

China and the Middle East

The Quest for Influence

Edited by
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Sino–Pakistan Relations and the Middle East

Samina Yasmeen*

The Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests of May 1998 have once again drawn attention to Sino–Pakistan relations. Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee explained his decision to test nuclear weapons in terms of the Chinese threat to India's security, and the nuclear nexus between China and Pakistan.¹ While announcing the five nuclear tests on 28 May, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif refuted India's claims and emphasised China's opposition to expansionism 'despite its tremendous superiority in defensive capability'. He also praised China for its support for Pakistan during 'this hour of crisis' and said that Pakistan was proud of its neighbour.²

These explanations and the resurfacing references to an Islamic Bomb have raised issues about the relevance of Sino–Pakistan relations to the Middle East. They also raise questions about the exact nature of China's relations with its Muslim neighbour. This paper answers some of these questions. It argues that China's relations with Pakistan can best be understood within the context of South Asia's relevance to China's counter-encirclement strategy. It is essentially conducted as a South Asian and not a Middle Eastern relationship. However, it does have some relevance to the Middle East which, while limited in the past, is likely to increase in the aftermath of the Indian and Pakistani entry into the nuclear club. To this end, the paper is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the evolution of Sino–Pakistan relations during the fifties and sixties. The second part discusses the emergence and implementation of Beijing's new South Asian policy and the extent to which a Sino–Indian rapprochement affected the relationship in the nineties. The last part discusses the manner in which the relationship between China and Pakistan has impacted upon the Middle East and discusses how the changed nuclear equation may make Sino–Pakistani relations more relevant to the region west of South Asia.

* The author wishes to thank Mrs Sarfraz Iqbal and James Trevelyan for their help in writing this paper.

¹ See, for example, Raj Chengappa and Manoj Joshi, 'Hawkish India', *India Today* (international edition), 1 June 1998, pp. 10–11.

² M. Ziauddin, 'Account Evened with India, says PM: Pakistan Opts to go Nuclear', *Dawn*, 29 May 1998.

FROM INDIFFERENCE TO ENTENTE

Since its independence in August 1947, Pakistan's foreign policy has been shaped by the dynamics of a relatively smaller state existing next to a major state. Convinced that the partition of the Indian subcontinent did not and need not herald the region into an era of Indian hegemony, and determined to 'balance' the perceived Indian threat, Pakistan has sought to build relationships with regional and extra-regional states. The dominant theme in this search for equality has been the need for a patron or ally who could support Pakistan against its main regional adversary. In the fifties, this process resulted in Pakistan establishing close links with the US. Not only did Islamabad participate in the US-led alliances including the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), but it also signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Pact with Washington in 1959.

Membership of the alliance system earned Pakistan military and economic assistance from the US. It also provided support for Pakistan's claim for a UN supervised plebiscite in the disputed territory of Kashmir. By the end of the fifties, however, the changing nature of Sino-Soviet and Sino-Indian relations altered the level of American support for Pakistan. Eager to woo India, both the US and the Soviet Union supported India in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian border war of 1962. For Pakistan, it meant an era of reduced US commitment to Pakistan's security and its stand on the Kashmir issue. Disillusioned by the failure of its pro-US policy, Pakistan turned towards China in search of a patron state which could counter the Indian threat.

The Chinese response to Pakistan's overtures, which resulted in an era of Sino-Pakistan entente in the sixties, was a function of its counter-encirclement strategy and the place assigned to South Asia in this process.³ Since its rise to power in 1949, the communist regime in Beijing had viewed the US as its principal enemy engaged in a process of establishing a network of alliances to encircle China. The perception was reinforced by the bilateral pacts and Mutual Defence Assistance Agreements Washington concluded with Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, Laos and Pakistan. These agreements enabled the US to establish a military presence around the mainland and the creation of SEATO further reinforced the fear of encirclement in Beijing.

Hence, in the early fifties the Chinese government embarked on a dual-track counter-encirclement strategy of its own. On the one hand, the Chinese communist regime established close politico-military links with Washington's main rival, the Soviet Union and on the other hand, it sought to improve its ties with neighbouring states by using a combination of economic and diplomatic measures. Such a dual-track strategy was expected to achieve two interrelated goals; first, to reduce and neutralise American influence in states where it was strong so as to decrease the chance of their use as bases from where the US could pose a military threat to China; and

³ For details see, Samina Yasmeen, 'The China Factor in the Kashmir Issue', in Riju G.C. Thomas (Ed.), *Perspectives on Kashmir* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 320-24.

second, to prevent neutral states from 'tilting' towards the US and joining Washington in its encirclement strategy.

As part of this counter-encirclement strategy, Beijing targeted sympathetic groups in Japan, including the Japan Socialist Party, left wing intellectuals, students and business community. In Southeast Asia, Beijing maintained trade and aid relations with Malaysia, Singapore, Laos and Cambodia. It also demonstrated its willingness to expand the scope of inter-state relations by offering a non-aggression treaty to the Philippines, inviting Thailand to inspect the 'Thai Autonomous Zone' and concluding a dual-nationality treaty with Indonesia.

In South Asia, Beijing had depended heavily on developing close links with India. During the fifties, the Indian leadership was frequently portrayed by the Chinese media as 'progressive bourgeoisie' and the mild Indian criticisms of Chinese annexation of Tibet were ignored. In 1954, China concluded an agreement with Tibet on the basis of the five principles of the *Panchsheel* resulting in the abolition of the special privileges enjoyed by India in Tibet and withdrawal of Indian military escorts, but it permitted India to maintain its trade agencies in Yatun, Gyantse and Gartok. More importantly, exchange of high level delegations took place between India and China and Prime Minister Zhou En-Lai also visited India. His visit was reciprocated by the Indian Prime Minister later the same year. The level of Sino-Indian trade grew and in the fifties *Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai* became a popular slogan in India.

