

In Indian eyes, the China-Pakistan relationship appears as an alliance between two evil entities which have come together to perform wicked deeds in South Asia. Following the Anglo-American epithet used for Germany and Japan during the Second World War, this relationship is routinely referred to as the "Axis". Its focus, it is believed, is to keep India destabilised, to get India's neighbours to gang up against it, all with a view to preventing India from emerging as a preeminent power in the subcontinent, in Asia and in the world. Why else would China, so militantly opposed to US imperialism in the early 1960s, start a relationship of friendship with Pakistan, which was then a member of two anti-Communist military pacts, CENTO and SEATO, led by the US? An "axis" against India, the common enemy, would be the obvious answer; as Chanakya says in the Arthashastra, the enemy's enemy becomes a friend.

The India factor in the Pakistan-China relationship was very important, but it was not the only glue which bound them together, and that too for the entire duration of some 40 years. For Pakistan, it was and still is the most important one but for China the most important objective during the 1960s and 1970s was to break the encirclement of its southwestern tier. That encirclement was first the handiwork of the US, and later, that of the Soviet Union. While Pakistan was openly militarily aligned with the US in CENTO and SEATO, India's non-alignment had begun to wear thin as the India-China border dispute hotted up after 1959; China saw a foreign hand, i.e., the US, behind Mr Nehru's belligerency and unwillingness to arrive at any compromise. The Dalai Lama's flight to India, his reception in India and the establishment of a Tibetan

An Anti-India Glue? China-Pakistan Relations

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government-in-exile only made matters worse. The Chinese leaders did not need any proof; the US had officially anointed India as the bulwark against China. The anti-China encirclement contained one overt and another covert ally of the US.

The overt US ally offered possibilities worth exploring. Pakistan had been among the first countries to recognise China, and despite its subsequent membership in CENTO and SEATO, their relations, low level as they were, were free of strains. At the Bandung meeting, the leaders of the two countries appear to have had a friendly exchange of views. Then, in 1959, Pakistan had taken the initiative to propose to China that the two should settle the border between Baltistan-Hunza and Xinjiang. China had also noted that Pakistan's relations with the US were becoming strained because of increasing US military and economic aid to India to bolster its strength against China. As it is, Pakistan had made no secret of the fact that its membership in the US-led alliances was primarily for building up its capability vis-a-vis India.

For some two years, China did not respond to Pakistan's proposal for holding border talks. For one thing, in 1959, when the proposal was made, Pakistan had also made a proposal to India for joint defence of the subcontinent, obviously against China. In the event, India

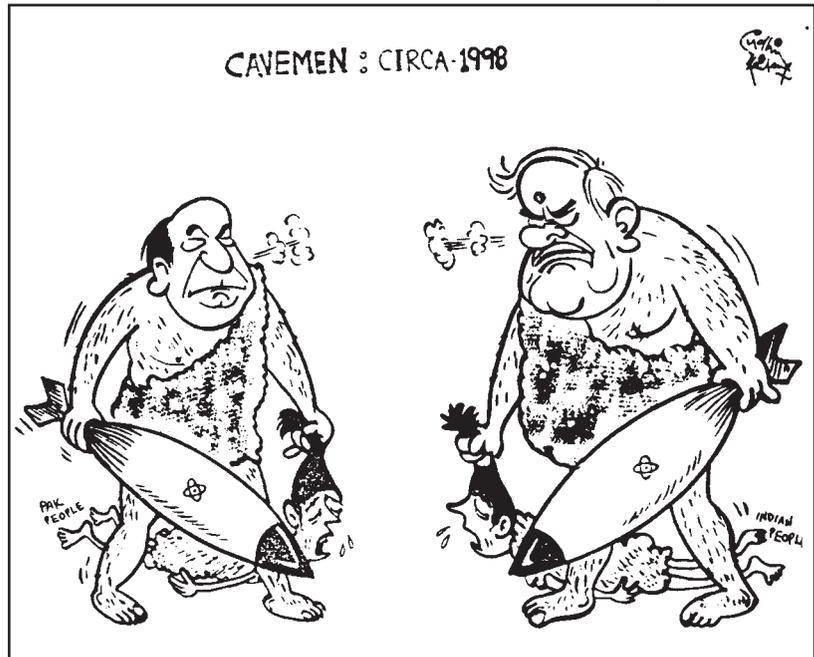
turned down the proposal but it did indicate an element of suspicion of China on Pakistan's part. For another, the areas on the Pakistani side opposite the Xinjiang border were claimed by India as parts of Jammu and Kashmir. China did not want to further complicate the India-China border problem. It is only when it became abundantly clear that no compromise with India was possible that China in January 1961 agreed to discuss the border with Pakistan. Even so, negotiations began in October 1962, just as events were leading to the India-China border war.

