

## The great game of china in south asia

Bashir Ahmad Dar

Ph.D Student, Department of Political Science, University of Kashmir, India  
[showkat80ahmad@gmail.com](mailto:showkat80ahmad@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The focus of the present paper is China's engagement with India and Pakistan to fulfill its two ends. On the one hand China tries to maintain the balance of power in the south Asia and checks Indian domination by providing the arms to Pakistan while as, on the other hand, it engages and enhances her trade relations with India so that to control the huge market of India and emerge as a leading economy of the world.

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### Introduction

South Asia ranks third in the importance after the Northeast and Southeast Asian regions in China's Asia policy. China shares common borders with four (Bhutan, India, Nepal and Pakistan) out of seven South Asian states (the other three are Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives) and is an integral part of South Asia. China's military security concerns vis-à-vis South Asia's largest and most powerful state, India, coupled with territorial disputes and the need to protect its 'soft strategic underbelly', i.e. Tibet, provide a key to understanding Beijing's South Asia policy. In the last decade, China's relations with India have passed through a rollercoaster from the highs of the early and mid 1990s to the lows of the late 1990s. India-China relations remain poor, with or without a risk of confrontation, despite a dramatic increase in bilateral exchanges at the political, economic, military and cultural levels including some high-level visits.

On the other side, Beijing's entente cordiale with Pakistan continues to flourish, underpinned by nuclear and missile co-operation. Chinese leaders regularly visit Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to demonstrate a continuing determination to remain involved in South Asia and a desire to reassure China's friends in the region that improvement in India-China relations would not be at their cost. New Delhi keeps a close eye on the political and strategic relations between China and India's neighbors.

### China's rise: An overview

The remarkable achievements of China, one of the five recognized nuclear states and a permanent member of the United Nation Security Council, in economic and military departments during the last two decades have far reaching impact on global balance of power. China, the major exporter of arms, ammunition and armaments in the region, was the 6<sup>th</sup> largest arms exporter by the mid of 1990s and recently it emerged the 5<sup>th</sup> arms exporter in the world

according to a report issued by the SPRI.<sup>1</sup> China is the second largest economy in the world and leading one in Asian region as well. The China's policy towards South Asian region is very vibrant and dynamic and strategically very important keeping in view its relationship with India and Pakistan.

The post-revolution leadership of China frequently stressed its intent to have good relations with its neighbors in the spirit of cooperation and mutual benefit. In early fifties of 20<sup>th</sup> century People's Republic of China (PRC) had taken a number of initiatives in South Asia in this direction. China adopted a two layer approach towards the South Asia region: first, strengthening its bilateral relations with the individual states of South Asia and second, its interest in becoming a permanent member of SAARC- the South Asian economic grouping. During the 13<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit held in Decca in 2005, China got an observer Status<sup>2</sup> in the group. However, in 2006, China-South Asia Commercial Affairs Council in Kunming was formed by the China Council for the Promotion of International trade (CCPIT) for the Economic Cooperation between South Asia and China<sup>3</sup>. South Asia had been in the focus of Chinese interests because of rich natural resources, under development of the region, ethnic conflicts, communal violence, border issues between the south Asian states etc. As all major powers attempted to exploit these things in South Asia in the name of development or promotion of Democracy, China also nurtured the dream of establishing its influence towards the region. Almost all the South Asian States including India and Pakistan are under developed/under developing

<sup>1</sup> [www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2013/ATLaunch](http://www.sipri.org/media/pressreleases/2013/ATLaunch)

<sup>2</sup> People's Daily (online), *Pakistani PM welcomes China to be associated with SAARC*, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Kondapalli Srikanth, *Mufine Emis(Eds), China and its Neighbors, Dragon Looks South: current Drives in China's South Asian Neighborhood Policy* by Jagannath P. Panda, Pentagon Press, 2010, P.184

countries and also most of the South Asian States, Bhutan and Nepal shares their borders with China. In fact, South Asian Region is located between the South East Asian and the Middle East region, so it provides an opportunity to China to open a direct Sea Line access to reach out to the International Sea lines route through the Indian Ocean Region. Thus, the Chinese involvement in South Asia is varied and multi dimensional. Firstly, the region is rich in natural resources and fit to meet the growing energy requirements of emerging China, secondly, to contain the Indian influence in the region and take its 'Pearl of Strings' policy to its logical conclusion and thirdly, to limit the interests of West in the region and sustain and promote its arms mundi in the region. Amnesty International Report of June 11, 2006 termed China as "the fast emerging and one of the world's biggest, most secretive and irresponsible arms exporters"<sup>4</sup>. Thus China's involvement and activism in South Asia fulfills and supplements its economic and strategic goals.

