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An 'All-Weather' Axis:

*Building Sino-Pakistani Defence Cooperation during the Cold
War Era (1947-1988)*

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ABSTRACT**An 'All-Weather' Axis: Building Sino-Pakistani Defence Cooperation during the Cold War Era (1947-1988)**

The relations between Pakistan and China have a long history, including ups and downs during the trying times of the Cold War era. Yet, unlike in the case of numerous post- Second World War alliances, it appears that not even the changes of regimes weakened the ties between the two states, suggesting that maintaining good bilateral relations is mutually beneficial and an all-time priority for Islamabad and Beijing. What interests lie behind keeping the entente together and how have China and Pakistan become 'all- weather friends'? The aim of this essay is to analyse the early stages of China-Pakistan cooperation by examining the formation of a defence alliance between the two countries during the Cold War era through the analysis of four major armed conflicts that occurred in the South Asian subcontinent between 1950 and 1988. It is in this light that I seek to understand the benefits of the alliance from both parties' perspective. Furthermore, I tackle the question of why the Sino-Pakistani entente proved to be an 'all-weather' axis despite changes of governments, regimes and the region's political environment during the Cold War period.

ÖSSZEFOGLALÓ**Időtálló tengely: A kínai-pakisztáni védelmi együttműködés kiépülése a hidegháborús időszakban (1947–1988)**

A pakisztáni-kínai bilaterális kapcsolatok hosszú története során főként a kezdeti, hidegháborús időszak jelentett megpróbáltatásokat. Azonban a második világháborút követő időszakban létrejövő, majd széteső számos más szövetséggel ellentétben a rezsimek és az erőviszonyok változása sem gyengítette számottevően a kínai-pakisztáni kapcsolatokat, arra utalva, hogy a jó kapcsolatok fenntartása kölcsönösen előnyös, és prioritást képez mindkét fél számára. Milyen érdekek húzódnak a kínai-pakisztáni szövetség fenntartása mögött és hogyan alakult ki az „időtálló barátság” a két állam között? Jelen tanulmány vizsgálati keretét Kína és Pakisztán kapcsolatainak kezdeti időszaka, azon belül elsősorban a hidegháborús

időszakban formálódó védelmi együttműködés kialakulása képezi. A kínai és pakisztáni érdekeket a hidegháborús időszakban lezajlott négy fegyveres konfliktus vizsgálatán keresztül elemezzük. A tanulmány célja, hogy ezen érdekek, valamint a térség nagyhatalmi és regionális hatalmi erőeltolódásainak bemutatásán keresztül értelmezze, hogy miként és miért maradt fenn az „időtálló barátság” Kína és Pakisztán között.

DÓRA GÜNSBERGER

AN 'ALL-WEATHER' AXIS: BUILDING SINO-PAKISTANI DEFENCE COOPERATION DURING THE COLDWAR ERA (1947-1988)

I. INTRODUCTION

China¹-Pakistan relations have been in the centre of attention due to an extensive economic and development cooperation project named China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), introduced in 2015. The relations between the two countries have a long history, including ups and downs during the trying times of the Cold War era. Yet, unlike numerous post-Second World War alliances, the Sino-Pakistani entente does not appear to have declined after the end of the Cold War, and CPEC is undoubtedly an indicator of a strong alliance between China and Pakistan. It appears that not even the changes of regimes could significantly affect the ties between these two states, suggesting that maintaining good relations is mutually beneficial, regardless of who is in power.² What interests lie behind keeping the entente together and how have China and Pakistan become 'all-weather friends'?³ How did bilateral relations change over the Cold War period and what path led to a friendship that is 'higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the deepest sea in the world and sweeter than honey'?⁴

¹ I refer to the People's Republic of China as 'China' in this study.

² VERTZBERGER 1983.

³ Sino-Pakistani relations are often referred to as an 'all-weather axis' or 'all-weather friendship' in academic literature as well as journalistic writing. See for example SATTAR 2015, WINTOUR 2018 and SMALL 2015.

⁴ 'China-Pakistan friendship 'sweeter than honey', says Nawaz Sharif.' 2013. Over the last two decades, numerous other Pakistani and Chinese politicians – including former PM Yousuf Raza Gillani, and Chinese President Hu Jintao – have quoted the same metaphor.

Sino-Pakistani friendship could be and, naturally, has been examined from numerous aspects. The aim of this essay is to analyse the early stages of China-Pakistan cooperation and to understand the benefits of the alliance from both countries' point of view and from a historical perspective. In this essay, I focus on the ties in question from a geopolitical point of view and propose to outline the defence alliance between the two countries during the Cold War era. I examine four major military conflicts in the South Asian subcontinent between 1950 and 1988, in order to understand how the scope of Sino-Pakistani relations changed over the decades in question. Furthermore, I tackle the question of why the Sino-Pakistani entente proved to be an 'all-weather' axis despite changes of governments, regimes and the region's political environment during the Cold War period. Lastly, I briefly address the implications of the formation of a nuclear alliance between the two countries.

