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Balance of Power between Pakistan & India: China's Role

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Abstract

China's rapid strategic elevation has been accompanied by its conscious efforts to have a dominant position in South Asia. China, a growing world power, is on the verge of having access to warm water and Euro-Asia. This has resulted in China's cordial relations with Pakistan. The convergence of interests regarding India is yet another factor shaping China-Pakistan friendship. Chinese initiatives in the South Asian region have expanded sharply in recent years. The paper explores China's position in South Asian politics and its role in balancing power between Pakistan and India. China's strategic interest in South Asia and its relation with India and Pakistan are discussed as the sole factors responsible for China's involvement in BOP between Pakistan and India. Secondary data has been collected from books, articles, and newspapers. The study's findings suggest that China's growing interest in Pakistan has enabled it to ensure strategic deterrence.

Key Words: China, Pakistan, India, Rivalry, Convergence of Interests, Balance of Power

Introduction

It has been asserted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) from the very beginning that the chief guarantor of China's strategic independence, security, and influence in the world is military power. Since independence, the Chinese leadership Mao has repeatedly stated that it is not our aim to make China a superpower. However, he has also asserted that our prime objective is to make China "a first-rank power" as soon as possible. China is facing three main challenges in the Post Cold War. The first and immediate challenge is related to the pursuance of its sovereignty and territorial claims on Taiwan, the South China Sea islands, and if necessary elsewhere, for example, against India, Vietnam, and Japan, which will be possible only through a robust military force as it will enable China to use force if necessary for the challenge aforementioned. The second challenge faced by China is its rivalry with the Super Power (United States), which needs strong military power and capabilities as it will provide enough deterrence against the United States. Finally, the third challenge is its interests and concerns in Asia and the Pacific, as it wants to be an essential part of the new security structure in Asia and the Pacific ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

The world has faced rapid changes in China's overall national power: its military capabilities and economic growth. This largely agrarian state has been transformed into a powerful entity by its fast and sustained industrialization and modernization ([Dutta, 1998](#)).

The primary factor responsible for the stability and security of Asia is the commitment of the Chinese leadership to build Comprehensive National Power (CNP). Moreover, it has gained an exceptional place in the Asian security and strategic order mainly due to its nuclear weapon capability, particularly its large-sized armed forces, its permanent status in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and the crucial role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in its political system ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

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Thus, the rise of China into a military-industrial powerhouse has far-reaching impacts on the other states of the Asia-Pacific region, particularly China's neighbors, notably Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Philippines, Mongolia, other Southeast Asian states, the Central Asian states, and Russia, and the countries of South Asia. China's changing economic and military capabilities, particularly its trade and defense policies and its approach toward resolving bilateral disputes will have possibly more far-reaching impacts on these states ([Dutta, 1998](#)).

China Relations with Pakistan

Since the 1950s, China has been a steadfast and trustworthy friend of Pakistan, making them close allies. China has always assisted Pakistan on military and economic grounds by providing nuclear technology and diplomatic support ([Castillejo, 2013](#)). There is a deep convergence of interests between Pakistan and China regarding India, which gives rise to the cooperation between the two on many grounds, notably military technology transfers and mutual diplomatic support. The strategic significance of Pakistan for China can be analyzed by the fact that the containment of India is still the principal objective of Chinese policy. Only Pakistan can perform a reasonable balancing role and tie India down on its Western border and its Western border, the subcontinent more broadly. China and Pakistan's economic and military relations enlarged for such convergence of interests. Such relations proved significant for civil nuclear power projects or Gawadar port ([Ansari, 1963](#)).

However, in recent years, the rising extremism and instability in Pakistan made the Chinese concerned about their security as such a devastating situation is also a threat to Chinese citizens. Moreover, it has adverse impacts on Sino-Pakistani economic projects ([Lamb, 2014](#)). China has been trying to reduce the tensions between Pakistan and India as there are always risks of war between the two, and it is a matter of concern for China as such war will have adverse impacts on Chinese interests. The relationship of Pakistan with the United States is also a matter of concern for China as China is in favor of balance and moderate relation between the two. Too close relations will endanger China's relationship, and too cold relations will ensure continued U.S. military and economic support to India and will make China stuck in the middle of the hostile relationship. Additionally, China is also concerned about the role of Pakistan in the stability of Afghanistan as it wants to use Pakistan as an instrument for Chinese interests there after the withdrawal of the United States ([Lamb, 2014](#)).

