



## Pakistan-China Iron Brothers: A New Horizon of Inter State Relations

Vol. IV, No. II (Spring 2019) | Page: 42 – 49 | DOI: 10.31703/grr.2019(IV-II).05

p- ISSN: 2616-955X | e-ISSN: 2663-7030 | ISSN-L: 2616-955X

Waseem Ishaque\*

Jawad Shah†

Zahir Shah‡

### Abstract

*From Pakistan's perspective, the relationship with China is one of the core national interests, which has endured the test of times and is growing stronger every day. Since establishment of diplomatic relations in 1951, both countries have enjoyed respect, support and mutual trust. We are truly good neighbors, trusted partners, close friends and dear brothers. President Hu Jintao, described the relations as "higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the Indian Ocean and sweeter than honey" (Hu Jintao, 2006). Similar sentiments have been reciprocated by every segment of Pakistani society as China has a special place in the heart of Pakistani society and obvious foreign policy orientation. The existing level of bilateral relations has touched new heights and the two nation states are referred as Iron Brothers. This articles therefore, sketches evolution of bilateral relations from historical to contemporary times and suggests measures for furthering bonds of existing friendship.*

**Key Words:** All Weather Friends, Iron Brothers

### Introduction

Historically Pakistan - China relations started much before the present day borders between the two brotherly nation states. On the religion aspects, it is widely believed that Buddhism and Islam came to China through Karakorum pass of present day Pakistan about thousand years ago. Vincent Smith describes that “*Buddhism came to China from South Asia, while Islam also spread in many parts of China, with the oldest mosques dating back to more than a thousand years*” (Smith, 1992). Similarly, from Chinese side, the first recorded contacts with South Asia began in era of Han Dynasty. Dr Maqbool states that “*trade links between China and South Asia started by Han dynasty in the beginning in the 2nd Century BC via silk road over Karakorum pass*” (Bhatty, 2008). Chinese monk Faxian was the first overseas student, who studied at Taxila University 25 Kilometres north of Islamabad some 1500 years ago. It can be concluded that the relations between China and Pakistan have been embedded in the pages of history as the ancient neighbouring civilizations. In the backdrop of this historical construct and moving forward towards founding of Pakistan and PRC, the friendship spans over six decades and is imbued with exceptional degree of trust and commonality of interests. It has matured into a comprehensive strategic partnership at multiple levels, especially in the fields of politics, diplomacy, defence and economy to name a few. After the founding of PRC, Pakistan was one of the very first countries that recognized it and remained firm in the commitment of furthering relations irrespective of prevailing international order, which at that time was not very conducive for China. Hali (2010) states that “*Pakistan remained steadfast ally of China during the periods of international isolation in the 1960s and early 1970s*”. Therefore, despite changes in the governments and the leadership in both countries in the last over six decades, the advancement of relationship with China has been carried forward as esteemed national priority by Pakistan and reciprocated by China. Premier Wen Jia Bao while addressing Pakistani Parliament in Islamabad on 19 December 2010 stated about the friendship of both countries as “*the China and Pakistan are all weather friends and strategic partners*” (Bao, 2010). These relations have been crowned with unprecedented success; aircraft-thunder roaring our sky, tanks braving the deserts with great and smart manoeuvrability and ships skimming past

\*Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, National Defense University, Islamabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

Email: [waseemishaque@ndu.edu.pk](mailto:waseemishaque@ndu.edu.pk)

† Director Research, Institute for Strategic Studies, Research & Analysis (ISSRA), National Defense University, Islamabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

‡ Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan, Mardan, KP, Pakistan.

the deep seas, industries in the defence sector, Gwadar port, nuclear power plants, highways, investment in telecom sector etc are just a few icons symbolizing this friendship.

During 1965 and 1971 war, China extended diplomatic and military support to Pakistan. These events are fresh in the memory of Pakistani nation that China always stood by weak side on just principals of International Relations. Even during other crises, especially during heightened military escalation periods with India or the phases of sanctions and isolation, China was always there to help and support Pakistan irrespective of the international and regional environment of the time. Pakistan remained actively engaged in hectic diplomacy for grant of UN membership to PRC after the revolution. In the same efforts, in 1971 Pakistan initiated the resolution for grant of UN membership to China, which was passed with huge majority and China was recognized as member of UN. Pakistan also played a pivotal role in establishing diplomatic ties between China and USA. In September 1971, Pakistan was prime mover in organizing the secret visit of Secretary of State Mr. Henry Kissinger to China which indeed helped in formal commencement of diplomatic relations between China and USA. This successful diplomacy subsequently led to the landmark visit of USA's President Nixon to China in February 1972. President Nixon after arriving in Beijing on 21 February 1972 announced that "*his breakthrough visit to China is the week that has changed the world*" (Nixon, 1972) Therefore from the arguments discussed in this part amply highlight that both China and Pakistan maintained reciprocity in furthering relations through win-win cooperation.