II. THE BEGINNING OF A BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP: 1947-1962

Pakistan was the first Muslim state and the third non-communist country to recognise the communist regime in China, despite the fact that Pakistan was devoted to a non-aligned foreign policy in the first few years after Partition in 1947.⁵ As proof of friendly intentions, Pakistan voted in favour of a resolution challenging the right of the Nationalists to represent China in the United Nations in September 1950. Furthermore, in July 1951, Pakistan appointed its first ambassador to China, and a trade agreement was signed in 1953.⁶ Yet, despite such friendly gestures, some suspicion also characterised the initial few years of Sino-Pakistani relations. First, while being 'neutral', Pakistani foreign policy included an anti-communist agenda as a result of strengthening ties with the US. This was marked by Pakistan's initial support for UN actions in Korea – however, a turn was to be seen soon, when Pakistan opposed labelling China as an aggressor when it entered the war.⁷ Secondly, driven by fear of India, Pakistan joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in 1954, and a year later became a party to the Baghdad Pact (1955) – both treaties were initiatives of the 'West' and aimed to establish a *cordon*

⁵ In October 1949, the People's Republic of China was established, and it was recognised by Pakistan on 4 January 1950. MAHDI 1986: 60.

⁶ MAHDI 1986: 60.

⁷ BARNDI 1975: 468.

sanitaire against China and the USSR, that were considered expansionist regimes.⁸ Realising that joining the aforementioned treaties might jeopardise relations with China, Pakistani Foreign Minister Mohammad Ali Bogra was quick to reassure Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai that Pakistan was by no means hostile to China, had no intention to express any form of aggression, and the military agreements would mean no threat to their friendly relations.⁹ In return, China indicated to Pakistani Prime Minister Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy that Pakistan's reasons for joining Western alignments were understood¹⁰ and Zhou Enlai concluded that 'we reached a mutual understanding in spite of the fact that we are in general opposed to military alliances.'¹¹

Despite the above-mentioned Pakistani decisions, Sino-Pakistani relations began to improve promptly in the mid-1950s. The first high-level contact of China and Pakistan was made in Bandung during the Afro-Asian Conference in 1955, between Mohammad Ali Bogra and Zhou Enlai.¹² Furthermore, trade agreements were signed during the 1950s to support Sino-Pakistani relations: the first two in 1954 and 1955, further three in 1956 and two more in 1958, respectively.¹³ Additionally, a series of visits by state delegations took place – for instance, in October 1956, Pakistan's Prime Minister Suhrawardy visited China, which was reciprocated in December 1956 by Zhou Enlai's trip to Pakistan.¹⁴

II.1. PAKISTANI AND CHINESE PERSPECTIVES OF SINO-PAKISTANI COOPERATION

Pakistan's decision to tighten the relations with the People's Republic of China might seem ambiguous at first, mainly due to the apparent ideological differences between a communist state and a self-proclaimed Islamic democracy. It was made clear in a joint communiqué issued in 1956 that ideological differences would not prevent the two countries from establishing 'cordial and friendly relations' and the parties stated that 'the difference between the political systems of Pakistan and China and the divergence of views on many problems should not prevent the strengthening of friendship between the

⁸ MAHDI 1986: 61.

⁹ MAHDI 1986: 63.

¹⁰ NAQVI 1986: 32.

¹¹ Palmer quoted in VERTZBERGER, 1983: 5.

¹² SINGH 2003: 172–173.

¹³ MAHDI 1986: 63.

¹⁴ Ibid.

two countries.¹⁵ Additionally, Pakistan's strong ties with the United States, paired with heavy dependence on aid from Western countries, seemed to constitute an obstacle to the further development of Sino-Pakistani relations, given the ideological differences between the People's Republic of China and the US. But during the 1960s, due to the strengthening ties between the USSR and India, Pakistan's informal alliance with both China and the US ceased to be a political ambiguity.

