

Pakistan-China Relations under the Shadow of Neo-Realism

*Mirwais Kasi**

Abstract

Pakistan-China friendship has nothing in common in terms of history, language, ethnicity, culture or ideology, yet their nexus is being considered as deeply rooted and time-tested which has developed into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Pakistan-China partnership has remained sustained and unaffected during changes of leadership, political system and variations in regional and international politics. Both states have developed an ideal state-to-state relationship based on complete trust. They have been steadfast friends who have supported each other through thick and thin. The hallmark of these bilateral ties is that both states, existing under an anarchic order, framed their partnership in accordance with neo-realism, with the objective of achieving maximum advantage to assure their security interests. Their multi-dimensional cooperation, having wide-ranging connotations, is based on the principle of respect and equality. This article explores how Pakistan and China have been securing their self-interests through their bilateral partnership.

Anarchic order

The neo-realist theory is also labeled as structural realism. A few writers from neo-realist school of thought occasionally denote their theories as realist to underline the connection between their personal and older opinions. However, there are numerous basic dissimilarities between realism and neo-realism, which is not the main point to prove here.

Neo-realism was first articulated by Kenneth N. Waltz in his famous book, 'Theory of International Politics' in 1979. According to neo-realist the arrangement and structure of the international system is anarchic in nature. While anarchy does not indicate the presence of chaos and disorder, but it chiefly highlights and refer to the existence of an international order or government.¹ States are unitary actors who want

* Mirwais Kasi, Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Balochistan, Quetta.

¹ Elif Dibek, 'What Are the Basic Concepts of Neorealism?' Accessed on 17 October 2015 http://www.researchgate.net/post/What_are_the_basic_concepts_of_neorealism

just to sustain, and state is the basic units of systems.² With no predominant universal power that delivers and assures the security and stability in international politics, the global system is thus explained in terms of an anarchic international structure. An anarchic structure has two main effects: Primarily, every actor in the global system is responsible for taking care of itself and then, states continuously feel threatened by a potential attack from the other states.³ 'Rendering to this opinion, the relationship between states are influenced by the structure under which states interact with each other'.⁴ The development of exceptional relations between Pakistan and China 'is best evaluated in a conceptual context where ideological considerations are substituted by security interests and realpolitik as chief determining element of the association between states'.⁵

After the establishment of their diplomatic ties, Pakistan and China went through some real tests. They shared nothing in common and, in addition, soon after their independence they aligned with rival coalitions which emerged because of cold war politics between the two super powers. China sided with the communist group which was controlled by the Soviet Union while Pakistan aligned with the capitalist group which was commanded by the U.S.A. Later, Pakistan joined the military alliances — Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955 and the Joint Defense Treaty with the U.S.A in 1959. All such military alignments obviously contained anti-communist elements and hatred against the communist regime in China. Pakistan, however, did not join those alliances against China, but because of its hostility with India.

Despite such alignments and counter alignments, Pakistan and China did not become hostile towards each other in anarchic circumstances, rather they focused on developing friendly ties with each other. China never sought friendly ties with India at the expense of Pakistan. Furthermore, China was surprisingly soft in its criticism of the three SEATO countries (Pakistan, Thailand and the Philippines), however, it warned that they made a serious mistake by getting into the

² Kenneth N. Waltz, 'The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 18:4 (1988), p.618.

³ Dibek, *op.cit.*

⁴ Dr. Minhas Majid Khan, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, during an interview to the author, 30 May 2012.

⁵ *Ibid.*

US trap.⁶ Pakistan, on the other hand, gave clear gestures to China that its membership of various pacts was not opposed to China, but through them Pakistan sought economic assistance and security against Indian aggression.