#### China and India

India was the second non-communist country to recognize and develop its diplomatic relations with Peoples Republic of China (PRC)<sup>5</sup>. In the beginning of 1950's the relationship between India and China was cordial and of mutual understanding. In 1955 the two states signed famous Panchsheel Agreement- a peace model for peace loving world. Both India and China considered it as a major step towards the dream of a peaceful world. It was in this background that Pt. Nehru said:

"By this agreement, we ensure to a very large extent peace in a certain area of Asia. I would earnestly wish that the area of peace could be spread over the rest of Asia and indeed over the rest of the world"<sup>6</sup>.

Hindi-Chini-Bhai-Bhai was like a trade mark in the bilateral relationship of both sides. Unfortunately, the gains in late 1950s and the early 1960s were lost and both the Hindi-Chini-Bhai-Bhai and Panchsheel agreement became the victim of their differences because of the issues like border, Tibetan issue, territorial disputes etc. All the diplomatic as well as other relations remained cut off and the period between 1962-1976 is considered as the 'Cold Storage' and the 'dark period' in the bilateral relationship between the two states. The ice started

melting only in 1970s when a little ground work was prepared by resuming the normal diplomatic relation in 1976 and signing the Trade Agreement in 1984<sup>7</sup>. In 1976 India took a strong, unique and unilateral step and appointed Sheri K.R. Narayanan as an Ambassador to China and China gave the same, quick and positive response and appointed Chen Chao-Yuan as PRC's Ambassador to India in July 1976. In his first official statement Chen Chao-Yuan said.

"Full normalization of China-India relationship through joint efforts was in full accord with the interests of the people of the two nations, and expresses the hope that the friendship between the two nations would grow further and the bilateral relations would improve"<sup>8</sup>.

In 1988, the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's made an official visit to China after a gap of 34 years since 1954 and a Joint Working Group (JWG) was established for solving long pending issues like the border disputes and in response to this Chinese Premier Li Peng also visited India in 1991(the 1<sup>st</sup> visit in 31 years since Zhou Enlai visited in 1960). Thus the bilateral relations were improved between the two nations by the frequent visits and Agreements Signed between the Stake Holders. In this direction Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited China in 1993 and signed the agreement on "Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility" on the border areas<sup>9</sup>. By these visits and agreements between the two countries a new mutual confidence building framework was created which still exists till date.

In 2000, during the visit of then President of India K R Narayanan to China, the India-China bilateral relations improved dramatically. The trade between the two countries touched heights i.e. in 1992-1993 the trade between the two countries rose from 0.38 billion dollars to 1.4 billion dollars in 1996-1997 and 25.73 billion dollars in 2006-2007. A trade of 20 billion dollars was set as target to be achieved up to 2008 by the then Chinese Premier Wen Jaibao during his visit to India in 2005 which was later increased to 40 billion dollars, during the visit of then Chinese President Hu Jintao to India in November 2006, to be achieved by the end of 2010<sup>10</sup> and finally settled at 100 billion US dollar to be achieved by 2015<sup>11</sup>. By this improvement in trade

<sup>7</sup> K.N.Ramachandran, 'India-China Interactions', S.Santhanam (Eds), Asian Security and China 2000-2010, New Delhi, IDSA, 2004, p.281

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Jetly, *India-China Relations 1947-1977: A study of parliament's role in the making of foreign policy*, New Delhi, 1979, p.290

<sup>9</sup> Kondapalli Srikanth, *Mufine Emis(Eds), China and its Neighbors, India-China Relations: Bonhomie with Ambivalence* by Takenori Horimoto, Pentagon Press, 2010, Pp. 162-63.