Despite an obviously pro-Indian policy in South Asia, Beijing avoided alienating Pakistan. Pakistan was rarely subjected to direct public criticism by the Chinese media for its membership of SEATO. Most of the time it was criticised only indirectly, and its government was portrayed as being naive and ignorant rather than an accomplice in the US grand strategy of containing China. Whenever possible, Beijing also attempted to build 'correct' relations with Pakistan. This Indocentric but not an anti-Pakistan policy was clearly evident in China's neutral and cautious stand on the Kashmir issue. Instead of aligning itself with the Indian interpretation of the nature and solution of the dispute, Beijing restricted itself to acknowledging that a dispute existed and encouraging its solution through direct negotiations between India and Pakistan but without 'American influence'.⁴

Developments at the turn of the sixties forced China to reassess its South Asian policy. As the Sino-Indian boundary dispute unfolded and the Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, China redefined its understanding of the main threat to its security and the manner in which this threat manifested itself. The Soviet Union was no longer viewed as an ally in its counter-encirclement strategy. Instead, Moscow's attempts to improve relations with countries surrounding China were seen as part of a Soviet drive to encircle China. This view was reinforced as the two communist states disagreed on the delimitation of their mutual border. Meanwhile, the US had not altered its anti-China policy and in some cases had even increased the level of its military presence in areas adjoining China. Therefore, the Chinese government adopted the view that

⁴ See, for example, *New China New Agency* (hereafter *NCNA*), 25 December 1956, in *Survey of China Mainland Press* (hereafter *SCMP*), No. 1440, 30 December 1956.

the major threat to its security emanated not merely from American machinations, but from the American and Soviet 'collusion' to encircle China.

South Asia, and especially India, was seen as the focal point of this collusion for encirclement. This view began to emerge as the Soviet Union and the US adopted a pro-Indian stand on the Sino-Indian border dispute. The Soviet Union wavered between neutrality and suggestions that China should give up its claims on the Aksai Chin area. The US also made overtures indicating its support for New Delhi against the Chinese government. The need to counter this perceived Soviet-American threat led China to reassess its counter-encirclement strategy in South Asia. Pakistan was no longer seen as a state enticed by the west in the latter's machinations against China. Instead, it came to be viewed as a 'pillar' state in South Asia that China could rely on in 'balancing' India and countering the perceived US-Soviet collusion. Within the context of this reassessment, China responded favourably to Islamabad's overtures for improved relations in early 1962.

The first indications of China's shift towards a Pakistan-centric policy emerged as the two states concluded a boundary agreement in principle in December 1962 or weeks after the Sino-Indian border war. The agreement delimited the border between China and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Under its terms Beijing agreed to cede to Pakistan 1,350 square miles of territory, 750 of which had been *actually* occupied and administered by China. Pakistan, in return, made a symbolic gesture by giving up claim over 2,050 square miles of territory *on map only*. The next month, China and Pakistan concluded a trade agreement which guaranteed most-favoured-nation treatment on a bilateral basis. In August 1963 the two states also signed an air travel agreement which permitted the Pakistan International Airlines to operate in China without any conditions on the nationality of passengers travelling aboard.

These agreements were followed by a perceptible change in Beijing's attitude on the Kashmir issue. After an initial period of remaining neutral, Chinese leadership sided with Pakistan. The joint communique issued at the end of Prime Minister Zhou En-Lai's visit to Pakistan in February 1964 urged a solution of the Kashmir dispute 'in accordance with the wishes of people of Kashmir as pledged to them by India and Pakistan'. In an obvious attack on India's refusal to hold a plebiscite, the communique stated: 'It would be of no avail to deny the existence of... (this) dispute and adopt a big-nation chauvinistic attitude of imposing one's will on others'.⁵

The Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 further confirmed the growing amity between China and Pakistan. Beijing did not approve of President Ayub Khan's adventurism in Kashmir but once the war broke out, it sided with Islamabad. More significantly, as it became obvious that the US imposed arms embargo would limit Pakistan's ability to continue the war, China extended support to Pakistan. Following assurances from Ayub Khan that Pakistan would not submit to the US, Soviet or UN pressure for a solution to the Kashmir dispute, Beijing issued an ultimatum to India on 17 September 1965 demanding that India should dismantle 'within three days its aggressive military

⁵ 'China-Pakistan Joint Communique', *NCNA*, 24 February 1964, in *SCMP*, No. 3167, 27 February 1964.

works on the Chinese side of the China–Sikkim boundary’ or bear ‘full responsibility for all the grave consequences’. By creating the possibility of escalating the Indo–Pakistan conflict, Beijing secured a change in the Security Council’s treatment of the Indo–Pakistan war and achieved a resolution favourable to Pakistan.⁶

In the years following the 1965 Indo–Pakistan war, a military dimension was added to China’s Pakistan-centric policy. Under the terms of an agreement which was not made public until 1966, Beijing supplied 4 MiG-15s, 4 IL-28 bombers, 40 MiG-19s and approximately 80 T-59 medium tanks to Pakistan. Beijing also assisted Islamabad in setting up an Ordnance factory in Ghazipur, in the erstwhile East Pakistan.⁷ From Pakistan’s point of view, the military aid proved invaluable at a time when it was refused military aid from the US and yet could not tap alternative sources among the NATO states. The assistance enabled Pakistan to continue its strategy of ‘balancing’ the perceived Indian threat.