China has assisted Pakistan regarding its nuclear program's military and civilian aspects. The most exhausting phase of nuclear proliferation started in the early 1980s when China delivered bomb designs and highly enriched uranium to Pakistan, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it transferred ballistic missiles. Since then, assistance to Pakistan's missile program has continued, making Pakistan secure regarding its capacities in a possible future war with India ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

In recent years, China declared an agreement with Pakistan to progress two additional 330 MW reactors at the Chashma nuclear complex and extended this to a new phase of 1000 MW reactors. Such support of China to Pakistan's civilian nuclear program is to counter the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal (Lamb, 2014).

China Relations with India

China's strategic interests in its dealings with India have three main dimensions, firstly their long-established security rivalry, secondly, maintenance of a robust economic relationship, and finally, the cooperation on points of convergence in global affairs. The traditional Sino-India border dispute, the hegemony of India as a regional power, the deep growing ties between India and the United States, and China's own greater interests in the Indian Ocean are the factors responsible for their rivalry ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

India has always assumed itself as a rival to China, as China's approach is always tilted towards Pakistan. The rivalry of India and China can be understood by their energy competition which is ascertained more intensely in India than in China. However, Beijing believes that it can win most of the competition by having access to natural resources against India as it has the economic capital, political power, and influence ([Dutta, 1998](#)).

The transformation of Pakistan's instability and recent weakness into strengths was expected, but the recent developments in the U.S-India relationship, particularly following the civil-nuclear deal, blocked it. It has been a matter of concern for China as it constitutes more significant risks to the relative superiority of China's position vis-à-vis India ([Rais, 1977](#)).

China is facing intense pressure regarding geostrategic threats (the U.S. role and the balancing of India) and transnational threats (terrorism, instability, narcotics flows). However, recent developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including the United States withdrawal, have been a rebalancing approach, tilting China's favor regarding the transnational threats more actively ([Lamb, 2014](#)).

China's Role in South Asia

South Asia is one of the most critical regions in the world. The most powerful nation in South Asia is India which has a hegemonic power over other countries in the region. India was following a policy that influenced other countries to safeguard its interests. Due to these reasons, other South Asia were tended to move towards China, which always forwarded its helpful hands towards them. China is not a South Asian country, and it belongs to the East Asian region ([Kumar & Kalis, 2015](#)). At the same time, China had followed a peaceful coexistence policy towards the small countries and tended to grab the South Asian countries, and that intention is to some extent successful in recent times. This was a kind of threat to India in the region. This situation has caused a competitive rivalry in the balance of power in South Asia. On one side, India is trying to regain its hegemonic role over other South Asian countries.

On the other hand, China has built a chain of ports that encircled India in the Indian Ocean, and those ports are called "China's String of Pearls." These ports have increased the naval power of China in South Asia. So, in the 21 century, China came into the scenario of balancing the power of South Asia ([Afridi S. K., 2015](#)).

China has been succeeded to some extent in upholding the peaceful availability with many countries in South Asia by enhancing the trade and commercial links with them. Moreover, China's string of pearls strategy is working very effectively in the Indian Ocean, which includes the chain of ports in Gawadar (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar). The rivalry between Indian and China in the South Asia region has drawn the world's attention nowadays. China has gained more power in South Asia than India ([Farooque, 2016](#)). Most of the neighboring countries of Indian have welcomed China with establishing economic ties, which exposes a threat to the Indian existence. While acquiring the chain of ports in the Indian Ocean, China could create a ring around India.

Furthermore, funding the construction of railway and pipeline projects in Gawadar and Kyaukpyu, which link these territories to China, creates a land lock around India. Even though China is becoming more potent in South Asia, India is still the major historical player in South Asia. With the new leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Indian is now in a strategy to regain its hegemonic power across the region ([Madanayaka, 2016](#)).