### **Significance of Research Article**

Pakistan – China friendship is unique in its dimensions and manifestation and exemplary interstate relations in the evolving strategic millennium. Relations between both brotherly countries have endured the tests of times and have strengthened irrespective of regional environments and type of political dispensation in both countries. Chinese vision of One Belt One Road (OBOR) and inclusion of Pakistan into that through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) are some of the contemporary examples of strengthening bonds of friendship. This article unveils the history of relations from past to contemporary and suggests measures for optimizing these relations to jointly face challenges of future international and regional order.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The essence of Pakistan-China relations are based on the selfless and power politics free environments based on the tenants of Liberalism, where mutual cooperation, common development, shared destiny and community of shared benefits are the main themes, therefore, the article has been constructed by applying theory of Liberalism.

### **Research Methodology**

Qualitative method is predominant in this article, however, certain quantitative data has also been added to validate the arguments.

### **Research Questions**

The article has been constructed by discovering answers to the following research questions:

- How Pakistan-China relations have evolved over different historical periods?
- What is the status of contemporary Pakistan-China relations?
- How future relations can be optimized in view of changing global and regional strategic landscape?

### **The Commencement of New Era of Bilateral Relations with the Change of Leadership 1978-1988 and End of Cold War**

The passing away of Chairman Mao Zedong was indeed felt with grief and sorrow throughout Pakistan and China alike. However, the replacement by another charismatic leader Deng Xiaoping ushered a new vistas of cooperation and friendly relations. The China's reforms and opening up policy engaged the Chinese leadership for economic reforms at home, while Pakistan got distracted strategically due to Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and resultant fallout of refugees and host of other economic and security related fallouts due to adjoining borders.

China provided all out moral, diplomatic and financial and military assistance in sharing Pakistan's burden of refugees and economic assistance for development works in Pakistan and meeting the needs of security forces in combating traditional and non-traditional threats.

After the end of cold war and disintegration of USSR, the virtual utility of Pakistan for USA started to diminish. Unfortunately, despite huge sacrifices in terms of men and material, USA abandoned Pakistan and rather punished with the enforcement of the Pressler amendment in October 1990 and process of cessation of US economic and military aid commenced on the premise of allegedly developing nuclear weapons. On the regional landscape the Indo – US collaboration commenced, which was considered detrimental to the interests of both China and Pakistan as India was in the process of developing nuclear weapons and USA's next objective was containment of communist China. Due to fragile security situation, weak economy, burden of refugees, emerging Indo-US nexus and Pakistan's isolation in the international community, Pakistan's dependence on China's political and economic support increased thus vindicating the importance of this all-weather relationship. Despite USA's emergence as sole Super Power, throughout the 1990s, China was the primary source of Pakistan's military assistance. "During his visit to the USA in November 1997, Chinese President Jiang Zemin took principal stand on the transfer of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes to Pakistan" (The Nation Daily, 1997) which was reassurance of Chinese firm commitment for enduring relations with Pakistan irrespective of changed geo-strategic environment. This phase is very significant for Pakistan, as the gigantic project of Karakorum Highway linking Xinjiang with mainland Pakistan was completed in 1978 and massive defence production infrastructure was built in Pakistan by China. Civil nuclear cooperation was also boosted during this period.

In summary, the arguments put forward amply highlight the transition of relations after passing away of Chairman Mao Zedong, end of cold war and era of sanctions and isolation for Pakistan, where despite changes in geo strategic regional and international landscape, Pakistan-China relationship grew further and got stronger in every domain, while from Chinese perspective, the relationship between Pakistan and India were managed pragmatically.

