

## China's Evolving Posture in South Asia: Some Reflections

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### Abstract

China is considered to be an important pillar of the security structure of South Asia particularly in the context of traditionally tense relationship between India and Pakistan, the two principal states of the region. This article explores the evolution of this important factor in South Asia and its future trajectory at a time when the region is passing through a significant geopolitical transformation in the wake of planned drawdown of the US-led forces from Afghanistan. In this regard, this article is divided into three broad sections and is followed by the concluding remarks. The first section traces the history of Beijing's policy towards South Asia till 9/11. The second section discusses its post-9/11 dynamics. Following that the third section discusses the future of Beijing's South Asia policy and argues that the China factor in the transformed region will be on the whole stabilizing and constructive.

**Keywords:** China, South Asia, Sino-Pakistan Relation, Sino-Indian Relations.

### Tracing the History

Following the establishment of People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing mainly dealt with South Asia in accordance with the overall ideological thrust of its foreign policy whereby it generally opposed the role of the United States and its western capitalist allies, condemned UN and emphasised on Afro-Asian unity in the post-colonial era. For example, when direct talks were initiated by India and Pakistan on the key regional dispute over Kashmir in 1953, the Chinese media welcomed it and *The People's Daily* hoped that such direct talks would exclude the UN which had 'aggravated the Kashmir dispute' in the past and that the UN 'was a mere instrumentality of the United States who wanted to convert Kashmir

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into a colony and military base.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Zhou Enlai, during his visit to Pakistan in 1956, emphasised that the Kashmir, along with other disputes among the Afro-Asian nations could be solved by keeping the ‘colonists’ out of it.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, Beijing was also impressed by the anti-colonial stance of the leaders of the Indian National Congress that had spearheaded the independence movement of India and hoped to team up with New Delhi against the western ‘imperialist’ states. Pakistan’s decision to align with the West soon after its establishment and its subsequent membership of the US-backed defence pacts, such as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) also made it simpler for Beijing to choose New Delhi as a preferred partner in South Asia. As a result, China and India drew close in the early 1950s and worked together to coordinate their policies towards various Afro-Asian problems. On the other hand, Sino-Pakistan relations did not get a promising start and Beijing remained somewhat suspicious about the pro-West tilt in Pakistan’s foreign policy.

Sino-Indian warmth, however, did not last long and the two countries fell apart in late 1950s in the wake of their dispute over the demarcation of their common borders. The deteriorating relations between the two countries even led to a direct military clash between them in 1962. China now reassessed its policy towards South Asia and decided to court Pakistan which was India’s main rival in the region. These shifts in Beijing’s calculations occurred at a time when Pakistan also became frustrated with its major ally i.e. the United States as a result of large military and economic aid being channelized to India by the Western countries following the deterioration of the India-China relations and was looking for more options in its foreign policy regarding its struggle against what it believed to be an unreasonable Indian attitude in the region.

A common cause against India thus led to Sino-Pakistani convergence on the regional situation and soon the two countries were able to develop an alliance-like relationship with close military and diplomatic ties.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, China took the first important step in mid March 1962

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in S. M. Burke and Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: An Historical Analysis* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1990), 104.

<sup>2</sup> Josef Korbel, *Danger in Kashmir* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), 91.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed study on the evolution of the relationship between the two countries, see Anwar Hussain Syed, *China and Pakistan: Diplomacy of Entente Cordiale* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1974); Mushtaq Ahmed, *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy* (Karachi: Space Publishers, 1968), 55-66;

when it decided to demarcate the boundary between the Sinkiang province and the Northern Areas of Pakistan. Following that China also started giving resolute support to Pakistan position on Kashmir. Zhou Enlai visited Pakistan in February 1964 and expressed complete support for the settlement of the Kashmir problem 'in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir as pledged to them by India and Pakistan.'<sup>4</sup> Similarly, China also became an important supplier of military hardware for Pakistan whose access to the Western sources was now under severe constraints.

In the course of Sino-Pakistani entente, Beijing extended strong support to Pakistan during several of its military confrontations with India. For example, China took a clear stand in favour of Pakistan during the 1965 Indo-Pak war and this Chinese support proved to be critical in the final outcome of the war. Zhou Enlai remarked during the war that the Indian 'reactionaries' were 'outright aggressors in both the local conflict in Kashmir and the general conflict between India and Pakistan'. He denounced the US and Soviet position in the Indo-Pak conflict and said that by not declaring India as an aggressor and professing to be neutral, the US and the USSR were not distinguishing between the right and wrong, 'aggression and anti-aggression.'<sup>5</sup>

China also supported Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pak war. Beijing regarded the East Pakistan crisis as an internal problem of Pakistan and condemned the Indian and Soviet interference in the affairs of Pakistan. Li Xiannian remarked on November 29, 1971 that 'because the Indian Government ... has been carrying out subversive activities and military provocations against East Pakistan, the tension on the subcontinent has been aggravated'. He made it clear that 'the Chinese Government and people resolutely support the Pakistani Government and people in their just struggle against foreign aggression.'<sup>6</sup> Along with the United States, China also played an important role in preventing India from starting any major military offensive against West Pakistan.<sup>7</sup>

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Mohammad Ayoob, 'India as a Factor in Sino-Pakistani Relations,' *International Studies* 9, no. 3, (January 1967), 279-300.