These negotiations, which were carried on for several months, were to establish a relationship of trust and goodwill between the two. They were difficult to begin with, but became smoother as the process continued. The Chinese negotiators discovered to their relief that Pakistan admitted the existence of a dispute and wanted the border to be negotiated along the line of actual administrative control and not basing themselves on historical evidence and legal principles. (India dismissed it as Pakistan's ignorance of facts about the border and viewed the compromise as being made at the expense of giving away Indian territory to please China.) There were differences over high ground; the most important one was over the status of Mount K-2. But a compromise was struck by putting

the border on top of the peak, much as China and Nepal did for Mount Everest. The agreement was signed in 1963 but with the proviso that it would be renegotiated after the final status of Kashmir was decided.

The trust established between the two was never fundamentally shaken. On the contrary, it grew into warmth between the two countries and their leaders, particularly between the militaries of Pakistan and China. Pakistan understood the limits within which China had to operate and did not make unrealistic demands of China. During the Pakistan-India war of 1971, it appeared for a while that China had promised to come to Pakistan's aid militarily, but it turned out that this was a unilateral declaration made by Mr Bhutto to boost the morale of the Pakistan army. China did not protest—it understood Pakistan's compulsions. The trust was manifested in several other ways. In the early 1960s, China permitted Pakistan International Airways to overfly its territory, overruling fears in China that the US planes which were used would be used to spy over China. And in 1971, China agreed to have Pakistan as an intermediary between the US and itself. The Cultural Revolution in China, which expressed intense hostility towards all "bourgeois" countries, did not affect China-Pakistan relations; the free supply of Chinese weapons, started after the US embargo in 1965, continued unhindered.

The India-Pakistan war of 1971 confirmed Pakistan's worst fears that India's continuing aim was to destroy Pakistan, if necessary by resorting to military action. It seems also to have persuaded the Chinese leaders to come to the conclusion that a predatory India was on the march in the subcontinent, a conclusion reinforced by Sikkim's



contrived merger into the Indian Union. China reacted mildly to the Indian nuclear test of 1974 since at that time, the Chinese declared policy was to uphold every country's right to develop and possess nuclear weapons. But it hoped that India would not use its nuclear capability for aggressive purposes, i.e., against Pakistan.

In 1972, Pakistan had become aware of the Indian preparations for the nuclear test and had decided to embark on a programme of its own. The efforts were intensified after the Indian test but were frustrated when France declined to help Pakistan in building a plutonium separation plant. But then something unexpected happened. A.Q. Khan, who had been working in the Netherlands on gaseous centrifuges for uranium enrichment, came under a cloud of suspicion and decided to return to Pakistan. With his return and the expertise he brought back, Pakistan abandoned the plutonium route and switched over to the uranium route.

Until well into the 1970s, by all accounts, China had nothing to do

with the Pakistani nuclear programme. Even today, we do not know what kind of technical cooperation developed between the two subsequently. What kind of transfer of technology? Of materials? Of designs? Words like "aid", "help", "collaboration" leave many questions unanswered. But as a close observer of the scene, after resisting the conclusion for many years, I am persuaded that some collaboration did take place, possibly over a period of ten years or more.

