

Pakistan and China strengthen ties after Bin Laden assassination

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In the aftermath of the assassination of Osama bin Laden earlier this month, the US and India have ratcheted up pressure on Pakistan. There are now signs that the longstanding conflict between India and Pakistan will intersect with growing tensions between the United States and China.

Last week, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Defence Minister Chaudhry Ahmad Mukhtar staged a four-day visit to China. China's top leadership provided strong diplomatic and material support for Islamabad.

This included agreeing to accelerate production of the JF-17 Thunder jet, a joint Chinese-Pakistani project, so that Pakistan can take delivery of 50 of the combat planes before the end of 2011. China also adopted Pakistan's description of the Beijing-Islamabad relationship as an "all-weather" partnership.

More significantly, Pakistan announced that it has offered and China has agreed to take control over the newly built Arabian Sea port facility in Gwadar, Baluchistan.

The port, whose construction was financed by China, has long been a focus of US strategic concerns. It has the potential to provide China not only with a naval base, but even more importantly with a means of transporting Middle Eastern oil and natural gas overland to western China. Such a route would circumvent the need to pass through a US-dominated Indian Ocean, with critical chokepoints such as the Straits of Malacca.

In 2007, Pakistan entered into an agreement giving the Singapore Port Authority the right to manage the Gwadar port for forty years. Pakistan has indicated it wants to revoke the contract on the grounds that promised investments have not been forthcoming.

"The Chinese government has acceded to Pakistan's request to take over operations at Gwadar port as soon as the terms of agreement with the Singapore Port Authority

(SPA) expire," said Defence Minister Chaudhry Ahmad Mukhtar. He then added that Pakistan is grateful to the Chinese government for building the Gwadar port. "However, we shall be more grateful to the Chinese if they agree to build a naval base at Gwadar."

Of course, any naval base Beijing builds for Pakistan's military at Gwadar could also provide facilities for Chinese warships.

The joint communiqué issued at the end of Gilani's visit Friday affirmed the intention of Beijing and Islamabad to increase their cooperation on numerous strategic and economic fronts, "particularly" in respect to "the Afghan issue."

Afghan sources recently claimed that Gilani had urged Afghan President Hamid Karzai to distance his regime from the US and turn toward China and Pakistan.

Gilani's visit was originally planned to mark sixty years of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the People's Republic. However, it took on a new dynamic following the US's summary execution of Bin Laden in an illegal raid in Abbottabad, deep inside Pakistan.

While continuing to refrain from explicitly condemning the Abbottabad operation, Chinese leaders praised Islamabad for its efforts in countering terrorism and affirmed their support for Pakistani sovereignty.

"The Chinese side," declared the joint communiqué, "recognised the tremendous efforts and great sacrifice that Pakistan has made in fighting terrorism and reiterated its respect and support for Pakistan's efforts to advance its counter-terrorism strategy and safeguard its security."

In private, Beijing was reportedly even more forthright in supporting Islamabad in pushing back against Washington and New Delhi.

According to press reports, the Chinese expressed dismay at the treatment of Pakistan in recent high-level meetings between Chinese officials and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy

Geithner.

The *Dawn*, Pakistan's most influential English-language daily, reports that Beijing "urged the US to publicly acknowledge Pakistan's role in the global war against terrorism and accept the constraints that Islamabad operates under. The Chinese are also reported to have asked Washington to refrain from publicly humiliating Pakistan."

One Pakistan daily, *The News*, reported that it has learned from diplomatic sources that during the Washington meetings China's foreign minister formally warned the US "in unequivocal terms that any attack on Pakistan would be construed as an attack on China."

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao is said to have informed Gilani of Beijing's stance during their talks Wednesday.

Pakistan's elite has a decades-long partnership with the US centered on the use of its military as a proxy for Washington. However, relations have become increasingly factitious and explosive as the US pressures Islamabad to change its geopolitical posture in conformity with the new imperatives of the US's world strategy. These imperatives include, in particular, securing access and control over the energy resources of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and countering a rising China.

In 2001, the US threatened to bomb Pakistan "back to the Stone Age" if it didn't sever all ties with the Taliban and support the US invasion of Afghanistan, although the US itself had been courting the Taliban regime only shortly before.

Even more menacingly from Islamabad's standpoint, the US has made archrival India a "global strategic partner," an alliance cemented through Washington's creation of a special status for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime. As a result, India, which was for decades the target of a nuclear trade embargo, has access to civilian nuclear fuel and technology and can focus its indigenous nuclear program on weapons development.

Now the Obama administration is insisting that Pakistan do still more to support the Afghan War, while the US asserts the right to violate Pakistan's sovereignty at will.

Desperate to counter US pressure, Pakistan's elite is seeking to strengthen its strategic partnership with China, a partnership rooted historically in their common rivalry with India. The two countries already have extensive economic and military-strategic ties.

During his visit, Gilani publicly declared Islamabad's support for China wielding greater influence in Central and South Asia and across the globe. "I have no doubt," declared Gilani, "that Chinese sagacity and thought will

have a profoundly beneficial impact for mankind, as a whole. We are happy to see China shape the Twenty First Century world."

India has responded with alarm to the tightening embrace between Islamabad and Beijing. Speaking Friday, Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony called the Chinese initiative to accelerate production of the JF-17 Thunder jet "a matter of serious concern for us. The main thing is we have to increase our capability — that is the only answer."

Antony added that India may sign a contract to buy 126 fighter jets for its air force by March 2012.

In recent weeks India has also expressed grave concern over a test Pakistan conducted at the beginning of April of a missile capable of carrying "low yield" or tactical nuclear weapons. Pakistani strategic thinkers claim that the Indian military's adoption of a "Cold Start" strategy designed to enable India to rapidly invade Pakistan is forcing it to take counter-steps.

Thus far, the Obama administration's public response to Gilani's visit and the strengthening of Sino-Pakistani ties has been circumspect. But there has been no letup in the US pressure on Islamabad to increase its support for the US war in Afghanistan, beginning with an extension of the counterinsurgency war against anti-US, Taliban-aligned forces.

There is every danger that the six-decades-old Indo-Pakistani conflict, which has given rise to three wars and countless war crises, will become entwined with the ever more globally significant confrontation between Beijing and Washington, adding a new explosive dimension to both conflicts.



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