The Bandung conference in 1955 became milestone in Pakistan-China relations. It provided a chance to Prime Minister of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Bogra, and Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlia, to talk over their countries relationship.⁷ Chinese premier openly recognized Mohammad Ali Bogra's statement, during discussion with him, that the Pakistani nation and government has never been against China.⁸ Moreover, Pakistan never felt that China would ever be aggressive towards Pakistan. Similarly if under SEATO, USA took aggressive steps against China, Pakistan would not be a party to it. Thus via such clarifications the two countries accomplished a shared understanding.⁹

Survival in anarchic order

It is correctly observed that development of exceptional relations between 'Pakistan and China, is best evaluated in a conceptual context where ideological considerations are substituted by security interests based on security agendas and realpolitik as chief determining element of the association between states'.¹⁰ Pakistan-China relations after independence were strongly affected by the international system. The neo-realist holds that in international system states are unitary and for them most important issue is national security. For assuring security, therefore, after their independence Pakistan aligned itself with the US while China leaned towards the Soviet bloc. However, beside Indian military might and its forceful actions in Kashmir, Junagarh, Hyderabad etc., Soviet threats to Pakistan because of U-2 spy plane event and US support to India in 1962 war against China, increased the paranoia of insecurity in Pakistan. On the other hand, the role of the Soviet Union during the Korean war, its failure in securing UN membership, western support to India in 1962 India-China war and Soviet Union's neutrality in that war increased Chinese security anxieties. Both Pakistan and China

⁶ Prof. Khalid Mahmud, 'Sino-Pakistan Relations: An All-Weather Friendship', Islamabad: *Regional Studies Journal*, Vol.XIX, No.3 (Summer, 2001), p.4.

⁷ Abdul Sattar, *Pakistan Foreign Policy 1947-2005* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.69.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Dr. Minhas Majid Khan, *op.cit.*

also got disillusioned with the UN in managing their crises in Kashmir and Taiwan respectively. Thus, from the prism of neo-realism, Pakistan-China bilateral relations started to flourish in an anarchic environment.

Thereafter, Pakistani government started a more sovereign line of actions in its foreign policy. In December 1961, Pakistan voted for Chinese membership in the United Nations. It was in total contrast of traditional approach which Pakistan followed from the ninth to the thirteenth session of the UN General Assembly, when it regularly voted against deliberations on the issue of China's membership in the UN.¹¹ China appreciated Islamabad's modified stance. Pakistan proposed negotiations on demarcation of border with China and, in March 1962, China showed its willingness for setting the proceedings in motion.¹² The India-China war of 1962 added momentum in the negotiations for proper border demarcation.¹³ A border agreement was signed on 2 March 1963. The accord was concluded in a time frame of less than a year, while the actual negotiations did not take more than two and a half months.¹⁴

The boundary agreement was followed by an air service treaty which ended the Chinese isolation from regional politics¹⁵ because, in this agreement, China granted permission to PIA to fly to Japan through China and extend its services to China. Thus, on Chinese soil PIA became the first non-communist airlines to land on 29 April 1964.¹⁶ In February 1964 Premier Zhou Enlai came to Pakistan, on his second official visit, and President Ayub Khan made the return trip in March 1965; after that the pace of Sino-Pakistan relations became swift and smooth.

Expansion of each other's relative power

An 'anarchic structure' has two major implications: First, every actor in the global structure is in charge for looking after itself, representing the

¹¹ Latif Ahmed Sherwani, *Pakistan, China and America* (Karachi: D and Y printers, 1980), p.94.

¹² Shahzad Akhtar, 'Sino-Pakistani Relations: An assessment', p.72. accessed on 05 February 2013 http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1299824823_90636169.pdf

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Prof Khalid Mahmud, 'Sino-Pakistan Relations: An All-Weather Friendship', Islamabad: *Regional Studies Journal*. Vol.XIX, No.3 (Summer, 2001), p.7.

¹⁵ Dr. Maqbool Ahmed Bhatti, 'Pakistan-China Relations in the 21st century', Institute of Regional Studies (Islamabad), XVIII:1 (Winter, 1999-2000), p.82.