Although the Sino–Pakistan entente continued, geopolitical changes at the global level towards the end of the sixties and domestic power struggles in China prompted Beijing to reassess its counter-encirclement strategy. The slow advent of Sino–American rapprochement coincided with the further deterioration in Sino–Soviet relations which ultimately resulted in the Sino–Soviet border clashes in 1969. That these clashes were followed by Moscow’s intensive efforts to build economic links with countries surrounding China was viewed by Beijing as part of a gradual yet grand Soviet strategy of encircling the mainland. Moscow, therefore, came to occupy the position the US had occupied in the fifties; the USSR was now identified as the principal threat to Chinese territorial integrity.

The need for a revised counter-encirclement strategy seems to have initiated a debate between the Chinese moderates and radicals in the late sixties. The debate was of special relevance to South Asia. While radical groups favoured a continued close relationship with Pakistan, the moderates appeared to favour a gradual return to a relatively even-handed policy in South Asia. Moving away from the hostile relationship with New Delhi formed an essential part of this alternative policy. That the moderates were partially successful was obvious in the overtures made by the Chinese government towards India at the turn of the seventies. On May Day 1970, for example, Mao smiled and shook hands with the Indian Charge d’Affaires and suggested that the two great Asian states should live peacefully together. In the same year, Beijing reportedly expressed an interest in restoring diplomatic relations with New Delhi at the ambassadorial level.

Beijing’s successful return to a relatively even-handed South Asian policy, however, was hampered by the civil war in and the impending disintegration of Pakistan. The 1971 Indo–Pakistan war, the dismemberment of Pakistan, and the emergence of Bangladesh against the background of the Indo–Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, led Beijing to suspend all initiatives for improving relations with India.

⁶ Yasmeen, *op. cit.*, pp. 326–27.

⁷ Samina Yasmeen, ‘Chinese Policy towards Pakistan: 1969–1979’, Doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Tasmania, 1985, ch. 8.

Instead, for the next five years, China offered political, economic and military support to Pakistan. At the political level, China sided with Pakistan against India during the war and later Beijing assisted Pakistan to secure the release of more than 80,000 prisoners-of-war held in captivity in India.

By linking the issue of the admission of Bangladesh to the United Nations to the unconditional release of the prisoners, the Chinese government ensured that Pakistan was not forced to make compromises on the ground in Kashmir. Economically, Islamabad became the recipient of Chinese economic aid on extremely soft terms. Not only did the Chinese government convert its previous four loans into grants, but it also extended the grace period for a loan of over US \$217 million provided in November 1970 for another ten years. Most importantly, the Chinese government reinforced its military links with Pakistan. In fact, the relationship was placed on a much stronger footing than before.

The prospect of Pakistan's further disintegration in the wake of the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, coupled with the drastic restructuring of the regional military balance laid the basis for China's strong military alliance with Pakistan. While unwilling to accept Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's suggestion for concluding a defence pact during his visit to Beijing, the Chinese government agreed to support Islamabad militarily. During the next two and a half years, Pakistan became a major recipient of Chinese weapons and received 495 T-59 tanks, 101 MiG-19s and 8 naval vessels. These supplies helped reduced the imbalance in military capability between India and Pakistan. The ratio of the total number of Pakistani tanks to those in India, for example, was reduced from 1:2.3 in 1972 to 1:1.8 in 1974. Beijing also assisted Pakistan in building up an indigenous defence production capability. Pakistan was helped in setting up an aeronautical complex at Kamra, and a Heavy Rebuild Factory in Taxila. While Pakistan was required to provide the site, labour force and building materials, the Chinese supplied the equipment and technical assistance.⁸ In the wake of India's first nuclear test in May 1974, China was reported to have assigned twelve scientists to assist Pakistan in its efforts to develop its nuclear capability.⁹

A 'NEW' SOUTH ASIA POLICY AND SINO-PAKISTAN RELATIONS

Despite Beijing's strong support for Islamabad, however, the Sino-Pakistan entente did not prove as enduring as claimed by some Pakistani sources or alluded to by non-Pakistani analysts. In fact, as Pakistan appeared comfortable with its 'new' identity and the danger of the country's disintegration subsided, Beijing made an effort to pursue the South Asian policy it had suspended in 1971. Instead of only relying on Pakistan to counter the Soviet influence, it endeavoured to improve links with India as well. The media relented on its criticism of the Indian government, began to acknowledge progress made by New Delhi and portrayed its neighbour as less than an

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

⁹ 'A Friend Indeed', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11 June 1998, p. 22.

accomplice in Moscow's encirclement strategy. The most important change occurred in 1976 when the two states upgraded their diplomatic relationship to ambassadorial level. The rapprochement with India did not end China's relationship with Pakistan. However, it did introduce caution in Beijing's response to South Asian developments. As the Sino-Indian rapprochement continued, Beijing became more circumspect in siding with Islamabad on the Kashmir issue. During General Zia ul-Haq's first visit to China in December 1977, for example, Beijing avoided making even a cursory reference to its support for the Pakistan government on the Kashmir issue. When the issue *was* mentioned, a clear distinction was drawn between the people of Pakistan and the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

Once trailed, the 'new' South Asian policy became the basis on which Beijing related to Pakistan and India. The main features of this policy as it emerged during the eighties and nineties are: (a) a close political and military relationship with Pakistan which continues despite occasional difference of opinion on issues facing the two states; (b) a continued move towards a rapprochement with New Delhi; and (c) a cautious and circumscribed support for Pakistan on its differences with India, with an increasing emphasis on settling South Asian disputes in the spirit of cooperation and dialogue.

