dr. Kissinger never to forget the bridge (Pakistan) which had made China and the US achieve this breakthrough. USA accepted the “One China” principle, a major point of contention between the two powers.

China, once again displayed support for Pakistan during the 1971 East Pakistan crisis. On the heels of the crisis, India and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty of Friendship in August 1971, which had a military clause: “to deter any move China might think of making to neutralize eventual military action by India in East Pakistan”^[22]. While Moscow assured Pakistan that the treaty was not directed at Pakistan, subsequent events belied this assertion. The Soviet Union vetoed every resolution in the Security Council after the Indian invasion of East Pakistan while China was defending Pakistan there. The most virulent exchanges in the Council were between the representatives of China and the Soviet Union.

It is pertinent to note that in 1971, China was facing serious domestic challenges. There was a widespread purge in PLA and Mao’s military chief Lin Biao had died in an air crash. Following 1969 Sino-Soviet border clash, the Soviet Union had deployed about 45 divisions on China’s northern border. China’s ability to militarily intervene in East Pakistan crisis was thus circumscribed by obtaining environment. Despite these constraints, China assured Pakistan that it would “as always firmly support Pakistan government and people in their just struggle to safeguard state sovereignty and national independence”. China continued to supply economic assistance and military equipment and extended political support to Pakistan’s position at the UN^[23]. China vetoed Bangladesh’s application of the UN membership at Pakistan’s request until the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh and return of Pakistani POWs.

On the third day of Indian invasion of East Pakistan on 5 December 1971, the Soviet Union proposed inviting the representative of Bangladesh to address the Security Council. The Chinese delegation firmly opposed this proposal. It instead introduced the first-ever Chinese draft resolution at the Security Council which “strongly condemned the Indian government for its act of creating the so-called Bangladesh, its subversion, dismemberment of and aggression against Pakistan”^[24].

Another test came in 1979 when the Soviet Union marched into Afghanistan. The Chinese government firmly opposed the invasion and reaffirmed China’s support to Pakistan’s independence and territorial integrity. The Chinese side also extended considerable assistance for Afghan Mujahideen as well as for the Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Pakistan and China have stood by each other throughout history. There are numerous examples of Pakistan and China helping each other at critical times and on crucial issues. Among the most important issues are the core issues of their national interest. Pakistan supports China on issues of its national sovereignty like Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet.

It has also extended support to China on the South China Sea issue. On its part, China fully supports Pakistan’s efforts to safeguard its independence and sovereignty. China extends support to Pakistan on the membership issue of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), FATF and UN listing. It has blocked India’s entry into NSG maintaining that same criteria should be applied for both India and Pakistan. China recognizes Kashmir as a dispute between India and Pakistan and calls for a peaceful solution in line with UN Security Council resolutions, UN Charter and bilateral agreements between India and Pakistan.

Another glaring example of this friendship is the China-Pakistan collaboration in the peaceful use of nuclear energy. China has shown its loyalty by resisting the pressures mostly from Western countries and provided Pakistan with Chashma series of nuclear power plants. The work is also underway on two Karachi nuclear power plants.

Pakistan’s nuclear doctrine was reviewed in view of the 1974 nuclear test by India. Pakistan resorted to developing its own nuclear capability in view of India’s defiance. Pakistan exercised complete restraint, despite developing its nuclear capability until 1998, when India exploded its nuclear device yet again and compelled Pakistan to follow suit. Chinese assistance to Pakistan has achieved two objectives; firstly, it has enabled Pakistan to develop its own indigenous capacity for a robust nuclear programme and secondly to restore the strategic balance in South Asia.

All-Weather Relations under BRI and CPEC

A notable development in the last seventy years, has been the establishment of a viable framework for bilateral cooperation. An important hallmark of the relationship has been its resilience and all-weather character. A unique feature is that this partnership has remained unshaken and unaffected by domestic and international changes. Both countries have helped each

other, resisting international pressure. Today, it is truly a multifaceted and broad-based relationship which has a natural propellant to grow.

