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'THE RECENT FLIRTATION WITH U.S. CANNOT WEAKEN PAKISTAN'S TIES WITH CHINA'

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The recent meetings between Pakistan Prime Minister Shabaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir, public recommendation of Trump for the Nobel Prize, and symbolic presentation of rare earth samples to Trump, have triggered speculation that Pakistan is shifting alignments and moving closer to the U.S. The speculation ignores that Pakistan and the US have quietly maintained close and cordial ties over the decades and that the China-Pakistan relationship has got steadily consolidated and deepened since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1951. The relationship intensified after the Sino-India war in 1962. Since then, as their interests converged, the China-Pakistan relationship has developed into one of the most comprehensive that Beijing has with any country. By 2010 it was elevated to the level of an "all-weather strategic partnership". The only other country with which China has a special type of relationship, or strategic partnership, is Russia.

2. China-Pakistan relations have today penetrated virtually every corner of Pakistan. They encompass economic and trade cooperation, people to people exchanges, defence, security and nuclear collaboration, and cooperation in regional and international affairs. Pakistan's critical telecommunications infrastructure is dominated by the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE, adding to Islamabad's strategic dependence on Beijing. China has also built many of Pakistan's power plants and become a major provider of energy. Pakistan is additionally a debtor and owes China an estimated nearly US$ 70 billion as well as US$ 30 billion in external debt. An example of China's influence is the silence of the otherwise vociferous Pakistan-based Islamic fundamentalist outfits about the fate of Muslims in China's Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region.

3. China-Pakistan military ties have simultaneously grown significantly with China becoming the principal supplier of military hardware to Pakistan. China began clandestinely supplying Pakistan the M-9, M-11 etc missiles since the 1980s and later began their co-production in Pakistan. China is the main supplier of warships, submarines, aircraft, and hardware for Pakistan's ground forces. After 'Op: Sindoor' the Pakistan military has contracted for access to China's constellation of satellites, Chinese built satellite ground stations and link-ups etc. The relationship between the armed forces of the two countries has consequently strengthened steadily and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) today wields a lot of influence in the Pakistan army. China also -- to avoid international censure as a proliferator -- clandestinely brokered the missile-for-nuclear technology deal between Pakistan and North Korea. China was the provider of these technologies to both the countries.

4. By 2010, the number of Pakistan military personnel going for training to PLA establishments had exceeded the number travelling to the US. Pakistan is now the biggest importer of Chinese military hardware with 81% of its military hardware coming from China. Sino-Pak military cooperation is, however, not restricted to weapons sales, exchanges of delegations, and regular joint military exercises, but extends to cooperation in sharing operational know-how on the Indian armed forces, capabilities of the Indian Air Force, and framing doctrines. Pakistan also assists Chinese companies in their efforts to sell military hardware to other countries, especially in the Islamic world. The two armies have recently enhanced their level of cooperation. The Colonels posted in the PLA Central Military Commission (CMC)'s Joint Staff Department (JSD) and Pakistan Army's General Headquarters (GHQ) have been replaced by officers of the rank of Major General, indicating an expansion in the areas of collaboration.

5. The unveiling of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, signalled his expansive global ambition. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was the first segment of the BRI to become operational in 2015. It was a major development and Pakistan became the first country where China operationalised the BRI. The Pakistan Army, Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his PML(N), and sections of Pakistan's Foreign Affairs establishment backed the CPEC and despite opposition from the Governor of the Bank of Pakistan, Pakistan's economists and others, the project was approved. The CPEC strengthened the China-Pakistan relationship even more. Chinese enterprises got the contracts for projects and brought Chinese workers and personnel. Since CPEC projects stretched across the length of Pakistan, Chinese personnel were present in Pakistan's conservative heartland. Instances of attacks on Chinese personnel, which increased subsequent to China beginning development of Gwadar Port, compelled the Pakistan Army to raise a Special Security Division tasked solely with their protection. Each Chinese State-owned and other enterprise in Pakistan retained at least one Chinese security officer for collecting local intelligence and liaising with the local police and security forces. At least 35 dual-use, military and infrastructure projects have been under construction in Pakistan, northwest Pakistan, Gilgit and Baltistan. When during a private conversation in late 2015, I asked a leading Chinese academic who occasionally briefs China's Politburo how China expected an economically distressed Pakistan to repay the huge loans, he responded: "till now we have been purchasing the Pakistanis, now we are buying Pakistan"!

