



## Historical Evolution of Military Cooperation between China and Pakistan: From Strategic Partnerships to All-Weather Friendship

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### ABSTRACT

China and Pakistan have a long history of friendship, trust, cooperation and collaboration. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is a great contemporary symbol of Pakistan China friendship. They both also have strong roots of military cooperation. The concept of "all-weather friendship" is inspected as a sign of their deep military relations, about not only strategic cooperation but also the diplomatic solidarity. This paper explores the historical background of military relations between China and Pakistan tracing its routes from strategic cooperation to the "all-weather friendship". This research paper pays a clear understanding of the multifaceted dynamics, determining the military relations and cooperation of China and Pakistan within the framework of regional security and global geopolitics.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the start of diplomatic bonds between Pakistan and China in 1951, both the countries have shared a union of interests rooted in their respective strategic imperatives and geopolitical objectives. Their military cooperation, initially forged in the context of the regional security challenges and Cold War dynamics, has changed into a multi-layered partnership characterized by strategic alignment, mutual trust, and complete collaboration across several domains of defense and security (Akhtar, 2009). At the heart of this growing association lies a deep sense of solidarity and friendship, that is often mentioned to as an "all-weather friendship," which exceeds mere strategic calculations and reflects a shared commitment to each other's national interests, sovereignty and territorial integrity. This friendship has been encouraged through decades of cooperation in defense production, military training, technology transfers, joint exercises and intelligence sharing, among other paths of engagement (Bhola, 1995). The strategic significance of China-Pakistan military cooperation extends beyond mutual dimensions, with profound implications for regional security dynamics and global geopolitics. As two major regional actors, Pakistan and China have cooperated closely to focus on common security challenges including insurgency, terrorism and maritime security threats, in that way contributing to solidity and peace in South Asia and beyond.

## 2. Literature Review

China and Pakistan have a deep-rooted history of friendship and cooperation. The military relations and cooperation have been a cornerstone of strategic relationships which is often considered as an "all-weather friendship" between both countries. It is a clear fact that China Pakistan relations are shaping regional security dynamics. Despite this there exists a notable gap in the literature regarding the historical background of military collaboration between China and Pakistan. This research study aims to address this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis that traces the roots and dynamics of China-Pakistan military cooperation.

### **2.1. The Birth of Military Relations**

The ensuing collaboration transformed China into a key supplier of military equipment to Pakistan, further solidifying their strategic rapport (Levi, 1962). The context of the United States' sanctions against Pakistan, which occurred before the onset of the 1965 war, played a significant role in catalyzing Pakistan's pivot towards China. These sanctions created a situation where Pakistan was compelled to seek alternative sources of military support and assistance. China emerged as a natural partner in this context, offering Pakistan an avenue to enhance its defense capabilities and security posture. The birth of defense and strategic ties between China and Pakistan represented a significant shift in their diplomatic landscape. The collaborative efforts, particularly in the realm of defense, underscored the depth of their alliance and the strategic dividends that both nations sought to reap. As they navigated a complex geopolitical environment, the Sino-Pakistan partnership evolved into a robust and multifaceted relationship that spanned various spheres, including security and military collaboration. According to Faruqi:

"After the 1965 war, Pakistan required to expand its weapons supplies by going to France and China. French arms were very expensive and had to be limited to a few regiments of three Daphne-class submarines and Mirage III & V fighters-Bombers. Thus Beijing became Pakistan's arms suppliers of first option with its bulk supplies)." (Faruqi, 2002).

### **2.2. China and The Indo-Pakistan War of 1965**

China's steadfast commitment to its friendship with Pakistan was put to the test during the Indo-Pakistan war that erupted in September 1965, stemming from the longstanding Kashmir dispute. The underlying cause of the conflict lay in the turmoil and unrest that had gripped the Indian-held Kashmir region, sparked by the theft of a revered holy relic in 1964. This incident triggered a chain of events that exacerbated tensions between the two long-standing rivals, ultimately culminating in clashes in the Rann of Kutch in April 1965 (Mahmood, 2001). This was the first Indo-Pakistan military clash since the Sino-Pakistan entente was created. It appears from certain accounts, that China's public and private sites were different. Publicly, Beijing supported Pakistan in its confrontation with India including on the Rann of Kutch. Some Pakistani officials, who were involved in decision making, however stated that privately China disapproved of Pakistan's adventurists policies (Chaudhri, 1970). A commentary published in Peking Review stated:

"The recent aggression by India against Pakistan not only represents a blatant disregard for the fundamental principles of international relations but also poses a significant threat to peace in this region of Asia. The Chinese government strongly reaffirms its unwavering support for Pakistan in its rightful resistance against aggression and emphatically cautions the Indian government that it will be held accountable for all ramifications resulting from its unlawful and protracted acts of aggression." (Yasmin, 1980).

