

South Asia Analysis Group

Published on *South Asia Analysis Group* (<http://www.southasiaanalysis.org>)

[Home](#) > China's dilemmas in Af-Pak region

China's dilemmas in Af-Pak region

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 09/08/2014 - 06:46

Paper No. 5780

Dated 08-Sept-2014

By Col R Hariharan

Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan to be scheduled along with his visit to India this month has been cancelled. It was strategically a very important visit for both China and Pakistan and a lot of preparation had gone into it.

Evidently the cancellation was related to the political paralysis in which the Nawaz Sharif government finds itself. This has been so for over three weeks after Imran Khan-Tahirul Qadri duo have laid siege to the parliament calling for resignation of the Nawaz government.

The crisis in Pakistan highlights the arc of instability in the Af-Pak region which could become a major game changer in the strategic scene in South Asia. This region poses a major dilemma for President Xi when he holds formal talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi to build a win-win relationship between the two countries as both India and China have competing strategic interests in the region.

Even before the political crisis in Pakistan, the Af-Pak was heading for a period of instability due to the expected resurgence of Jihadi terrorism after the last of the American troops thin out by end 2014.

Pakistan had been using terrorists operating from its soil to strategically 'bleed' India. Like India, Afghanistan also has been 'bled' by fraternal Jihadi terrorists operating from sanctuaries in Pakistan. So, the political crisis in Pakistan would affect Af-Pak region much more than developments elsewhere.

Both the Asian giants would need greater convergence in their actions to successfully handle developments which affect them both. Both Prime Minister Modi and President Xi will be required to take some hard decisions on this count without compromising their national interests

if the talks are to make meaningful progress.

However, Chinese leader's dilemmas appear more complex than India's as China has invested heavily in creating strategic assets in its Western border regions, Pakistan, as well as Central Asia. According to a September 2013 assessment "China has come to displace both the United States and Russia as the great power with the most influence in Central Asia."^[i]

At the moment Pakistan, rather than Afghanistan, looks more unstable. Democracy is on a precarious perch after the Nawaz Sharif government was compelled to seek the help of the army when thousands of followers of two opposition groups - Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) – entered the secure area of the National Assembly and the Secretariat.

The army's lukewarm response to the situation followed by the breach of security zone by agitators has raised serious doubts about its role in triggering the crisis. The two opposition parties demanding the resignation of the Nawaz Sharif government are suspected to be proxy of Pakistan army. Even in the early stages, Pakistani columnists considered it a sort of soft coup.^[ii]

Political parleys have yielded no results, as leaders of both sides do not appear to be willing to give in. Prolonged paralysis of the government which enjoys a 209-seat majority in the 342-member parliament would help justify Army intervention. Though the Army has denied any such intention, the chances for it are increasing with the continuing political gridlock.

In this context, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's timely reiteration of China's support to Pakistan "realize national security, stability and economic development" on August 27, 2014 when a Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) delegation called upon him is interesting. On the occasion he also said China also "supports Pakistan's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, while hoping it can ensure the safety of Chinese projects and people there."^[iii]

These are probably not merely words of solidarity but an affirmation of China's strategic interest in Pakistan's political stability for other countries (particularly India) to take notice.

On the occasion Premier Li also "vowed to work with Pakistan to build an economic corridor between the two countries, and promote the construction of the 'One Belt and One Road' with countries in the region to push forward regional economic integration." China had been promoting the "One Belt and One Road" refers to the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" concepts ever since President Xi spoke about them during his visit to Central Asia and Southeast Asia in 2013.

In fact, President Xi was supposed to sign investment agreements worth \$32 billion with the Pakistan during his visit. Pakistan economy strapped for cash badly needs the Chinese investment for a revival. Politically, the cancellation of the visit was “insulting, disgraceful and a big diplomatic and economic blow” as described by Minister Ahsan Iqbal, who blamed the two opposition leaders for it. [iv][iv]

Premier Li Keqiang when he visited Pakistan in May 2013 mooted the proposal for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Both countries are now fleshing it out. China sees it as “a driver for connectivity between South Asia and East Asia.” Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain in his maiden visit to Beijing in February 2014 focused on this project which he said was “a monument of the century...” benefitting “not only Pakistan and China, but also the whole region with billions of people.”

The CPEC envisages linking Kashgar in Xinjiang with Gwadar Port in Pakistan coast. The link involving Karakoram Highway (1300 km), Indus Highway (1264 km) and Makran Coastal Highway (653 km) is being constructed by China. A parallel high speed railway system is also part of the CPEC.

When completed the CPEC would radically change China’s strategic capability not only in South Asia but West Asia as well. It would add more muscle to China-Pakistan strategic alliance in this region.

The CPEC is expected to spark economic boom in Xinjiang where China is making big investments in infrastructure and industry. But the success of CPEC is possible only if the Af-Pak region is terrorism free and Pakistan remains politically stable.

China has the ability to weather tectonic changes in Pakistan politics as it enjoys a lot of goodwill in all constituencies (including pro-Taliban right wing elements). In the words of Oslo-based analyst Qandeel Siddique, Sino-Pak relations are strongest in diplomatic and defence collaboration “rooted in over-lapping geo-strategic interest and threat perceptions.” He identifies India as “one common adversary” united China and Pakistan and “arguably remains the germane reason for Sino-Pak alliance.”[v][v]

China’s ‘all weather’ friendship is one of the three aspects – the other two being nuclear bomb and claim on Kashmir – in which Pakistani people are unanimously agreed. According to a recent poll 81% Pakistanis consider China favourably.[vi][vi]

So far this environment has probably enabled Pakistan to satisfy China’s concerns about the presence of Uighur extremists of ETIM (East Turkestan Islamic Movement) in Pakistan. Pakistan has conveniently blamed outsiders (obviously from the US and India) as the root cause even for the attacks on Chinese workers in Gwadar.

