

Associate Paper

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Pakistan's Security Outlook in the Global Power Shift – Part 2

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Key Points

- Pakistan's new security policy emphasises neutrality as a key characteristic of its international engagements.
- Its efforts to balance its relationship with the US, on the one hand, and China, on the other, however, see it lean more towards Beijing.
- This is due to a perception that China has done more for Pakistan in a short time than the US did over a decades-long relationship.
- Its relationship with China, moreover, gives Pakistan the ability to balance India's increasing regional influence.

Summary

In recent years, Pakistan has seen a major shift in its foreign and defence policy orientation taking political pundits by surprise.¹ This shift is an outcome of the domestic changes occurring in Pakistan as well as a rapidly changing global world order. At the core of this shift, however, lie the ideological underpinnings of Pakistan's security establishment. On the domestic front, the rise of sectarian violence, terrorism and economic meltdown have all pushed the government to make certain strategic changes. At the same time, Pakistan's first democratic transition has strengthened the country's democratic institutions, allowing the newly elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to enhance his ties with the military establishment in steering the security policy of the country.

¹ See, for example, "Pakistan remains neutral in Yemen fight";
<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/4/10/pakistan-remains-neutral-in-yemen-fight.html>

This new-found civil-military balance in Pakistan has not developed from a vacuum but is the result of a changing global environment that has compelled the civilian political leadership and the military establishment to work closely together. The shift in US foreign policy towards the Middle East highlighted by its recent nuclear negotiations with Iran and its potential withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's enhanced global prominence and the overall rise of Asia have all contributed to Pakistan's new security outlook. However, it is the recent \$50bn Chinese investment in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that has most affected Pakistan's foreign and defence priorities, ushering in a new era of Pakistan's security policy outlook and, potentially, the global architecture of alliance blocs.

Analysis

The Balancing Act: With a View towards the Middle East and the US-China Relationship

Pakistan's new security posture emphasises neutrality as a key characteristic in its global engagements. This was quickly put to test in the Middle East soon after the CPEC agreement with China was signed and the horrific Safoora carnage - an attack on the Shiite community in Karachi that killed over 50 people - occurred. At the height of the recent Yemen crisis, when Saudi Arabia asked for Pakistani help, Islamabad for the first time refused to be a part of Middle East politics.² This single event reveals Pakistan's shift on Middle East policy, to one in which the underlying rationale is to avoid Pakistan becoming a locus for a proxy Shia-Sunni war and to balance out its ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia in light of the US's and China's tilt towards Iran in the Middle East. Moreover, Pakistan is one of the only countries in the world where Iran is seen positively, with an approval rate of around 63 per cent.³ The positive sentiment towards Iran, along with the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline project underway, makes it necessary for Pakistan to keep a very cautious foreign policy posture towards the Middle East. In recent years Pakistan has also fostered closer ties with Turkey, developing an alliance bloc in the Middle East. In fact, the decision to stand back from the Yemen crisis was done in close partnership with Turkey.⁴ With major global shifts occurring and the centre of power moving to Asia, Pakistan is eyeing bigger opportunities with China instead of active involvement in Middle Eastern affairs – a striking shift from its previous position.⁵

A similar balancing act is perceptible in Pakistan's engagement with the US and China –two global powers. While Pakistan may have a close security and economic alliance with the US, it looks to China, Pakistan to balance India, with which country it shares a border. The recent

² Ankit Panda, "Pakistan's Neutrality in Yemen: Brought to you by China", *The Diplomat*, 28th April 2015; <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/pakistans-neutrality-in-the-yemen-crisis-brought-to-you-by-china/>

³ Pew Research Centre, "Iran's Global Image largely Negative", 18 June 2014; <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/06/18/irans-global-image-largely-negative/>

⁴ The Staff Reporter, "Turkey's Erdogan holds call with Pakistani PM over Yemen Crisis", Reuters, 11 April 2015; <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/11/us-yemen-security-turkey-idUSKBN0N20BU20150411>

⁵ Ankit Panda, "Pakistan's Neutrality in Yemen: Brought to you by China", *The Diplomat*, 28th April 2015; <http://thediplomat.com/2015/04/pakistans-neutrality-in-the-yemen-crisis-brought-to-you-by-china/>