## **Analysis on the Contemporary Status of Relations**

### **Diplomatic**

The unfortunate incidents of 9/11 changed the geo strategic landscape of the world especially for South Asia with US led war in Afghanistan and resultant turmoil and destabilisation once again knocking the borders of Pakistan with huge spill over effects. Pakistan under extreme circumstances agreed to side with the international coalition which has brought serious repercussions for Pakistan. However, despite US presence in the region and resultant rise in terrorism and exterimism with fallout on Pakistan and China, the all weather friendship between Pakistan and China has got new impetus in the contemporary era. China has remained ally in Afghanistan with massive contributions in infrastructure and social sector development and is also facilitating in reconciliation efforts. China is also facilitating rapprochement between India and Pakistan. The regional peace and stability is vital for China's peaceful development, therefore, making joint efforts with Pakistan in that direction. China has fully supported Pakistan in its fight against terrorism in diplomatic dimensions and has always stood with Pakistan whenever her sovereignty was violated for example during Ossama Bin Laden raid, Salala post incident and host of other terrorists incidents in Pakistan. China has always helped in projecting Pakistan's sacrifices during fight against terrorism and consequent economic, material and human losses suffered. Pakistan has also maintained a delicate balance in relations with USA and China and paid special attention to Chinese sensitivities, therefore, the trajectory of relations is on the rise. The testimony of growing relationship is the statement of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang which he gave on 22 May 2013 during his visit to Islamabad, "the tree of China-Pakistan friendship was planted decades ago, nurtured by successive leaders and is now exuberant with abundant fruits" (Keqian, 2013). It is worth mentioning here Mr. Nawaz Sharif after assuming the office of Prime Minister selected Beijing as his first visiting capital thus setting priority and the alignment of his government towards China. In his land mark trip on 5 July 2013, he quoted President Hu Jintao in his speech that "our friendship is higher than the Himalayas and deeper than the deepest sea in the world, and sweeter than honey" (Nawaz Sharif, 2013). Primer Li also reciprocated with kind thanks on love and affection from people and the government of Pakistan for people of China. During the same visit, President Xi Jinping also appreciated the enduring relations and stated that "strengthening strategic cooperation

with Islamabad was a priority for China's diplomacy” (Jinping, 2013). It is worth mentioning here that irrespective of geo strategic environment, Pakistan has maintained firm stance and stated at several forums that Pakistan believes in One China Policy and endorses Chinese position on Tibet and Taiwan and Human Rights issue. Similarly, China has also acknowledged the disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir and always supported peaceful and negotiated settlement of the issue. It can therefore be concluded that, despite changes in the governments in both countries and the regional environment, the tree of our friendship is growing and is ever green and shady. After taking over the office, President Xi Jinping’s recent visit to Pakistan on 20 April 2015 symbolizes strong friendship among our two countries. The warm reception with unanimity of voice of entire Pakistani nation for full support for China in all dimensions and reciprocal kind and thanking compliments from President Xi Jinping during his several addresses are testimony of our ever strengthening relationship, which are very different from routine diplomatic interstate relations. Entire Pakistani nation is highly indebted to Chinese people who have coined the term “Iron Pakistan” to address most trusted ally and partner. Indeed we have transformed our relations from “Iron Friends” to now “Iron Brothers”. Similarly, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s welcome remarks for President Xi symbolize the new heights of our bilateral ties, “welcome home, indeed it is a very happy family reunion”. The entire Pakistani nation is privileged and honored to receive President Xi Jinping in Islamabad. The mammoth investment to the tune of US\$ 46 Billion under China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) brought by President Xi’s visit with signing of 51 of MoUs and inauguration of several projects is testimony of our all weather and enduring brotherly ties. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif commented that “President Xi’s recent visit was a watershed in the history of Pakistan-China relations. The momentous decisions taken will raise Pakistan-China relations to new heights with deep impacts on economic future and peace and stability in the region” (Sharif, 2015). No country has ever taken care of Pakistan as China, and Pakistan has also been quick and reciprocal in voicing support for China irrespective of the environment.

