Two assumptions dominate current debates on US foreign policy toward Pakistan. First, Pakistan shares a robust “all-weather” friendship with China centered on core national interests. Second, Pakistan’s ability to turn to China in times of need insulates it from US pressure and renders hardline US policies counterproductive. Both of these assumptions are mistaken. First, China and Pakistan do not share a robust partnership; they engage in limited cooperation on a narrow set of interests, and these interests have been diminishing over time. Second, China will not take active measures to protect Pakistan from US pressure. As a result, the United States can impose punitive measures on Pakistan without fear of catalyzing an anti-American Sino-Pakistani alliance.

Two weeks after US Navy Seals killed Osama Bin Laden, the Pakistani Prime Minister flew to Beijing and invited China to build a naval base at Gwadar, a Pakistani port approximately 400 km from the Strait of Hormuz. Several days later, Pakistan’s defense minister reiterated this request publicly, declaring: “we have asked our Chinese brothers to please build a naval base at Gwadar.” For many analysts, this event attests to the deep bond between Pakistan and China, an “all-weather friendship” that Chinese President Hu Jintao has described as “higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the Indian Ocean, and sweeter than honey.”

In reality, however, the Sino-Pakistan relationship falls short of the lofty rhetoric. China tilts toward Pakistan in moments of geopolitical convenience, but does not seek a robust relationship, much less a military alliance. China has three main interests in Pakistan: preserving Pakistan as a viable military competitor to India; using Pakistan as an overland trade and energy corridor; and enlisting Pakistani cooperation in severing links between Uighur separatists in western China and Islamists in Pakistan. These all remain salient interests for China, but they are declining in importance and

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The conventional wisdom that China desires a robust partnership with Pakistan lends itself both to overly optimistic and overly pessimistic conclusions for US foreign policy. Now constitute second- or third-tier interests in which China only needs Pakistan to play a supporting role: China is more secure vis-à-vis India today than at any time in its history and therefore has less need for an alliance with Pakistan; Pakistani political instability and the technical challenges of building pipelines and railways over the mountains on the Chinese-Pakistani border undermine Pakistan’s potential to serve as a Chinese trade and energy corridor; and China’s success in suppressing Uighur dissent, coupled with doubts among Chinese leaders about the competence and commitment of the Pakistani security forces, have reduced China’s interest in counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan.

The conventional wisdom that China desires a robust partnership with Pakistan lends itself both to overly optimistic and overly pessimistic conclusions for US foreign policy. Optimists argue that China’s stake in Pakistan opens up possibilities for US-Chinese cooperation to stabilize Pakistan, mediate the Indian-Pakistani conflict, and develop trade and energy routes through South and Central Asia. Pessimists argue that the Sino-Pakistani partnership undermines American leverage with Pakistan and US foreign policy in Asia. But both of these views presume that Chinese leaders actually care about what goes on in Pakistan. In fact, China’s interests in Pakistan are not deep and broad-based, but rather shallow and narrow. On the one hand, this means American attempts to enlist Chinese cooperation with US policies in Pakistan are likely to fail. On the other hand, the absence of a Sino-Pakistani alliance frees the United States to pursue its own interests in the region without fear of damaging US-China relations.

This essay proceeds in four sections. The first three discuss the drivers of China’s foreign policy toward Pakistan: balancing India; developing an energy and trade corridor; and containing Uighur terrorism. The final section discusses implications for US foreign policy.

INDIA

Today, China’s primary interest in its relationship with Pakistan is, as Stephen Cohen puts it, to pursue a “classic balance of power strategy,” using Pakistan to confront India with the possibility of a two-front war. Sino-Indian relations were not always hostile. At the time of their founding in 1948 and 1949, respectively, the Indian and Chinese governments declared a postcolonial brotherhood. But when China conquered Tibet in 1950, China and India suddenly shared an undemarcated border stretching 2,500 miles. To this day, Indian and Chinese maps of their border do not match. As a result, some 400,000 square miles of disputed territory exists between China and
India concentrated in two places: the Aksai Chin Plateau, which China controls but India claims, and Arunachal Pradesh, an Indian state that China calls “South Tibet.” In 1962, the two sides fought a war in which Chinese forces expelled the Indian army from both of the disputed territories before withdrawing back to their original positions in China.