China's close political relationship with Pakistan has been evident in its support for the latter on the Afghanistan issue during the eighties. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 created a sense of insecurity in Islamabad and a fear that Pakistan would be the next state in Moscow's search for warm water ports. This view, while not supported by historical evidence on Russia's interest in the warm water ports of the Indian Ocean region, was shared by Beijing. China viewed the Soviet move as part of its two-pronged strategy to establish control of the Indian Ocean by linking its presence in Afghanistan with that in Vietnam in the east and the Horn of Africa in the west. Although Beijing frequently identified 'the west' as the main target of this two-pronged strategy, the increased discussion of the Soviet encirclement strategies indicated that Beijing feared that the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was also directed against China.

The convergence of Sino-Pakistani interpretation of Soviet moves led them to co-ordinate their response to developments in Afghanistan. This co-ordination was apparent in Beijing's acceptance of the revival of a strong security relationship between Islamabad and Washington. Unlike in the fifties when US-Pakistan alliance was viewed with apprehension, Pakistan's identity as the frontline state was not only accepted but also encouraged in the eighties. In fact, Beijing tacitly agreed to the US leading the process of using Pakistan to contain and roll back the Soviets. Pakistan received strong political support from China against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. During Pakistani Foreign Minister Agha Shahi's visit to China, for instance, his Chinese counterpart Huang Hua categorically stated: 'We appreciate the correct position of the Pakistani government which insists that the Soviet Union should withdraw its troops and the Afghan people must be allowed to decide their own future free from outside interference'.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Dawn*, 27 December 1980.

In the subsequent period, the number of high level visits exchanged between the two countries increased. These exchanges included, for instance, visits by Chinese Vice Prime Minister Ji Pengfe in March 1982, President Zia ul-Haq in October 1982, Chinese President Li Xiannian in March 1984, Prime Minister Junejo in 1985 and the Chinese Prime Minister Zhao Ziyang in June 1987.¹¹ These high level visits were supplemented by exchange of visits between senior civil and military officials of the two states. China also provided humanitarian aid to the Afghan refugees based in Pakistan.

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new international system have not ended the political understanding between China and Pakistan. Instead, the emergence of new Central Asian Republics has opened another avenue for cooperation between the two states. In 1996, for instance, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China ratified the transit trade treaty. According to this agreement, major roads from Almaty and Bishek would be extended to join the 420 km long Karakorum Highway built in 1978 which links China and Pakistan. The roads are expected not only to increase trade between the four states but also to 'create favourable conditions for a considerable expansion of local trade'.¹²

Meanwhile, Beijing and Islamabad have maintained close links despite the frequent change of governments in Pakistan and the change of leadership in China. In September 1990, for instance, President Ishaq Khan visited China and the following March Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif paid a visit to China following the end of the 1991 Kuwait war. This was reciprocated by President Yang Shangkun in October the same year. The next year, Nawaz Sharif again visited China. In 1994, four high level delegations exchanged visits. These included visits by the Chinese Defence Minister and by Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, President Farooq Leghari and the Chief of Army Staff. In 1995, Benazir Bhutto again visited China to participate in the Beijing Conference on Women, followed in February 1998 by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's visit.

While not a major feature of the Sino-Pakistan relationship, economic links have also persisted during the eighties and nineties. Building on the trend established in the sixties and seventies, Beijing has provided loans to Pakistan on favourable terms with the option of repayments made in the form of locally produced goods. In 1989-90, Pakistan received a US \$10.6 million interest free loan from Beijing with an amortisation period of twenty years. The next fiscal year, Beijing extended another loan for US \$75.6 million at an interest rate of 9 per cent to be paid in ten years. During 1991-92, Pakistan was provided an additional US \$10 million interest free loan to be repaid in twenty years.¹³ Beijing also agreed to extend a loan of Rs 1068.00

¹¹ Hasan-Askari Rizvi, *Pakistan and the Geostrategic Environment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 149-51.

¹² ITAR-TASS News Agency, 19 August 1994, in *BBC Monitoring Service of World Broadcasts*, 26 August 1994.

¹³ *Economic Survey 1992-93* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, Economic Adviser's Wing, 1993), p. 182.

million (about US \$29 million) to Islamabad during the 1996–97 fiscal year.¹⁴ These and previous loans have been used to set up projects in the four provinces including two textile mills in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), two sugar mills in Sindh and a copper mine in Saindak.¹⁵ China has also been assisting Pakistan in power generation and transmission. Apart from providing a nuclear power plant subject to the safeguards by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Beijing has erected transmission lines in Sindh. Equally significant has been the assistance provided in upgrading the Heavy Mechanical Complex and the Heavy Foundry and Forge earlier completed with Beijing's assistance.