Pakistan's friendly acts towards China stemmed primarily from realpolitik calculations and strategic interests, and its motivations for turning towards China could be distilled into the following two points. First of all, Pakistan sought to establish a defence alliance. Even though Pakistan proposed to follow a non-aligned foreign policy, this approach proved to be unsustainable as early as the 1950s, given Pakistan's constant fear of losing territorial integrity and the ever-growing 'India syndrome'.¹⁶ Thus, soon after Partition the most determining factor in Pakistan's foreign policy was to find allies against India – i.e. to form alliances that are sufficiently durable and are thus able to provide protection and help maintain the territorial integrity of Pakistan. Looking at the region and considering the political alliances in formation in the early Cold War period, one might draw the conclusion that cooperation with China was the best option available for Pakistan. Secondly, geostrategic considerations also motivated Pakistan to seek to establish a strong alliance with China. Given the strategic location of Pakistan – having access to the Indian Ocean and a passage to Middle Eastern oil fields –, concerns about a military attack coming from the Soviet Union emerged and the increasing Soviet influence in Afghanistan gave more reason for concern.¹⁷ By bonding with China, Pakistan hoped to gain support and protection in maintaining the regional status quo, as well as to weaken the ties between India and the USSR.¹⁸

From the Chinese point of view, strengthening the ties with Pakistan was a less ambiguous decision. This was partly due to the evident asymmetry between the two countries in terms of size, population, economic and military power – i.e. the cooperation meant less commitment for China than for Pakistan. Secondly, given the political isolation

¹⁵ PANDE 2011: 117.

¹⁶ A term referring to Pakistan's constant fear of India, used by Jean-Luc Racine in RACINE 2002.

¹⁷ VERTZBERGER 1983: 22.

¹⁸ Also see MAHDI 1986: 60. Furthermore, she quotes the acceptance of China's thesis of peaceful coexistence among countries with diverse social systems and the realisation that no realistic conflict of interest seemed to occur between the two countries as factors that contributed to the strengthening cooperation between the two states.

and embargo imposed by the West after the establishment of the communist regime, China was in the need of a reliable political ally in the region.¹⁹ The primary aim of the Chinese leaders was to break out of isolation: the trade agreements with Pakistan helped China re-enter the global system, and opened up the gate to the Middle East and a passage towards establishing relations with Islamic and Muslim majority countries. Secondly, China sought to counter-balance the Soviet Union's power in South Asia: Sino-USSR relations began to sour in the mid-1950s and the Soviet Union strengthened its bonds with India. In parallel, Sino-Indian ties had been loosening after the Bandung Conference, mostly because of issues related to Tibet – for instance, India's offer of asylum for the Dalai Lama.²⁰ Given the bilateral conflicts over Tibet, the ever-growing influence of the USSR and the efforts to make India a meeting ground for the US and Moscow, establishing a strategic alliance with India could not be an option for China. Consequently, strengthening the ties with India's arch-enemy occurred as a strategically beneficial step that included, most importantly, encircling India.²¹ And lastly, by establishing good relations with Pakistan China sought to prevent the US from creating a loyal ally in South Asia.

III. STRENGTHENING SECURITY TIES: 1962–1979

III.1. THE KASHMIR ISSUE AND THE SINO-INDIAN WAR (1962)

The sole political obstacle with the potential to eventually sour Sino-Pakistani relations was the Kashmir issue. The outstanding symbolic significance of where Kashmir belongs²² made the issue a core source of discontent between India and Pakistan since Partition and Chinese territorial claims in Aksai Chin – a high-altitude desert region in Northern Kashmir with virtually no population – further complicated the problem. Chinese interest in Kashmir stemmed from strategic concerns: the Muslim population in Xinjiang

¹⁹ PANDE 2011: 116.

²⁰ NAQVI 1986: 34.

²¹ For further discussion see VERTZBERGER 1985: 24–33.

²² Kashmir has been of strategic and symbolic importance for Pakistan since 1947, as K in Pakistan's name refers to Kashmir. Pakistan and India fought three wars over Kashmir, but until today neither state accepts the Line of Control (since 1949, the *de facto* border dividing Kashmir into Indian administered Kashmir – i.e. Jammu and Kashmir -, and Pakistani administered Kashmir – i.e. Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan) as a *de jure* international border.

autonomous region shares a border with Kashmir.²³ Therefore, particularly in order to create a buffer zone between Xinjiang and the Muslim-majority Kashmir, China claimed that Aksai Chin was part of the Xinjiang region.

As of the disputed areas between India and Pakistan, China took a neutral position that caused bitter disappointment for the Pakistani leadership.²⁴ Moreover, Ayub Khan's pro-Western and anti-communist regime (1958-1969) in Pakistan showed less friendly intentions towards China than its predecessors, for instance by expressing sympathy for the uprising in Tibet and eventually voting in favour of a motion censoring China in 1959, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army entered Tibet.²⁵ Additionally, Ayub sought to establish a mutual defence agreement with India, which was rejected by the latter. This rejection eventually led Pakistan to reappraise its foreign policy and Ayub turned to China and proposed to come to an agreement about demarcating the borders of Azad Kashmir, on a bilateral level. Therefore, Pakistan and China entered into border talks in 1962 without India.