<sup>4</sup> K. Arif (ed.), *China Pakistan Relations (Documents): 1947-80* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1980), 47.

<sup>5</sup> 'Chinese Government Leaders Condemn Indian Expansionism and Aggression Against Pakistan,' *Peking Review*, no. 38, September 17, 1965, 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> 'Firm Support for Pakistan People's Just Struggle,' *Peking Review*, no. 49 (December 3, 1971), 5.

<sup>7</sup> For an informed account of the Sino-US diplomacy during the war, see G. W. Choudhury, *India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Major Powers: Politics of A Divided Subcontinent* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1975).

### *Advent of the Deng Era*

Chinese policy towards the region was, however, modified with the rise of Deng Xiaoping who initiated sweeping reforms in the country in the late 1970's. Beijing now put emphasis on economic development as a means to ensure overall national security and started 'giving greater play to market forces, dismantling agricultural collectives, and encouraging foreign trade and investment in China.'<sup>8</sup> In order to achieve these objectives China initiated the process of securing peaceful relations with all of its neighbours in order to ensure smooth economic development. As a result, China sought rapprochement with India as well that led to the initiation of regular talks between the two countries in late 1970s aimed at improving their political and economic relations.<sup>9</sup> The phenomenon of Sino-Indian rapprochement had certain negative implications for the Sino-Pakistan relations. For example, China now started omitting any direct reference to Kashmir or the related UN resolutions in an effort to appease India.

The geopolitical changes in the region during the 1980s however kept Pakistan's importance solidly intact in the eyes of the Chinese when the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan militarily in 1979. China felt threatened by the Soviet move whose relations with the USSR had already deteriorated due to growing suspicions between Beijing and Moscow in the wake of their boundary dispute. China perceived the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as Moscow's attempts to encircle it.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, India's alignment with the Soviet Union during the period also complicated the regional situation for the Chinese. Furthermore, New Delhi's moves in the region during the period like the occupation of the Siachen Glacier located at the tri-junction of the Indian-Pakistani-Chinese borders led to the raising of eyebrows in Beijing. The development brought Indian military in proximity to the area which New Delhi claims Pakistan had illegally ceded to China during the Sino-Pakistani boundary settlement in 1962 as India considers the area to be part of the territories of Kashmir. Pakistan thus emerged as the only reliable opening for Beijing when it felt surrounded by hostile powers during the period and rapprochement with India remained a secondary concern in the Chinese policy towards South Asia.

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<sup>8</sup> Denny Roy, *China's Foreign Relations* (Macmillan, 1998), 33.

<sup>9</sup> For a more discussion on the changing dynamics of Chinese policy towards South Asia see, G.W. Choudhury, 'China's Policy Towards South Asia,' *Current History* 76, no. 446, (April 1979), 155-158 and 181-183.

<sup>10</sup> A. Z. Hilali, 'China's Response to the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan,' *Central Asian Survey* 20, no. 3, (2001), 323-351.

*The Post-Cold War Developments*

The departure of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 and the subsequent end of the Cold War after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 changed the whole context of China's South Asia policy. Taking advantage of relative peaceful environment in the region, China now ambitiously moved on its policy of achieving a normalized relationship seeking stronger bilateral economic and political ties. These changing dynamics led to increased negative consequences for Beijing's traditional close relationship with Pakistan in the post-Cold War period. Many observers of the regional politics noticed these transformations in the Chinese attitude towards the region. For example, Devin T. Hagerty notes that as a result of positive developments in the process of Sino-Indian rapprochement, the post-Cold War era witnessed 'the relative neglect' of Pakistan in China's approach to the region.<sup>11</sup> Robert G. Sutter also comments in a similar way that this progress in Sino-Indian relationship 'was made to some degree at the expense of traditionally close Sino-Pakistani relations.'<sup>12</sup>

The impact of these shifts in China's South Asia policy was first highlighted during India-Pakistan Crisis over Kashmir in 1989-90. Contrary to its position during the Cold War when China openly supported Pakistan against India, Beijing's response was somewhat balanced. Similarly, China also did not make any reference to the relevant UN resolutions on Kashmir during the Crisis. It pursued a neutral course emphasising 'peace' and 'calm' in the region and urged both the parties to solve their problems through talks.

Also, during rest of the 1990s, China tried to balance its posture in the region and continued with its policy of urging talks between India and Pakistan to resolve their disputes without resorting to force while describing Kashmir as an issue 'left over by history.' Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who visited Pakistan in 1996, did not even refer to the dispute in his 45 minute speech in Pakistan Senate. Rather, he advised Pakistan 'to put the thorny issues aside and develop cooperative relations with India in less contentious sectors like trade and economic cooperation'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Devin T. Hagerty, 'China and Pakistan: Strains in the Relationship,' *Current History* 101, No. 656, (September 2002), 284.

<sup>12</sup> Robert G. Sutter, *China's Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils* (Lanham Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 231.

<sup>13</sup> Jiang Zemin, 'Carrying Forward Friendly and Neighborly Relations from Generation to Generation, and Working together for a Better Tomorrow,' *Foreign Affairs*, Islamabad, XXII, no. 12, (December 1996).