US\$50 billion Chinese investment in Pakistan has given Islamabad a lifeline to spur its economy. Pakistan's Federal Minister for Planning and Development Professor Ahsan Iqbal said, "China, unlike the US, is not giving us aid – it is investing", highlighting the changing Pakistan-China relationship.⁶ The perception within the Pakistani security establishment is that in a partnership with the US spanning decades and encompassing the War on Terror and the Cold War, Pakistan did not receive the aid that the US promised it. With Chinese investments dwarfing sixty years of US financial assistance to Pakistan and Pakistan's recent membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), little doubt remains about where Pakistan's loyalties are likely to lie in terms of its strategic posture and commitments. There is also a sentiment within its security establishment that the vacuum left after the US withdraws from the region would be filled by China, thus giving it enhanced regional influence especially vis-a-vis Afghanistan and India.

Despite this, it remains highly unlikely, however, that Pakistan's dependence on the US in areas of security, intelligence, and development is going to wane. Moreover, with a large expatriate Pakistani community in the US and excellent people-to-people relations between the two countries, the Pakistani security establishment is likely going to carefully balance its relations between the US and China, especially in light of a potential cold war that could emerge from their competition in the South China Sea.

Peace in Afghanistan – With Conditions

Afghanistan has become a key security challenge for Pakistan in the last decade. Given the porous border between the two countries, incidents of cross-border terrorism on each side have grown exponentially, resulting in a blame game and series of accusations. Also, with rising Indian influence in Afghanistan, the Pakistani security establishment has been obliged to make strategic shifts in its policy and mind-set on Afghanistan. With the new governments of PM Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan and Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan, there have been some signs of reconciliation and fruitful peace processes. For the first time in decades, the leaders of both countries are working together towards an end game in Afghanistan and to foster peace by negotiating with the Taliban.

While Pakistan's security posture towards Afghanistan may have changed, its 'strategic depth' approach towards that country remains relevant – although with changes in its nature and scope. Under the new thinking, the Pakistani security establishment appears to have cast aside its interest in 'running' Afghanistan and instead seeks to ensure that Afghanistan remains friendly, and free of an overwhelming Indian influence that could potentially pose a security risk to Pakistan. As such, the fear of being stranded between India and a pro-India Afghanistan still looms over the Pakistani security establishment's mind-set.

As the US withdraws from Afghanistan, Pakistan's top priority is peace. However, in the case of Afghanistan, 'peace' may not have the same definition across the key stakeholders. For Pakistan, peace in Afghanistan is local stability, free of Indian influence and cross-border terrorism. For Afghanistan, peace is simply the end of the Taliban insurgency and foreign

⁶ Hussain Nadim, "China's Economic March into Pakistan", *The Interpreter*, 23 April 2015; <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/04/23/Chinas-economic-march-into-Pakistan.aspx>

involvement in the country. For the US, it is to ensure that the current Afghan government that it has helped establish does not disintegrate and that Afghanistan is not again used as a base for international terrorism. The consensus on what “peace” entails will determine the outcome of Afghanistan’s peace negotiations. While the recent deal signed by the intelligence agencies of Pakistan and Afghanistan and the negotiations taking place between the Taliban, the Afghan Government, Pakistan, the US and China are a step in the right direction, it remains to be seen how the fragile process to achieve peace struggles to continue, especially with divisions within the Taliban and mistrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷ While Pakistan’s security posture demands that it engender peace in Afghanistan, it is unlikely to compromise on its stance against India’s presence in Afghanistan.

Resisting Indian Regional Hegemony and the Revival of the Kashmir issue

Triggered by the US drawdown from Afghanistan, major Chinese investment in Pakistan and the recent surge of terrorism in the country, one of Pakistan’s major shifts in its security posture is towards its engagement with India. While India may have taken the back stage during the last decade because of Islamabad’s focus on the War on Terror, Pakistan’s new security outlook appears to be very much concerned with the threat India poses in terms of not only border skirmishes but also the fuelling of separatist movements in Pakistan. The Kashmir issue that had waned earlier in the decade is also back at the forefront and, as alleged by India, Pakistan is sponsoring separatist movements in Kashmir.

There was some hope for peace immediately after the 2013 elections in Pakistan, with PM Nawaz Sharif declaring peace with India as his first foreign policy goal.⁸ In fact, in his very first speech he talked about visa liberalisation and close trade ties with India as the future of Pakistan. Two years into his administration, however, with little support from the military establishment towards that goal and with the Modi government taking a tough stance on Pakistan, there is little hope for rapprochement between the two countries any time soon.