### Trade and Economic Dimensions

Pakistan and China despite strong strategic and diplomatic ties started formal trade relations in January 1963. Subsequently in 2006, Pakistan- China agreements in trade, investments and host of associated dimensions were signed with a resolve to enhance the bilateral trade as envisioned in 1963 trade agreement. Both the countries accorded MFN status in January 2013. During 1990s, economic cooperation gained prominence alongside the military and strategic aspects of the inter-state relations. Premier Wen Jiabao during his visit to Islamabad on 6 April 2005 stated “The goal of our cooperation is to seek common development as the economies of both countries enjoy strong complementarities” (Bao, 2005). China’s investment projects in Pakistan are aimed at improving the economic outlook of Pakistan and raising the living standards of common citizens thus contributing towards poverty alleviation by creating more jobs and employment opportunities. Therefore, comprehensive agreements since last over one decade have been concluded to carry forward economic and trade relations in a structured manner. “China and Pakistan have signed 206 x MoUs since 2003” (People’s Daily Online, 2014). Split into 2003-2008 (Musharaf era) and 2008-2013 (Zardari era), the status of these MoUs is as per figure 1.

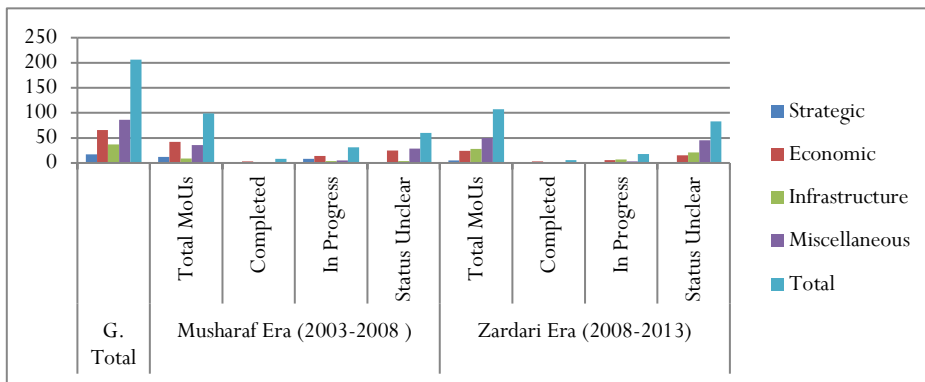


Figure 1: Status of MoUs signed during Musharaf and Zardari eras

The China-Pakistan Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed in 2006 which took effect at the start of 2007. Currently the trade between the two countries is approximately US \$ 12.7 billion. However, it is highly in favour of China as clear from the graph in Figure 2. On the investment side, China is single largest investor in Pakistan with US\$ 20 billion invested in different projects in Pakistan with another US\$ 14 billion in the next phase. “The Chinese companies have agreed to invest US \$15 billion over the next five years in Pakistan's energy, infrastructure, telecom, mineral exploration and banking sectors” (Business Recorder, 2013). Proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) promises investment of US\$ 45.6 billion which is appreciated as fate changer for Pakistan and the region.