Another remarkable landmark of Pakistan-China friendship is the progress in economic cooperation. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of 2013 is a vision of strategic significance, opening new avenues in economic growth for developing countries like Pakistan. Multi trillion dollar BRI can be described as the biggest cooperation platform of the 21st century. The Chinese government has underlined four main principal aims of BRI (i) to bring prosperity to under developed parts of China, particularly in west of China (ii) increased connectivity and economic development through the movement of goods, services, information and people to people interaction and cultural exchanges (iii) greater integration between China and its neighbors; and (iv) energy security through diversification of import sources^[25]. BRI's philosophical underpinnings are best illustrated by a Chinese proverb "A river is formed when streams come together".

China's BRI reflects China's Foreign Policy objectives of stability in the global order through economic development and connectivity. Trade enhancement, relocation of surplus industrial capacity and exploring new markets for stable sources of energy and food supply are prerequisites for China's continued growth and in line with China's growing role in global economic affairs. Peaceful development, win-win cooperation, inclusiveness and openness and voluntary action define the underlying principles of BRI. Growing popularity of the initiative underscores its voluntary nature. BRI has speeded up trade and exchange of services between China and the European continent. China's economic and political footprint is now writ large all over.

Like any project of such scale and magnitude, BRI has faced challenges such as asymmetry of economies and regions, different financial and taxation systems, logistical issues, ecological concerns and cultural divergences. Covid-19 pandemic has also raised concerns about the financial sustainability of the projects under BRI. More importantly, the initiative faces strategic challenges from powers that consider China to be a potential threat to their dominance and this initiative to be an expansionist move. Chinese government is nevertheless cognizant of these challenges and seeking practical solutions to deal with the unforeseen environment. It is opening up its doors to the outside world and deepening reforms. It is resolved to pursue an inclusive approach to global growth. In a world which is mired in growing uncertainty and strife, BRI offers a ray of hope and a unique paradigm of peace and development. In the words of a Chinese scholar, BRI would greatly improve trade and investment systems, and promote a win-win global value chain, while eliminating development bottlenecks^[26].

CPEC, a flagship project of BRI, is a new breather in Pakistan's economic life. It has introduced a new discourse in Pakistan on development and its fruits benefitting different regions of the country. Since its launch in 2013, CPEC has helped meet Pakistan's energy deficit, improved physical infrastructure, generated local employment and enhanced people to people interaction between the two friendly countries. Its expansion in its second phase to cover the fields of Agriculture, Health, Education, Science & Technology, Industrial Cooperation, Tourism and Cultural Cooperation will further solidify our friendship.

CPEC is a rare window of opportunity for Pakistan to improve its infrastructure, enhance its growth, trade and investments and HR capacity. Pakistan can be on the road to self-reliance taking advantage of the learning curve offered by CPEC. The development of the Gwadar Port and the city's allied infrastructure will help address poverty in Baluchistan. Completion of ML-I will transform the logistics, cut costs of internal and external trade and enable connectivity with our regional partners. Pakistan will earn revenue through transit rights of interregional trade.

CPEC thus has the potential to transform Pakistan into a geo-economic hub. It will optimize Pakistan's geographical position at the intersection of various regions. CPEC's regional extension will induce development addressing poverty and underdevelopment as well as curbing extremism and terrorism.

While CPEC has clear advantages for Pakistan and the region, opposition by India and some other countries manifests a self-serving agenda to keep Pakistan vulnerable and weak. There is a need to see through these designs and foil them since such attempts are at variance with global trends and aspirations of the common lot. Much is at stake for both countries to make BRI and CPEC a success. In this regard, Chinese firm support to CPEC is highly appreciated.

CPEC has opened new vistas of opportunity for Pakistan, through a well-established framework. Pakistan and China must mutually embark on a steady course that guarantees successful completion of all projects according to the stipulated deadlines. It is imperative that obstacles like difference in policy objectives within the federal and provincial governments, legal and regulatory lacunas, bureaucratic inconsistencies, and lack of skilled human resource be addressed with complete diligence and sincerity. Foreign investment can be facilitated through consistency and coherence of policy. It is worthwhile to study and follow successful overseas models of industrial development and establishment of Economic Zones.

When in 1950s Pakistan and China started on a journey of rediscovering each other, cold war was laying new parameters of inter-state relations. India was trying to establish its non-aligned credentials and Pakistan was leaning towards the west. When Pakistan gained independence, it was confronted by a hostile India, hostile Afghanistan and unfriendly Soviet Union. Amid a complex set of conflicting world views, Pakistan and China followed a path of mutual understanding leading to culmination of a strong and dependable partnership.