<sup>10</sup> Kondapalli Srikanth, *Mufine Emis(Eds), China and its Neighbors, India-China Relations: Bonhomie with Ambivalence* by Takenori Horimoto, Pentagon Press, 2010, P. 165

<sup>11</sup> The Economic Times, 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Amnesty International Press Release, *China: Secretive arms exports stoking conflict and repression*, 11, June, 2006, Al Index: ASA 17/033/2006, <http://web.amnesty.org/librarv/index/ENGASA170332006>

<sup>5</sup> Keshav Mishra, *Rapprochement Across The Himalayas-Emerging India-China Relations in Post Cold War(1947-2003)*, Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2004, p.11

<sup>6</sup> Keshav Mishra, *Rapprochement Across The Himalayas-Emerging India-China Relations in Post Cold War(1947-2003)*, Kalpaz Publications, Delhi, 2004, p., P. 13. See also in Lok Sabha Debates, Vol.5,1954,Col.7496

relations, both the countries signed the foreign Trade Policy (FTP). More than 200 Indian Companies are in operation in different areas like manufacturing and IT in Chins and have made huge investment in China. On the bilateral trade, S Jaishankar Indian Ambassador to China showed his satisfaction and said “the economic cooperation between the two states in the last decade has been an amazing story”<sup>12</sup>. Not only the trade agreements but also Memorandum of Understandings (MoUs) and Agreements were signed between the two countries such as Joint Military exercises, annual joint Naval exercise (November 2003), annual joint army exercise (December 2007) and a declaration of strategic partnership signed during the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to India<sup>13</sup>. However the bilateral arms trade between the two nations is too little to be counted.

### China and Pakistan

Pakistan was the first Muslim country and third non communist country to recognize the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Many colorful metaphors were used in relation to the Pakistan and China since their diplomatic relations started such as all Weather Friendship, Panjabi-Chini Bhai Bhai<sup>14</sup>. The former president of Pakistan, General Musharraf, made an official visit to China and called for a deeper than Ocean and higher than Mountain relationship between the two states. Pakistani Ambassador Masood Khan while commenting on the bilateral relations between the two countries said, “deeper than ocean, higher than mountain, nearer than eye, stronger than steel, closer than...”<sup>15</sup>.

The Sino-Pak trade relations remained disquietingly low till 2005. It improved after the high official visits of both sides after 2000. In May 2001, the then Primer Zhu Rongji of China visited Pakistan and identified large areas of cooperation and signed six agreements and one memorandum of Understanding including the agreements on Technical and economic cooperation and urged that both sides should take steps to “boost cooperation in agriculture, infrastructure, information technology and other areas under the principle of mutual benefit and reciprocity for achieving common prosperity”<sup>16</sup>. By the year 2005, China-Pakistan trade had gradually increased and reached from \$1 billion in 2000 to \$4.5

billion in 2005. The important visits which had been made in the early 2000 were Pakistani President General Musharraf’s visit in November 2003, and former Prime Minister of Pakistan Shaukat Aziz’s visit in December 2004. These in return were followed by the visit of then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao to Pakistan in 2005. During these mutual visits, both states signed a document known as the “Joint Declaration on Direction of Bilateral Relations”, which was the blue print of future cooperation and coordination so for as the economic relations relationship is concerned<sup>17</sup>. The overall Sino-Pak bilateral trade had crossed \$12 Billion in the year 2012 and put the target of \$15 Billion in the next two to three years, says Masood Khalid-Pakistan Ambassador to China<sup>18</sup>.

However, relationship between Sino-Pak is more active in the field of Arms Trade. Pakistan remained a consistently regular and swelling market of Chinese made arms and weaponry over the last three decades. Reportedly it is said that Pakistan had imported one third of its weapons from China since 1966 to 1980<sup>19</sup>. According to a study.

“During the last 30 years, Beijing became largest arms exporting nations to Pakistan. China has become Pakistan’s most extensive and reliable supplier of military hardware, transferring military related exports of virtually every description and destined for every brand of the Pakistani military–personnel, small arms, equipments ammunition, armored personnel carrier, mortars, naval vessels, tanks, aircrafts, missile, missile technology, 1500 tanks and 350 fighters aircraft”<sup>20</sup>.