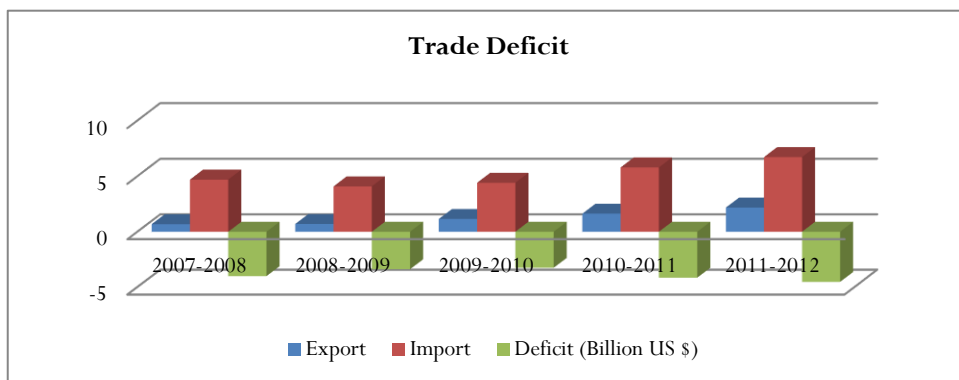


Figure 2. Bilateral Trade between Pakistan and China

Other infrastructure developmental assistance by China include; “Heavy Mechanical Complex, Heavy Foundry & Forge, Heavy Electrical Complex, the Heavy Industries at Taxila, Pakistan Aeronautical Complex at Kamra and the Saindak integrated Mineral Project at Saindak” (Siddiqui, 2000). Apart from Chashma Nuclear Power Plant, China has also built thermal and hydel power plants like “Guddu Thermal Power Station Unit 4, Jamshoro Thermal Power Station Unit 2, 2 and 4, Muzaffargarh Thermal Power Station Unit 4, 5 and 6. China also provided gate and hydraulic hoist equipment, installation of machinery for the Ghazi Barotha Hydropower Project” (Khan, 2005). China also helped in landmark friendship road Karakoram highway through a treacherous mountains and passes from Gilgit through Hunza and the Mintaka pass with length around 456 miles. China has also completed Phase-I of Gwadar port in 2007 and under CPEC, there will be development of 18,600 hectares of land, port development in Phase I & II on 4,000 hectares; Export Processing Zone on port east bay over of 74 hectares, Special Industrial Zone on 4,000 hectares and Oil Refinery on 1000 hectares. Linked to Gwadar is Makran Coastal highway linking Gwadar with Karachi has also been completed with the assistance of China. As per CPEC plan, new international airport at Gwadar, two highways linking Gwadar with the rest of Pakistan, construction of oil refinery at Gwadar and taking pipe lines from here to Kashgar, up gradation of Pakistan railway, widening of Karakorum highway and developing rail link from Kashgar to Islamabad, construction of Lahore – Karachi motorway and host of logistic hubs with related infrastructure have also been planned.

The proposed CPEC investment of US\$ 45.6 billion is expected to be a fate changer for Pakistan and the region, thus a balanced approach might be more appropriate for future. It is also worth mentioning here that CPEC promises huge investment for Pakistan which is highly appreciated by all segments of Pakistani society, however, CPEC also vital for opening up and development of Chinese western provinces. The mega project of development of Gwadar port will count 3000 KMs to China as compared to 12000 KMs using Malacca strait. Secondly the vulnerability of Malacca SLOCs usually called Malacca dilemma in Chinese strategic consideration will also be obviated. Therefore, CPEC vision is visualized to pay dividends for both countries.

### China and Pakistan's Views on the Evolving Regional Tendencies

Few important issues which have great impact on bilateral relations are worth mentioning here. Many western media have been portraying China's peaceful development and China Threat and this theory has been gaining

currency in the recent past. China's vision of One Belt One Road and related corridors are also being projected as China's attempt to enhance her sphere of influence. More specifically, China-Pakistan economic corridor has also been propagated as Chinese attempt of reaching Indian Ocean through Gwadar port as competitor of USA and India in this area. Unfortunately, Gwadar has also been included Chinese String of Pearls strategy propaganda. Even to the extent of Chinese participation in anti-piracy Task Force in Gulf of Aden faced similar allegations. Several China containment theories have also surfaced most notably, USA rebalancing strategy towards Asia and military presence in several North and South East Asian countries, unprecedented rise in Indo-USA relations and USA's presence in gulf countries and Afghanistan. From Pakistan's perspective, it stands firm on relationship with China in all forms and dimensions. Pakistan does subscribe to any idea of China threat, string of pearls, or enhancing areas of influence. Pakistan does not believe in Thucydides theory of classical realism of challenging the statuesque power of international structure. Pakistan welcomes China's peaceful development and believes that it is for the benefit of all countries and the regions. Pakistan is vigorously pursuing the public diplomacy to negate the misreporting and misperceptions generated by international media regarding Gwadar port. In short, Pakistan and China have built excellent confidence and share parallel views on the evolving trends thus testify the robustness of relationship.

## **Recommendations for Optimizing Relations to New Heights**

### **Diplomatic**

Capitalizing on historical friendly relations, Pakistan must continue to pursue constructive engagement with China. Pakistan to provide all out support to "One China Policy" in order to realize the dream of Chinese national reunification. Pragmatic policy for reconciliation and enduring stability in Afghanistan should be coordinated with China along-with economic development and honourable return of Afghan refugees. Afghanistan can be converted into an opportunity for cooperation between Pakistan-China-India and Afghanistan for bringing lasting stability and economic development as it is vital for progress of the entire region. No country other than Pakistan is biggest beneficiary of stable Afghanistan. Pakistan should endeavour to use good office of China in re-initiating stalled composite dialogue process with India and also for peaceful dispute resolution. South Asian economic development is fulcrum of China's vision, therefore, Pakistan must integrate and position herself in the wider development arc. Bilaterally, transforming Pakistan –China economic corridor (CPEC) into reality at fast pace is the need of hour which must be undertaken as highest national priority. Pakistan needs to work on a pragmatic regional policy focused at developing parallel interests with all neighbouring countries especially western neighbours and Central Asian States, while giving due consideration to interests of regional and global players. Pakistan and China are recommended to engage constructively for facilitating memberships of each other in SCO and SAARC as emerging regional organizations. Pakistan should also continue to support China's vision of multilateral approach and reforms of UNO for meeting the emerging challenges.