After the war, India intensified its economic and security relationship with the Soviet Union, which itself had severed ties with China in 1961. Soon Moscow was supplying roughly three-quarters of India’s imported military equipment. Fearing Soviet-sponsored encirclement, China turned to Pakistan. In 1963, the two sides signed a border agreement that transferred 2,000 square miles of territory in Pakistan-held Kashmir to China, and China began selling weapons to Pakistan, a practice that continues today. Between 1978 and 2008, China sold roughly $7 billion in military equipment to Pakistan, typically accounting for 40 percent of Pakistan’s total arms purchases in any given year. China also helped build two nuclear power plants in Pakistan in the 1990s and signed a deal in 2009 to build two more.

In recent years, tensions between India and China have flared. In 2006, China’s ambassador to India declared, “the whole state of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese territory . . . we are claiming all of that. That is our position.” India responded by declaring Jammu and Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh to be “core interests” and deploying two additional army mountain divisions to the northeastern state of Assam, directly below Arunachal Pradesh, bringing India’s troop levels in the region to more than 100,000. China then attempted to block a $2.9 billion loan from the Asian Development Bank for projects in Arunachal Pradesh and began issuing visas to Indian residents of Jammu and Kashmir on a separate paper stapled to their passports, instead of the customary stamping. In August 2010, China denied a visa to the head of the Indian delegation to the 4th China-India defense dialogue, Lt. Gen. B.S. Jaswal, because he commanded forces in the “disputed area” of Arunachal Pradesh. In response, India cancelled defense exchanges with China.

Many analysts believe such tensions, along with growing US-Indian ties, cement an already robust China-Pakistan alliance. This view, however, overestimates the strength of the China-Pakistan partnership during the Cold War, and underestimates how changes since the end of the Cold War have diluted China’s interest in Pakistan.

During the Cold War, China sold arms to Pakistan but never guaranteed its security. In both the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars, Chinese leaders condemned Indian aggression and funneled military and economic aid to Pakistan, but explicitly rejected Pakistani requests for direct military assistance. In 1971, Chinese leaders watched as India literally tore Pakistan apart, lopping off East Pakistan and turning it into the independent state of Bangladesh.

This experience set the tone for the Sino-Pakistani relationship today: China provides Pakistan with diplomatic support and military hardware, but not protection. The China-Pakistan relationship therefore has never been an alliance, but rather a “subtle partnership” in which China does “the minimum necessary to preserve Pakistani security...
from a distance but seeks to avoid all overt entanglements in Islamabad’s challenges to Indian primacy in South Asia.”

Since the end of the Cold War, two developments have increased China’s security vis-à-vis India, and therefore reduced China’s interest in cooperation with Pakistan. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union eliminated the primary threat to China’s security and deprived India of its superpower patron. In 1988, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi traveled to Beijing, reiterated India’s recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, and agreed to establish a working group to settle the border issue. In 1993 and 1996, the two sides signed agreements pledging to maintain peace and restrict military activities in the border regions.

Second, China has significantly increased its national power relative to India over the last two decades. In 1990, the size of China’s gross domestic product (GDP) was roughly equivalent to India’s; today it is nearly four times the size of India’s. At the end of the Cold War, China’s military budget was slightly smaller than India’s; now it is over three times as big. In the 1980s and 1990s, successive Indian administrations supported the development of India’s nuclear program culminating in nuclear tests in 1998. But India’s fledgling nuclear arsenal remains so small that, according to Ashley Tellis, “China does not have to take special measures to counter India’s incipient efforts at developing a minimum deterrent.” Indeed, Chinese leaders were more concerned about the anti-China justification of the 1998 tests than the tests themselves. Today, the conventional wisdom among Chinese analysts is that “India’s aggregate strength is not sufficient for a contest with China.” China, therefore, can “be patient at the negotiating table because time is on China’s side.”

**Figure 1.** *Gross Domestic Product: China, India, Pakistan, 1990–2010 (US $, current prices, billions)*
Qualitative assessments of Chinese and Indian military forces in their border region provide additional evidence that China faces a smaller military threat from India than at any time in its history. While India fields 100,000 troops armed with artillery and protected by two squadrons of SU-30 MKI (Flanker-H) fighter jets based in Arunachal Pradesh, China maintains 400,000 troops and five airfields in the military regions surrounding the border (Chengdu and Lanzhou) and has constructed a long-distance rail link between Beijing and Tibet that can be used to move additional units to the border. More important, Chinese soldiers sit atop the Tibetan plateau while Indian units are located in the valleys below the Himalayas, a position that exposes them to Chinese fire and impedes counter-attacks. In 1962, China expelled the Indian military from Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh in less than a month, including a two-week diplomatic cease-fire. Today, according to one assessment, China’s modern “rapid reaction forces” could take the same territory in forty-eight hours.