The war took a new turn on September 17, when the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs summoned the Indian charged affaires and handed him a warning note demanding India immediately pull to pieces all violent military works assembled on the Chinese side, returned kidnapped men and sheep and initiate to refrain from irritating raids across the Sino-Indian border within three days. Otherwise, the note warned, New Delhi would be solely responsible for dire consequences. China then further extended its deadline for another three days. The note, which became popularly known as an 'ultimatum', was intended, according to Hussain, to 'strengthen a newly found friend which was slowly but surely distancing itself from the US' (Chaudhri, 1970). After having received China's note, India consulted the British, the US and the Soviets. The latter two assured New Delhi of Military help in case of Chinese involvement (Yasmin, 1980). China involvement in the war could have escalated the tension with the possibility of embroiling it, or either or both the US and the USSR, into the war. To preempt such a scenario, the big powers accelerated the peace process and with their accumulated pressure on both (India and Pakistan), induce them to admit them a ceasefire on 22 September.

### **2.3. China and the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971**

Between 1970 and 1971, Pakistan faced a deteriorating political landscape marked by significant challenges. The backdrop of this period was shaped by the 1970 general elections,

which revealed a stark divide in the nation's political dynamics. The Awami League, commanded by Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rehman, secured a resounding victory in East part of Pakistan, yet remarkably failed to secure single seat in West Pakistan. In contrast, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), under the headship of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, claimed a majority in West Pakistan but failed to secure any representation in the eastern wing. The result of the elections deepened the political polarization already present among several parties. The inability of these parties to reach a consensus on a power-sharing arrangement exacerbated the situation and pushed the country perilously close to a civil conflict. As political tensions escalated, the threat of civil war appeared larger (Chaudhri, 1970). In March 1971, Sheikh Mujeeb-ur-Rehman declared East Pakistan's independence and announced it as "Bangladesh". The response from the central government, led by President Yahya Khan, involved the deployment of military forces in an attempt to restore control. Regrettably, the use of excessive force by the armed forces only exacerbated the situation, effectively closing off avenues for political reconciliation. Tragically, the inability to find common ground and address the escalating tensions ultimately led to the disintegration of Pakistan. The disintegration of the nation unfolded against the backdrop of these profound political and social ruptures, culminating in the creation of Bangladesh as a separate and independent entity.

Military operation in East Pakistan placed the Chinese in an awkward situation. Ideologically China was in favor of revolutionary movements in Afro-Asian nations (Mahmood, 2001). In November 1971, shortly after the outbreak of war, Bhutto visited Beijing as Yahya's special emissary. China's public and private gestures were different. Publicly, it assured Pakistan of 'resolute' support but privately it pressured Pakistan to find a 'rational solution', and disapprove of military action and atrocities. China reportedly presented to Bhutto a list of pro-Beijing Bengali leaders who were killed during the military operations. 'In Substance', according to Mehrotra,

"China appears to have urged Pakistan to avoid war with India and if that was not possible to confine it to as small an area as possible." (Barnds, 1975).

Contrary to this, the Pakistani elite portrayed a different outcome of the visit. Bhutto termed it a complete success with tangible results while Yahya announced that the Chinese would come to support Pakistan as much as possible if there was war with India (Choudhury, 1975). On 5 December, China presented a resolution in the Security Council (SC) the first since its membership, urging an immediate ceasefire. China also blocked a move intended to invite a representative from East Pakistan to attend the SC proceedings. Moscow voted all resolutions until India had consolidated its victory over Pakistan (Jain, 1981). Pakistan experienced a devastating and humiliating defeat during this period, culminating in the separation of its eastern wing, which emerged as the independent nation of Bangladesh. This pivotal event marked a significant fracture in the nation's unity and led to the emergence of a new sovereign state. Concurrently, India's victory in the conflict carried profound implications. The consequences of the war reverberated across multiple dimensions of Pakistani society, undermining its strength on political, economic, and social fronts (Vertzberger, 1983).

