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# Evaluating a rocky India- China-Pakistan relationship

*Ramananda Sengupta\**

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Al Jazeera Centre for Studies  
Tel: +974-4930181  
Fax: +974-4831346  
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net  
www.aljazeera.net/studies

“Nervous China may attack India in 2012.” That was the title of a recent column by Bharat Verma, editor of the *Indian Defence Review*, a respected quarterly published in New Delhi. Picked up and disseminated by Indian wire and news services, the article sparked numerous public and private debates in the country – not on whether Verma was correct, but on whether India was prepared for such an attack by its northern neighbour.

When the world’s two fastest growing economies (even though China is way ahead in the numbers game; India’s GDP per capita of \$1016 pales before China’s \$6,100) prepare to face off, the rest of the world cannot but worry. The events in these nations will probably determine the world’s future over the next decade.

Since independence in 1947, India has struggled to shed the constant association with its western neighbour, Pakistan, with which it has fought three major wars and one quasi-war. “Don’t look at us through the prism of Pakistan; look at us for ourselves,” Indian diplomats plead at international forums, pointing to the obvious differences: size, economy, and political system. The two states, both of which officially went nuclear in 1998, regularly exchange rocket and artillery fire. Several well-meaning peace initiatives have floundered due to the deep-rooted mistrust and political-military compulsions on each side.

Today, however, Pakistan is linked with its volatile western neighbour, Afghanistan, while India is usually mentioned in the same breath as its large northern neighbour, the People’s Republic of China, a country with which it fought a border war in 1962, and which considers Pakistan its “all weather ally”. India is today in the unenviable position of having two hostile nuclear weapons states on its borders.

## **Pakistan and China**

Months after Mao Zedong officially declared the formation of the People’s Republic of China on the 1 October 1949, a newly-born Pakistan not only recognised the new state, but stood by it firmly through the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time when the United States of America and its allies refused to recognise the new government in Beijing and consistently blocked its entry into the United Nations.

When the U.S. and China finally decided to break the ice, it was Islamabad that brokered the talks, leading to the secret visit of U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to Beijing in July 1971. Three months later, on the 25 October, the UN recognised the People’s Republic of China as “the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations.”

Beijing did not forget Pakistan’s consistent support, and publicly described Pakistan as its “all weather ally”. Recently, China’s President Hu Jintao publicly reiterated that his country’s relations with Pakistan were “higher than the mountains and deeper than oceans”.

Apart from the long-tested political friendship, the two nations share strong economic and military ties. China helped set up defence production facilities in Pakistan, and the two countries jointly produce military equipment, including aircraft. China has also provided generous amounts of money to Pakistan in the form of aid and soft loans. Annual trade between the two countries is between six and seven billion dollars per annum, and is expected to reach \$12 billion by the end of this year. After the U.S. imposition of military sanctions on Pakistan in 1990, China became Pakistan’s largest supplier of military hardware, including missiles. (The U.S. lifted its sanctions on Pakistan after September 2001, when Pakistan became a “front line ally” of the U.S. in its “war on terror”.) China also provided

sensitive missile and nuclear weapons technology and equipment to Islamabad, allowing it to test its nuclear weapons days after the Indian nuclear tests of May 1998. Furthermore, China's People's Liberation Army regularly trains and conducts joint exercises with Pakistani forces.

Sino-Pakistani ties in various spheres remain strong despite continuous political strife in Pakistan. Successive Pakistani military dictators and democratically-elected leaders have traditionally made Beijing their first official foreign port of call. Following the devastating earthquake in China's Sichuan province in May 2008, Pakistan pulled out all the stops to help, rushing medical teams, 30,000 tents, food, life-saving drugs and other essential supplies to China. A Chinese foreign office spokesman, while acknowledging foreign support generally, declared that the Chinese people found Pakistan as their "most trusted and reliable friend, coming to their help in the quickest and most generous manner." This was a sign of true friendship, and it proved once again that Sino-Pakistani friendship was time-tested and mutually beneficial, he added.

The relationship has strong strategic underpinnings as well. China helped build the major port complex and naval base at Gwadar in the troubled Pakistani province of Baluchistan. Formally inaugurated in December 2008, the deep sea port with modern facilities caters to shipping from more than 30 countries. The port also gives the Chinese navy strategic access to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, through which most of the world's oil shipments are routed. This is especially useful considering that China is one of the world's largest importers of oil. The port also gives downstream access to China's landlocked and restive Xinjiang autonomous region, and the resource-rich Central Asian nations. Gwadar is a critical "pearl" in the Chinese "string of pearls" – the term used to refer to friendly ports and airfields – with access to sea lanes stretching from Hong Kong to the Arabian Gulf. China insists that such ports which, apart from Hong Kong, include Sittwe, the Coco Islands and others in Myanmar, the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka (still under construction), and Gwadar, are aimed at ensuring that its energy supply is not disrupted. Some Indian analysts worry, however, that this is part of a Chinese plan to "encircle" and contain a rising India.