### **Civil Nuclear Cooperation**

Pakistan is energy hungry country with huge gap between consumption and production of electricity. Pakistan's well developed nuclear power plants with Chinese help have mitigated the effects of energy shortage to a large extent, yet more is suggested in this field. Additionally, human resource development on core nuclear technologies for medicines and other related uses will have great impact on health services in the country, therefore, recommended to be enhanced in future as well.

### **Economic and Trade**

The ongoing work on CPEC should be trailed as vital national undertaking as it promises aura of immense prosperity for Pakistan. Similarly, Chinese enterprise of developing western provinces contain immense opportunity for Pakistan as bulk of developmental activities will have to be traversed through the conduit of CPEC. Additionally, Pakistan should also develop institutionalized mechanism to translate MoUs into practical actions. All pending MOUs be revisited and expedited at priority. Chinese apprehensions on safety of investments, security of its nationals and overall security matrix on the route of CPEC have to be addressed.

Pakistan-China trade is heavily tilted in favor of China. It is suggested that all stake holders should chalkout comprehensive plan of action in bringing trade balance. Special task force, as already in vogue, has to be rejuvenated on the aspects of safety of Chinese nationals working on various projects in Pakistan. It is also considered appropriate that constitutional guarantees and consistency of policies on Chinese investments be ensured by the government of Pakistan, which must be followed as a binding by all future governments.

## **Conclusion**

Pakistan - China friendship is marked by mutual trust, mutual respect and selfless bond of friendship which has now been transformed into Iron Brothers which is unique in the contemporary history of interstate relations.

Chinese vision of common development and prosperity of relevant countries and the regions to benefit them from China's peaceful rise is in-fact testimony of China's benign intent outside power politics and strings which the existing international order professes and practices. In Chinese policy calculus, Pakistan has especial place and China has helped Pakistan in economically, diplomatically and technologically even during trying and unfavourable regional and global environment. For Pakistan, there are enormous prospects of development and progress which can be exploited through pragmatic policies and skilful diplomacy. In all probability, the stronger China in the future will play a more positive role for Pakistan. The esteemed projects like CPEC with whole of government and whole of nation approach promises new vistas of cooperation and furtherance of already existing bonds of friendship which must be capitalized irrespective of transforming balance of power and shifting regional influences.

## **References**

- Bao, W, J. (2005). Press Statement during his visit to Islamabad
- Bao, W, J. (2010). *Address at Pakistan's Parliament Islamabad.*
- Bhatty, M, A. (2008). China's Peaceful Rise and South Asia, *IPRI Paper 13, Asia Printers Islamabad, August 2008 P. 9.*
- Business Recorder. (2013, October 1). Pakistan China Trade Relations.
- Hali, S, M. (2010). *Pakistan-US vs. Pakistan-China Relation.*
- Hussain, A, S. (2000). Pakistan-China Cooperation in Energy Sector. *The News.*
- Jinping, X. (2013). *Meeting with Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at Beijing, ndtv.com.*
- Jintao, P, H. (2006). Address at Islamabad Convention Centre:
- Keqian, Li. (2013). Press statement on visit to Islamabad Pakistan.
- Khan, M, S, B. (2005). Pakistan to build more Nuclear Plants; Ground Breaking of Chashma-2, *Dawn Newspaper.*
- Nixon, R. (1972). Joint Statement, *Meeting between President Nixon and Premier Zhuo Enlai.*
- People's Daily Online. (2014). China-Pakistan free trade agreement.
- Sharif, N. (2013). Address at People's Great Hall Beijing, *ndtv.com*
- Sharif, N. (2015). President Xi's visit was a watershed moment, *Rediff News.*
- Smith, V, A. (1992). History of India, *Oxford University Press Karachi, 1992, p. 169.*
- The Nation Daily. (1997). *The Nation Daily Newspaper of Pakistan.*