#### **2.4. Post-1971- Sino-Pakistan Relations**

During and after the 1971 crisis, the Pakistani leadership complained about the irregularity of the US-led defense agreements which deepened the schism in Islamabad-Washington ties. Bhutto, who supposed power as president of a shortened Pakistan, stated that the US had repeated its 1965 policy. Instead of helping Pakistan, it imposed authorizations before the occurrence of the 1971 war. He termed the US policy as 'pressure and interference' and subject to the whims of various US administrations. Pakistan's defeat during the 1971 war had titled the original balance of power conclusively in favor of India, which suited neither China nor Pakistan. As a result of its loss, Pakistan was reduced in size and its former eastern wing, after becoming an independent country, Bangladesh, adopted pro-Indian and pro-Soviet policies. As Sutter wrote,

"The reminders of the small states in the region were cowed by Indian's demonstration of power during the war against Pakistan and were unwilling to help Beijing challenge India and its Soviet backers in the region." (Sutter, 1978)

After the 1971 war, Pakistan's defense capabilities, which were substantially weakened were restored with China's help. According to Vertzberger,

"China assumed the responsibility of reeducating the Pakistan army and providing it with state-of-the-art weaponry, all without any expense to Pakistan." (Vertzberger, 1983).

According to an Indian source,

"China in particular helped Pakistan strengthen the army division based along the Line of Control in the Kashmir" (Bhola, 1995).

By 1971-72, China delivered to Pakistan a 175 F-6 aircraft, four bomber aircraft (11-28/Beagle), four trainer airplane and twelve patrol crafts. For Pakistan's ground forces China provided 750 T-59 tanks and 100 light tanks (50 T-63 and 50 T-60), 650 towed guns (400 M-30 122mm, 50 ML-20 152mm and 200 D-74 122mm) and various fire control radars. By the start of the 1970s. (Vertzberger, 1983). In 1972, China and Pakistan solidified their assistance through the signing of a protocol to establish an aircraft reparation of center for Chinese-origin F-6 airplanes in Pakistan. This collaboration was prompted by the outcome of the 1971 war with India, during which the Pakistan Air Force faced a pressing need for an aircraft repair facility. Recognizing this requirement, Pakistan turned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) for assistance (Ali, 2017).

## **2.5. Strong Defense Ties During 1980s**

During Zia-ul-Haq's third visit to China in 1982, notable shifts were occurring on the global stage. By this time, China had already conducted two rounds of border negotiations with India and had also initiated discussions with Moscow regarding a potential boundary settlement. These unfolding developments stirred a sense of unease within Pakistan, given its perspective of China as a key ally in countering Indian influence in the region (Ali, 2017). For Pakistan, Zia-ul-Haq's visit to China in 1982 helped as an opportunity to assess the implications of China's evolving interactions with India and other global powers. It highlighted the complexity of regional geopolitics and the delicate equilibrium that nations often strive to maintain in their pursuit of diplomatic and strategic interests. During Zia's visit Zhao Ziyang assured Zia that

"No matter how the international condition develops in the coming years, China's policy towards developing friendly relations with Pakistan will not change." (Peris, 2011, November 28).

Beijing continues to supply Islamabad with significant levels of military hardware. Moreover, there was an unprecedented degree of military exchanges between the two sides in the initial years of the 1980 (Mahmood, 2001). From the early 1980s, two pertinent trends in China's defense ties began to emerge. First, Pakistan started licensed making of Chinese weapons and military arms such as tanks, armored vehicles, guns and aircrafts. This cooperation further expended in the following decades. Second, in 1980, China reorganized its arms industry along Western lines, bringing a greater focus on commercial aspects. China, which had initially supplied weapons to Pakistan free of charge began to charge for each arms deal (Vertzberger, 1983).