The New York-based Council for Foreign Relations quoted Husain Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador to the U.S., as saying in 2006: "For China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India," while "for Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India."

### **India-China relations**

Like Pakistan, newly independent India too was among the first states to recognise Mao's People's Republic of China. Under its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, New Delhi too lobbied extensively for China's inclusion in the United Nations.

But underneath the apparent bonhomie the relationship started showing signs of strain as the two nations announced rival territorial claims over areas poorly demarcated by the British before they left the subcontinent. China's claims to Tibet, which it occupied – or liberated – in 1950, added to Indian disquiet. In the 1950s, China also built a road from Western Tibet to Xinjiang, part of which passed through the barren Aksai Chin region in Kashmir's extreme north-eastern region, which India claims as its own.

In 1954, after several meetings regarding disputed territory, the two nations signed what is known as the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which committed both parties to:

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

The improved relations were jeopardised, however, when, in 1959, the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan Buddhist spiritual head, fled Tibet and, together with thousands of his followers, was granted sanctuary in India. Describing this as “Indian expansionism and imperialism”, an angry China reiterated its claim to large chunks of territory in India's north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, and demanded that the borders be re-aligned accordingly. Nehru reacted by initiating his “Forward Policy”, which began the process of establishing military posts in the disputed areas, often behind Chinese lines. The two sides fought a brief border war in October 1962, in which the ill-equipped Indian side was routed and the Chinese advanced to the plains of Assam before unilaterally withdrawing to behind their earlier positions.

Sinologist and author of *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, Professor John Garver, said the 1962 conflict was a crucial moment. He said: “The 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict was a watershed moment for the region. Both China and India incurred heavy costs on their economic development, and both sides shifted their policy over time to become more accommodating to growth.”

In March 1963, much to India's chagrin, Pakistan ceded 1,942 square kilometres of land in northern Kashmir – which India claims – to China as part of a border agreement. Border clashes and sabre-rattling marked Sino-Indian relations for the next two decades.

The relationship began to thaw after India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Beijing in 1988 at the invitation of Premier Li Peng. Evoking the Five Principles, the two sides agreed to set up a joint working group to resolve the border issue, and to step up economic, diplomatic and cultural ties. High level visits and bilateral exchanges in various fields were embarked on, even as talks on border issues continued. But, a decade later, in May 1998, India conducted nuclear tests, followed days later by Pakistan.

Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, in a letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton justifying the tests, invoked the China threat:

I have been deeply concerned at the deteriorating security environment, especially the nuclear environment, faced by India for some years past... We have an overt nuclear weapon state on our borders, a state which committed armed aggression against India in 1962. Although our relations with that country have improved in the last decade or so, an atmosphere of distrust persists mainly due to the unresolved border problem. To add to the distrust, that country has materially helped another neighbour of ours to become a covert nuclear weapons state. At the hands of this bitter neighbour we have suffered three aggressions in the last 50 years. And for the last ten years we have been the victim of unremitting terrorism and militancy sponsored by it in several parts of our country, especially Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir.

A few days earlier, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes had referred to China as India's “potential threat number one”.

Beijing's reaction was sharp. Demanding that India roll back its nuclear programme, it cancelled all pending high-level visits, as well as a meeting of the joint working group on the border issue. By expressing "regret" rather than condemning Pakistan's nuclear test, Beijing made its position clear. But a year later, when Pakistani intruders were found occupying Indian territory in Kargil, Indian foreign minister Jaswant Singh visited Beijing and declared that India did not consider China a threat. China, in turn, surprised Pakistan by asking it to respect the Line of Control in Kashmir.

The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw both India and China trying to improve relations, despite the defection of Ugyen Thinley Dorje, the 17<sup>th</sup> Karmapa and Tibet's third highest ranking Lama, to India in January 2000. In 2003, Prime Minister AB Vajpayee visited China and India formally recognised Tibet as a part of China, while China in turn agreed to formally recognise the Indian state of Sikkim, which it earlier saw as an independent state illegally occupied by India. Despite Indian fears of Chinese goods impacting on domestic manufacturing, bilateral trade grew from \$2 billion in 1999 to \$40 billion in 2007 – the target set for 2010. The 2010 target was subsequently revised to \$60 billion.

While the spurt in trade has enhanced political relations too, the two nations compete externally for energy resources to fuel their growth. Both are vying for oil and other resources in Africa, Central Asia, and South America.

A war of words erupted again in late 2009, following Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims to be a part of Southern Tibet. "We demand," said a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, "the Indian side address China's serious concerns and not trigger disturbance in the disputed region so as to facilitate the healthy development of China-India relations." A month later, the Dalai Lama too was granted permission by New Delhi to visit Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.