In October 1962, following a long-standing border dispute over the question of Aksai Chin's autonomy and as the negotiation process between China and Pakistan was about to begin, Chinese-Indian rivalry over Kashmir resulted in a military conflict. The war lasted for a month and ended with a unilateral ceasefire declaration from China's side. A Sino-Pakistani agreement was declared on 12 October 1962, merely a week after a Chinese attack on India, and was signed in 1963. As per the border agreement of 1963, Pakistan gained 3500 square km of territory and China occupied around 40,000 square km of Jammu Kashmir – including Aksai Chin, ceded by Pakistan. The outcome was devastating for India – the war was lost and Chinese troops remained in the disputed territories –, and froze Sino-Indian relations for two decades. On the other hand, the 1963 border agreement marked a new beginning in Sino-Pakistani relations by removing the source of a potential crisis between the two states. In the words of Pakistani President Ayub Khan, 'this agreement on border demarcation was the first step in the evolution of relations between Pakistan and China... [T]he Chinese began to have trust in us and we also felt that if one was frank and straightforward, one could do honest business with them'.²⁶ The agreement marked the beginning of a systematic and conscious

²³ SINGH 2003: 73.

²⁴ CHOPRA 1968: 244–251.

²⁵ MAHDI 1986: 61.

²⁶ VERTZBERGER 1985: 22.

improvement of multi-level bilateral relations that won Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Foreign Minister (and later President) of Pakistan the nickname 'architect of Sino-Pakistani relations'.²⁷ To indicate a strengthening cooperation, new agreements were signed in 1963, such as the opening of trade and shipping facilities that made China the largest importer of Pakistani cotton.²⁸ Due to improving economic relations, the total scale of trade between the two countries increased from 13.5 million USD in 1961 to 56.6 million USD in 1964.²⁹ Furthermore, according to an air traffic agreement (the first one between China and a non-communist country), national airlines were allowed to operate in each other's territories and Karachi airport became the foreign airport most frequented by Chinese aircrafts.³⁰ And lastly, due to its involvement in the conflict after 1962, the ever-worsening relations with India and the Soviet Union, and the blooming relations with Pakistan, China finally gave up its neutrality regarding the Kashmir issue. As a result, on 23 February 1964, a joint communiqué issued by Ayub Khan and Zhou Enlai expressed the hope that the Kashmir issue would be resolved 'in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir as pledged to them by India and Pakistan.'³¹

In return for China's agreement, Pakistan voted for the accession of the People's Republic of China to the UN.³² The agreement was a significant step forward in Sino-Pakistani relations, that was not to Washington's liking. The US sent diplomat George Ball to try to convince Ayub Khan that due to the threat posed by China in the region India and Pakistan should seek cooperation in defence matters. Furthermore, Ball also came with a warning that the Beijing-Islamabad axis is disobliging for Pakistani-US relations.³³ Foreign Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's anti-American approach and desire to cut loose from American influence was clearly indicated by Pakistan's choice. Turning away from the US was partly due to severe disappointment regarding the Kennedy administration's pro-India policy, which was manifested in arms supply to India and the lack of American support for Pakistan's Kashmir-policy.³⁴ Thus, strengthening Sino-Pakistani bilateral relations – especially from a defence perspective – seemed mutually beneficial and a rational choice from both parties' perspective.

²⁷ VERTZBERGER 1983.

²⁸ PANDE 2011: 121.

²⁹ BARNDT 1975: 472.

³⁰ PANDE 2011: 121 and GARVER 1992: 79.

³¹ GARVER 1996: 328.

³² VERTZBERGER 1983: 7.

³³ MAHDI 1986: 64.

³⁴ VERTZBERGER 1983: 60.

III.2. THE 1965 INDO-PAKISTANI WAR

Giving up on neutrality regarding the Kashmir question proved that China can be a reliable friend of Pakistan, but it was yet to be seen how friendly intentions would materialise in the hour of need. The first trial occurred merely three years after the Sino-Indian war.

