IN FOCUS

How Beijing Manages Its Relationship With Pakistan

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Professor Yuan Jingdong of the University of Sydney began his presentation with the argument that Pakistan has an important place in Chinese foreign policy. There is a geostrategic aspect to Beijing’s relationship with Pakistan. It also has an impact on China’s domestic issues, particularly that in Xinjiang, as well as on China’s energy security and China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Pakistan-China relationship has been coined by many as an all-weather strategic cooperative partnership, with leaders on both sides acknowledging that the relationship is “higher than the mountain, deeper than the ocean, sweeter than honey, and stronger than steel”. The Sino-Pakistan relationship is thus unique, defined by strong mutual trust and close defence ties.

China’s Kashmir policy has always been characterised as between support of Pakistan’s position and neutrality. Beijing shifting stance on Kashmir has always been attributed to the changes in the Sino-Indian relations.

Leaders on both sides have always maintained regular and frequent high-level visits, close ties between militaries; the Chinese supports Pakistan positions and pursues common interests and cooperation. The defence ties between the Pakistani military and the People’s Liberation Army began in the 1970s, and since then there have been regular high-level visits by military leaders on both sides, training and joint exchanges between both militaries, and joint defence production of military weapons and so on. Chinese arms transfers account for over 80% of all Pakistan imports. China also provides Pakistan with nuclear missile assistance. There is also a Chinese naval base near Gwadar.

The Chinese policy after 9-11 incident has been to support Pakistan against terrorism and encourage India-Pakistan dialogues. It has tried to play a mediating role and defuse tension in the South Asian region. Professor Yuan argues that there has been a deepening of the Sino-Pakistani relationship in the recent years as it has gone beyond the security dimension to emphasise on economic ties. The bilateral trade between China and Pakistan recorded 13 billion yuan in 2017, and there have been massive Chinese investments in infrastructure projects in Pakistan, like the Gwadar Port and the
Karakorum highway in the early 2000s. China has also pledged to invest 62 billion yuan in projects in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and four billion yuan in financial assistance to Pakistan.

Professor Yuan also analyses the importance of Pakistan to China’s foreign policy, arguing that Pakistan remains as China’s critical link to and key partner in the Muslim world. Pakistan is also an important ally on fighting terrorism and separatism, especially in Xinjiang, and is now increasingly a critical gateway for China’s energy security.

Concluding the presentation, Professor Yuan highlights that Sino-Pakistani all-weather ties are likely to continue but will be based on their own merit rather than directed against others. The defence ties between the militaries will remain strong and economic ties are set to strengthen further. The delicate balance in the China-India-Pakistan triangle will remain in the foreseeable future.