The effects of these changing dynamics of China's South Asia policy in the post-Cold War era were demonstrated more clearly during the Kargil crisis as this was a time when Sino-Indian rapprochement had entered into a more mature phase. During the crisis, Beijing adopted a neutral stance towards India and Pakistan, emphasised restraint in the region and advised the two countries to hold talks to settle the disputes. For example, Chinese Foreign Ministry in a press briefing on June 10, 1999 hoped that 'both sides will use peaceful means and solve any crisis through negotiations to prevent the escalation of the situation'.<sup>14</sup>

Beijing's position in this regard remained unchanged despite repeated attempts by Islamabad to seek active Chinese support regarding its position on Kargil. For example, when Pakistan's Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz visited China on June 11, 1999, Chinese FM Tang Jiaxuan told him that the situation in South Asia has caused great concern among the international community and that 'The Kashmir issue ... should be, and could only be, solved through peaceful means'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Li Peng, Chairman of the Committee of the Chinese People's Congress, also urged upon Aziz that 'out of consideration for maintaining peace and stability in the South Asian Region, Pakistan should remain cool-headed and exercise self-control and solve conflicts through peaceful means and avoid worsening the situation.'<sup>16</sup>

In another effort to muster Chinese support on Kargil, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif embarked upon a weeklong visit to China late in June. During his talks with Nawaz Sharif, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji maintained that the Kashmir dispute is a 'historical issue involving territorial, ethnic and religious elements' which should 'be solved only through peaceful means'.<sup>17</sup> Nawaz Sharif, later, cut down his visit and returned home earlier than planned and Pakistan's leading English newspaper *Dawn* commented that, 'it is perhaps not surprising that the prime minister found little to comfort him'.<sup>18</sup> It was also reported that the Chinese were more blunt in private, warning that there would be no military support from the China, and so the Pakistanis should get out of Kargil and settle the crisis.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 'China Urges Negotiations,' *Dawn* (Karachi), Jun 11, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> 'China Backs Pakistan's Efforts to Ease Tensions,' *Dawn* (Karachi), Jun 12, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Shao Zhongwei, 'Zhu: Dialogue A Must for Peace,' *China Daily*, June 29, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Editorial, *Dawn* (Karachi) June 27, 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Michael R. Chambers, 'Dealing with a Truculent Ally: A Comparative Perspective on China's Handling of North Korea,' *Journal of East Asian Studies*

## The Post-9/11 Trends

Regional and international developments following 9/11, however, led to some important adjustments in China's South Asia policy. Unlike its passive posture during the India-Pakistan crises of the 1990s China has exhibited an unprecedented interest in peaceful conduct in South Asia in the post-9/11 period. In this regard, it has expressed greater concerns about the post-9/11 India-Pakistan tensions and has played a proactive role at the diplomatic level in order to ensure peace in South Asia. This has been highlighted during various post-9/11 crises between India and Pakistan including the 2001-02 crisis and the Mumbai crisis of 2008.

### *The 2001-02 India-Pakistan Crisis*

The 2001-02 India-Pakistan crisis ensued soon after 9/11 and led to an unprecedentedly long military and diplomatic standoff between India and Pakistan. For almost a year the armies of the two countries stood almost eyeball to eyeball and on more than one occasion the two countries came dangerously close to the brink of all-out war. The crisis ensued in the wake of a few terrorist incidents in India and the part of Kashmir controlled by it. New Delhi blamed certain Kashmir-focussed insurgent groups including Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) for the attack and also accused Pakistan and its intelligence agency, Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), for the planning and implementation of the attack.

The crisis consisted of two major phases. The first phase of the crisis was triggered soon after the December 13, 2001 terrorist incident in the premises of the Indian Parliament. This came to an end when the situation in the region somewhat stabilized towards February 2002. However, the regional environment deteriorated again following the May 14, 2002 attacks in Srinagar leading to the second and tenser phase of the crisis. The crisis finally ended in mid-October 2002 in the wake of the intense diplomatic efforts by various international actors chiefly led by the United States.

During the crisis, Beijing played an important role as part of the international effort aimed at diffusing the regional tensions. As opposed to its passive role during the Kargil crisis, China pursued an active diplomacy during the 2001-02 crisis. There was a closer interaction between the Chinese and the South Asian leadership through regular mutual visits and by means of telephonic conversations. Similarly, during the crisis Beijing regularly expressed that it was 'extremely worried' over 'the development

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1, no. 5, January 2005, 43. The author reports it on the basis of his interview with an American diplomat who was in the region at the time of the crisis.

of the situation' in South Asia.<sup>20</sup> It also increasingly emphasised upon India and Pakistan the need for a peaceful settlement of the disputes through a process of dialogue and urged utmost restraint in the region. For example, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji told the visiting Pakistani President Musharraf during the crisis that 'it is in the fundamental interest of both countries and the expectations of the international community for both Pakistan and India to maintain the utmost restraint, and safeguard the peace and stability of South Asia'.<sup>21</sup>