Its development assistance has ensured China's economic engagement in South Asia, and Pakistan is the primary beneficiary of such assistance. Being a developing region, there is a lack of infrastructure facilities in the South Asian region. Poor connectivity, particularly road networks, has adversely affected Intra-regional trade and commerce. Almost all parts of the region face a deficiency of good road networks, developed seaports, advanced telecommunications, and adequate electricity. For improving infrastructure, all countries have been dependent on private and external investments and development assistance, as individually, each country is facing difficulty in overcoming the infrastructure shortfall mainly due to scarcity of resources ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

In this regard, the response of China is positive as it has become a significant player in infrastructure development in South Asia. Chinese support ensures Pakistan's railway development faster in response to the agreement of 2007 between "Pakistan Railways" and "Dong Fang Electric Supply Corporation" to link Havellian and Khunjerab. It will benefit China through better rail connectivity throughout Pakistan, and China will be in a better position to attain the energy-rich Central Asia and Persian Gulf states ([Palit, 2010](#)).

China's Interest in South Asia

Strategically, South Asia has been a significant region for China as its main interest lies in its access anywhere in the region, thereby facilitating trade and energy corridors throughout the region. China is also interested in ensuring its influence on other South Asian states, as it provides a route to get energy and undergo trade with the Middle East and Europe and extend its political and economic influence throughout other regions. Additionally, China, rival India in the region, is more inclined to contain Indian power, thereby moving close towards Pakistan.

In this way, China is strengthening Pakistan's military development as it asserts that it can counter India's military force and strategic capabilities by tilting towards Pakistan ([Curtis, 2016](#)).

Its main interest in South Asia is to expand its power over the Indian Ocean, which is regarded as the most significant maritime trade hub. China's two-way trade seemed at around \$3.5 trillion (2011 estimate). Most of this trade is in seaborne. The protection of the sea lanes of communication became a significant commercial concern and the principal justification of naval bureaucracies in China. Due to the large population, China highly depends on other countries' raw materials, minerals, and energy resources ([Ahmad & Malik, 2017](#)). The most important reason to expand its naval capacities is securing access to other countries, especially Africa and the Middle East. Beijing has invested in littoral state's economies, building ports and infrastructure, thereby, increased its engagement in the Indian Ocean as approximately 77% of China's oil comes from the Middle East and Africa. Beijing had unveiled plans to construct more than one aircraft carrier and signaled their political commitment to build their blue-water capabilities. China has followed effective strategies to approach the other countries in South Asia by investing in these countries for future benefits ([Madanayaka, 2016](#)).

China's Role in Pak-India Relation

China is playing a significant role in Indo-Pak relations. As far as the relation of China with Pakistan is concerned, both share long-established strategic relations. However, the relation of China with India is based on mutual distrust and competition; mainly, their rivalry was on peak during the 1962 Sino-Indian border war, which made China's ties with Pakistan more consolidated. Since then, Beijing's interest in the containment of India by distracting its military away from China has shaped Beijing's policy towards Pakistan. However, the friendly relation of Pakistan and China serves the interest of both, as they are jointly countering India's rising power. However, the fact is that Beijing is in favor of a certain level of Indo-Pakistani conflict to divert India's military's attention from China. However, China has often played a valuable role in reducing the Indo-Pakistani tensions, notably during the 1999 Kargil border war and the 2001-2002 Indo-Pakistani military mobilization ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

China is interested in maintaining strong security ties with Pakistan. In order to keep India focused on threats exuded from Pakistan and to counter Indian power, China has established Pakistan's military, nuclear, and missile capabilities. However, China is also concerned about the forces of radical Islamists with Uighur separatists in Xinjiang as it considers Pakistan (and particularly Afghanistan) as a breeding ground for these radical Islamists. Pakistan was partially blamed for the outbreak of ethnic violence in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang province, in July 2009. Additionally, the Chinese government criticized Pakistan as responsible for attacks in Xinjiang in July 2011 which killed 20 people, as Pakistan failed in curtailing terrorist activities in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan ([Curtis, 2016](#)).

China's Role as a Balancer

As a rival of India and a close ally of Pakistan, China plays a vital role as a balancer. As China wants to curtail the regional power of India, thus the main interest of China is to keep the Indian army focused on the Pakistani border rather than the Chinese border; thereby, its primary objective is to maintain Pakistan as a feasible rival to India. Similarly, two other significant interests shape China's engagement in Pakistan ([Hussain M., 2017](#)).

