

The Conduct of Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Structure, Strengths and Issues

(2018-2020)

Policy Brief

Part-4

Pakistan-China Relations

Pakistan-China relations are a unique example of close, cooperative, and friendly ties, which have consistently been developed and strengthened over seven decades. At the time of formation of the incumbent government, bilateral relations were rapidly progressing and witnessing upward trajectory, which was evident from the frequent exchange of leadership and high-level visits, the signing of the landmark memorandum of understanding on cooperation for the long-term plan of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013, the desire of deepening China-Pakistan strategic cooperative partnership, and the signing of 50 CPEC-related agreements on infrastructure, energy and industrial development during Chinese President Xi Jinping's landmark visit to Pakistan in 2015. It had commenced a new phase of all-weather strategic co-operative partnership between Pakistan and China. Former prime minister Nawaz Sharif accorded high priority and special profile to CPEC projects. Notwithstanding pull and push of geopolitics under which the US and India had become strategic partners opposing both Pakistan and China, Islamabad and Beijing did not succumb to pressures and consolidated their time-tested relations.

Chronology

Pakistan-China relations witnessed new heights and upward trajectory during 2018-2020 though initially there were some reservations of the incumbent

government. Prime Minister Imran Khan indicated in October 2018 to review CPEC projects to remove reservations of the government and the people of Balochistan on CPEC-related projects of the previous government.¹ Abdul Razak Dawood, Advisor for Commerce, Industry and Investment, even hinted in September 2018 in an interaction with *The Financial Times* that Pakistan should put everything on hold for a year and all CPEC projects could be suspended until a review is completed.² Apart from domestic reservations of the government, there were critical doubts created by the Indian and the Western sources. Among these the most poignant criticism came from the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Alice Wells, who challenged the credibility of the CPEC projects.

Against the above backdrop, Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who visited China on September 19-21, 2018, on the "special invitation" of Chinese President Xi Jinping, played an important role in reinforcing and safeguarding Pakistan's national interests and reiterating that China occupied a central place in Pakistan's foreign policy. To allay any doubts and reservations on CPEC, President Xi reiterated that "Pakistan is our time tested iron friend and Pakistan Army has a pivotal role towards this lasting relationship", reassuring that "China shall continue to support Pakistan as a strategic partner", and "those who oppose Belt and Road Initiative [BRI] or CPEC

¹ Saleem Shahid, "CPEC projects under review, says Imran," *Dawn*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1437358>

² Jamil Anderlini, Henny Sender and Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan rethinks its role in Xi's Belt and Road plan," *The Financial Times*, September 9, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/d4a3e7f8-b282-11e8-99ca-68cf89602132>

shall never succeed". The army chief reassured the Chinese president that "BRI with CPEC as its flagship is destined to succeed despite all odds and Pak Army shall ensure security of CPEC at all costs". He stressed that "we need to stay strong to thwart designs of all inimical forces challenging our resolve".³ The incumbent government subsequently observed a more prudent approach and established the CPEC Authority for monitoring various developmental activities of the CPEC projects.

Exchange of Visits

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi was amongst those foreign ministers who visited Pakistan in September 2018 soon after the formation of the new government. He conveyed goodwill message from the Chinese leadership, reiterated the Chinese government's desire to work closely with the new government, underlined that Pakistan will always be a priority for China in its foreign policy, and China will work with Pakistan to prioritize CPEC projects.⁴ The Pakistani side, while reaffirming that CPEC will remain a national priority, proposed to include socio-economic development, poverty alleviation, anti-corruption measures, agricultural cooperation, and industrial development in CPEC phase-II.

Prime Minister Imran Khan paid three official visits to China. During his first visit in November 2018, the Chinese leadership allayed concerns and agreed to include new areas of socio-economic development in CPEC phase II,⁵ which reflected the clear vision of the Chinese leadership in the conduct of their consistent foreign policy.