The war between India and Pakistan broke out in late August 1965, as a result of the long-standing territorial dispute over Kashmir and was the second armed conflict over this territory between the two countries. As early as on 4 September 1965 China proclaimed its support for 'Pakistan's just action in hitting back at India's armed provocation'. Furthermore, Beijing declared that

[T]he Chinese Government sternly condemns India for its criminal aggression and expresses firm support to Pakistan in its just struggle against aggression and solemnly warns the Indian government that it must bear the responsibility for the consequences of its criminal and extended aggression... Indian aggression against any one of its neighbours concerns all its neighbours.³⁵

China also announced the possibility of intervention in case India extended the war to East Pakistan.³⁶

Chinese interests behind supporting Pakistan were manifold. Regionally, China's aim was to weaken the Indian army by forcing it to split its forces and to secure a wider hearing for its long-standing territorial claims towards India. Additionally, taking advantage of the conflict in Kashmir that attracted the Indian army's full attention, China was able to occupy a strategic mountain pass between Tibet and Sikkim in Arunachal Pradesh, another disputed territory between India and China. On a geostrategic level, China sought to draw Pakistan away from the USSR, as Soviet-Pakistani relations appeared to be improving after Ayub's visit to Moscow in 1965³⁷, and it also aimed to decrease the US's influence by proving reliability and loyalty to their informal alliance.

³⁵ VERTZBERGER 1983: 36.

³⁶ SINGH 2003: 173.

³⁷ *Peking Review* No. 37, 1965: 6.

Prior to the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976), a few major signs of dynamic developments in Sino-Pakistani relations occurred. First, the decision of Pakistan regarding refraining from SEATO conferences after 1966 was a clear gesture of Pakistan towards China.³⁸ Second, Pakistani President Yahya Khan's visit to Beijing and the joint communiqué on Chinese support for Pakistan in the Kashmir issue and the condemnation of US intervention in Indochina could also be regarded as steps ahead – Pakistan's declaration of the latter was a revolutionary step, given it was the first instance Pakistan openly criticised the US.³⁹ But the most significant outcome of the 1965 war was the sudden change in the primary source of Pakistani military supply. The US – being the dominant arms supplier for Pakistan – announced arms embargo in 1965, leaving Pakistan without a significant source of supply and resulting in Beijing taking over from the US as Pakistan's primary security guarantor.⁴⁰ The People's Republic of China proved to be a useful friend by supporting Pakistan with significant arms supply during the war – including T-59 tanks and MiG 19 aircrafts – via Xinjiang.⁴¹ After 1965 China took over the US's place of being Pakistan's major military supplier and remained the dominant source of arms import for Pakistan, making Chinese help vital for Pakistan.

After the war, both parties realised the possible benefits of an informal defence alliance in order to counter-balance India's power in the subcontinent. A part of the historic Silk Route was reopened, linking Xinjiang with the Hunza-Nagar valley in Pakistan and the joint constructions of the Karakoram Highway started in 1968. The new 774 km long highway took almost twenty years to become operational and is not only used as a significant trade route, but also as an all-weather link that could be used in the event of war since the bridges at Karakoram Highway were constructed to be able to carry light-weighted tanks.⁴²

In 1966, the first formal agreement on military assistance was signed between Pakistan and China, that included a promise of Chinese support of the value of 120 million dollars for Pakistan. As per this document, China supported Pakistan with a hundred tanks, eighty fighter jets and ten bomber aircrafts within two years of signing the agreement.⁴³ Thus, as contemporary sources suggest, 'the tanks supplied by China already

³⁸ VERTZBERGER 1983: 45.

³⁹ VERTZBERGER 1983: 47.

⁴⁰ SMITH 2011: 202.

⁴¹ MAHDI 1986.

⁴² CHAUDHRI 1986: 21.

⁴³ Ibid.

constituted 25% of the entire tank force at Pakistan's disposal. The aircrafts of Chinese origin constituted 33% of the Pakistani air force's 270 planes, 65% of all interceptor-bombers, and 99% of its first line modern fighter planes' by 1970.⁴⁴ To conclude, as a result of the 1965 war and the changes in the region's political scene joint defence became the most determining point in Sino-Pakistani relations.

III.3. THE 1971 INDO-PAKISTANI WAR

1971 marked the probe of the formalising defence alliance between China and Pakistan when the already existing tensions between East and West Pakistan turned into open armed conflict. Tensions in East Bengal began to rise as a result of demonstrations against Yahya Khan in East Pakistan, who prevented Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party, the East-Pakistani Awami League from forming a government, despite the fact that this party won the elections.⁴⁵ Yahya Khan concluded that the general strikes could not be contained by peaceful means and sent the Pakistani army to East Pakistan in order to put down the revolts. The army's interference resulted in a bloody massacre and thousands fled to Indian Bengal as political refugees. In the name of solidarity with East Bengali refugees, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi commanded Indian troops to march to East Bengal and fight alongside Bengali troops for East Bengal's independence.