The most outstanding feature of Sino-Pakistan relations during the eighties and nineties, however, has been defence cooperation between the two states. Building on the links established during the sixties and seventies, China has maintained its supply of weapons to Pakistan. While China was exporting arms for political reasons in the seventies and eighties, Pakistan remained one of the top five recipients of Chinese arms.¹⁶ Most of these weapons were supplied as gifts or at 'friendly prices'. According to one source, Pakistan has received 'long-range and anti-armour guns, and communication equipment; F-6, F-7 and Q-5 Fantan aircraft; CSA-SAM batteries, and various naval craft including Romeo submarines'.¹⁷ In March 1991 the two states agreed to expand defence cooperation. Although no details were provided at the time, cooperation included 'the progressive production of T-59 and T-85 tanks as well as a new tank in Pakistan'.¹⁸

Pakistan and China have also cooperated in developing the Chengdu FC-1 jet fighter. According to some reports, their joint efforts included reverse engineering of the F-16 aircraft supplied to Pakistan in the eighties. With a unit cost of US \$15 million, the aircraft is to be inducted into the Pakistani airforce. This cooperation is a natural extension of the joint Sino-Pakistani efforts to build K-8 jet trainers which were inducted into the Pakistani airforce in January 1995.¹⁹ The two states have also been collaborating to build a missile boat for the Pakistan Navy at the cost of US \$19 million.²⁰ The Chinese have played an active role in expanding and modernising the ordnance factory at Wah.

More significantly, China has assisted Pakistan in developing a nuclear and missile capability. Reports of their collaboration in the nuclear field date back to 1983 when, according to US intelligence sources, China gave Pakistan a complete design for a nuclear weapon and enough enriched uranium for two bombs. Reports of such collaboration became more frequent in the nineties when China agreed to help

¹⁴ *Estimates of Foreign Assistance: 1996–97* (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, 1996), p. 61.

¹⁵ *South China Morning Post*, 8 October 1990, p. 11.

¹⁶ Michael Brzoska and Thomas Ohlson, *Arms Transfers to the Third World 1971–1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); *SIPRI Yearbook 1991*, pp. 208–11. See also Yitzhak Shichor 'Unfolded Arms: Beijing's Recent Military Sales Offensive', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1988, pp. 236–27.

¹⁷ Rizvi, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–57.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁹ *Xinhua*, 25 January 1995.

²⁰ 'All Set to Produce Pak Missile Boats', *The Nation* (Lahore), 1 May 1998.

Pakistan build the 300 MW nuclear power plant at Chashma and a tritium gas purification plant at Khushab. In 1995 China was alleged to have supplied 5,000 nuclear related ring magnets used in gas centrifuges to enrich uranium for weapon use. While the actual extent of Chinese support remains unclear, it is obvious that Beijing has played a significant role in helping Pakistan develop its nuclear capability.

It has also provided the necessary support to help Pakistan develop a missile capability to counter the Indian development of short and medium range missile capability. Of the three variants of the short range missiles, Hatf, Hatf III with a range of around 600–800 km is related to the Chinese M-9 missile. China has reportedly assisted Pakistan in the development of Hatf II/M-11 missile with a range of 280 km. Apart from the news that Pakistan bought components for this missile, American intelligence reports claim that Beijing supplied 'more than 30 ready-to-launch M-11s that are stored in canisters at the Sargodha airforce base'.²¹ China is reportedly assisting Pakistan in the development of an indigenous capability to produce these missiles. Since the early nineties, there have been numerous reports that China had supplied parts of the M-11 missile to Pakistan.

Notwithstanding the strong military links with Pakistan, China has studiously followed the blueprint of a 'new' South Asian policy developed at the turn of the seventies. While supporting Pakistan politically, economically and militarily and thereby containing India, Beijing has continued its efforts to improve links with New Delhi. Following the upgrading of relations to ambassadorial level in 1976, it has attempted to broaden the level of contacts and reduce hostility with its southwestern neighbour. The process has been aided by New Delhi's positive responses to these moves such as Rajiv Gandhi's landmark visit to China in 1988. In the joint communique issued at the end of the visit, India delinked a Sino-Indian rapprochement with a settlement of the border dispute and expressed 'concern over anti-Chinese activities by some Tibetan elements in India'.²² Three years later, in December 1991, China's Prime Minister Li Peng paid a four-day visit to India. This was the first such visit by a Chinese Prime Minister in thirty-one years and indicative of a changed Chinese attitude to India.²³

Thereafter, exchange of visits between the two states continued and a cooperative relationship developed. China, for example, supplies fuel for the Tarapur nuclear reactor. More importantly, the Joint Working Group on the Boundary Question has paved the way for Confidence Building Measure Agreements (CBMs) between 1993 and 1996. The agreement on building confidence in the military sphere, concluded in 1996 during Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit, has paved the way for exchange of visits between medium and high level military commanders.²⁴ The two states have also adopted similar or often mutually supportive stand on international issues.

²¹ Douglas Waller, 'The Secret Missile Deal', *Time*, 30 June 1997, p. 36.

²² Swaran Singh, 'Problems of Dealing with an Emerging Superpower', *Mainstream* (New Delhi), 24 January 1998, in *Selections from Regional Press* (Islamabad: Institute of Regional Studies, 15 February 1998), p. 3.

²³ See, for example, 'Sino-Indian Ties Usher in a New Era', *Beijing Review*, 23–29 December 1991, p. 4.

²⁴ 'Army Vice Chief to Visit China on May 22', *The Hindustan Times*, 21 May 1997.

The Indian and Chinese positions on global climate change and the conclusion of the Multilateral Investment Agreement, for example, have been similar with both arguing for the rights of developing states and opposing agreements that would erode the sovereignty of such countries. They also agree that the right to subsistence and development are part of the human rights regime and must not be ignored.