## **2.6. Indo-Pakistan Conflict in Kargil (1999)**

The Kargil conflict, spanning from May to July 1999, was a limited-scale war that unfolded between India and Pakistan in the area of Kargil district of Indian-administered Kashmir. The conflict arose when India accused the Pakistan Army of infiltrating militants and paramilitary forces across the Line of Control, resulting in heightened tensions and a localized armed confrontation (Mahmood, 2001). During this period, Sino-Indian relations were still navigating the aftermath of the nuclear tests conducted by both countries. Amid this backdrop, China's stance towards the Kargil conflict demonstrated a significant degree of neutrality. While the relations between China and India had not fully recovered from the tensions stemming from the nuclear tests, Beijing refrained from overtly favoring either side in the conflict (Mahmood, 2001). As Hagerty stated

“China declined to endorse Islamabad's provocation; while China's tone toward Pakistan was slightly more favorable compared to India, its official diplomatic stance remained neutral.”

According to an Indian analyst:

“Although this perception may not entirely reflect reality, China's steadfast commitment to neutrality in this fourth Indo-Pak conflict significantly elevated its visibility and effectiveness in encouraging Pakistan's decision to pursue an honorable withdrawal from Kargil. Furthermore, China's past responses during previous Indo-Pakistani conflicts, where it openly supported and sided with Pakistan, added to its significance in the current scenario.” (Sing, 1999).

### **3. Defense Cooperation**

In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, the defense and military bonds between China and Pakistan experienced a notable expansion. Given Pakistan's history of military rule during that period, the armed forces naturally played a central role in shaping the bilateral relationship. This phase witnessed a series of significant developments in their defense cooperation, which had a deep impact on their strategic partnership. One of the most important outcomes of their defense relationship was the collaboration in joint defense production. Both countries embarked on several projects aimed at developing and manufacturing defense equipment together. This not only enhanced their self-reliance but also extended their strategic bonds. The joint production of defense hardware highlighted the high degree of trust and technology-sharing between Pakistan and China, highlighting their commitment to safeguarding their shared interests (Ali, 2017).

Overall, the post-9/11 period witnessed the consolidation of defense and military bonds as a crucial element of the China-Pakistan corporation. These collaborative efforts in security talks, joint military exercises, strategic dialogues and defense production established their mutual commitment to security, regional stability and promoting a lasting and multifaceted connection (China Daily, 2011, March 8).

#### **3.1. Joint Military Exercises**

The first exercise between armies of the China and Pakistan was held in August 2004 with the aim of enhancing the anti-terrorism capabilities of their law enforcement agencies. The name of this three-day drill code was 'Friendship-2004' conducted in Xinjiang. It was the first time that a foreign army took part in a military exercise on Chinese soil. Over 400 soldiers joined in this eight-day exercise. This was the very first time that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) engaged in a military exercise in Pakistani territory. The third exercise was held in the month of July of 2010 in China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and the fourth-one in November 2011 near Islamabad (People's Daily, 2006). Though Pakistan and China stated categorically that the exercise was not beleaguered against any other country, Indian media reported it as 'dangerous for India' (Peris, 2011, November 28). Like their armies and navies, the air forces of both countries have also accepted out joint exercises. In the month of March of 2011, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and Chinese PLA Air Force (PLAAF) conducted their first ever joint exercise code-named 'Shaheen-2' in Pakistan. The exercise coincided with the sixtieth anniversary of the formation of their diplomatic relations (Ali, 2017).

#### **3.2. Joint Production in the Defence Sector**

In the realm of defense collaboration, a significant chapter unfolded through the initiation of four major joint production programs during this period. These programs encompassed the development of the JF-17 aircraft, Fast Attack Craft (FAC) missile boats, and submarines. These collaborative endeavors were marked by a unique process that involved the joint commencement of projects in China (Mangi, 2010). Among these projects, the JF-17 Thunder aircraft held particular prominence. This lightweight, multi-role combat aircraft was the outcome of a joint effort. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) received the first two aircraft in March 2007 and 2009, signifying a crucial milestone in their joint development. Subsequent production of the JF-17 Thunder was undertaken within Pakistan, highlighting the successful transfer of technology and the deepening of their defense cooperation (China Daily, 2011, March 8).

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout the historical background of China and Pakistan, both the countries have directed complex geopolitical landscapes and shared strategic interests. The strategic importance of military relation of China and Pakistan extends and exerting various significant impacts on regional and global dynamics and geopolitics. Moreover, their cooperation in maritime sector for transfer of defense technology has contributed for the promotion of peace and stability in the region of south Asia. With a comprehensive and detailed analysis of military collaboration of both states, this study has illuminated the various dimensions of their military cooperation and its significance for the regional and global security and geopolitics.

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