

## **FUTURE OF PAKISTAN-CHINA RELATIONS**

*Ambassador (R)*  
*Dr Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti*

The relationship between Pakistan and China has held up as a model of friendly relations between two countries having different social systems. Since 1963, when the two countries signed a Boundary Agreement, thus removing only potential cause of differences, their friendship and range of cooperation has grown with each passing year. The two have stood together in the face of many challenges, so that their friendship is described as an all-weather friendship". This friendship has endured because it is based on common principles and interests.

Pakistani leaders and policy makers describe the friendship with China as the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, since it has assumed critical importance in safeguarding Pakistan's security and in its facilitating its development. The Chinese leaders also describe this relationship in superlative terms, calling Pakistan "China's best friend". Over the years, the two neighbours have laid the foundation of trust and friendship through high level visits, and by turning the mutual esteem into mutual cooperation in nearly all walks of life. They have also shared perceptions and policies on the whole range of regional and global issues.

While the strategic and political relationship reached great heights, the economic relations and trade did not keep pace. Therefore, in the new century, special attention was given to developing trade and joint ventures. The 50th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations in 2001 was marked by joint efforts to increase economic and technical cooperation. China had achieved an economic miracle since Deng Xiaoping's reform programme was launched in 1978, with an annual growth rate averaging over 9 per cent. Premier Zhu Rongji, who visited Pakistan in May 2001, announced a

decision to invest in several mega-projects, including the building of the Gwadar Port, utilization of the coal deposits in Sindh to generate power, and the modernization of the railway system.

Recalling the vital role played by China in safeguarding its security, and in facilitating its development, the people of Pakistan derive great reassurance from the country's friendship with the great neighbour to the north. However, the very fact that China is emerging as a superpower by virtue of its remarkable economic and technical progress over the past 25 years, has tended to raise doubts whether this intimacy can be maintained.

### **Grounds for Doubts about Future of Relations**

Pakistan-China friendship had developed when both felt isolated. In the early 60s, China was facing a hostile US, in the Cold War context, while the Soviet Union had been alienated by Beijing's refusal to accept Moscow's hegemony in the communist bloc. The boundary dispute with India, that caused a conflict in 1962, produced tension on China's southern border. Still relatively poor and undeveloped, People's China felt the pressure of hostile powers surrounding it, and welcomed the chance to develop friendly relations with Pakistan, which was also feeling relegated by the eagerness of its western allies to befriend India, owing its clash with China. The period between 1963 and 1978 marked the heyday of Sino-Pakistan friendship, when China was recognized by a relatively small number of countries.

The services Pakistan rendered over this period left a lasting imprint on the Chinese leadership and people. In 1964, Pakistan provided an airlink to China through its national airline, even though this step displeased the US, which cancelled the aid it had pledged for the improvement of the Dhaka airport. Pakistan was

helpful in transferring western technology that was unavailable to China, and played a significant role in the restoration of China's seat in the UN. For its part, China provided vital military hardware after the Western powers placed an embargo on the supply of weapons after the outbreak of the 1965 war. China's diplomatic support also proved invaluable in facing up to Indian pressure after the 1971 war. China's commitment to the independence and sovereignty has been a source of strength to Pakistan in facing up to pressures and threats from India over the years.

Pakistan also played a major role in facilitating the rapprochement between the US and China in 1971, that was followed by the visit of President Nixon to China in 1972, and produced a strategic convergence between Washington and Beijing to confront Soviet militancy. This was reflected in their joint backing to the Afghan struggle against Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan in late 1979, in which Pakistan played the role of a frontline state.

Since 1978, when it started its modernization programme that is based on opening to the outside world China has been transformed. Within a quarter of a century, a 9% annual growth rate has led to a six-fold increase in its GDP, and a twenty-fold increase in its international trade.<sup>1</sup> China's foreign policy revolves around its economic reforms, based on adapting the free market economy to its environment, while retaining the centralized single-party control of internal affairs. This foreign policy requires the cultivation of friendly relations with all countries, and to give low priority to political disputes.

China no longer faces the problems and constraints that made the friendship with Pakistan critically important. It has diplomatic relations with most of the world, and no longer needs Pakistan as an intermediary to deal with countries that do not recognize it.

More seriously, the internal situation within Pakistan has been marked by upheavals, and even a certain deterioration, as reflected in the law and order situation, in which even the Chinese experts involved in major projects do not feel safe.