The goals and objectives of BRI are futuristic, based on careful foresight leading towards greater cohesion in the global economic system. It is a blueprint for economic development through regional connectivity and regional integration. As it spreads across regions and continents, it would result in massive economic, commercial, infrastructure and energy resource development.

Historical Rise: China's Role on the World Stage

China's economic progress of last four decades is unprecedented in human history. "The world has never seen like the rapid, tectonic shift in the global balance of power created by the rise of China"^[27]. In 1980, when China had just started changing course by opening up its economy, its GDP was less than \$300 billion; by 2018 it was \$14 trillion and global trade \$4 trillion compared to \$ 40 billion in 1980. Its per capita was \$180 compared to Pakistan which was \$250. Now China has a per capita income of \$10,000.

China has positioned itself to be a world leader in technologies like the Artificial Intelligence, robotics and space sciences which will dictate the future course of human history. Over the past decade, China has constructed the world's largest high-speed rail network. Between 2011 and 2013, China both produced and used more cement than the US did in the entire 20th century.^[28]

The conclusion of several prominent American business leaders and scholars is that "China is on its way to surpass (the US) in many ways. They are going to end up with a bigger economy, more R & D investments, better quality research, wider applications of technology and a strong computing infrastructure."^[29] So the theory that the US can contain China through embargoes, denial of trade or technology or even military means is far fetched and unrealistic. The US can only try to compete with China fairly and at a level playing field.

The post World War II order which was primarily established to preserve and advance the strategic and economic interests of the West, has transitioned to a new power equation where US and China are the main players with rest of the world adjusting to this power dynamics. American preeminence has been challenged by China's rapid economic growth and military prowess. As Napoleon famously remarked over 200 years ago: let China sleep; when it wakes up, it will shake the world. That is exactly what is happening now.

Compared to 1980s, when the United States and Europe were the main drivers of the global economy, the pendulum has shifted towards Asia led by China. Its rise and its influence is creating a new and vibrant Asia. 21st century has been called the Asian century. Asia's demographic potential and its incredible economic dynamism are unmatched. Asia is now the global engine of growth. While the west had led the world in terms of industrialization, innovation and invention as well as a liberal economic order, its lure has diminished over the past century due to both internal and external factors. This void has been filled by Asia led by China. Its rise has transformed the global balance of power.

Western scholars like Graham Allison refer to the "Thucydides Trap" whereby a conflict becomes inevitable between a rising power and the established power. The US Administration has categorized China as a "competitor, rival, predator and a revisionist power." US officials have openly questioned the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China (CPC). US appears threatened by ideological differences with China and due to its formidable economic capacity. While there seems to be a growing bipartisan consensus in the US on "China's threat", commentators like Fareed Zakaria feel that the China challenge is being exaggerated as was the case with the Soviet Union during the cold war. Fareed is of the view that consequences of not getting the Chinese challenge right will be huge. "The US risks squandering the hard-won gains from four decades of engagement with China, leading the world's two largest economies into a treacherous conflict of unknown scale and scope that will inevitably cause decades of instability and insanity. A cold war with China is likely to be much longer and more costly than the one with the Soviet Union, with an uncertain outcome."^[30] A similar sentiment has been expressed by no less than Dr. Kissinger who has advised the incoming Biden Administration to work with China to avoid a catastrophe.

The Chinese leaders dismiss the so called "China threat" or "China challenge". They assert that China is on the path of rejuvenation after a century of humiliation and its rise is a historical phenomenon which cannot be reversed. They assert that China will never be an expansionist power. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently remarked that by pursuing the path of confrontation with China, USA is on the wrong side of history.

Undoubtedly, China has earned the respect of the global community due to its responsible behavior. It has not gone to war against any country since 1979. It has not interfered in other countries' affairs. It has not encouraged insurgencies or proxies. It is the second largest contributor to UN budget and a major contributor to UN peacekeeping operations. Its support for the poor and developing countries is widely applauded. Its financial institutions like the AIIB, NIB and Silk Road Fund are contributing to the development of various countries. President Xi Jinping has offered an alternative model for global governance based on Chinese wisdom and Chinese experience.

