

# Is it the end of the road for China-Pakistan relations?

By [Abid Mustafa](#)

Region: [Asia](#)

Global Research, December 02, 2006

2 December 2006

On his visit to Pakistan, the Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasised the importance of Sino-Pak relations and expressed his desire to expand bilateral ties between the two countries. "Let us build on past achievement and strengthen traditional friendship, advanced with the time, expand and enrich China-Pakistan strategic partnership so that our friendship will pass on from generation to generation," he said. The Pakistani government reciprocated by praising China's relationship with Pakistan. Colourful metaphors like "time-tested friendship" and "all weather friendship" were employed to convey this message to the Pakistani public. Supporters of the government pointed to the 18 agreements signed between the two countries as proof of China's longstanding commitment to Pakistan. These agreements included the much publicised Free Trade Agreement (FTA), the establishment of a free zone in Lahore for Chinese businesses, and a five year plan to boost bilateral trade between the two countries to \$15 billion by 2011.

But beyond the media grabbing headlines and the over-inflated speeches by politicians—Pakistan's relationship with China has reached a crescendo and is unlikely to progress any further. In contrast, China's relationship with India has vastly improved and the two adversaries are exploring numerous partnerships to augment their newfound relationship. Prior to visiting Pakistan, Hu spent a few days in India and signed 13 agreements. These included protection of bilateral investment, trade of iron ore and the export of rice, agriculture cooperation, educational assistance, and the conservation of cultural heritage. Nevertheless the most obvious improvement in relations has been in bilateral trade. From a meagre US\$117 million in the late eighties, the two-way trade for this year stands at \$20 billion and is projected to reach \$50 billion for 2010.

On the energy front the two nations instead of competing with each other are cooperating to meet the energy demands of their burgeoning economies. Indian and Chinese companies can be found collaborating on oil and gas projects in Iran, Syria, Sudan, Kazakhstan, South America and elsewhere in the world. While some of these joint ventures maybe small the trend supports the notion that China prefers to engage India over the acquisition and protection of energy resources. Commenting on the need of both countries to play an active role in shaping the international energy order, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Hu said in a joint statement: "There is the need for an international energy order, and for global energy systems to take into account the needs of both countries based on a stable, predictable, secure and clean energy future. In this context, the international civilian nuclear cooperation should be advanced through innovative and forward-looking approaches while safeguarding the effectiveness of international non-proliferation principles."

On the nuclear front China has offered assistance to bolster India's nuclear energy for civilian purposes. The nuclear cooperation on offer is on more or less equivalent to what China has in place with Pakistan. Furthermore, Hu's refusal to commit to the building of extra nuclear reactors on his trip to Pakistan underscores China's intention of alluring India into a long-term nuclear partnership. On this note an interesting statement was issued by US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack in response to an Indian reporter who questioned whether China's nuclear help to Pakistan extended to civilian nuclear reactors. McCormack said there was no new nuclear agreement between Pakistan and China "other than what was already grandfathered in by the Nuclear Suppliers Group."

Drawing confidence from the emerging nuclear cooperation between the two countries, the Indians believe that China will not scupper India's bid to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG). Speaking on the matter External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee said, "I am confident." Little wonder then that Manmohan Singh gave an upbeat assessment of Sino-Indian relations. He said, "At the fulcrum of our efforts is our collective political will to enrich and reinforce our strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity, and to resolve our outstanding issues in a focused, sincere and problem-solving manner."

China and India have also made strides on defence matters. This includes port calls, joint search-and-rescue exercises and defence exchanges. Last year this relationship was upgraded when Beijing and New Delhi signed a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation. While the military ties between the two countries are still in their infancy and do not quite match the military relationship found between China and Pakistan—it is more than evident that China is taking a different view of its one time adversary. Leaving boundary disputes aside, both countries are enjoying the benefits a multi-faceted bilateral relationship.

There are several reasons as to why Indian-Sino relations are expanding and maturing in comparison to Sino-Pak relations, which bear all the hallmarks of an association that is slowly becoming nominal.