¹⁶ Prof. Khalid Mahmud, *op.cit*, p.9.

whole structure as a 'self-help order in which states primarily seek to survive'. Second, because of absence of a stable world system, states continuously feel insecure by a potential attack from others. Therefore, states attempts to expand their relative power in order to survive and secure their positions. In terms of Pakistan and China relations they supported each other through thick and thin to stabilize each other for their own self based interests. To stabilize their own positions, they worked for maximizing the strength of the other.¹⁷ For instance when Pakistan-India war started in 1965 the press of China harshly criticized India openly, rejected all Indian allegations against Pakistan and branded India as an aggressor.

Although, during the course of the war, India enjoyed superiority in conventional arms over Pakistan, China, as a balancing factor, came to rescue Pakistan by its threatening military gestures towards India. The Chinese were generous even in offering arms supply to Pakistan. Beijing also tried to pressurize the super powers and the UN for extending their efforts for arranging a cease fire. Subsequently, on 20th September, Security Council passed a resolution for ending the war. The resolution also asked for withdrawal of all troops from the held territories, and to go back to the positions held on 5 August 1965.¹⁸ Without getting physically involved in the war, China extended enthusiastic diplomatic support to Pakistan and tried its best bring to it to an end. Chinese support to Pakistan was driven by the fact that instead of an unstable and demoralized Pakistan, a stable and strong Pakistan was in their interest.¹⁹ Pakistan appeared to serve as a low cost deterrence card against India. Therefore, China preferred to assist Pakistan in expanding its relative strength for bilateral gains.

In the late 1960's, because of Vietnam war, American frustration reached its peak. It wanted to withdraw from the war and was fully aware of the fact that the Chinese contribution would provide a face saving opportunity in this regard. Eventually, China and US went soft towards each other for their own reasons. The historic task of building a bridge between China and the US was accomplished by Pakistan. In July, 1971 Henry Kissinger was flown to Beijing in a PIA plane while

¹⁷ Rizwan Naseer and Musarat Amin, 'Sino-Pakistan Relations: A natural alliance against Common enemy', *Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences*, 1:..2 (February, 2011), p.3.

¹⁸ Gurnam Singh, *Sino-Pakistan Relations: The Ayub Era* (Ameritser: Gurunanak Dev University Press, 1987), p.182.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

everyone thought he was ill and resting in Pakistan's hill resort Nathiagali.²⁰ The Henry Kissinger visit of China was planned well in advance and Pakistan was requested for assistance in facilitating and organizing the whole affair. Thereafter, President Nixon arrived in Beijing on 21 February 1972, on a seven-day historic visit. He met Chairman, Mao Zedong, and Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai. The normalization of Sino-US relations left both countries to explore many areas of cooperation. It helped China to end its prolonged isolation and secure a permanent seat in United Nations Security Council. The veto power status of China not only worked for its own advantage, but it favored Pakistan, on several occasions.

Sharing capabilities for balance of power

The neo-realists hold that as every state frequently feels uncertain and insecure in the anarchic system, each state needs the capability of defending itself. The notion of capability, play an instrumental role for states to confirm their survival.²¹ As states are continuously insecure, they perpetually aim to enhance their capabilities. The striking paradox of global politics the 'security dilemma' thus originates. In the struggle for assuring security, states accomplish changeable heights of capability. Capabilities are divided in different ways across the units of the international system.²² The neo-realists view that the ultimate objective of states in any relationship is to prevent adversaries from achieving any progress in maximizing relative capabilities. Neo-realists also contend that democratic peace is simply a myth. The presence or absence of war is not because of presence and absence of democratic systems in states, but it is due to existence and non-existence of balance-of-power. International law and International institutions may affect the advancement of events to some degree, but they are powerless to encounter the supremacy of states who act as the foremost actors in global politics.

In this context, after Indian nuclear test at Pokhran in 1974, Pakistan under Bhutto's leadership gave top priority to develop deterrence against the nuclear threat of India. Any development of Pakistan towards acquiring a nuclear technology was taken as a severe challenge for the strategic interests of the U.S. and the western world. The U.S.A passed a Symington amendment aiming at blocking all

²⁰ Prof. Khalid Mahmud, *op.cit*, p.13.

²¹ Elif Dibek, *op.cit*.