Pakistan had also been taking quick action to apprehend and repatriate Uighur extremists wanted by China. A case in point was the repatriation of ETIM leader Memetuhut Memetrozi (41) who is now serving a life sentence in Xinjiang. China had generally been playing down the Pakistan links of ETIM though the establishments in both countries are aware of them.

However the present understanding between China and Pakistan on handling Uighur terrorists may well be tested as the scale and spread of Uighur extremist attacks in China has increased in the last 18 months.^[vii]^[vii]

China is seriously concerned about its spill over as far as Beijing and Kunming in Yunnan. It is evident that worsening Uighur insurgency situation is of serious concern to China. The rare public revelation carried in Chinese media on August 27 on Pakistani links to Uighur militancy in reporting Memetuhut's confession of his indoctrination by extremists at a madarasa in Pakistan was probably intended to send message to Pakistan to clean up its act.^[viii]^[viii]

Perhaps sensing China's increasing concerns, when Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain met President Xi in May 2014, called the East Turkestan 'terrorism forces' a common enemy of Pakistan and China and vowed to make joint efforts with China to combat them.

President Xi said that China backed Pakistan in practicing a counter-terrorism strategy based on its "national conditions" and was willing to enhance bilateral security cooperation "to safeguard the peace and stability of the two countries and the region."^[ix]^[ix] It is evident China views counter-terrorism as part of its overall strategic security cooperation with Pakistan.

India faces a more complex terrorist threat from Pakistan based terrorists. Pakistan army's intelligence arm ISI's involvement with Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Tayaba terrorists is well established. Their activity in Jammu and Kashmir has continued to be aided and abetted by the ISI regardless of Pakistan's political pronouncements.

In Afghanistan potential for political instability has increased with the simmering post-presidential election confrontation between the President-in waiting Dr Ashraf Ghani and the defeated rival Dr Abdulla Abdulla. This could turn into the beginning of yet another ethnic confrontation between Pashtuns and Tajiks. And that could be hastened when Taliban terrorism surges once again after the US troops are pulled out of Afghanistan.

India has serious concerns about China's forays into South Asia and Indian Ocean Region which have strong strategic connotations for Indian security and national interest. And the developments in Af-Pak region and China's likely response to them remain in the realms of speculation.

In spite of this, Prime Minister Modi has now provided China an opportunity to broad base its relationship with India. China's dilemma would be how to handle India without jeopardising its strategic interests as well avail the opportunity to promote better strategic and trade ties with India.

The developments in Af-Pak region, particularly the fall out of Pak political paralysis, would make President Xi's task a little more complicated. He has to manage it successfully when he talks to Prime Minister Modi to make its silk route strategies a success. China simply cannot ignore India because of its sheer size and strategic domination of South Asia.

[Col Hariharan, former MI officer, is associated with the Chennai Centre for China Studies and the South Asia Analysis Group. E-mail: haridirect@gmail.com [1] Blog: <http://col.hariharan.info>] [2]

NOTES

[i][i] Martha Brill Olcott 'China's unmatched influence in Central Asia' September 2013, Carnegie Endowment <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/18/china-s-unmatched-influence-in-central-asia/gnky> [3]

[ii][ii] Babbar Sattar, 'Return of the gamekeeper', Dawn, Karachi, August 4, 2014. www.dawn.com [4]

[iii][iii] 'China supports Pakistan's security, development: premier, Xinhua news agency, August 28, 2014 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/> [5]

[iv][iv] Dawn, Karachi, September 5, 2014 www.dawn.com [4]

[v][v] Qandeel Siddique, "Deeper than Indian Ocean? – An analysis of Pakistan-China relationship," SISA Report no. 16-2014, Centre for International and Strategic Analysis, Oslo, February 2014. http://strategiskanalyse.no/Publikasjoner%202014/2014-02-27_SISA16_Sino-Pak_QS.pdf [6]

[vi][vi] Qandeel Siddique *ibid*

[vii][vii] *Terrorist attacks in China: Data*, Global Times, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/lazy-pack/counter-terrorism/index.html> [7]

[viii][viii] *'China jihadi outfit leader admits to Pak terror links'* Times of India, August 28, 2014 <http://timesofindia.com> [8]

[ix][ix] *'China, Pakistan vow to strengthen anti-terrorism cooperation'* Xinhua news agency, May 22, 2014 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/>
[5]

Tags:

[china](#) [9]

[Pakistan](#) [10]

[Af-Pak Region](#) [11]

[Indian Security Concerns](#) [12]

Category:

[Papers](#) [13]

Countries:

[Pakistan](#) [14]

[China](#) [15]

[India](#) [16]

Topics:

[Strategic Affairs & Security](#) [17]

Source URL: <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1607>

Links

- [1] <mailto:haridirect@gmail.com>
- [2] <http://col.hariharan.info>
- [3] <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/18/china-s-unmatched-influence-in-central-asia/gnky>
- [4] <http://www.dawn.com/>
- [5] <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/>
- [6] http://strategiskanalyse.no/Publikasjoner%202014/2014-02-27_SISA16_Sino-Pak_QS.pdf
- [7] <http://www.globaltimes.cn/lazy-pack/counter-terrorism/index.html>
- [8] <http://timesofindia.com/>
- [9] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/6>
- [10] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/71>
- [11] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/820>
- [12] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/821>
- [13] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>
- [14] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/pakistan>
- [15] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/china>
- [16] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/india>
- [17] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/strategic-affairs-and-security>