India, in turn, protested China's plans to fund a hydro-power project in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, which India claims as its territory. New Delhi also reacted strongly to the Chinese Embassy in Delhi issuing visas stamped on a separate sheet of paper to Indian passport-holders from Kashmir.

## **India and Pakistan**

Pakistan and India have been arch enemies since their independence from Britain in 1947. They have fought three major wars against each other. The first, in 1947-1948 was over Kashmir and ended with a UN-sponsored ceasefire; the second in 1965 also ended in a stalemate after a UN ceasefire call; the third war, in 1971, led to the birth of Bangladesh after the Pakistani Army formally surrendered in East Pakistan.

Subsequently, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Pakistan's President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto met in Simla to sign an agreement that might peacefully settle their differences through bilateral negotiations. Both sides agreed "to refrain from threat or the use of force in violation of this Line [of Control]." In a goodwill gesture, India unilaterally released over 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war.

But Kashmir continued to fester, with Pakistan inciting and funding the separatist and terrorist movement there. Officially, Islamabad acknowledges only moral support to the "freedom fighters" in Kashmir. In May 1999, less than a year after Vajpayee went to Lahore for talks with his Pakistani counterpart President Nawaz Sharif, India launched a massive

offensive to evict Pakistani soldiers who had occupied strategic heights in Kashmir on the Indian side of the Line of Control. The war finally ended in late July, after President Clinton threatened Nawaz Sharif with dire consequences, and even China advised him to recall his troops.

Subsequently, Nawaz Sharif was overthrown in a coup by his army chief, General Pervez Musharraf, who ruled Pakistan with an iron fist for nine years, from 12 October 1999 to August 2008. In December 1999, an Indian Airlines flight was hijacked and taken to Kandahar, Afghanistan, then under Taliban rule. Buckling under domestic pressure, New Delhi agreed to free three Pakistani terrorists in exchange for the passengers and crew aboard the aircraft. One of the three, Maulana Masood Azhar, later founded Jaish-e-Muhammed, the Pakistan-based terrorist outfit which claimed responsibility for the attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. Another, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, was later arrested for the slaying of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. The third, Mushtaq Ahmed Zargar, runs military training camps in Kashmir.

In July 2000, a summit between Vajpayee and Musharraf ended with the latter walking away in a huff. In December 2001, Pakistani terrorists attacked the Indian Parliament. India responded by mobilizing for war, but stood down in June 2002 after intense international pressure. In 2003, the two sides agreed to a ceasefire along the Line of Control, which both sides continually accuse each other of violating. In November 2008, Pakistani terrorists struck India's financial capital, Mumbai, killing 166 people in multiple locations. India responded by breaking off talks unless Pakistan took action against the masterminds of the attack.

## **Conclusion**

Currently, India's relationship with both Pakistan and China is tinged with distrust and suspicion on all sides. Pakistan is facing a severe internal crisis, with terror groups striking virtually at will across the land. On its western front, Pakistan is concerned about increasing Indian influence in Afghanistan. India has also accused Pakistan of involvement in an attack on its embassy in Kabul in July 2008. Pakistan mistrusts the U.S., while accepting huge weapons and other aid packages from Washington to "fight terrorism".

China, while professing peace and good relations with its neighbours, suspects Indian motives in harbouring the Dalai Lama, and is concerned over the growing India-U.S. relationship. The Indo-U.S. nuclear deal (which allows India to acquire or purchase nuclear technology despite not being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty), signed in 2008, and increasing Indo-U.S. defence co-operation has Beijing worried. Many western analysts argue that this is an attempt by the U.S. to use India as a counterweight to China.

India's military exercises with Japanese and Australian forces has heightened Chinese unease. Last year, in an obvious attempt to counter the Chinese military presence in Tibet, India moved two army divisions to areas adjacent to the border with China, and built three new airstrips in the region. India also distrusts the Sino-Pakistan nexus, and believes that Pakistan is being used as a pawn by China to keep India on the back foot.

But the increasing political instability in Pakistan, coupled with the attacks on Chinese engineers in Baluchistan and the involvement of Pakistani-trained Islamists in the unrest in Xinjiang, has made Beijing hesitant to offer Pakistan a nuclear deal similar to the one the U.S. gave India.

According to some experts, the Indo-U.S. relationship and the increasing alienation of Pakistan might push Islamabad to seek even closer ties with its long-time friend, China. Others predict that economic relations with India, the growing unrest in Pakistan, and the fact that Beijing and New Delhi see eye-to-eye on several international issues, like the World Trade Organisation and climate change, might force Beijing to rethink its relationship with Islamabad. At the moment, China holds most of the aces. How Beijing plays its cards will determine the region's future.

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*\* Ramananda Sengupta is the Chief Editor of [www.sify.com](http://www.sify.com), one of India's oldest and largest Internet news portals*