The prime minister paid a second visit to China in April 2019 to attend the 2nd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. In leadership meetings, the two sides agreed to implement the consensus reached in the prime minister's first visit to timely complete the ongoing CPEC projects and focusing on socio-economic development. The leaders agreed to establish China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue and

renamed the former strategic dialogue at vice foreign minister-level as political consultations for deepening cooperation in the fields of marine issues, science & technology, space, environment, agriculture, social sector, people-to-people contacts, cultural linkages, defense, security, and counter-terrorism. Prime Minister Imran Khan paid a third official visit to China in October 2019. The leaders exchanged views on the worsening situation in IOJ&K after August 5, 2019.⁶

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi accompanied by the foreign secretary visited China on December 25, 2018, and had detailed interaction with Foreign Minister Wang Yi on bilateral relations, regional matters including the situation in Afghanistan, and international issues. He paid a second visit to China in March 2019. The two foreign ministers co-chaired the China-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue. Qureshi visited China a third time (August 9-10, 2019) and briefed his counterpart on illegal steps taken by India since August 5, 2019. The Chinese foreign minister expressed serious concern over the situation and reiterated China's position that the Kashmir dispute should be resolved peacefully based on the UN Charter, relevant UNSC resolutions, and bilateral agreements. In August 2020, Foreign Minister Qureshi visited China for the fourth time and held a second round of China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue. The two sides resolved to cooperate to overcome Covid-19, share benefits in building CPEC, and offered to the international community to join the CPEC projects.

The subsequent visits of the Chinese Vice President, Wang Qishan (May 26-28, 2019), and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Pakistan (September 2019), strengthened bilateral relations and provided the opportunity to exchange views on the Afghan peace process, and regional and international issues.

Mutual Trust and Support During Covid-19

In early days of 2020 when China was successfully combating Covid-19, the government, the Senate, and

³ "General Qamar Javed Bajwa, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) called on Chinese President Xi Jinping on special invitation," ISPR press release No PR-286/2018-ISPR, September 19, 2018, <https://www.ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=4940>

⁴ "Foreign Minister meets Chinese State Councilor," MOFA press release, September 8, 2018, <http://mofa.gov.pk/foreign-minister-meets-chinese-state-councilor/>

⁵ "Joint Statement Strengthening China-Pakistan All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership Building Closer China-Pakistan Community of Shared Future in the New Era," MOFA press release, November 4, 2018, <http://mofa.gov.pk/joint-statement-strengthening-china-pakistan-all-weather-strategic-cooperative-partnership-building-closer-china-pakistan-community-of-shared-future-in-the-new-era/>

⁶ "Pakistan-China Joint Press Release on the visit of Prime Minister Imran Khan to China (8-9 October 2019)," October 9, 2019, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/t1706535.shtml



the people of Pakistan expressed their full solidarity and support to China's fight against the coronavirus outbreak. The Senate unanimously passed a resolution moved by the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs in February 2020 and pledged full cooperation with China "in this difficult moment of the medical and health emergency", and expressed its appreciation to China for having treated Pakistani citizens in the central city of Wuhan. China expressed appreciation for the resolution and pledged to strengthen cooperation with Pakistan and other members of the international community to combat the epidemic.

Prime Minister Imran Khan telephoned Chinese President Xi Jinping to demonstrate Pakistan's unequivocal solidarity with China in the backdrop of coronavirus outbreak, conveyed his heartfelt condolence over the loss of precious lives, praised the relentless efforts undertaken by China for containing and controlling the virus, and underscored that the people and the government of Pakistan stood firmly behind China in its decisive efforts to fight and eliminate the virus.

An even stronger message of amity and cooperation was conveyed to the Chinese leadership by President Arif Alvi, who visited China in March 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic and reiterated Pakistan's support and solidarity with the Chinese people and the government in successfully dealing with Covid-19. Subsequently, the Chinese government, after containing Covid-19 successfully, extended invaluable support to Pakistan by providing masks, sanitizers, ventilators, medical and protective equipment, and vaccines to handle the pandemic.