In September 1986, the two states signed agreement committing Chinese support to the nuclear energy sector. By this agreement China sold two mini research reactors to Pakistan in November 1989 and February 1990. In November 1989, China also agreed to supply a 300 megawatt pressurized water nuclear plant based on the design of its own first nuclear energy plant at Zinshan, then under construction in China. In August 1990, PRC agreed to provide the enriched Uranium to Pakistan<sup>21</sup>. In 1990 Pakistan and China signed a ten year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defense covering cooperation in weapons procurement military

<sup>12</sup> The Economic Times, 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2012

<sup>13</sup> Kondapalli Srikanth , *Mufine Emis(Eds), China and its Neighbors, India-China Relations: Bonhomie with Ambivalence by Takenori Horimoto*, Pentagon Press, 2010, P. 163

<sup>14</sup> C.Raja Mohan, With SEZ,Hu brings Lahore in Chinese economic orbit, *The Indian Express*, 24 November,2006

<sup>15</sup> Interview, *Velker and wang ke to Mr.Masood Khan,Pakistan’s ambassador to china on*, www.China.org.cn, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2011

<sup>16</sup> Pakistan-China Relations-2011: year of friendship, organized by the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, January 11-12, 2011, p.3. [www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1299822989\\_pdf](http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1299822989_pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Pakistan-China Relations-2011: year of friendship, organized by the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, January 11-12, 2011, p.3. [www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1299822989\\_pdf](http://www.issi.org.pk/publication-files/1299822989_pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Pakistan Embassy Newsletter, August 2012-January 2013, <http://pakbi.org.pk/publications/Embassy%20Newsletter%20August%202012-%20January%202013.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> SIPRI Year Book,1980.

<sup>20</sup> Pokharna Bhawna, *India china relations-Dimensions and Perspectives*, New Century Publications, New Delhi, 2009, p-191.

<sup>21</sup> Shirley A. Kan, *China and Proliferation of Weapons of Mass, Destruction and Missiles: Policy Issues*, Congressional Research Service, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, p-5, <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/nuke/RL31555.pdf>

production and R&D and the transfer of military related technology<sup>22</sup>. Beijing has been the regular suppliers of arms and armaments to Pakistan since the inception of its special partnership with Islamabad. China became the main source of Pakistan's short and medium range solid fuel missile tested in 2005. China exported F-7 fighters, a version of T-96 Main Battle tank, to Pakistan and subsidized the construction of four Frigates for Pakistan Navy for future trade. Pakistan clinched a 600 million US dollar defense deal with China in May 2006<sup>23</sup>.

Recently, Pakistan has started the construction of a major nuclear power project in Karachi costing \$6.5 billion financed by China which would be completed by 2019. The capability of the project would be greater than the combined capability of all the nuclear reactors presently in operation in Pakistan<sup>24</sup>. China is selling its 3<sup>rd</sup> generation nuclear reactor to Pakistan under IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) safeguards<sup>25</sup>. On the other side, China's arms export grew by 162% compared to the previous five years and most of it i.e. 55% to Pakistan in 2008-2013. China. According to the Paul Holtom, a Research Director at SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), the Chinese rise has been driven mainly by large-scale arms acquisition by Pakistan<sup>26</sup>. In 2013 report published by SIPRI for the first time, China replaced Britain as the fifth arms suppliers since 1950. Thus, China emerged as the world's 5<sup>th</sup> largest arms exporter.<sup>27</sup>

### Conclusion

The differences within the region provide a chance to the big powers including China to exploit the region in general and India and Pakistan in particular. That is why their natural resources are drained to aggravate the conditions of underdevelopment and poverty in them. The Chinese policy of enhancing trade with India on one side and intensifying its strategic and security relations with Pakistan on the other is not only frustrating for both India and Pakistan but menacing for South Asian region as a whole. It engages the rival Asian neighbors in a seemingly never ending arms race and keeping the developmental prospects way from both the neighbors. It not only supplies arms to Pakistan, the key adversary of India for last six decades, but also to the rebel and secessionist groups operating in different parts of Indian soil against the state such as the Naxalites. From China's bilateral trade relations

with India it seems as they are "partners not rivals", but in case of arms trade between the two states it looks more like "rivals not partners". However there is cooperation and coordination in Sino-Pak relationships with regard to supply of weapons and extending of military cooperation.

India's trade with China stands at the top among south Asian countries, but in the field of supply of arms trade India stands nowhere close to top. This opportunistic approach of China vis a vis India and Pakistan needs to be exposed and worked on, and particularly when their resilient authoritarianism is getting unsophisticated and combative. Recent incursion in Ladakh is a case to the point.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.Pakistanthinktank.org/tag/china-pakistan-friendship-2>

<sup>23</sup> *The tribune*, 26 May 2006.

<sup>24</sup> *The Times of India*, 24 December 2013.

<sup>25</sup> *The Times of India*, 20 October 2013.

<sup>26</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 19 March 2013

<sup>27</sup> SIPRI Report published 2013.

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