In many areas, China's cooperation with India has grown more rapidly than with Pakistan, for instance in trade and cultural cooperation. China seeks to maintain a balance in its relations with India and Pakistan, even though Indian strategic thinkers relate their plans to the assumption that China is the main threat to Indian security. Last, but not least, China shares the current perception in the West that terrorism and extremism constitute a threat whose roots lie mainly in the Islamic countries, and the Chinese government has moved firmly against Muslim separatists in Xinjiang. China also supports the priority accorded by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to fighting terrorism, separatism and fundamentalism.

The corruption and inefficiency found among our petty bureaucrats has tended to be a major obstacle to trade and technical cooperation with Pakistan, though this problem is not limited to Pakistan. In the Chinese calculations about the future, on which they base their policies and plans, Pakistan's internal instability is a cause for concern. Though our friendship and multi-faceted cooperation with China is of unquestioned importance for both our security and economic progress, their future cannot be taken for granted. The current trends in many areas produce legitimate doubts whether this "all-weather friendship" can be maintained.

We can draw reassurance from certain facts and traditions that make a friendly relationship an imperative for both the countries. But our primary focus should be on the measures that are needed to safeguard this invaluable friendship. So far as China is

concerned, the regard for old friends is almost a national trait. To promote regard for the achievements in fifty-three years of diplomatic relations the Chinese make it a point to educate the younger generation about what the friendship of Pakistan has meant for China, so that the current order does not erase the imprints of their understanding and cooperation.

We in Pakistan need to do likewise because China is progressing so fast that by 2050, its GDP will be higher than the of the US. Having started as a developing country, China's experience is relevant to our challenges, audits identification with the developing countries is an important lever to bring about a more just international order.

### **Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy**

Though there have been many changes of leadership and direction over the past half century, the foundations Chinese foreign policy have remained consistent, and are based on principles. China has followed an independent foreign policy, and believes that principles, and not power, should determine relations between states. Premier Zhou Enlai identified the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence in 1953, and had them accepted in 1954 during visits to two of China's neighbours, namely India and Myanmar (Burma) They are as follows:<sup>2</sup>

1. Mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty.
2. Mutual non-aggression.
3. Mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs.
4. Equality and mutual benefit.
5. Peaceful co-existence.

These principles constitute the essence of the UN Charter, which is also regarded as the foundation of international relations. Flowing from those principles is China's policy of opposing hegemony, and of not seeking hegemony for itself.

From the beginning, both China and Pakistan have based their relations on these principles, which is why their friendship has a secure foundation, leaders of both used to say, in the early years, that their relationship was not based on expediency. Such statements are no longer considered necessary, as this friendship not only conforms to principles but also to the interests of their people. Their cooperation in virtually all fields, ranging from trade and joint ventures to agriculture and peaceful uses of nuclear technology, is flourishing, and its scope is being expanded to achieve the shared objective of promoting the prosperity and well-being of their people. China's peaceful rise is setting an example to other developing countries to emulate. Pakistan stands out among China's neighbours as one with which there are no problems and disputes, and both the governments and the people have achieved a high level of mutual trust and confidence.

### **Sino-Pakistan Relations in the Regional Context**

Some of the questionings regarding the outlook for the relations between Pakistan and China arise out of China's evolving attitude towards South Asia, and other regional organizations, such as ASEAN. As China has emerged as a regional and world power, its perspective has doubtless changed somewhat, since bilateral considerations can be subordinated to broader goals. In this context, the reassuring fact is that there is broad convergence in the policies and attitudes of the two neighbours indeed, as India has tended to sideline regional cooperation under SAARC in the interest of its own ambitions, China has been supportive of the efforts of the other six members to activate the organization as a

vehicle for regional cooperation. South Asia has become important for China also finds the regional grouping linking West and Central Asia, ECO to be a useful concept, and has itself helped found the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, (SCO) in 2001, that links it to Russia and four Central Asian States. Pakistan, already a member of SAARC and ECO, has expressed a desire to join SCO as well, and expects to get Chinese support for admission, while Russia is expected to sponsor India.

The multilateral diplomacy of China is being focused on the regions surrounding it. As ASEAN has achieved rapid growth China has] stepped up both political and economic ties with member countries. The interaction with SAARC is also improving, with Pakistan favouring membership for China while India is pushing the admission of Afghanistan. East and South Asia are strategically important to safeguard the sea lanes to the Middle East as Chinese requirements for oil increase. The threat of encirclement by the US is a factor also, though the Chinese display confidence that they can manage their relations with Washington. Pakistan continues to have a special place of its own, being a member of both SAARC and ECO. Thus, in the regional context also, the comprehensive and all-weather relationship between Pakistan and China has a bright future.