Beijing also remained actively engaged with the key international players regarding the situation in South Asia. For example, on January 03, 2002, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan held detailed telephonic discussions with the US Secretary Powell and expressed China's deep concerns about the tensions in South Asia.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, when tensions escalated following the May 14, 2002 attacks in Srinagar, Tang again discussed the deteriorating situation with his US and British counterparts and remarked that his country 'will spare no effort to promote reconciliation' between India and Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> China's increasing profile in managing the South Asian situation was also highlighted when Tang remarked in a press conference during a session of the National People's Congress that Beijing would continue 'to play a unique constructive role' in this regard.<sup>24</sup>

Beijing also activated the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and other relevant forums regarding the deteriorating situation in the Sub-continent. The joint communiqué issued at the end of the meeting of Foreign Ministers of SCO held in Beijing on January 07, 2002 expressed 'serious concern over the growth of tensions between India and Pakistan.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> 'FM Spokeswoman on Clashes between India and Pakistan,'

<http://www.china-embassy.ch/eng/xwss/t137990.htm> (accessed July 16, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> 'Chinese Premier, Pakistani President on Pakistan-India Tension,' Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Switzerland,

<http://www.china-embassy.ch/eng/xwss/t137990.htm> (accessed July 16, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Jiang Zhuqing, 'Tensions in South Asia of Common Concern,' *China Daily*, January 4, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> 'Chinese, US FMs Discuss India-Pakistan Situation by Phone,' May 28, 2002, Consulate General of People's Republic of China in Houston,

<http://www.chinahouston.org/news/2002528074426.html>

(accessed July 16, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> 'Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan Met a Press Conference,' Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Australia, available at <http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/xw/t45651.htm> (accessed July 16, 2010). [Emphasis added]

<sup>25</sup> 'Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of Shanghai Cooperation Organization,' January 7, 2002, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Geneva,

<http://missions.itu.int/~kazaks/eng/sco/sco06.htm> (accessed July 16, 2010).

Following the conference a separate meeting of the Chinese and Russian foreign ministers also issued another statement which called on 'India and Pakistan to make diplomatic efforts to politically resolve the present crisis.'<sup>26</sup> China also remained active on the issue during the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia held at Almaty in June 2002. Jiang met separately with Vajpayee and Musharraf during the Conference and emphasised that the two countries 'must dialogue' in this regard.<sup>27</sup> Following that, Chinese Vice-FM Wang Yi and Assistant FM Zhang Yesui separately called in diplomatic envoys from India, Pakistan, the United States, Russia, Britain and France and briefed them about the outcome of the meetings.<sup>28</sup>

Fearing that any attempt at isolating Pakistan or pushing it to the wall will be dangerous and counterproductive, China also warned the international community against applying one-sided pressure on Pakistan. Beijing thus asked the United States to take a more balanced view of the South Asian crisis. For example, during his telephonic conversation with Powell on May 27, 2002, Tang asked for 'a more balanced and fairer attitudes from the international community to encourage direct dialogue' between the two South Asian nations that was 'the most effective way to lead South Asia towards peace and stability.'<sup>29</sup>

### **The Mumbai Crisis**

Following the 2001-02 crisis India and Pakistan initiated a comprehensive bilateral dialogue. The process was, however, called off by New Delhi in the wake of the Mumbai attacks on November 26, 2008. About 160 people, including tourists of various nationalities, were killed in the attacks. Blaming the incident on 'elements from Pakistan,' India took a belligerent posture towards Pakistan and the situation led to a fresh crisis in the region. India alleged Jama'at ud Dawa (JuD) — a group formed by the affiliates of LeT after its banning by Pakistan — to be behind the Mumbai attacks though the group denied any involvement.<sup>30</sup> Describing Pakistan as the 'epicentre of terrorism,' India also demanded the extradition of persons involved in Mumbai attacks that it claimed to be present in Pakistan. On the

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<sup>26</sup> Qi Hua, 'Statement Calls for Restraint,' *China Daily*, January 9, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> 'Chinese President Meets Indian Prime Minister,' *China Daily*, June 6, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Gang Bian, 'S. Asia "must take peace path,"' *China Daily*, Jun 7, 2002.

<sup>29</sup> 'Chinese, US FMs Discuss India-Pakistan Situation by Phone,' May 28, 2002, Consulate General of People's Republic of China in Houston, <http://www.chinahouston.org/news/2002528074426.html> (accessed July 16, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> 'UJC Terms Mumbai Slaughter Reprehensible,' *Dawn*, November 30, 2008.

other hand, Pakistan rejected India's demand and urged it to share evidence proving that elements from this country territory had carried out attacks.

Following that the situation worsened in the region leading to a fresh crisis. Mounting tensions between India and Pakistan were highlighted by the military movements in both countries in the wake of talks in India of 'surgical strikes' on the alleged militant camps in Pakistan. India moved part of its forces to the forward positions while describing it as 'normal winter exercises.' Pakistan was not ready to believe and it also put its forces on high alert while moving some of these to the borders along India. Expressing its concerns regarding the highly dangerous situation in the region, a White House spokesman warned that 'In some ways that whole region is like a forest that hasn't had rain in many months and one spark could cause a big, roaring fire.'<sup>31</sup>

The crisis was managed as a result of active engagement of the international actors led by the United States. China was an indispensable part of this effort and it regularly stressed regional stability and continuation of dialogue between the two countries which it said was 'in line with the requirements for regional peace and stability and the common expectation of the international community'.<sup>32</sup> Like its role during the 2001-02 crisis, Beijing again became closely engaged with the Indian and Pakistani leadership in order to defuse the tensions. For example, Chinese FM Yang Jiechi phoned his counterparts in India and Pakistan and hoped that the two countries would 'bear in mind regional peace and stability' and properly handle related issues through dialogue and consultations.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, China also sent a seven-member delegation headed by Deputy FM He Yafei to the region during the crisis in order to convey its message effectively to the leadership of India and Pakistan that Beijing was highly interested in a peaceful conduct in South Asia.