The Sino-Indian rapprochement, however, has not been without implications for China's political support for Pakistan. On the one hand, Islamabad has been supported by Beijing in its suggestions for holding a five power meeting to deal with the nuclear issue, and its idea of establishing a nuclear weapon free zone in South Asia. Beijing's support for Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, however, has become muted over the last two decades. Unlike in the sixties when Pakistan's demand for a UN supervised plebiscite received unequivocal support from China, the emphasis in the eighties and nineties has been on the need for cooperation and resolution. Significantly, Beijing has avoided blaming New Delhi for the deterioration of the situation in Kashmir. Significantly, China has offered to mediate between the two South Asian states. Realising that this may be unacceptable to India, it has expressed hope that the issue be resolved 'through dialogues' between India and Pakistan.²⁵

Despite references in the Pakistani media to continued Chinese support, this preference for dialogue comes closer to India's demand that the Kashmir dispute be resolved bilaterally under the terms of the Simla Agreement and not through a UN supervised plebiscite.²⁶ The suggestion has been consistently made with reference to the *situation in South Asia* and without reference to its implications for other regions. This is despite the fact that the revival of the Kashmir issue has attracted some Islamic groups/individuals from other regions and could, even if indirectly, impact upon developments in countries like Sudan and Egypt. Such an approach and its treatment of issues affecting Islamabad and New Delhi indicates that China has consistently conducted its relations with India and Pakistan within the South Asian context. To put it differently, as in the case of India, China's Pakistan policy has been designed and conducted with a distinct South Asian focus. The question arises if, despite the narrow regional focus, Sino-Pakistan relations have impacted upon or been affected by developments in the adjoining region, the Middle East.

MIDDLE EAST IN THE SINO-PAKISTAN EQUATION

Against the background of China's focus on Pakistan within the context of its South Asian policy, the Middle East has remained marginal to the Sino-Pakistan relationship. In the fifties China focused more on the Southeast and South Asian region while leaving the Middle East primarily to the Soviet Union. In the sixties, as China and

²⁵ See, for example, *Xinhua News Agency Report*, 22 February 1994, in *BBC Monitoring Service of World Broadcasts*, 24 February 1994.

²⁶ Singh, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

Pakistan established an entente, Beijing's policy of relying on a selected few 'pillar' states meant that it did not venture much into the Middle East. Pakistan's Islamic identity, therefore, was not highlighted in the Chinese media as a reason for Sino-Pakistani links. This is not to suggest that the relationship had no symbolic value. Nor does it mean that the relationship did not indirectly contribute to projecting a positive image of China among other Islamic countries in the Middle East.

However, it was not until the turn of the seventies that the linkages between Sino-Pakistan relations and the Middle East became apparent. The 1971 Indo-Pakistan war and the emergence of Bangladesh drastically changed the geostrategic environment in South Asia. It also altered Pakistan's foreign policy outlook. While in the past it had been more focused on South Asia, the loss of its eastern wing forced Pakistan to redefine its identity. Pakistan's Muslim and Middle Eastern identity entered the foreign policy discourse when Bhutto came to identify Pakistan as a state at the crossroads of two regions. Since then, while remaining at the periphery of their relationship, the Middle East and especially the Gulf have acquired some relevance to the Sino-Pakistan relationship.

The linkage has been apparent in the concept of a China-Pakistan-Iran axis. The concept dates back to the post-1971 era when dismemberment raised the possibility of Pakistan's further disintegration. The NWFP had a history of such tendencies but the likelihood of further disintegration was most feared in the southwestern province of Baluchistan where Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's refusal to accept a non-PPP government in the province led to a four-year insurgency. While the exact nature of such aid is unclear, the anti-federal Baluch elements were supported by Iraq and the Soviet Union. The spectre of an Iraqi-Soviet aided insurgency in Baluchistan created concern in Iran. Having been identified as a pillar state for the US in the era of detente and interested in establishing his own sphere of influence in Southwest Asia, the Shah of Iran reacted to the possibility of further disintegration of Pakistan. He was especially concerned about these tendencies spreading to the Iranian part of Baluchistan.

These concerns were shared in China which wanted to balance India's links with the Soviet Union in South Asia and at the same time was not keen to see further disintegration of a Third World state it had studiously helped. The mutuality of interest led Iran and China to provide simultaneous support to the Pakistan government. Apart from statements expressing support for Pakistan's territorial integrity, this support took the form of aid for development projects in Baluchistan. Although there is no evidence that their policies were jointly designed and developed, Chinese and Iranian efforts to prevent Pakistan's disintegration gave the appearance of an Iranian-Chinese-Pakistani understanding.

In the eighties, the notion of a Pakistani-Chinese-Iranian understanding metamorphosed into the concept of an Iran-Pakistan-China axis.²⁷ The concept gained support from some groups in Pakistan in the nineties but was essentially linked to Pakistan's South Asian concerns. The need for such an axis was justified in terms of

²⁷ See, for example, 'New Axis Emerging—Says BBC', *The Muslim*, 7 October 1992; and Arif Azim, 'The China-Pakistan-Iran Axis', *The Nation*, 1 November 1991.

providing strategic depth to Pakistan against any possible clash with India. Despite references to the idea and the reality of such an axis, however, Sino-Pakistan relations have not expanded to include a close tripartite defence relationship. In fact, both China and Pakistan have denied the existence and need for such an axis as neither of them wish to alienate the US by closely and openly aligning with Iran. Realities on the ground, such as Iranian-Pakistani differences over the solution to the Afghan crisis and allegations that Iranian support for Shi'ite groups in Pakistan contributed to sectarian violence have militated against a tripartite relationship. Nonetheless, mere references to such understanding or pacts have meant that parts of the Middle East, especially Iran, have figured in the discussion of Sino-Pakistan relations.