Analysis

The exchange of leadership and ministerial visits managed to assuage concerns, set the tone for future engagement, and played an important role in reinforcing time-tested and deep-rooted ties with China. But practically there was a perceived slowdown on CPEC projects in Pakistan due to reservations of the provinces on these projects and inordinate delays in the issuance of approvals by the

provincial bureaucracy.⁷ Besides, negative domestic, Western, and Indian media propaganda coupled with negative statements, most vocal among these was the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Alice Wells, during her visits to Pakistan in November 2018 and April 2019, created unwarranted doubts about the credibility of the CPEC projects.⁸ The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad had to issue an official statement for removing those doubts.⁹

Notwithstanding the outbreak of Covid-19 and other odds, Pakistan and China constituted a task force which morphed into the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) to endorse the working of its 10 subordinate Joint Working Groups (JWGs). The CPEC Authority, in concert with JCC and JWGs, is focusing on the implementation of CPEC projects. Karakoram Highway-II (Thakot-Havelian section), Peshawar-Karachi Motorway (Multan-Sukkur section), and Orange Line Metro Train projects have been opened. Hakla-D.I. Khan Motorway is near completion. East-Bay Expressway, which connects Gwadar with the main grid of Karakoram Highway, is 81 percent completed. The New Gwadar International Airport has entered the second phase. Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan has been approved. Work has begun on Gwadar 300 MW coal-fired power plant. PC-I of ML-I was approved by ECNEC on August 5, 2020. Three out of nine CPEC Special Economic Zones – Rashakai, Dhabeji, and Allama Iqbal Industrial City Faisalabad – have been prioritized.

The chairman of CPEC Authority has time and again allayed concerns of slowing down of CPEC projects and categorically stated that work on the eastern, western, and central alignments is going on smoothly and work on the CPEC phase II has begun. The recent progress in CPEC projects is a testament to the "all-weather strategic co-operative partnership" between Pakistan and China. Relations with China will remain the key strategic priority for Pakistan. CPEC will remain a bedrock of Pakistan's hope for economic recovery.¹⁰

⁷ "Sherry Rehman sees no progress in CPEC Balochistan projects since 2017," *The News*, October 3, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/723946-sherry-rehman-sees-no-progress-in-cpec-balochistan-projects-since-2017>

⁸ "Ambassador Wells' Remarks on the 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor'," US Embassy Islamabad press release, November 21, 2019, <https://pk.usembassy.gov/ambassador-wells-remarks-on-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/>

⁹ "Statement by the Spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan in response to US views on CPEC," Embassy of the People's Republic of China, January 22, 2020, <http://pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/zbqx/t1735168.htm>

¹⁰ "CPEC improved China-Pakistan connectivity, says chairman," *Dawn*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1622058/cpec-improved-china-pakistan-connectivity-says-chairman>

Plight of Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims

Apart from overall dimensions of Pakistan-China strategic relations, there is another important albeit critical issue of the plight of Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims, which has implications, to an extent, on bilateral relations, and much broader regional and international ramifications. The issue, therefore, is highlighted and analyzed here separately.

China's policy towards Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims has spurred questions in the wake of the American and Western countries' persistent reports that over one million Uighur Muslims have been detained, mistreated, incarcerated, and tortured in China's Xinjiang region and restrictions are imposed on their religious obligations including prayers, fasting, and celebration of religious festivals.