²² *Ibid*.

military and economic aid to that country which acquires or transfer uranium enriched material. It also pressurized France to withdraw from its deal for building nuclear reprocessing plant in Pakistan.

To accomplish Pakistan's dream of becoming a nuclear power, China responded positively. China remained the vital ally of Pakistan who contributed progressively in the nuclear program of Pakistan. The level of Chinese assistance to Pakistan in this regard is, however, hard to assess. The two countries kept nuclear collaborations between them a guarded secret.²³ According to various sources, Pakistan-China nuclear collaborations started from late May 1976; it was the occasion when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto visited China, his third since 1972.²⁴ In September 1986 by means of an agreement China provided support to Pakistan nuclear objectives. Afterward from 1989 to 1990 China sold dual small research reactors to Pakistan; additionally it also sold 300-megawatt pressurized water nuclear plant. The specific nature of this collaboration is not entirely known, but it is widely believed that Pakistan's nuclear bomb project might not have come to fruition without Chinese support. Chinese nuclear support to Pakistan became much more vital during the 1980s when western states and various organisations became gradually watchful vis-à-vis the nuclear program of Pakistan.²⁵ 'The American State Department believed that, in 1983, Beijing might have helped Pakistan overcome some of the difficulties it had in mastering enrichment technology, and that bilateral cooperation was possibly taking place in nuclear-device design. China may have supplied uranium hexafluoride to Pakistan. Chinese nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan became an increasing source of Sino-US tension and a topic of internal political debate in the United States'.²⁶

It is believed that by the beginning of 1990 Pakistan manufactured from seven to twelve nuclear warheads that were not only based on Chinese design but Islamabad was even helped by Chinese scientists.²⁷ Because of this collaboration, America imposed sanctions

²³ 'Pakistan's nuclear program and its import', 02 May 2007. Accessed on 15 February 2013. <http://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/nbm/nuclear-black-market-dossier-a-net-assesment/pakistans-nuclear-programme-and-imports/>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Tim Welner, 'U.S. and China helped Pakistan build the bomb', *New York Times*, 1 June 1998, p.A6.

against the Pakistani and Chinese companies on numerous occasion.²⁸ Such sanctions could not stop their nuclear collaborations. Chinese nuclear proliferation and transfer of missile technology to Pakistan played a key role in altering the regional balance between India and Pakistan and in assuring Pakistan's security. For China, Pakistan became a low cost deterrence option against India. The two countries also cooperated in nuclear and missile sectors. Likewise, through the Gwadar port of Pakistan, China has easy access to the Indian Ocean to secure its commercial and energy targets. There China can, play an active role through its naval presence frustrating Indian ambitions in that region.

One of the key component of neo-realism is balancing. Balance of power and alignment strategies have been used by states to increase their capabilities and reduce the capabilities of adversaries.²⁹ Pakistan and China concluded the civilian nuclear deal to balance the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal and to prevent India from attaining supremacy in regional politics.

Exploring advantages on basis of self-interests through one another

The scope of Pakistan-China relationship has become very broad, even variations in leadership and regimes in both states have not influenced and shaken their durable bilateral partnership.³⁰ This time-tested relationship have continued to grow in a world that has been constantly changing in many ways since the two states established their diplomatic relations.³¹ Pakistan is strategically very important abode for China as it serves as a gateway to China to access Middle East and Indian Ocean. While for Pakistan, China is solid and reliable source of its defense and economic requirements. India has tried, since its independence to increase regional influence across the region due to its history, size,

²⁸ Rajan Natarajan, Deputy Secretary of State, Maryland office of the Secretary of State-U.S.A, during discussion to the author under the International Visitor Leadership program meeting, 14 June 2012.

²⁹ Karl. W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, 'Multiple Power Systems and International Stability', *World Politics*, 16:3 (1964), p.390.

³⁰ Yaacov Vertzberger, *The Enduring Entente: Sino-Pakistani Relations 1960-1980* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1983), p.10.