At another level, the relationship has also been pertinent to the development of Beijing's links with the Middle Eastern states. After the dismemberment of Pakistan, the new state of Pakistan established a network of multifaceted links with the Middle Eastern states. While receiving economic aid from them, Pakistan provided unskilled manpower to the Gulf states as the latter rose in prominence after the 1973 oil embargo. Pakistan also established military links with these states including defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia. The partial re-orientation of Pakistan's foreign policy was beneficial for China. Having left the Middle Eastern region to the Soviet Union, Beijing had expressed increasing concern about Moscow's moves in the region in the seventies.²⁸ The concern stemmed from the perceived threat of a Soviet Indian Ocean strategy that was to supplement its land-based strategy of encircling China. The seventies, therefore, witnessed an increased interest in China to establish links with the Middle Eastern states to counter the Soviet moves. In the eighties and nineties, as China embarked upon and then progressed along the path of economic modernisation, it perceived the Middle East as a source of meeting its energy requirements.

The nature of Pakistan and China's relationships with the Middle Eastern states is essentially different. Despite Pakistan's military links with some of the Gulf states, it has been primarily a *recipient* of economic aid from these states and hence has been in an unequal relationship with its Muslim neighbours. The Chinese relationship with the Middle East, on the other hand, has been conducted from a *position of relative strength* and a mutuality of economic and military interests. Despite differences in the nature of the relationships, their parallel orientation towards the Gulf states has created the basis for some linkages between Sino-Pakistan relations and the Middle Eastern region. During the seventies, China used its support for Pakistan to establish its credentials as a fellow Third World state which was supportive of a Muslim state. This opened avenues for Beijing to establish inter-state links with the Gulf states. During the eighties, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan further broadened the space in which the Chinese, Pakistani and the Middle Eastern interests intersected. Concerned that Moscow was interested in gaining access to warm water ports and posing a threat to oil supplies, the Gulf states united in their efforts to push the Soviets back. The Chinese, motivated by their own interest, also provided aid to Pakistan. This mutuality of

²⁸ For an excellent analysis of China's Middle Eastern policy see, John Calabrese, *China's Changing Relations with the Middle East* (New York: Pinter Publishers, 1991).

interest and parallel policies enlarged the scope of cooperation between China and some of the Gulf states. While evidence is hard to come by, it can be argued that the relationship between China on the one hand and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other *partially* improved as a result of their common approach towards Pakistan. Egypt, for instance, was able to explore options of defence cooperation with China and Pakistan to acquire 'modern weapons according to (its) . . . capability'.²⁹ However, it is important to point out that regardless of the role played by Pakistan, once China established links with the Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, it has chosen to conduct its Middle Eastern/Gulf policy independent of its relationship with Islamabad.

China's conscious attempt to separate its links with a South Asian state from those with the Middle Eastern countries was apparent in its approach to the Gulf crisis and war in 1990–91. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait was condemned by China from the outset. However, while concerned about the invasion and its implications, Beijing urged a diplomatic solution to the crisis. It urged restraint by all parties involved and asked Iraq to withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait.³⁰ This line of thinking continued as the Gulf War broke out in January 1991. While distancing itself from the UN Security Council Resolution 678, Beijing issued appeals for restraint by all parties concerned with a view to avoiding escalation of the conflict. It reiterated demands for unconditional withdrawal by Iraq from Kuwaiti territory and expressed hope that upon cessation of hostilities, all troops (including those of the US) would leave the region.

Pakistan's response to the crisis and the war was slightly different. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait had affected the network of economic, military and political relations Pakistan had developed since the early seventies. The invasion, therefore, was viewed with apprehension. The loss of remittances from nearly 100,000 Pakistanis employed in Iraq and Kuwait and the prospect of rising oil prices as a result of the invasion caused great economic concern in Islamabad. These concerns prompted the caretaker government in Pakistan to immediately agree to Saudi Arabia's request for support and to send 5,000 troops to join the multinational force. Upon being elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif upgraded the level of commitment by sending 6,000 soldiers to Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, facing a domestic backlash and a split in society between pro- and anti-Saddam Hussein groups, Nawaz Sharif took a political initiative. He paid a visit to the Gulf region suggesting a peaceful resolution of the crisis. The emphasis on a diplomatic solution, although it came after Pakistan's commitment to send troops, revealed some similarity of views between China and Pakistan on the best way of dealing with the crisis and the subsequent war. This was acknowledged by both sides when Pakistan's President Ghulam Ishaq Khan visited China in September 1990.

Although both governments favoured diplomatic resolution of the Gulf crisis, Beijing did not acknowledge that Pakistan had an active role to play in the unfolding

²⁹ See, for example, 'Egypt: Agreement Reached with China and Pakistan to Modernize Weapons', 5 August 1994, in *Reuters Business Briefing*, 8 August 1994.

³⁰ See, for example, 'Foreign Minister Qian on World Issues', *Beijing Review*, 7–13 January 1991, p. 10.

crisis and the war. Nor did it reinforce Pakistan's projection of itself as a state at the crossroads of the Gulf and South Asian region. Instead, Beijing consistently underscored indirectly that while Pakistan had an interest in developments in the Gulf, it remained an outside actor with a limited role to play in the crisis and the post-war scenario in the Gulf. This approach was apparent in the Chinese government and media's treatment of developments in the Gulf. While elucidating China's position on the Gulf situation, for instance, Qian Qichen 'firmly supported the efforts of mediation by Arab nations and other parties concerned' without specifically mentioning Pakistan.³¹

Once the Gulf War broke out, the Chinese media failed to mention Pakistan's stand except with reference to efforts and suggestions made by other regional states. An article published in the *Beijing Review*, for instance, referred to Nawaz Sharif's call for the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) to hold an emergency meeting but only within the context of the Iranian position on the conflict, and even then *after* the discussion between the Iranian President, Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the Indonesian ambassador had been reported. Most obvious was the author's failure to report Pakistan's reaction to the Gulf War while it discussed pleas from other countries such as Yugoslavia, Mali, Kenya, Romania, Czech Republic and Slovakia, Hungary, Algeria and the Maghreb Union.³² As the war drew to a close, the Chinese media's discussion of post-war developments in the Gulf studiously avoided referring to any role that Pakistan might play.

