

Pakistan's Relations with China

Pakistan has enjoyed a remarkably close relationship with China, almost from the very early years of its independence. Considering that the two countries have been ideologically far apart, and have at times even belonged to two opposite military blocs, China-Pakistan friendship has aroused considerable curiosity and various explanations have been offered for this seemingly odd couple. Indian observers have described this friendship as being based on opportunism, expediency and, even, collusion directed mainly against India since, in their view, apart from a common dislike for India, there was little else which was common between Pakistan and China.

An analysis of the history of the relationship reveals that the two countries had proceeded step-by-step towards establishing friendship on the basis of a mutuality of interests, which overcame ideological differences. India, no doubt, figured in an important way in the calculations of both sides. However, both Pakistan and China were moved by wider geo-strategic considerations as well.

When the communists seized power in China in 1949, Pakistan was quick to recognize the new regime. It was assumed by Pakistan and many others that China's seat at the UN would, henceforth, be occupied by the new Communist regime. Since the Kashmir dispute was before the UN Security Council, it would not have been in Pakistan's interest to alienate the new Chinese regime by delaying its recognition since China's veto could have adversely affected Pakistan's case there. Also, Pakistan was faced with a major economic problem in 1949 when India had suddenly stopped trading with Pakistan since it

had not followed India's example in devaluing its currency. Pakistan was, therefore, desperate to find an alternative market for selling its raw jute and cotton as also to locate a supply source for coal. Trade with China thus fitted in very admirably with this situation. For these reasons, Pakistan was among the first nations to recognize Communist China and establish diplomatic relations with it.

Communist China had inherited old territorial claims on Tibet, and even in the Himalayas, which ran counter to India's position. Thus, when China moved its troops into Tibet in 1950, India protested, although it later decided to acquiesce in the Chinese claim on Tibet. But the differences on the delineation of the India-China border, both in Kashmir as well as on the eastern side, were to acquire an increasingly bitter dimension. Even more importantly, from the beginning, China foresaw the potential of friction with India not only on the border question but also in the context of the leadership of Asia.

It was this background of actual or potential friction with India, which made Pakistan an attractive proposition for China. It was aware of Pakistan's anti-Indian stance and probably calculated that friendship with Pakistan could be handy when China ran into problems with India. Thus, during the 1950s, even in several instances when Pakistan took steps which were not to China's liking—such as joining SEATO or sympathizing with the US during the Korean War—China did not lose patience with Pakistan.

Moreover, as China developed differences with the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s and as the latter moved closer towards India, China found a commonality of interests with Pakistan. At the Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian countries in 1955, China was helpful to Pakistan in several ways. This led to the first-ever visit by a Pakistani Prime Minister to China in 1956, followed by a return visit to Pakistan by Premier Zhou Enlai when he said that, although Pakistan was a member of SEATO, there was no reason why China could not be friendly with her. He added that the two countries had 'no conflict of interests.'¹ On his part, Pakistani Prime Minister Suhrawardy predicted,

early in 1957, that 'I feel perfectly certain that when the crucial time comes, China will come to our assistance.'²

With the seizure of power in Pakistan in 1958 by General Ayub Khan, China-Pakistan relations initially entered into difficulties. Ayub Khan was, in the beginning, strongly pro-American and anti-Communist. Thus in 1959 when India's relations with China soured, Ayub offered, in a surprise move, to have joint defence with India, evidently against Communist aggression from the north, involving either China or the Soviet Union or both. India immediately rebuffed the offer, mainly because it was conditional to resolving the Kashmir dispute.³ China was clearly not pleased with Pakistan's move for joint defence with India. It even asked officially as to whom the Pakistanis were proposing joint defence against.⁴ The Chinese news media was more openly critical and Pakistan was advised 'to pull up the horse before the precipice.'⁵ It was, however, remarkable that, on the whole, China still maintained its sang-froid. It seemed to have made the correct calculation that Indo-Pakistan differences were too profound to be spanned by an unexpected, but conditional, offer of joint defence with India which the latter, in any case, rejected swiftly.

In the corresponding period, there had been a steady cooling of China's relations with India, particularly after the border clashes between the two countries in 1959. In the same period, there were growing differences between China and the Soviet Union. Not surprisingly, the Chinese took a very dim view of Moscow's strong support for India. In early 1961, it was announced that China and Pakistan had agreed to demarcate their border. Next, China proposed, and Pakistan agreed, that the border agreement would be a provisional one, pending the settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

By October 1962, China's relations with India had reached their lowest ebb when there was a brief but serious border war between the two countries. India suffered serious losses in this war. Pakistan was upset with the Western decision to rush military aid to India following its border war with China. Pakistan considered this to be a serious breach of its under-

standings with the US Government that any US military aid would be given to India only after prior consultations with Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan felt convinced (and was later proved right), that the military hardware supplied to India, ostensibly to fight China, would eventually be used against Pakistan.

The border talks between Pakistan and China were, therefore, taking place in the backdrop of growing tensions between China and India, as well as Pakistan's alienation with the West. The Pakistan-China border agreement was signed in March 1963, a few months after the border war between India and China. In the view of many observers, Pakistan was able to secure a favourable border settlement with China under which the latter had made important concessions when judged against its previous position.⁶ India angrily denounced the agreement since it claimed the whole of Kashmir and regarded the Pakistani control of the relevant portion of Kashmir where the new border was agreed as illegal.