#### *China's Post-9/11 Posture in South Asia: An Analysis*

China's proaction in South Asia crises after 9/11 should be understood in the context of its heightened security apprehensions due to some important geopolitical changes in the region. The arrival of US forces in Afghanistan

<sup>31</sup> 'US Trusts Pakistan, Says White House,' *Dawn* (Karachi), December 2, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> Xinhua, 'China Calls for India-Pakistan Dialogue after Mumbai Attack,' December 4, 2008, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-12/04/content\\_10457142.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-12/04/content_10457142.htm) (accessed November 20, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> 'Chinese FM Talks with Indian, Pakistani Counterparts over Phone,' *People's Daily*, December 27, 2008, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/6562940.html> (accessed November 21, 2009).

soon after 9/11 in the wake of Washington's declaration of 'Global War on Terrorism' was viewed by the Chinese as a worrisome development in the context of its broader internal and external security concerns. The Chinese now openly talked about the 'southern discomfort' and Fu Quanyou, one of the top Chinese military commanders, warned the United States that 'counter-terrorism should not be used to practice hegemony'.<sup>34</sup>

Although, there was an inherent tactical gain for China in the form of overthrowing of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan because of the negative fall-out of the rise of the group in Afghanistan on the worsening situation in its troubled province of Xinjiang, however, Beijing became unsettled by the US military presence close to its western borders. China feared that along with fighting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Washington might also have other political designs in the region. It feared that the United States may create instability in the Chinese areas adjacent to Central Asia as indicated by the US approach of not considering the Uighur separatists as 'terrorists.' While articulating Chinese concerns in this regard, a Chinese analyst noted that 'Based on the experiences of the past decades, the US might get involved' in Xinjiang.<sup>35</sup>

Beijing also became concerned about the possible stress of the US military presence in the area on its Central Asian strategy, an area where Beijing had become increasingly involved following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The establishment of Shanghai Five organization in 1996 had demonstrated the critical importance of the region for China. China wanted to maintain close relations with the newly-independent Muslim-majority Central Asian states as leverage to check any separatist tendencies in Xinjiang. Moreover, the energy-rich Central Asian states had also become highly attractive for Beijing whose economic machine had an increasing need of abundant oil and gas supplies. The creeping political influence of Washington in the area as highlighted by the establishment of military bases in the region by the United States unsettled China regarding US motives in the region.

Heightened post-9/11 tensions in South Asia were viewed as a complicating development by the Chinese. In this regard, Beijing became worried about the widening of the conflict in the region and the negative fall-out of the Indo-Pak tensions on the Afghan situation. It became concerned that increased tensions between India and Pakistan could easily

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<sup>34</sup> 'China Warns US against Using Terrorism Fight to Expand Influence,' *Agence France-Presse*, January 16, 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Zhang Xiaodong, 'China and Western Regions,' *Asia Times Online*, July 10, 2002, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/DG10Ad03.html> (accessed September 13, 2009).

embroil Afghanistan making its stabilization more difficult. It was in this context that while expressing such Chinese concerns, Tang told Powell during the 2001-02 crisis that 'if the situation gets out of control and results in large-scale armed conflict, not only would India and Pakistan both suffer, it would also influence the peace process in Afghanistan and endanger the stability and development of South Asia and *even all of Asia*.'<sup>36</sup>

Another factor exacerbating China's security concerns in the region after 9/11 came in the form of rapidly expanding US-India military and strategic ties during the period. Increased collaboration between the two powers in politico-military spheres during the period were considered as a worrisome development by China and it looked at the phenomenon as part of the thinking among the US policy circles in late 1990s of seeing 'India as a counterweight to China.'<sup>37</sup> While expressing such Chinese apprehensions, a Chinese analyst noted soon after 9/11 that 'the United States and India have a commonality of regarding China as a potential threat and main rival. It is therefore their common interest to limit China's rise.'<sup>38</sup>

For Beijing, all this was occurring along with some worrisome Indian moves in the region after 9/11. For example, India was getting closer with countries like Japan and Vietnam with whom Chinese relations remain tense. Beijing also voiced concerns about the Indian Navy flexing its muscles in the South China Sea, an area of high importance for China. At the same time, problems regarding certain bilateral issues in the Sino-Indian relations had also exacerbated during the period as China felt that India had become more assertive on the issue in the post-9/11 period.