Indian intervention in East Bengal directly led to an open military conflict between West Pakistan and India. India had the USSR's support because of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation that India and the USSR signed prior to the war in 1971.⁴⁶ Pakistan, on the other hand, had China on its side. Chinese Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei assured Pakistan of Chinese support in case of a war, and in April 1971 Zhou Enlai sent a note to Yahya Khan, stating that 'the Chinese government and people will as always support the government and people of Pakistan in their struggle to safeguard the nation's sovereignty and independence.'⁴⁷ As a proof of support, Pakistan received military equipment such as tanks, guns and gun and missile boats.⁴⁸ Moreover, China used its new

⁴⁴ CHAUDHRI 1986: 23.

⁴⁵ ZIRING 1992: 55-74.

⁴⁶ BUDHRAJ 1971: 487-501.

⁴⁷ MAHDI 1986:9.

⁴⁸ CHAUDHRI 1986: 10.

permanent membership in the UN Security Council to influence the course of events by proposing a resolution that included the condemnation of India for invading East Pakistan, called upon the withdrawal of Indian troops and an immediate cease-fire. This resolution was vetoed by the USSR and as a result, a diplomatic proxy war between China and the USSR broke out in the Security Council: the USSR used its right of veto on two more occasions against China's resolution; meanwhile, the US-supported China.⁴⁹

However, reactions from the Chinese side were significantly less intense than in the case of the 1965 war, mostly because getting involved in the 1971 war could potentially have resulted in serious consequences for China. Article 9 of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation implied that the USSR would come to the aid of India in case of Chinese military intervention.⁵⁰ China did not want to risk a war with the Soviet Union and India since the balance of forces between them was clearly in the USSR's favour. Additionally, China was in a vulnerable state due to a series of internal crises and the ongoing Cultural Revolution.⁵¹ Furthermore, Pakistan's defeat seemed inevitable in this case, for ideological and practical reasons – the Indian army's military capabilities undoubtedly exceeded those of the Pakistani army. Lastly, East Pakistan was of much less strategic importance for China than West Pakistan, and Beijing assessed that the conflict was Pakistan's domestic affair. Thus, direct Chinese military intervention in Bengal was out of the question and it was communicated clearly from the very beginning of the conflict.⁵² Instead, China chose to morally and, to some extent, materially support Pakistan instead of taking overt action and getting involved in a military conflict.⁵³

The 1971 war resulted in significant changes in the regional balance of power and political preferences. India showed its potential to emerge as a regional superpower through its capability of military intervention and defeating Pakistan. Having gained independence with the help of the Indian army, Bangladesh remained an indebted ally of India, thus making two out of three powers siding with the USSR in the subcontinent.⁵⁴ Realising the shifting balance of power, China sought to intervene by strengthening Pakistan through rehabilitating the Pakistani army, easing the country's economic

⁴⁹ VERTZBERGER 1983: 48.

⁵⁰ VERTZBERGER 1983: 53.

⁵¹ PANDE 2011: 53.

⁵² SMALL 2015: 13.

⁵³ VERTZBERGER 1983: 51.

⁵⁴ VERTZBERGER 1983: 59.

disruptions and extending aid projects.⁵⁵ China was not against regional cooperation – i.e. potential Indo-Pakistani agreements – either, thus approved of the 1972 Simla Agreement and welcomed Pakistan’s act of recognising Bangladesh in 1974. To summarise, China’s interest was to see a strong, united and stable Pakistan in South Asia in order to counter-balance the Soviet Union’s emerging influence. Therefore, China helped Pakistan rehabilitate itself after the war – for instance, by heavy arms supply and the establishment of a heavy mechanical complex near Taxila, at the cost of 7 million dollars.⁵⁶ Additionally, as a result of the 1971 war, Pakistan and China began to institutionalise its defence axis by signing a protocol on collaboration in defence productions in May 1974 and setting up a joint China-Pakistan Military Committee in 1976.⁵⁷

III.4. THE 1979 AFGHANISTAN WAR

In December 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion resulted in a region-wide conflict and threatened the Western border territories of Pakistan specifically. Once again, Pakistan needed external help – in this case, to defend its borders and to accommodate the large numbers of Afghan refugees flooding into the country through the North-Western Frontier Provinces.

One of Pakistan’s allies, the United States did not appear keen on sending considerable support to Pakistan in the initial stages of the conflict. Realising this, China made some efforts to encourage the US to provide more support for Pakistan in the Afghanistan war after Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq rejected President Carter’s offer of 400 million dollars calling it ‘peanuts’.⁵⁸ Moreover, China continued to support Pakistan and in the early 1980s, Pakistan Air Force ordered Chinese fighter bombers and ground to air missiles as part of the air defence development programme. Chinese efforts were much appreciated by Pakistan. In an interview, Zia ul-Haq’s answer to the question whether as a reaction to Soviet intervention in Afghanistan Pakistan would opt for moving towards the US or it would rather keep a distance from the superpowers was the

⁵⁵ VERTZBERGER 1983: 60.