Collaboration or cooperation, because both sides must have gained from it. During the 1970s, Pakistan had the technology and skills for centrifuge enrichment, the latest technology. China did not have it. China had been all along following the horrendously expensive gaseous diffusion technology for uranium enrichment. Since all other sources for the centrifuge technology were closed to China, Pakistan appeared as the only possibility. It is impossible to say which side took the initiative in starting their cooperation. But

China did become a partner. It was a decision China was to regret later as it moved towards joining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the global non-proliferation regime. As the Chinese put it today, "We went through a learning process" in the matter of transferring nuclear technology.

Even today, while acknowledging help from many sources in his programme, A.Q. Khan insists that he got no "data" from the Chinese. That leaves room for many other items, ring-magnets, for example. The Chinese have subsequently admitted the export of that item, also acknowledging at the same time that their export controls had been lax. The exports of intermediate range ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia seem to have fallen into the same category, as were the plans to export M-9 type missiles to Syria.

After 1971, while remaining deeply suspicious of India's intentions towards its neighbours, China also came to the conclusion that the Pakistani armed forces would never be a match for India. Thereafter, it became only a question of preventing further dismemberment of Pakistan. So, China quickly set about replenishing the arms and equipment Pakistan had lost in the 1971 war; the quality of Chinese arms and equipment was inferior compared to those from the West, but Pakistan was grateful that its trusted friend had come to its aid. China-Pakistan collaboration for producing new aircraft designs was also initiated and China began to supply Pakistan with missiles which broadly conformed to the Missile Control Technology Regime.

Except for the area of nuclear collaboration, where the details are extremely sparse, China-Pakistan military cooperation could in no

way have destabilised India. Such attempts as Pakistan may have made in Punjab and Kashmir had nothing to do with help from China. Only in the case of the status of Kashmir could Pakistan draw some comfort from the Chinese stand because it emphasised the role of the United Nations and the people of Kashmir. This amounted to rejecting the Indian stance, but it was no more anti-Indian than the stand taken by the other members of the UN Security Council, in which China had reoccupied its permanent seat.

Several elements in the China-Pakistan relationship began to appear like impediments to China when India-China relations began to improve after Rajiv Gandhi's trip to China in December 1988.

Suspicious were aroused in Pakistan, but the basic trust between the two convinced Pakistan that China would not sacrifice Pakistani interests. However, the Chinese leaders realised that if India-China relations were to acquire a momentum, "readjustments" had become necessary. These pertained to three areas: One was the area of nuclear collaboration; whatever the nature of the collaboration, it would impede progress in India-China relations. And in any case, such collaboration with any non-nuclear weapons power would have to be tapered off by the time China became ready to join the NPT. As mentioned earlier, the supply of ring magnets continued but was stopped once it came to the Chinese government's notice. Secondly, although the export of Chinese missiles to Pakistan was within the parameters of the MTCR guidelines, with the knowledge that Pakistan had become a nuclear capable country it was unwise to continue to supply even such missiles to Pakistan.

That supply thus seems to have come to an end. The third was the status of Kashmir. By way of "readjustment", China has gradually reduced the references to UN resolutions and the wishes of the people of Kashmir.

None of the adjustments were to Pakistan's liking. But the trust and warmth to which this essay has referred several times have had a calming effect. Similarly, Chinese President Jiang Zemin's open advice to Pakistan to put aside the dispute over Kashmir and get on with improving India-Pakistan relations was seen by many Pakistanis as a "betrayal". In the event, Pakistan simply ignored the Chinese advice but the Chinese did not protest. After the Indian nuclear tests in May 1998, China strongly advised Pakistan not to retaliate with its own tests. But Pakistan once again ignored Chinese advice. Trust and friendship seem to have been at work again. The sporadic trickle of arms and Islamic propaganda from Pakistan to the Muslim rebels in Xinjiang have also been dealt with in a friendly way.

An anti-India glue cannot be taken as a permanent characteristic of the China-Pakistan relationship. That element did play a role but it has not done so for more than a decade now. On the contrary, during this period, China has repeatedly urged both India and Pakistan to resolve their problems through mutual consultations. The Chinese stance has not changed even after India adopted an anti-China posture in the context of its nuclear tests. Despite this, if India continues to hold that two of its most important neighbours, Pakistan and China, are ganging up against it in an evil plot, any small hitch could produce a major setback. □