While the world grapples with the devastating effects of Corona pandemic, Chinese economy has rebounded. During the quarter of July – September 2020, its economy grew by 4.9% compared to the same period last year^[31].

Further, China acted with fastness of speed to contain the virus after its breakout in Wuhan last year. This proves that "one of China's key strengths has been its ability to think long term and [plan] a well thought out strategy."^[32]

Pakistan holds in high esteem, China's special friendship and trust. When natural calamities like earthquakes, floods or locust strike, both countries stand shoulder to shoulder with each other. Excellent cooperation and support was displayed during the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought them closer together. Scientists from both countries are engaged in joint research on developing a vaccine. China has extended substantial material and technical assistance to Pakistan to deal with the emergency. No doubt, current upheaval in US-China relations is a matter of grave concern which is destabilizing the international system. A dangerous competition on a host of issues is in the offing. President Trump had held China responsible for Covid-19, while sanctions and counter-sanctions on trade have been imposed. World's attention is being consumed by this rivalry rather than focusing on the more urgent tasks of handling corona crisis and other pressing emergencies i.e. climate change, energy security, food security, mass migrations, terrorism etc. Globalization is in deep waters on the other hand as the gap between the rich and poor widens. US-China rivalry is ominous in terms of its likely spillover to an actual conflict due to several flash points which inform their strategic interests. Taiwan, DPRK, South China Sea, East China Sea are potential flash points where a conflict can break out.

Russia is also facing the heat from the United States. Its European partners of the United States are being asked to choose sides between US and China, which they are reluctant to do. At the societal level, there is rising populism and backlash against established elitist order, both within the United States and Europe, creating social fissures and disharmony. While the US-China relations are heading to a free fall, there is growing skepticism about a post-pandemic world remaining unscathed and retaining its present shape. New alignments and realignments are in the making. A world moving away from a strict unipolarity to bipolarity with multiple centers of power of unequal size and strength may dot the global geo-political matrix in the coming decades.

China's global and regional influence has increased in recent years. In the Eurasian region, China is counted as a reliable partner through its investments in railways, road infrastructure, energy and in logistic services. Chinese investments in Central Asia have sharply increased and China-Central Asian transport corridor is being upgraded to service commodity traffic between Europe and China. "China's current rise is driven by a desire to avenge the humiliation it suffered and to restore its pre-nineteenth century [position] as East Asia's dominant power."³³ In terms of purchasing power parity, China has already surpassed the United States as the world's largest economy. In military terms, the gap between US and China in East Asia is closing rapidly. Whether the US can or will peacefully cede its dominance in East Asia and acknowledge China's standing as its great-power equal is an open question^[33].

Biden's policy on China has a crucial bearing on Pakistan. There will be tough talk and 'retaliatory measures' but Biden Administration would seek accommodation with China — for instance, on trade, health and climate change issues. Pressure from the European partners for a more balanced US policy for China will also be an important factor in determining Biden's approach. A more realistic policy, given the inseparable nature of US-China ties, may inform Biden but a strategic reversal is unlikely.

In South Asia, the Democrats' approach to project India as a 'counterweight' against China and a 'regional policeman' may be pursued with greater consistency and coherence, notwithstanding Biden's reservations on India's policy in regard to its treatment of religious minorities and human rights transgressions in the Indian held Kashmir. This is borne out by previous Obama Administration's approach in support of India where Biden was a part. No US Administration can afford to lose India. There is now a firm strategic nexus between India and the US against China, which will play out in our region to the detriment of both Pakistan and China.

Issues like Terrorism, the so-called Pakistan sponsored militancy in IHK, US support for India's UNSC membership and NSG may be high on Biden's agenda after US withdrawal from Afghanistan. Conclusion of agreements like BECA, COMCASA, LEMOA and GSOMIA, described as "foundational defence pacts" by the Times of India underscore the strategic nature of US-India alliance and their convergence on common security threats.

There is a broad agreement amongst South Asia watchers that both Donald Trump and Joe Biden hold similar views on South Asia. Both support a strong relationship with India as a key partner to help push back against Beijing's presence in the Indo-Pacific^[34]. QUAD arrangements will get more prominence with the proposed "Coalition of Democracies" which includes all four QUAD members.