In January 1963, Pakistan and China signed a trade agreement followed a few months later by an agreement on air services. In fact, relations between Pakistan and China kept improving to such an extent that, in July 1963, Foreign Minister Bhutto told Parliament that, in case of an India attack, Pakistan would not be alone as such an Indian attack would involve 'the territorial integrity and security of the largest state in Asia.'⁷ In February 1964, Zhou Enlai paid an official visit to Pakistan and, for the first time, China declared open support for Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute.⁸

Pakistan became a vigorous supporter of China's membership of the UN and other international bodies. The years which followed saw Pakistan staunchly supporting China at the UN, often alone with Albania, at that time China's only friend in Europe. This evidently made a lasting impression in China. Pakistan came to be considered a special friend who had stood by China in good times and bad. In fact, Pakistan's strategic relationship with the US was put under severe strain in the early 1960s due to Pakistan's budding friendship with China.

Pakistan's strategic calculation that in case of a war with India, the assistance of China would be more readily forthcoming than that of the USA ultimately proved correct. Despite the annoyance of the Americans, particularly that of President Johnson, Pakistan stuck to its policy of befriending China. When President Ayub Khan visited China in March 1965, he was probably accorded the biggest-ever public welcome in China to any foreign visitor. This was a moment of triumph for Pakistani diplomacy. Pakistan had won over China almost completely while still maintaining a strong relationship with the US and, in the same period, had also improved relations with the Soviet Union. This had clearly been a successful case of following the policy of bilateralism to great advantage.

China's friendship with Pakistan reached its peak during the Indo-Pakistan War in September 1965. China not only denounced India for its aggression against Pakistan but also applied strong military pressure on India to stop the war. Immediately after the war began, China declared publicly that it was strengthening its alertness along its border with India. It accused India of serious violations of Chinese territory and warned it of serious consequences. On 16 September, China issued an ultimatum to India to dismantle all its military works on the Chinese side of the border and return all captive Chinese nationals and livestock, within three days, or else 'bear full responsibility for all the grave consequences arising therefrom.'⁹ This ultimatum created global alarm and also led to decisive action by the Security Council which insisted on a cease-fire. Moreover, China sent a warning to India, through the American Embassy in Poland, not to attack East Pakistan.¹⁰ This was believed by many to have deterred India from attacking the lightly defended eastern wing of Pakistan.

The strong Chinese support for Pakistan in the 1965 War won over the hearts of Pakistanis and this goodwill has survived the political changes in both countries in the past three decades. However, there was a realization in government circles in Pakistan that, despite this Chinese support, the country must maintain a good equation with the US, as well as the Soviet

Union with whom relations had been on the mend in the 1960s. The Chinese understood Pakistan's geo-strategic compulsions and did not think ill of the efforts of Pakistan to improve relations with the other two major powers even though, at that time, China did not have amicable relations with either.

Pakistan was anxious to bring about an improvement in the bilateral relations between the US and China. Although the Americans had periodically shown interest in establishing a better relationship with China, there was no real progress.

American involvement in Vietnam and the status of Taiwan were obviously very sore points for the Chinese. However, during a visit to Pakistan in 1969, when President Nixon showed interest in using Pakistan as an intermediary for this purpose, the latter agreed to do so. During his visit to the US in October 1970, Yahya Khan was requested to set up a secret meeting between an emissary of Nixon and Premier Zhou Enlai. The latter welcomed the intermediary role of the President of Pakistan. Pakistan was to prove a good channel for communication and the US Secretary of State Dr Kissinger eventually flew secretly from Islamabad to Beijing in July 1971 on an historic mission which normalized relations between the US and China after years of hostility. Nixon profusely thanked Yahya Khan for the 'great service to peace and to mutual relations which he is rendering by acting as a true friend of two parties' (i.e. USA and China).¹¹ This role played by Pakistan was one of the reasons for Nixon's pro-Pakistan posture during the Indo-Pakistan War which broke out in December 1971.

China, too, was highly appreciative of Pakistan's role, which fitted in with the special ties existing between the two countries in the past decade. In fact, Kissinger told Yahya Khan on return from Beijing that the Chinese had said that they would 'intervene with men and arms' if India moved against Pakistan. However, the message from Zhou Enlai, conveyed by the Chinese Ambassador in Islamabad, was that it had been indicated to Dr Kissinger that 'in case India invaded Pakistan, China would not be an idle spectator but would support Pakistan.'¹² There was no mention of intervening with men and arms. According

to Sultan M. Khan, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary at that time, during the talks held in the days prior to the war with India, 'China never.. held out any possibility of coming to Pakistan's aid with her armed forces'¹³ and that 'there was never any question of active Chinese military involvement and such an eventuality was never even discussed.'¹⁴

The impression in some quarters in Pakistan that Chinese troops were poised to apply pressure against India to rescue East Pakistan never had any basis. For one thing, China was too engrossed in its own internal situation during the ongoing Cultural Revolution to have been able to do so. Also, China could not risk a confrontation with Moscow, which was fully supporting India during the Bangladesh crisis. Moreover, China was no doubt aware that the majority of the people in East Pakistan had been irreversibly antagonized and little could be gained by its intervening under such circumstances.

Friendship between Pakistan and China has remained unaffected by the 1971 War. The Chinese have continued to extend significant moral and material support to Pakistan. In the meantime, China has liberalized its economic policies and achieved remarkable success in raising its exports and per capita income. Politically, China feels no longer menaced by the Super Powers. The Soviet Union is no more there and its successor Russia is a very different country. The US has, despite some differences, established a harmonious relationship with China. Since the 1980s, China's relations with India have also improved, until the BJP Government in India unexpectedly soured the pitch in 1998. Under these circumstances, China no longer needs Pakistan in the manner it did in the 1960s and the 1970s, though it continues to show every goodwill towards Pakistan and remains helpful to the latter in concrete ways. Nevertheless, it would be unwise for Pakistani policy-makers to expect China to give the kind of assistance which it did in the past in any kind of confrontation with India.