⁵⁶ CHAUDHRI 1986: 23.

⁵⁷ SINGH 2003: 179.

⁵⁸ SMITH 2011: 204–205.

following: 'I am in favour of a third option. The cornerstone is our relationship with China. They have given us tremendous moral and material strength.'⁵⁹

For China, the war in Afghanistan flagged the possibility of further limiting the USSR's influence in the region – therefore, as one might conclude, it is not surprising that China put significant efforts in strengthening Pakistan and provide support to hold back the Soviet Army. China immediately regarded the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a clear and direct form of aggression: Huang Hua, Chinese Foreign Minister regarded the invasion of Afghanistan an 'extreme form of Soviet expansionism'; referred to the issue as a 'threat to regional and global security' and called for strong cooperation with Pakistan.⁶⁰ Moreover, China assured Pakistan that in case of foreign aggression the Chinese people and the government would stand by Pakistan and increased the scale of arms supply – as a result, for instance, more sophisticated Chinese weapons appeared in Pakistan.⁶¹ Furthermore, China had recognised the Organization of Islamic Conference as an important anti-Soviet force, without breaking diplomatic ties with Kabul.⁶² During the war China's other objective was to take over the mountainous Afghan province of BadshahKhan – even though the Chinese-Afghan border is only 70 km long, the Chinese proved to pay significant attention to this region that stemmed from a fear of the Soviet Union.⁶³

To conclude, the 1979 Afghanistan war resulted in strategic interdependence between Pakistan and China. China's biggest fear was the extension of Soviet influence in Pakistan. In the event of Pakistan coming to Soviet hands – or, simply by the disintegration of the country –, Pakistan would have become a stepping stone for further expansion towards the Middle East and Southeast Asia; furthermore, China could have been easily attacked through the Himalayas.⁶⁴ Therefore, China depended on Pakistan for its own safety, and vice versa, Pakistan was heavily dependent on Chinese military support to protect its own borders.

⁵⁹ *Newsweek* interview cited in BHOLA 1986: 260-261.

⁶⁰ BHOLA 1986: 262.

⁶¹ For instance, 82 mm recoilless rifles and anti-tank cannons. CHAUDHRI 1986: 27.

⁶² CHAUDHRI 1986: 26.

⁶³ BHOLA 1986: 262.

⁶⁴ VERTZBERGER 1985: 64.

IV. THE BEGINNINGS OF A NUCLEAR COOPERATION

Nuclear technology development had been keeping Pakistani strategists busy since the 1950s⁶⁵, however, its scope remained limited to the generation of nuclear energy and the idea of nuclear armament was only used as a means of foreign policy negotiations. Pakistani thinking about the potentials of using nuclear energy changed in response to Indian nuclear tests in 1974 (Operation Smiling Buddha) and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto immediately called for the creation of an 'Islamic bomb'.⁶⁶ Indian nuclear tests in 1974 also raised China's concerns over the emergence of India as a dominant regional superpower. Furthermore, this step of India had a direct bearing on China's security calculus – thus, it made China decide to assist Pakistan in building nuclear weapons and missiles. This was formalised in an agreement signed in September 1974, alongside establishing academic cooperation.⁶⁷

In 1986, a comprehensive nuclear cooperation agreement was signed in Beijing between Pakistan and China. Both parties emphasised that the agreement was on using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes – Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang outlined that even though China did not subscribe to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, it did not help any country in nuclear proliferation. Pakistani Foreign Minister also emphasised that Pakistan had no intention to develop a nuclear weapon arsenal.⁶⁸ Following the agreement China allegedly transferred enough tritium gas to Pakistan for ten nuclear weapons, however, as emphasised by some, this amount could not have been enough to build the Kahuta plant – the centre of the Pakistani nuclear programme.⁶⁹ China has also seemed to have supplied Pakistan with a different range of nuclear material – for instance, uranium enrichment technology and both power and research reactors.⁷⁰ It was accounted by some that China had given enough uranium to Pakistan to build a bomb and Chinese scientists assisted Pakistan in the process of enrichment of weapons-grade uranium.⁷¹ Some also suspected that Chinese assistance in the construction of a nuclear reactor in Khushab helped Pakistan provide plutonium for building a nuclear weapon.⁷² However, both parties

⁶⁵ See for instance the appointment of an Atomic Energy Committee under the leadership of Dr Nazir Ahmad in 1955. SINGH 2003: 190.

⁶⁶ TALBOT 2009: 238.

⁶⁷ SINGH 2003: 174.

⁶⁸ SIDDIQUI 1986: 56.

⁶⁹ GARVER 1992: 82.