China's role in South Asia in recent years has become significant especially as a credible development partner. Its multibillion-dollar investments in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives and Nepal are reflective of its desire to have a peaceful neighborhood and contribute to regions' development. In the past few years, China has reached out to India — the only country in South Asia having troubled relationship with China. Their bilateral trade has grown to nearly \$100 billion. High level bilateral summits and exchanges led to closer trade and investment ties. "China's strategic goal is to stabilize relations with India in order to avoid a two-front war with the United States and India^[35]. However, China's overtures have been rebuffed by India due to its strategic decision to confront China.

Two nations stand off on Doklam in 2017 and in Ladakh in 2020 attest to serious mistrust which mars their relationship. China remains highly suspicious of India's strategic ambitions and intent. Washington's Indo-Pacific strategy, released three months after the Doklam standoff, magnified this mistrust. Yun Sun opines that "for China, the prospect of facing the

American military at sea and the Indian military along its southern border and in the Indian Ocean becomes much more real and dangerous with defence cooperation between the United States and India. Such cooperation will not only damage the security and stability of China's western borderland while undermining China's strategic influence in South Asia; it will also hinder China's power projection capability in the Indian Ocean with the potential to threaten China's energy supply from the Middle East.

In this backdrop, Pakistan-China relations have acquired even greater importance. Both are strategic partners. Our partnership is designed to strengthen bilateral ties for our mutual benefit and to promote peace and stability in our region. This relationship is not against any country but we have common perspective that if South Asia is to develop it has to eschew negative trends of hegemonism and focus on resolving disputes for creating a peaceful environment. There is complete trust and understanding at the highest level that has endured despite seismic changes on the domestic as well as external plane. There is unanimous agreement on the value of Pakistan's friendship with China across its political spectrum. Pakistan and China share a mutual perspective which entails that connectivity and development are critical to the progress, prosperity and security of the region. It supports BRI that entails win-win prosperity for all.

Regional Peace and Stability

Pakistan is cognizant that its unique geographical location makes it a critical player for establishing peace and stability in the region. Pakistan believes in peaceful resolution of all disputes through dialogue. In support of this ideal it earnestly believes that through sustained and meaningful dialogue and engagement, an atmosphere of mutual confidence and trust can be fostered in the region. The Jammu and Kashmir dispute which is lingering for the last seven decades, has been a source of conflict between the two biggest nuclear powers of South Asia. India's illegal action of annexing Jammu & Kashmir in August 2019, in complete disregard of UNSC resolutions, has inflamed the regional situation. Its false claims on Aksai Chin and infrastructure development in Laddakh, a disputed territory has placed China and India at the brink of a fresh conflict. Dangerous precepts of Hindutva philosophy invoked by Modi government in India have the potential to unleash religious and sectarian inferno in the region. Only India is responsible for this growing instability in the region. India is engaged in subverting CPEC through its proxies, evident in the dossier issued by Pakistan in November 2020.

It has been almost four decades since the creation of SAARC. Despite all existing goodwill, sincere intentions and efforts, the organization's underlying objectives remain unfulfilled due to India's procrastinating attitude even when it comes to accepting China as an observer.

Creating regional instability is India's non-sensical quest to transform into a regional bully with the help of Western supplies of high-tech defence equipment. It is a fact that a conflict between two nuclear armed adversaries, even by conventional means, has the potential to cross the threshold. Even if the escalation may not be premeditated risk exists of an inadvertent escalation, caused by misreading the intention of the adversary. To avert the risk of miscalculation, Pakistan has put forward several proposals, including a Strategic Restraint Regime in South Asia to promote nuclear stability and conventional balance, but of no avail due to India's intransigence. People of South Asia want peace to prosper, but the dream of peace and prosperity cannot be realised on the basis of 'dictat'. It is unfortunate that big powers which have an important responsibility for peace and stability in South Asia are not playing their role. We see principles being sacrificed at the altar of expediency.

Conclusion

China's elevation and economic preeminence is shaping a new, prosperous and vibrant region. South Asia's demographic and huge economic potential are promising. Pakistan and China can join hands together to make this dream of a prosperous, secure and peaceful region by aligning with those who wish to win the race, leaving losers behind.

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