³¹ Fazal-ur-Rahman, 'Pakistan-China trade and investment relations', paper presented at the seminar on 'Pakistan-China Relation-2011: Year of Friendship', Islamabad, The Institute of Strategic Studies January 11-12, 2011, p.1.

relative economic strength, and ancient cultural relevance.³² The Indian regional hegemonic design remained a serious challenge to the balance of power concept in South Asia. As balancing is an alignment against the threatening power, rather than the most powerful one, Pakistan-China relations creates a new pole for small and weak states of the region against the threatening power.

Like other regional and international actors, Pakistan and China also aspire to play a major and meaningful role in the Central Asian region — a region which is destined to play a vital role in global politics because of its natural resources and geographical positions. Various elements like the rise of China in economic and defense sectors, similarity in terms of religion and culture between Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs), easy access to Central Asian states via Chinese and Pakistani land routes towards Indian Ocean, and closeness between Pakistan and China can attract Central Asian states towards them.

Alliance

As Pakistan-China relations generate a new pole for small and weak states of the region against the threatening power, securing national interests to overcome their insecurity through balancing and other strategies become a motivating factor for them. Neo realist theory fits in terms of alignment politics in Pakistan-China relations as well. They have been maximizing their interests through alliance politics, e.g. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) comprising China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan; whereas Pakistan, India, Mongolia and Iran has observer status. Pakistan is desirous of becoming the permanent member of the SCO and Beijing is facilitating Islamabad in this regard. Pakistan's entry into SCO can have a positive impact not only on Pakistan, China and CARs but on Pakistan-Russian relations as well. The SCO has been merging the interests of all these actors at the regional and international level at a great pace to create a new military, economic and resource rich pole in the world.

Similarly, Pakistan-China and African countries alignment also has been paving the way for maximizing advantages for all these actors. African countries along with Pakistan and China continuously oppose colonialism, imperialism and all forms of great powers exploitation. They also oppose the big powers domination in the UN. They have

³² Ashlyn Anderson, 'Economics of Influence: China and India in South Asia'. Accessed on 20 August 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/economics/economics-influence-china-india-south-asia/p36862>, 7 August 2015.

remained on the same page on sensitive issues regarding Third World countries. Pakistan and China are interacting with African countries through diplomacy. They utilize ideological and international forums through which better understanding has been flourishing among them. Peace and security along with economic instability remain the core issues for African countries. China offers them a vital option in regard to achieving their targets related to peace, security and economic progress.

In the context of Gulf countries the worth of Pakistan-China relations cannot be ignored. Pakistan's relations with the Persian Gulf countries are based on trust and equality and in this regard Islamic religious homogeneity plays an important role. Pakistan played a vital role in bringing Persian Gulf countries and China closer towards each other. Pakistan serves as the easiest and shortest route connecting China and the Persian Gulf. The development of Gwadar port in Pakistan with the assistance of China will further assist all these actors to secure their economic and commercial targets through more secure options. Chinese high-tech, secure land route from China to Persian Gulf states via Pakistan, Pakistan's geo-strategic location and Persian Gulf countries' natural resources are key elements which will further enhance close collaborations between these actors. However, there are certain obstacles as Arab Spring, Iran-Saudi Arab clash of interests etc., which need to be tackled for positive outcomes.

Conclusion

The neo-realists hold that every state frequently feels uncertain and insecure in the anarchic system. In their struggle to assure security from any potential strike, states are forced to attain maximum capabilities to weaken the influence of the capabilities of other states. To deal with the problem of a common enemy thus they feel the need to facilitate each other in coordination in achieving their own interests, i.e. to survive and increase their material capabilities. States create such coordination to avoid adverse outcomes.

Pakistan and China face numerous challenges in the 21st century but the geo-strategic requirements and security factor compel each to bond with the other. The two states have strengthened their partnership and are working jointly in all fields, particularly related to defense, including nuclear collaborations along with the advancement of conventional and non-conventional weapons. Similarly they visualize that in the future Karakorum Highway (Pakistan-China Friendship Highway) and the Gwadar port will link together, making Pakistan the energy and trade corridor to the Middle East, and beyond. It will also support in the economic integration of the two countries at the same time assuring their security dynamics through better and secure options.