⁷⁰ AZEEMI 2007: 114.

⁷¹ SIDDIQUI 1986: 55.

⁷² AZEEMI 2007: 114.

denied the allegations and emphasised that all levels of nuclear cooperation are merely for promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy.

Chinese assistance to Pakistan in building nuclear devices has remained the most debated aspect of Sino-Pakistani relations. No hard evidence can be found as a proof of the exact extent of Chinese cooperation in Pakistan's nuclear programme, although certain connections – for instance, the Khan Network's connection with China⁷³ – are referred to very frequently in academic literature.

From the perspective of this study, it is the effort that should be taken into consideration and as Swaran Singh points out, it is unique for three reasons. First, for China's willingness to share these technologies even despite of the non-proliferation pressures; second, for this case is the only example when one state helped another and even after sharing technology, relations remained solid and widespread and lastly, for 'its politico-strategic motivations underwriting such an indulgence with nuclear Pakistan as China's bulwark in its South Asia policy.'⁷⁴

V. CONCLUSION

The Sino-Pakistani axis remained an all-weather relationship during the Cold War era, despite brief periods of stasis. Its scope, however, changed significantly during these decades and the defence alliance came to dominate.

In the early 1950s, partly due to Pakistan's America-focused foreign policy, bilateral relations were cautious and both countries appear to have been slightly suspicious of one another. A slow turn could be seen in the mid-50s: due to a mutual understanding about the place of Pakistan's accession to SEATO in Sino-Pakistani relations, the first state-level meetings took place. Trade agreements in the following years further improved bilateral ties. The 1963 border agreement regarding Kashmir settled the last challenging issue between the two countries and proved to be a real take-off point in the history of China-Pakistan relations. This and the bitter defeat from India's side in the 1962 China-India war resulted in the freezing of Sino-Indian relations for two decades. In tandem, the Kennedy administration's pro-Indian attitude and support of

⁷³ See, for instance MALIK 2004.

⁷⁴ SINGH 2003: 188.

India during the war brought disappointments for the Pakistani leadership. These all contributed to the strengthening of the Islamabad-Beijing axis; trading improved and, more importantly, both parties realised the significance of a defence alliance.

The 1965 Indo-Pakistani war brought the first trial of Sino-Pakistani relations. China proved to be a reliable friend and provided Pakistan with a significant amount of arms after Pakistan's primary ally, the US introduced an arms embargo against Pakistan. Two significant conclusions could be drawn from the 1965 war: first, the Soviet Union's open support for India froze the front lines in South Asia and gave a further push to the informal defence alliance between China and Pakistan. Second, as a result of the US's embargo, China became Pakistan's primary arms supplier.

During the military conflict between India and Pakistan over the separation of East-Pakistan in 1971, China proved to be a loyal ally again and continued supporting Pakistan both verbally and with weapons. After the severe defeat, China helped rebuild Pakistan's military; and the institutionalisation of the Sino-Pakistani defence axis began. Following that, the 1979 Afghanistan war formed into a region-wide conflict and Soviet efforts towards expansion raised serious concerns among members of the Chinese leadership. The war resulted in a strategic interdependence between the two: China was depending on Pakistan for its own safety, and vice versa – Pakistan was heavily dependent on Chinese military support to protect its own borders.

Looking at over 30 years of history in this critical period, one might conclude that Sino-Pakistani security and defence cooperation proved to be beneficial – and sometimes vital – for both sides. The unshakable nature of Sino-Pakistani relations was due to three factors: first, the realisation that no major conflict of interest was present between the two countries; second, the shared fear of India and the Soviet Union – especially an alliance of the two – and the common desire to avoid their dominance in South Asia; and third, the realisation that mutual interests are capable of overwriting seeming ideological differences. These three factors remained present during the Cold War era and that is why not even the change of regimes and/or governments could affect significant changes to Sino-Pakistani friendship over the *longue durée*. From China's point of view, Pakistan was an ally in the region and a 'window to the world' in the era of isolation, as well as a friend to support Beijing's regional ambitions. As William J. Brands pointed out, the subcontinent was more important for China than for the Soviet Union or the US. This was because the US has never been subject to a serious threat from the subcontinent, whereas, for China,

the region was not only a source of a potential attack but a gate to the world, too.⁷⁵ However, altogether, it is perhaps Pakistan that won most with the alliance: arms and nuclear support, a trading partner and aid supplier, and a strong friend who supported Pakistan's regional and pan-Islamic ambitions. And, above all, proved to be a strong and trusted security guarantor for Pakistan that has been much needed in the never-ending rivalry with India.

Budapest, January 2019

⁷⁵ BARNDS 1975: 464–465.

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