6. The relationship was further elevated in 2015/2016 with the creation of the PLA Western Theatre Command (WTC). This signalled the potential expansion of Chinese military power across India's entire northern border including Pakistan. The WTC tasking was expansive and mandated "protecting China's borders, eliminating threats in Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as in Afghanistan and other states that host training bases for separatists and extremists, and protecting Chinese workers and the assets of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor". Underscoring the military content of the CPEC, a fibre optic cable for secure communications was laid to link Kashgar, headquarters of the South Xinjiang Military District of the Western Theatre Command (WTC), with the GHQ in Rawalpindi. It was subsequently extended to Islamabad. Chinese military literature began describing Gwadar as the PLA Navy base and Karachi as the logistics base respectively. A senior Sri Lankan military officer in 2024 said China will a establish its second overseas base after Djibouti in Gwadar.

7. China and Pakistan both share a common objective, namely to prevent India's rise. China's leaders have adhered to Mao's declaration in 1945 that China will be the sole guarantor of security in Asia. India's leaders, however, maintain there is adequate space for all. China also continues to cite Qing dynasty maps to lay claim to territories, including within India's international boundaries, thus confirming China's territorial ambitions.

8. The most recent instance of China-Pakistan collaboration was evident in 'Operation Sindoor'. Chinese assistance to Pakistan was more direct and overt than ever before. China provided military assistance during the conflict including the urgent supply of P-15 missiles, allowed the use of its satellites and provided space-based technological assistance, and assisted Pakistan in its propaganda efforts. China's state-controlled social media highlighted this cooperation. Moreover, China was complicit in perpetration of the heinous terrorist attack on Indian tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir, on April 22. The Pakistan authorities are reliably reported to have obtained at least 129 satellite photos of the specific area and its vicinity in Pahalgam prior to the actual attack. In sharp contrast to diplomatic practice, neither Chinese President Xi Jinping nor Chinese Premier Li Qiang sent condolence messages after the terrorist attack.

9. Among indicators of Chinese preparedness for sudden military intervention are the new PLA units that have recently been deployed in Ladakh. Recent examples include the Drone base in Shigatse just 90 kms from the LAC where the latest advanced GJ-11 'Sharp Sword' stealthy flying-wing uncrewed combat air vehicles (UCAV) are deployed; a new UAV/Helicopter strip located in Shangzayü, Zayu, Nyingchi prefecture just 15 km from the LAC along India-Tibet border opposite Arunachal Pradesh; a PLA Information Support Force unit in Ngari in southern Ladakh; and a unit in Rudok, across Chushul in Ladakh. The uneasy calm along the LAC following the meeting between Indian Prime Minister Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit, thinly veils Chinese intentions. The military deployments and China's overt assistance to Pakistan during 'Op: Sindoor' belie expectation of any normalisation in ties.

10. This dense web of China-Pakistan relations imposes limits on Pakistan cosying up to the Trump administration. Islamabad, which has maintained close contacts with sections of the US military, State Department and CIA personnel, will undoubtedly have obtained Beijing's approval prior to making these moves towards the US. Beijing would have no objection to Pakistan seeking financial assistance from the US or international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF as Beijing has traditionally been reluctant to bail out countries financially. Beijing may also feel that Pakistan could be a useful intermediary to get US President Trump to relax tensions arising from the trade war and such contacts could possibly even presage a potential deal between the US and China. In any event India needs to be vigilant about these developments and China's actions in event of another clash with Pakistan.

(The author is President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)