In the context of all these developments, the post-9/11 India-Pakistan crises emerged as qualitatively different from their past confrontation for the Chinese and the Indian coercive tactics in South Asia were perceived in Beijing within the broader parameters of the US strategy in Asia. A Chinese national security analyst while reflecting his views on the Chinese apprehensions during 2001-02 crisis, said, 'What worries China more is the possibility that it could be drawn into a conflict, not between Pakistan and India per se, but between Pakistan and the US, with the latter using India as

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<sup>36</sup> 'Tang, Powell Exchange Views on Indian-Pakistan Tension,' *China Daily*, January 5, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Ren Xu, Qian Fing, Fang Hua, 'America and Japan Rope in India: Their Basic Objective is to Contain China,' *People's Daily*, April 30, 2001; and J. Mohan Malik, 'China Edgy over Clinton's India Visit,' *Pioneer*, March 2, 2000.

<sup>38</sup> Zhang Guihong, 'Bushi zhengfu de Nanya zhengce yu Zhongguo de anquan huanjing,' (The Bush Administration's Policy towards South Asia and China's Security Environment), *Nanya Yanjiu (South Asian Studies)*, no. 2 (2003), 32. (The author is thankful to an anonymous person for helping in the translation of this page.)

a surrogate.' Describing the 2001-02 Indo-Pakistani crisis as 'unlike all previous conflicts between the two sides', he remarked further that, 'It is in fact, a US-Pakistan conflict, with India serving as an American pawn.' He said the situation 'puts China in a dilemma' as 'Open support for its traditional ally Pakistan would risk jeopardizing its relations with US and India as well. At the same time if China does not support Pakistan, China's southern flank will be exposed to unrestrained Indian moves'.<sup>39</sup>

However, Beijing's proactivity in South Asia after 9/11 should not be viewed as a sort of replica of Cold War politics between China and the United States. China's unprecedented proactive role at the diplomatic front during various post-9/11 crises occurred at a time when it was actively engaged with Washington and New Delhi. The development of terms like 'Chimerica' (China-America) and 'Chindia' (China-India) speaks volumes about the close relationship Beijing developed with these countries during the period. Despite being critical of the post-9/11 US moves in the region, Beijing consistently sought coordination with Washington in its efforts to diffuse the South Asian crises and also did not lose sight of its process of rapprochement with New Delhi by balancing its posture towards India and Pakistan during the period.

China maintained a balanced posture towards India and Pakistan during the post-9/11 crises in the region. For example, during the 2001-02 crisis, the Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji went ahead with its already planned five-day visit to India in mid-January 2002. During his visit Zhu hoped that India and Pakistan, as China's two neighbours, could peacefully resolve their disputes through dialogue and consultation.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Director General of Asia Department of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Mr. Fu Ying remarked on the occasion that 'I don't think China has ever been leaning on any side' and that the 'visit by the Premier to India is a strong message in itself.' He further remarked that 'the message from China is for cooperation and good relations with India.'<sup>41</sup> Describing China's balanced approach to the region in a press conference during the session of the National People's Congress on March 6, 2001, Chinese FM Tang Jiaxuan remarked that 'both Pakistan and India are good neighbours of China' and that 'developing China-India and China-Pakistan relations can run parallel without conflict.'<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Ching Cheong, 'China Faces Strategic Dilemma in South Asia,' *Strait Times* (Singapore), January 7, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> 'Zhu's Visit Promotes Sino-Indian Trust: Vice FM,' *China Daily*, January 19, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> 'Zhu not to mediate on Kashmir issue,' *Times of India*, January 9, 2002.

<sup>42</sup> *People's Daily*, March 7, 2002.

China again played a delicate balancing act between India and Pakistan during the Mumbai crisis. Describing China's relationship with the two countries during his visit to the region, China's Deputy Foreign Minister Yafei told Indian foreign secretary Mr. Menon that India 'was their strategic partner and that Pakistan is a close friend of China' and emphasised that dialogue and consultation was 'the best way' to resolve issues in the region.<sup>43</sup> During the crisis, China put its weight behind Pakistan when it did not fully endorse India's side of the story and Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang remarked that the identity of the mastermind of the Mumbai attacks 'awaited further investigation by concerned countries.'<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a commentary in China's official newspaper *People's Daily* did not single out the Kashmiri groups being responsible for the Mumbai attacks but also pointed to other fault lines in the Indian society where many sects belonging to both 'Hindus and Muslims' were 'fighting for different religious beliefs and their own interests'.<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, China refrained from blocking the joint Indo-US move at UN for putting sanctions on the leadership of Jammāt-ud-Dawā (JuD) whom New Delhi accused of being the mastermind of the Mumbai attacks. Earlier attempts by India and the United States to get the group and its leadership on the UN terror list had been blocked by China in May 2007 and April 2006. At the same time, China also put behind-the-scene pressure on Pakistan to act against JuD. According to an editorial in a leading Pakistani newspaper, Islamabad's subsequent decision to go along the UN resolution and crack-down on the group came as the result of pressure from China. Citing certain official sources, it revealed that it was the Chinese 'message' that changed the Pakistani 'mind' regarding JuD initiating a subsequent crackdown on the organization. It was reported that the Chinese had reportedly told Islamabad as much beforehand, compelling Pakistan's