The distinction between Pakistan as a South Asian state, as opposed to a state at the intersection of two regions, became apparent after the Gulf War. As the war was drawing to a close, Nawaz Sharif paid a visit to China from 26 February to 1 March 1991. He discussed the Gulf situation and the Chinese media reported Sharif's view that Iraq's boundaries be respected and that regional security be guaranteed by the Gulf and Islamic countries. Nonetheless, Li Peng did not categorically support the view and merely restricted himself to stating that 'both China and Pakistan share(d) many identical and similar views on the Gulf Crisis'.³³ Later in the year, Yang Shangkun left on a tour of Pakistan and Iran from 26 October to 2 November, Beijing was careful to reiterate its view of Pakistan as a South Asian state.

An editorial note in the *Beijing Review*, for instance, outlined the history and frequent exchange of visits between Pakistan and China. The note said:

Pakistan is a big country in *South Asia* and has played important role in promoting cooperation and maintaining peace and stability in the region. . . . The development of the existing friendly relations will not only benefit the two countries but also contribute to peace in *South Asia* and *Asia as a whole* (emphasis added).

That Pakistan's role was different from that of Iran, a Middle Eastern state, was apparent in the same article's reference to the identity and similarity of views between

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³² Zhang Xiaodong, 'Worldwide Pleas for Peace Intensify', *Beijing Review*, 4-10 February 1991, pp. 9-10.

³³ 'Pakistani PM's "Homecoming to Beijing"', *Beijing Review*, 11-17 March 1991, p. 5.

China and Iran 'especially the Middle East issue and the situation in the Gulf'. Pakistan was not accorded such a role and only its concerns on the Afghanistan issue were acknowledged.³⁴

The Chinese policy of distinguishing South Asia (and hence its relations with Pakistan) from the Gulf and the Middle East has continued as the nineties draw to a close. While acknowledging Pakistan's views on the Middle East, Beijing has been careful to reiterate Pakistan's South Asian identity. Its approach to the escalation in the Gulf region during early 1998 is a case in point. Beijing had all along demanded that Iraq adhere to the UN Security Council resolutions and open its sites for inspection by the United Nations Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM). However, when Iraq refused to open all its sites to inspection, China refused to support the US request for the Security Council to sanction strikes against Iraq. Qian Qichen insisted that the Security Council had a responsibility to seek a peaceful solution. 'If force is used', he said, 'it will inevitably cause serious consequences and significant casualties of innocent people and will not contribute to a solution of the question over weapons inspection'.³⁵

The position was similar to that espoused by Islamabad which supported a diplomatic resolution of the Gulf crisis. Nawaz Sharif, during his visit to China in February 1998, expressed Pakistan's 'opposition to the use of force and urged all parties concerned to peacefully resolve the crisis through diplomatic channels'. Probably indicating a role in the Gulf situation, he also 'voiced appreciation and support for China's position on the Iraqi issue'. His Chinese counterpart, Li Peng, while reciprocating Sharif's support, however, focused more on Pakistan's links with other South Asian states and 'expressed the hope that South Asian nations will live and develop together in harmony'. Once again, Pakistan's South Asian identity was reiterated and Sino-Pakistan relations were placed within the South Asian context.

CONCLUSION

The limiting of Sino-Pakistan relations to the South Asian sphere has not ended with the recent nuclear tests by India and Pakistan. As the Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes voiced for the first time threats posed by China's military potential and New Delhi explained its nuclear tests in terms of the China factor, Beijing expressed its dissatisfaction. However, it discussed the nuclear tests and Pakistan's response to it on 28 May within the South Asian context. Despite references to Pakistan's tests as the era of an Islamic bomb by some international analysts, Beijing has refused to broaden the scope of analysis and has restricted itself to the regional reasons for the tests and

³⁴ Hu Guangyao, 'A Visit to Enhance Friendship and Cooperation', *Beijing Review*, 28 October-3 November 1991, pp. 4-5.

³⁵ Scott Hillis, 'China Focus: US Says Split with China over Iraq', *Reuters News Service*, 14 February 1998.

its implications for South Asia only. The Pakistan government has adopted a similar approach by categorically denying that it would share its nuclear technology with any other Muslim state.

These conscious efforts to restrict the discourse to South Asia notwithstanding, India's nuclear test and Pakistan's response to it are likely to encourage similar responses from other states. Iran, while critical of both Indian and Pakistani tests, may be prompted to follow suit. While Israel has reacted cautiously to Pakistan's entry into the nuclear club, it may not react in a similar fashion if Tehran was to follow suit. To the extent that India has identified Sino-Pakistan cooperation in the nuclear field, and Pakistan has responded to the Indian tests by those of its own, the relationship between Beijing and Islamabad may result in implications beyond the South Asian region into the Middle East. The current marginality of the Middle East to Sino-Pakistan relations thus might not last for long. However, the increased relevance is more likely to be a function of perceptions than a reality.