Repeated moves by Pakistan to reduce arms build-ups on the border and to resolve the Kashmir issue have been turned down by India. With the wounds of the 2008 Mumbai attack still fresh, India is reluctant to trust Pakistan unless it roots out from Pakistani territory what India alleges are militant outfits operating from there against it. Given that issue and Pakistan’s new close ties with China, which has annoyed the Indian establishment, both countries are drifting away from peace talks.⁹ Tensions will likely rise and Pakistan, backed by China, will take a sterner stance on the Kashmir issue and India’s involvement in sponsoring terrorism in Baluchistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan in the years to come. At the same time India will also continue to press Pakistan on the cross-border terrorism issue focusing on Pakistan’s support to groups like *Jamaat-ud-Dawa*, formerly known *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* (LeT).

⁷ Baqir Sajjad Syed, ‘ISI, Afghan Intelligence in Landmark Deal’, *The Dawn*, 19 May 2015; <http://www.dawn.com/news/1182742>

⁸ Dean Nelson, ‘Nawaz Sharif to appeal to India for Peace’, *The Telegraph*, 18 Sept 2013; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/10318132/Nawaz-Sharif-to-appeal-to-India-for-peace.html>

⁹ The Staff Reporter, ‘India will carry out military strikes at any place and time’, *The Dawn*, 10 June 2015; <http://www.dawn.com/news/1187334>

New Openings: Central and South East Asia and Australia

A new “Great Game” will likely be played out in Central Asia and South East Asia between China and the West, and Islamabad knows it will inevitably be drawn into it. It is, therefore, establishing ties with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries to be a part of the CAREC corridor in conjunction with China and Russia. Fostering close alliances with South East Asian countries, likewise, especially Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore is also underway. More importantly, however, recognising the similarities Australia’s ties with both the US and China and its own, the security establishment in Pakistan has for the first time stepped up its relations with Australia.¹⁰ Pakistan and Australia have historically shared excellent defence ties that go back to 1948, when an Australian, Major General R Cawthorne, on secondment to the Pakistan Military from the British Army, founded the Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence as Pakistan’s premier intelligence agency. Since Australia is the only English-speaking Western country in the region, Pakistan’s security establishment sees it becoming more prominent in global politics in the event of a US–China stand-off. Fostering a partnership with Australia at this time, therefore, could benefit both in the Indian Ocean region and help strike a balance between China and the West. It is for this reason Pakistan has hosted two high level Australian dignitaries in last six months, including Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Chief of Defence, Air Chief Marshall Mark Binskin. In this case, Pakistan is more interested in a strategic security and defence partnership with Australia, one that can provide a balance in Asia as a new global political arena, than it is in the economic and development aspects.

Conclusion: Pakistan’s China Card

Pakistan may be religiously, ethnically and ideologically inclined towards the Middle East and, for a long time, shared a good relationship with the West, but that may now change to a large degree because of the major Chinese investment in the country. The political establishment in Pakistan understands that this may be their opportunity to launch its economy and stabilise the country after years of war and civil unrest. The security establishment realises that China will fill the vacuum that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan will create. Pakistan, therefore, may have to take strong stance against its Middle Eastern allies or even the West that has so far, in the eyes of the Pakistani security establishment, provided Pakistan with paltry benefits compared to those that China offers. More importantly, a strategic partnership with China will allow Pakistan to balance India, an ability that it lost decades ago. Does that mean that the West has lost Pakistan? Perhaps, not completely!

While China is Pakistan’s trump card, a lot will depend upon how well Islamabad plays its US\$50 billion dollar card in terms of engendering internal peace, balancing its relations with the US and China, remaining engaged in the Middle East, avoiding a major war with India or a falling out with Afghanistan and opening up to new ties in Central and South-East Asia and Australia. A complete dependence on China will have a destructive effect on Pakistan, as the security establishment understands. It will, therefore, walk a cautious line between the West

¹⁰ Hussain Nadim, “Australia’s New Equation for Pakistan”, *Foreign Policy*, 13 May 2015; <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/13/australias-new-equation-for-pakistan/>

and China over the coming decades. That said, Pakistan's role in global politics is about to grow bigger in the new Cold War that is taking shape in the South China Sea between the US and China. The fact that the US has spent over US\$1 billion to build one of its largest embassies in Islamabad and that China has invested over \$50bn in the country only goes to demonstrate Pakistan's growing strategic importance in the emerging global order.

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