### **Pakistan and September 11**

In the aftermath of September 11, Pakistan adopted a more aggressive policy towards China. This policy disguised as the fight against terrorism enabled America to dislodge the Taliban from power, appoint a puppet regime in Kabul and set up several military bases in Afghanistan. Moreover, Pakistan opened up its airspace to American fighter planes and under the pretext of search and rescue missions allowed the presence of a number of American air bases on Pakistani soil. Some of these air bases hosted several hundred American military personnel.

For the first time in many years, China perceived Pakistan to play an active role in cementing American hegemony adjacent to Chinese western borders—China now felt ensnared by America's military might stretching from the Asian Pacific rim to Afghanistan. Pakistan attempted to dispel these concerns by inviting China to invest in Gwadar the deep water port project in 2002. Pakistan promised China that Gwadar would facilitate the transport Chinese goods to Central Asia and give China access to the Arabian Sea and Middle Eastern markets. However, beyond the development of the port, China has shown little enthusiasm to utilise Gwadar as a gateway to these markets. The lack of interest is due to America's military presence in the region coupled with insurgencies in Balochistan and

the tribal areas. China is also well aware of America's long-term plan to separate the Balochistan province from Pakistan and fuse it with Iran's Balochistan region creating Balochi state. Aspects of this plan have been mentioned in various US intelligence papers such as CIA paper on Global Trends in 2015.

China's has reacted to these developments by strengthening Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and together with Russia is keeping the door firmly shut to any American intrusion into Central Asia from Afghanistan.

### **Normalisation between India and Pakistan**

During the cold war China understood India's closeness to the Soviet Union as a threat to its security. To mitigate this danger, China extended its support to Pakistan— a defacto balance of power equation was pursued by China in South Asia. However with the ascendancy of the pro-American BJP to power in India in the late nineties, and the ensuing normalisation process between India and Pakistan, China had to readjust its policy. China was now facing a combined threat from two pro-American countries. September 11 gave a fresh impetus to the normalisation process and magnified the threat posed by Pakistan and India to Chinese security. Beijing's hitherto policy of balance of power slowly gave way to a policy of 'engage and contain' India and Pakistan—both countries under American auspices were being groomed to act as a counterweight against China.

This meant that China had to carefully recalibrate its relationship with Pakistan, so as not to undermine its traditional sensitivities with Islamabad and yet, at the same time make overtures to India to gain her trust. India being much bigger than Pakistan required China to invest more time, effort and money not only to engage India, but also to contain it. The example of the latter is the signing of the FTA with Pakistan. The removal of Pakistani tariffs on 2,423 products to zero percent will encourage China to buttress her economic position in the Pakistani domestic market, making it difficult for Indian companies to do likewise when a free-trade agreement is reached between Islamabad and New Delhi. China has conducted a similar agreement with Bangladesh in the hope of constricting Indian companies.

### **Indian government split over US relations**

Another reason that has persuaded China to enhance its engagement with India is the Congress Party and her allies supplanting BJP as the governing coalition. Distrust of America runs deep in both Congress and her partners. China senses these sentiments and has exploited them to her advantage. For example many of the oil and gas ventures between the two countries flourished under the anti-American Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar who was eventually replaced by Manmohan Singh due to US pressure. Still the schisms persist and even the pro-American Manmohan Singh cannot ignore them.

Whereas, China's rapprochement with India is cognisant of anti-American nuance within American-Indian relations, no such differences pervade Pak-US relations. By all accounts Pakistan is a subordinate state to America, and this not only complicates Pakistan's relationship with China, but hinders Beijing from enhancing its ties with Islamabad.

### **Resurgence of Islam**

The resurgence of political Islam across the Muslim world has forced China to explore relations with non-Islamic countries. Since September 11, China has sought to expand

security cooperation with Russia, Israel and India as a means of countering political Islam, in particular the re-emergence of the Caliphate. A few years ago Russia and China invited India to discuss this very prospect.

All of these factors have contributed to China's expansion of ties with India. But the eventual outcome of US-China-India-Pakistan relations hinges on three issues: America's ability to extricate itself from Afghanistan and Iraq; Pakistan ability to wrest control of its domestic and foreign policy from America; China's ability to assert itself as a global power.

If the present trends continue then Sino-Pakistan relations will quickly degenerate and Pakistan will be bereft of its only friend in the international arena China.

*Abid Mustafa is a political commentator who specialises in Muslim affairs*

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