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<sup>43</sup> Sheela Bhat, 'Pakistan Has to Extradite Terror Suspects: India,' *Rediff India Abroad*, January 6, 2009, <http://www.rediff.com/news/2009/jan/05mumterror-pakistan-has-to-extradite-terror-suspects-says-india.htm> (accessed July 21, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Jawed Naqvi, 'Singh Tones Down Rhetoric: Mastermind of Mumbai Attacks Remains to Be Identified: China,' *Dawn* (Karachi), December 24, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> 'Mumbai Attacks Reveal Deep-rooted Conflicts in India,' *People's Daily*, December 1, 2008, <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90777/90851/6543401.html> (accessed November 21, 2009).

permanent representative at the UN to assert that 'Pakistan would accept the ban if it came.'<sup>46</sup>

### **Assessing the Future**

South Asia is now undergoing a significant strategic transformation in the wake of planned withdrawal of the US-led forces from Afghanistan in 2014. How will this change impact China's approach to the region? Will China revert to its policy of the 1990s in the wake of these developments and adopt a posture of passive neutrality towards this explosive region? There can be no precise answer to it, however, a closer look at the developments in the China-South Asia relations during the recent past suggests that China is likely to continue with its post-9/11 diplomatic proaction in order to stem instability in this dangerous but increasingly important region for Beijing.

Since the turn of the century, China has taken important steps to integrate itself with South Asia where it shares borders with five out of eight states of the region (including Afghanistan). China has also joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as an observer in 2007. In a rare move Beijing has also offered \$600,000 for the SAARC Development Fund launched in 2010. China's deepening ties with the region can be well gauged by the fact that it is now a common phenomenon of Chinese delegations, whether commercial or diplomatic, travelling to Lahore via New Delhi through the India-Pakistan Wagah border.

Important milestones have also been achieved in the process of China-India rapprochement during the period and Beijing has been able to cultivate New Delhi in a significant way as a result of its tightrope balancing act during various post-9/11 India-Pakistan crises. Moreover, despite certain problems, the two countries have been able to manage a sustained process of talks over the boundary dispute. During Prime Minister Manmohan's visit to China in November 2013, the two countries have decided to calm down the recurrent tensions along their disputed borders and have concluded an agreement on this regard.

Sino-Indian interaction has also increased significantly in other areas of mutual concern in the region and beyond. China has forged cooperation with India on certain shared global goals including climate negotiations and the Doha trade talks and is also working closely with India within the framework of the BRICS. Beijing has also opened dialogue with India over

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<sup>46</sup> 'Cleaning up the Act with Conviction,' *Daily Times* (Lahore), December 13, 2008, [http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\12\13\story\\_13-12-2008\\_pg3\\_1](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2008\12\13\story_13-12-2008_pg3_1) (accessed July 21, 2013).

the future of Afghanistan. In April 2013, China and India held their first meeting in an effort to harmonise their policies on the issue. Chinese analysts also entertain the idea of a trilateral dialogue on the future of Afghanistan between India, Pakistan and China in the post-United States period.<sup>47</sup>

The period has also witnessed an unprecedented surge in the China-India trade ties. Sino-Indian bilateral trade stood at USD 66.6 billion in 2012 up from a meagre USD 3.5 billion in 2001 and the two countries plan to take their bilateral trade up to USD 100 billion by 2015. Similarly, during 2012, China has been India's second largest trading partner while India emerged as the 7<sup>th</sup> largest destination of China's exports. Chinese and Indian companies are now jointly bidding in various commercial projects at the international level.

Plans are also underway in Beijing for economic integration of India's northeastern areas with China's southern regions. An important step taken in this regard is the reconstruction of the Ledo Road. This was originally created as a military supply route for the Western Allies to China during World War II, and was rebuilt and opened in 2005. The road links China's Yunnan province to the town of Ledo in Assam, India, and has reduced the distance for transportation of goods between these two points by approximately 1200 km. The project has also been described as Kunming-Chittagong corridor that links China's south with the Bangladesh's Chittagong through Myanmar and northeastern India.

On the other hand, there has also been unprecedented improvement in China's economic relations with Pakistan since 2001.<sup>48</sup> The traditional exchange of goods between the two countries mainly consisted of transfer of Chinese military hardware to Pakistan. However, the bilateral trade is now much more diversified and commercially driven. The two countries concluded a Free Trade Agreement in 2006 which was further improved in 2009. China-Pakistan bilateral trade has now expanded from less than US\$1 billion in 2001 to US\$7 billion in 2007 and stood at US\$12.4 billion in 2012. Similarly, China has also made investments in many Pakistani infrastructure and commercial projects over the past decade. An important step taken by China in this regard is the development of the Haier-Ruba Economic Zone near Lahore in Pakistan's Punjab province which is the first such Chinese overseas investment.

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<sup>47</sup> Dr. Wang Shida, 'Manmohan Singh's Visit Boosts the 'New Pattern of Relationship,' Between China and India,' *RUSI Analysis*, November 12, 2013, <http://www.rusi.org/analysis/commentary/ref:C528243A39F085/#.UpwwoiftVbx> (accessed December 2, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Mathias Hartpence, 'The Economic Dimension of Sino-Pakistani Relations: An Overview,' *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71, (2011), 581-599.