This sensitive issue was also raised several times with the prime minister, foreign minister, national security advisor, and minister for religious affairs of Pakistan by the time of compilation of this brief. The first time, Minister for Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony, Noorul Haq Qadri, met Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan, Yao Xing, on September 19, 2018, and expressed concerns about the Uighur Muslims facing numerous restrictions in Xinjiang. The minister demanded relaxation of the restrictions and maintained that the restraints would increase the chances of an extremist viewpoint growing in reaction.¹¹ The meeting took place in the wake of several reports that Chinese Uighur wives of more than 500 Pakistani businessmen were arrested and interrogated about their alleged involvement in extremism and terrorism. Foreign Minister Qureshi took a different stance on the issue and criticized the media for "trying to sensationalize" the ongoing situation of Uighurs in Xinjiang.¹²

The first policy position of Pakistan was reflected in a joint statement issued at the conclusion of Prime Minister Imran Khan's first visit to China (November 2-5, 2018) wherein, without naming Uighurs, the joint statement read that "the Pakistani side reaffirmed its support to the Chinese side in safeguarding its sovereignty and security, and combating separatism, terrorism and extremism including East Turkistan Islamic Movement [ETIM]".¹³ According to the Chinese official position, the ETIM was involved in terrorist activities in China and beyond China's borders in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Middle East. The joint statement has thus validated China's position that its policies toward Uighurs are aimed at curbing terrorism and extremism which is why Uighurs are kept in "reeducation camps" in Xinjiang for reformation. In a way, China has equated a humanitarian crisis in Xinjiang with extremism and terrorism, which is unfair in the overall context of various dimensions of the prevailing situation and mistreatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang. The reaffirmation of Pakistan's support to this contention has caused much concerns among the Muslims of Pakistan.

Further developments in the matter underscore some tacit understanding of Pakistan about China's policy toward Uighurs. Against this backdrop, in an interview with *The Financial Times* on March 27, 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan, while responding to a question on mistreatment and detentions of Uighurs, refused to comment and replied that: "Frankly, I don't know much about it," and added, "If I had enough knowledge about it I would comment, but I don't."¹⁴ Yet in another interaction at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in September 2019, the prime minister said that Pakistan's "special relationship" with China stops him from speaking about the Uighurs in public.¹⁵ Furthermore, at the World Economic Forum, held in Davos in January 2020, Prime Minister

¹¹ Javed Hussain, "Religious affairs minister discusses treatment of Xinjiang Muslims with Chinese envoy," *Dawn*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1433886>

¹² Rhea Mahbubani, "Pakistani leader Imran Khan admitted he refuses to criticize China's treatment of its Uighur minority because they 'helped us when we were at rock bottom'," *Business Insider*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/imran-khan-pakistan-wont-criticize-china-on-ughurs-2020-1>

¹³ "Joint Statement Strengthening China-Pakistan All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership Building Closer China-Pakistan Community of Shared Future in the New Era," MOFA, November 4, 2018, <http://mofa.gov.pk/joint-statement-strengthening-china-pakistan-all-weather-strategic-cooperative-partnership-building-closer-china-pakistan-community-of-shared-future-in-the-new-era/>

¹⁴ "Frankly, I Don't Know Much": Imran Khan on China's Uighur Muslims," *The Quint*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/pakistan-pm-imran-khan-on-china-ughur-muslims-united-states>

¹⁵ Sadanand Dhume, "Pakistan Gives a Pass to China's Oppression of Muslims," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pakistan-gives-a-pass-to-chinas-oppression-of-muslims-11570142866>

Imran Khan, in response to a question raised in an interview by *Foreign Policy*, initially replied that he didn't "know much about" the scale of Uighur mistreatment and then acknowledged that Pakistan's special relationship with China played a part in his response to the Uighur crisis and added, "China has helped us", and "They came to help us when we were at rock bottom, and so we are really grateful to the Chinese government", and "We have decided that whatever issues we will have with China, we will deal with them privately. We will not go public".¹⁶

Relating to the same issue, in October 2020 the National Security Advisor, Moeed Yusuf, stated that the government is "100 percent satisfied" that the situation in Xinjiang was a "nonissue", and "We have zero concerns, absolutely zero concerns".¹⁷ In addition, in interviews with Chinese journalists held on March 7 and July 1, 2021, on the occasion of the celebrations of the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated that complaints about violations of human rights and the situation of the Uighurs in Xinjiang and the people of Hong Kong by Western public opinion were "hypocritical" and Washington's expectation that Pakistan will take sides in an alternative axis to Beijing is "unfair", and he believes Beijing's version, which rejects accusations of human rights violations against the Muslim minority living in the Xinjiang region. The prime minister also maintained that "there are much more serious violations of human rights taking place in other parts of the world such as in occupied Kashmir, but the Western media hardly talks about it".¹⁸