- Firstly its desire to make links with the Gulf and Africa by creating a trade and energy corridor
- Secondly, it needs to control the Uighur separatist movements.

Undoubtedly, the military dominance at the expense of democracy in Pakistan and its support for jihadi groups operating against India is because of its rivalry with India. However, this gave rise to Pakistan's own internal insurgencies ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

The rivalry between Pakistan and India has roots in their history and has nothing to do with China, but China is accelerating its pro-Pakistani policies. This can be analyzed by the rise in tension between Pakistan and India due to China's supply of nuclear technology and military hardware to Pakistan. Although this military support of China to Pakistan is shaped by its strategic competition with India and United States, its fondness for engaging directly with Pakistan's military contributes to military dominance inside the country. It also resulted in the

external and internal security of Pakistan. China is using its strategic support to Pakistan to counter U.S. ties with India which can be seen in its 2010 announcement that it would supply two new nuclear reactors to Pakistan. Undoubtedly, it directly responds to the “U.S-India Civilian Nuclear Deal”. However, improvements in relations of Pakistan and India arose in 2011 when the two countries recommenced composite dialogue, and Pakistan accorded India's most favored nation status. China's acceptance of depletion in Indo-Pakistan tensions depends not only on the shifting relationship between China and India but also on the views of China regarding the future of U.S. engagement in the region ([Curtis, 2016](#)).

Pakistan, a third-world country, is in a deep economic crisis, and it faces problems like growth stagnation, a fall in foreign direct investment (FDI), unemployment, and inflation. Therefore, China got engaged economically and invested heavily in Pakistan's economy, resulting in trade growth between the two countries. Although Chinese investment is increasingly crucial to Pakistan's economy, it is a point of debate whether Chinese investment promotes fair growth and jobs or crushes national industries, curtail international pressure for reforms, and increases local grievances ([Curtis, 2016](#)).

The most contentious investments of China are its extensive infrastructure projects, notably the Gawadar port in Baluchistan. It has raised tensions with India and has aroused local anger instead of promoting China's strategic interests. Chinese contractors and procurement carried out this major project as it is a Chinese-financed project. Thus, it tends to promote limited benefits to the local population. Resultantly, it increased anger among the Baluchi population and fuelled Indian anxiety about China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean ([Van Eekelen, 2015](#)).

Karakoram highway linking Xinjiang with Pakistan (including plans for a rail link) is another highly debatable Chinese project. It is also a matter of concern to India as it can open up China's new trade and energy routes. These transport links are running through Gilgit Baltistan, a politically sensitive area that forms part of the disputed Kashmir region ([Bhutto, 1964](#)). Thus, Chinese trade may be diverted and passed through India. This makes India worried as it also can transport the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to the Indian Ocean.

Similarly, the Karakoram highway has drawn Sunni migrants into this sensitive Shia region, fuelling sectarian tensions in Gilgit Baltistan. Thus, it seems that China's economic engagement in Pakistan is a mixed blessing. Although Pakistan needs Chinese investment to boost its economy, in some cases, Pakistan's local unrest and regional tensions are increased by these Chinese investments. However, it is beneficial as regards the balance of power with India. So China plays an essential role as a balancer ([Castillejo, 2013](#)).

Conclusion

China has always played a key role in South Asian politics. Since its inception, Mao has stated that our prime aim is to make china a first-rank power. For this, China has adopted strategies that could enable it to grab the whole region. The role of China in the balance of power between Pakistan and India is shaped by its hostility with India and its geostrategic interest in Pakistan. China has always assisted Pakistan against India due to their convergence of interests. China is trying to grab the Euro-Asia, and the position of Pakistan is very significant in this regard which has provided the latter an opportunity to secure its borders from Indian territories and boost its economy. In this way, China's partnership and its investment in Pakistan serve Chinese interests and enable Pakistan to provide deterrence against India. However, it is also asserted that on one side, China is trying to reduce the tensions between Pakistan and India as the war between the two will have adverse impacts on Chinese interests, while on the other side, it is striving to maintain modest Indo-Pak rivalry in order to keep Indian forces focused on Pakistan rather than China.

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