### **The Global Context**

The global scenario has undergone two transformations in the years since the end of the Cold War. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the US as the sole superpower, while bringing into being several independent states in the heartland of Eurasia. The US changed its perceptions dramatically, so that India became a strategic partner while Pakistan was placed under

sanctions in 1990 for its nuclear programme. The Gulf War of 1991 brought the US military presence to the oil-rich Middle East where it also bolstered Israel's security and generally opposed Islamic resurgence. South Asia went openly nuclear in 1998, resulting in additional sanctions on Pakistan that were also applied to India. China became even more important as the only source of technology and of military hardware for security.

The terrorist attack on the US on 11 September 2001, was the other seminal event that transformed the global scene. Being the most serious attack on the US mainland in its history, the superpower responded by declaring war against terrorism, and the base of the attack was traced to Afghanistan, where the Taliban regime had provided sanctuary and support to Osama bin Laden, the brain behind the outrage. Pakistan as well as China both joined the coalition against terrorism, which had the effect of greatly improving their relations with the US.

However, the Bush administration, which had adopted a unilateralist foreign policy on the basis of its overwhelming power, used the terrorist attack as the justification for adopting the policy of pre-emption, and gave itself the right to intervene militarily, whenever it felt that its security was threatened. The attack on Afghanistan in October 2001 received the backing of the UN Security Council, but the war on Iraq was launched despite the refusal of the Security Council to authorize it till a further report from its inspectors about the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Iraq. The subsequent discovery that Iraq neither possessed weapons of mass destruction nor did it have a link with Al Qaeda, has further eroded the case for pre-emption.

Pakistan and China took a common stand on the US demand for the Security Council's endorsement for its pre-emptive attack on Iraq. Both have called for a greater role for the UN, and believe



that military intervention can be authorized only by the Security Council under the Charter. Both have similar views on strengthening the role of multilateral organizations, in a manner that addresses the problems of the great majority of mankind leading lives of deprivation in the developing countries. Thus, the identity of views held by China and Pakistan on regional and global issues reinforce the likelihood that their friendship and cooperation will draw continuing strength from a shared vision on regional and global issues.

### **Outlook for Bilateral Relations**

The above background on shared principles, and on the common vision on regional and global issues, provides a solid and durable foundation for building a future of close friendship, and of expanding cooperation. The scope for cooperation in the economic field is constantly expanding as China continues its remarkable growth. A phase of accelerated interaction in all fields has been launched, by creating the Pak-China Friendship Forum, that is actively engaged in motivating the private sector in Pakistan to take advantage of the goodwill and financial facilities being made available.

If the whole range of factors, bilateral, regional and global is kept in view, the future of the all-weather and comprehensive friendship cannot be in doubt. For the US, preoccupied with the ambition to ensure that this century becomes the New American Century, China is perceived as the only credible threat. The Ballistic Missile Defence concept though justified on account of the threat from rogue states is really aimed at containing China<sup>3</sup>. The strategic partnership Washington is developing with India is clearly based on the premise that by its size and location, India would be a natural counterweight to China. The US has developed strategic relationships with several states surrounding

China, including South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, ASEAN members, and India, and has established its military presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pakistan is the only neighbour on whom China can rely in its diplomacy against encirclement.

Pakistan itself has to keep in mind the threats that persist, including that from India, whose elite has not really accepted the break-up of mother India. Though Pakistan has become a major ally of the West in the war against terrorism, it is seen as being at the core of the threat from Islamic fundamentalism, whose nuclear capability rankles and is not acceptable to the West. Our friendship with China is thus truly the cornerstone of our foreign policy, and is valued by all parties and schools of thought. All this ensures that the relations between Pakistan and China have a bright future.

### **References**

<sup>1</sup> Hu Shisheng, China South Asia Policy and its Regional Impact, in *Major Powers and South Asia*, Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad, pp 311-314.

<sup>2</sup> R.K.Jain, (ed), *China-South Asia Relations 1947-80*, Vol. 1, (India 1947-80), Radiant Publishers, New Delhi, 1981, p 61.

<sup>3</sup> Dr Maqbool A. Bhatti, Ballistic Missile Defence, China, and South Asia, Islamabad Policy Research Institute, 2003.