Pakistan has also slowly developed its own distinctive geo-economic worth for China during the period. This has been highlighted by the Chinese investment in the construction of Gwadar port on the coastal areas of Pakistani province of Balochistan. Along with that, China is also simultaneously working on the improvement of the Karakoram Highway that links Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region with the Chinese province of Sinkiang and would ultimately link it with Gwadar. Chinese assistance for the Gwadar project (\$198 million) was announced during Premier Zhu Rongji's visit to Pakistan in May 2001. Chinese Minister of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, Shi Guangsheng, remarked on the Chinese initiative that Beijing made 'all-out efforts on the issue of the Gwadar Port Project.'<sup>49</sup>

Gwadar has emerged as an important enterprise for the Chinese economic strategy in the region in many ways. Energy security remains a large headache for Beijing whereby 80 per cent of China's oil imported from Middle East and Africa passes through the Strait of Malacca which may not be available during any period of crisis.<sup>50</sup> Pakistan's coastal areas that lie close to the Persian Gulf can serve as a naval base for China to protect its energy supplies. The port is only 72 kilometres away from Iran and approximately 400 kilometres away from the Strait of Hormuz, the only sea passage to the open ocean for large areas of the petroleum-exporting Persian Gulf states.

The port can also be used as an alternate route for oil and gas supplies from the Middle East to China, especially its western regions. China hopes that it will one day ship Persian Gulf oil from Gwadar overland through Pakistan to China. Reportedly, that will cut transport by 19,300 kilometres, saving a month of the journey's time and 25 per cent of the fees.<sup>51</sup> Pan Zhiping, Director of the Central Asian Studies Institute of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences notes, that Gwadar is 'China's new energy channel' which 'is capable of serving as China's important energy transfer

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<sup>49</sup> 'China to Help Pakistan Build Major Sea Port: Minister,' *People's Daily*, August 9, 2001, [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200108/09/eng20010809\\_76872.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200108/09/eng20010809_76872.html) (accessed October 20, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Arun Kumar Singh, 'The games at Gwadar,' *Deccan Chronicle*, January 20, 2010, <http://www.deccanchronicle.com/dc-comment/games-gwadar-643>. (accessed May 1, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> David Montero, 'China, Pakistan Team up on Energy,' *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 13, 2007.

station. Oil from Africa and the Middle East will reach the port and go on to China via road, rail or pipelines.<sup>52</sup>

The port also provides the shortest link to sea for the Chinese western areas and is thus important for their future development plans. Kashghar, a major city in China's western region, is about 3,500 kilometres from its eastern seaboard while it is only 1,500 kilometres from Gwadar. Thus, it makes more sense for the western region of China to trade with other countries through Gwadar. Beijing's continued interest in the Gwadar project has been demonstrated by the development that a Chinese state-owned company took over the management of the port from the Singapore Port Authority in February 2013.

Thus, China's interests in South Asia have become multifaceted and the region has become increasingly important in China's strategic calculation. Its vast population offers Beijing an attractive market for its export machine at a time when Western economies are experiencing slowdown following the economic crisis of 2008. China's increased interaction with the region and its growing economic enmeshing with the region will have significant geopolitical implications for China's grand strategy. A Chinese analyst notes the region's enhanced importance for Beijing in the following words:

A grand strategy requires defining a geostrategic focus, and China's geostrategic focus is Asia. When communication lines in Central Asia and South Asia were poor, China's development strategy and economic interests tilted toward its east coast and the Pacific Ocean. Today, East Asia is still of vital importance, but China should and will begin to pay more strategic attention to the west. The central government has been conducting the Grand Western Development Program in many western provinces and regions, notably Tibet and Xinjiang, for more than a decade. It is now more actively initiating and participating in new development projects in Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Central Asia, and throughout the Caspian Sea region, all the way to Europe. This new western outlook may reshape China's geostrategic vision as well as the Eurasian landscape.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ni Yunshuo, 'Corridor of Cooperation,' *Beijing Review*, no. 13 (March 30, 2006), [http://www.bjreview.com/quotes/txt/2007-01/09/content\\_52531\\_2.htm](http://www.bjreview.com/quotes/txt/2007-01/09/content_52531_2.htm) (accessed December 8, 2009).

<sup>53</sup> Wang Jisi, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy: A Rising Great Power Finds Its Way,' *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2, (March-April 2011),

## Conclusion

China has been traditionally attentive to South Asia for geopolitical reasons though the region has not been a high-priority in Beijing's overall foreign policy calculations. Unprecedented interaction with South Asia since 9/11 is however increasingly enmeshing China with South Asia where Beijing has now developed a range of interests and increased leverage. China's relations with India and Pakistan have become deeper, multi-dimensional and more complex over the period of time despite the fact that 'realism' continues to define Chinese calculations towards the region. In this regard, China's economic growth and its specific economic needs including natural resources and transit routes have significantly transformed the scale of its influence and the balance of its relationships in South Asia. With its diversified interests in South Asia, Beijing is expected to pay more attention to the region in future. In this regard, China will however continue to harmonise its policies with other relevant international players, particularly the United States. The resultant China factor may not be interested in the resolution of South Asia's chronic territorial disputes but it will be increasingly helpful in dampening instability in the nuclearized region while bringing along more economic dividends. ■