Foreign Minister Qureshi, who attended UNSC Emergency Session on the situation in Palestine in New York in May 2021, in an interview with CNN anchor Bianna Golodryga responded to a question calling mistreatment of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang as "genocide", that "China is a very good friend of Pakistan. They have stood by us through thick and thin. And we have means of communication.

We use our diplomatic channels. We do not discuss everything in public", and as regards the issue of human rights violations in Xinjiang "there's always a way of doing things. And we are not oblivious of our responsibilities".¹⁹

Analysis

Pakistan needs to carry out an objective review of the plight of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. In this regard, there are three fundamentally important dimensions of the analysis.

Firstly, the sensitive issue does have technical grounds. Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken a principled stance on the oppression of Muslims in Palestine, Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir, and other countries. But he has not taken a similarly strong position on the plight of the Uighur Muslims and he has mostly remained reticent and non-committal on the issue. The statements of the prime minister, foreign minister, and the national security advisor reflect some confusion, lack of consistency, naivety, and incoherence toward the plight of Uighur Muslims. This approach does not reflect any incompetence. But it calls for adopting a clear, proactive, and consistent policy.

Secondly, Pakistan and China must understand the motives and intentions of the US and Western countries' criticism of the Chinese government's mistreatment of the Uighurs in a broader geopolitical context and its implications and potential dangers for the region and international relations. China's hard stance on the issue is understandable. But the overall situation is a unique example of the dilemma. Pakistan needs to use its leverage as a trustworthy friend of China to convey to the Chinese leadership to exercise the utmost prudence, take careful posturing, and manage skillful handling of the prevailing volatile situation in Xinjiang to counter motives and actions of the US and western countries. Pakistan must emphasize that such an approach will help achieve peace, economic development, prosperity, a win-win-

¹⁶ Rhea Mahbubani, "Pakistani leader Imran Khan admitted he refuses to criticize China's treatment of its Uighur minority because they 'helped us when we were at rock bottom'," *Business Insider*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/imran-khan-pakistan-wont-criticize-china-on-ughurs-2020-1>

¹⁷ Michael Kugelman, "Imran Khan's Silence on Uighurs Undercuts His Defense of Muslims Worldwide," *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/29/imran-khan-ughurs-muslims-china/>

¹⁸ "Pakistan accepts China's version on Xinjiang's Uighurs: PM Imran," *Dawn*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1632539>

¹⁹ "We do not discuss everything in public,' Pakistan Foreign Minister refuses to comment on the persecution of Uyghur Muslims in China," *Opindia*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.opindia.com/2021/05/pakistan-foreign-minister-refuses-to-comment-on-uyghur-muslims-in-china/>

cooperation, shared destiny, and success of the CPEC projects and the Belt and Road Initiative.

It is prudent for Pakistan not to raise the sensitive issue of Xinjiang's Uighur Muslims publicly. But Pakistan needs to carry out deft handling through quiet diplomacy and consistent engagement with the Chinese side. In addition, a proactive foreign policy calls for doing something more tangible than public diplomacy. Resultantly, whatever Pakistan's leadership communicates with the Chinese leadership must be reflected and brought out with some outcome.

Thirdly, there is a possibility of a negative impact and the potential danger for the goodwill of China in case a holistic and prudent approach is not adopted to address the sensitive issue. Such a situation can become a vulnerable point in Pakistan-China relations and convey a wrong signal to public opinion and create doubts among the people of Pakistan. Both Pakistan and China, therefore, need to remain fully engaged and work together to address the issue.

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