To be sure, such calculations are speculative. But China would have a geographic advantage even in the event of a protracted border war. Indian territory around Arunachal Pradesh is squeezed between China in the north and Myanmar, a Chinese client-state, in the south. India spoiled its relationship with Myanmar’s military regime in 1988 by supporting the opposition prodemocracy movement. China, by contrast, is Myanmar’s main arms supplier and diplomatic supporter. If another border war erupted between China and India, Myanmar might not open up a second front against India, but it might provide a staging point and base camp for Chinese forces.
None of this is to say that China no longer needs Pakistan to balance India. Pakistan’s strategic importance to China, however, has likely receded as China’s position vis-à-vis India has become more secure. Recent polls show that 60 percent of Chinese citizens see no threat from India, and the Chinese government, according to Even Feigenbaum, “considers India a third-tier security priority at best—far behind internal insecurity and challenges in the East Asian Littoral.”

In fact, India is becoming an economic asset to China. China’s trade with India now dwarfs that with Pakistan. Moreover, the composition of China-India trade is favorable to China: 70 percent of China’s imports from India are raw materials whereas the majority of China’s exports to India are manufactured goods. This situation supports employment and profits in China and helps Chinese manufacturers move up the value chain faster than their Indian competitors.

**Figure 3. China’s Trade with India and Pakistan, 2000–2010, (US$, current prices, millions)**

Economic interdependence may not preclude conflict between China and India, but the evolution of China’s position on Kashmir suggests that economic interests have dampened historical rivalries. In 1990, after a re-escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan, China withdrew its support for a United Nations plebiscite on Kashmir. This amounted to an implicit endorsement of India’s position that the conflict should be resolved bilaterally. During the Kargil War in 1999, in which Pakistani soldiers infiltrated Indian-Kashmir, Chinese leaders remained neutral and rejected requests for support from Pakistani leaders.

Source: IMF
Of course, the thaw in China-India relations will not stop China from selling arms to Pakistan. If China were to cut off these arms sales, it would not only lose an important source of income, but also allow India to redirect some of its forces from its border with Pakistan to its border with China. Thus, China will likely continue to prop up Pakistan as a viable counterweight to India. But China’s interests in Pakistan do not extend far beyond this basic goal, whereas China’s interests in India have been expanding rapidly in scope.

Some analysts believe that China will respond to India’s partnership with the United States by tightening its relationship with Pakistan. For now, however, Chinese analysts seem confident that India “will come into conflict with the United States over its many interests” and that US-Indian cooperation will remain limited for the foreseeable future. Indeed, during his first visit to China in November 2009, President Obama declared that the United States and China would “work together to promote peace, stability, and development” in South Asia. This statement was widely interpreted by Indian leaders as an invitation to China to meddle in India’s backyard. According to the former Indian foreign secretary and ambassador to the United States, Lalit Mansingh:

there is a feeling that in Obama’s international calculations, India is not that important. The suspicion is building up that Obama is not as keen on the strategic partnership with India as George W. Bush was. There is, underneath the surface, a suspicion that the Americans are scared or too dependent on the Chinese.

India, for its part, has opposed the United States on climate and trade initiatives, failed to enact liability legislation needed for American companies to develop India’s nuclear industry, and rejected US bids to sell India 126 multirole combat aircraft at a price of $10–$12 billion. A growing number of American analysts now say that “the refrain in Washington is that the Bush administration oversold the potential for strategic partnership with New Delhi,” and that “the Indo-US of the future will remain just that for quite some time . . . much of the partnership remains inspirational.” The same could be said of the Sino-Pakistani partnership.

**ENERGY**

In 2000, China’s total energy consumption was half of that of the United States; in 2010, China surpassed the United States to become the world’s biggest energy consumer, a milestone that testifies both to the massive size of China’s population and the speed with which its economy has grown. China’s hydrocarbon use has more than doubled in the past two decades and will double again in the next decade. As much as 85 percent of that oil and natural gas will pass through the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Straight en route to China.
to China’s Pacific Ocean ports. This is what Chinese President Hu Jintao refers to as China’s “Malacca Dilemma”—the fear that China’s dependence on the flow of energy resources through narrow transport sea lines is a weakness that adversaries can exploit. China has taken two steps to mitigate this dilemma: bolstering its naval presence in the Indian Ocean and developing overland trade and energy corridors through Central Asia. Pakistan could be key to both of these plans.

With regard to the Indian Ocean, in 2001 China agreed to help finance the construction of a port at Gwadar. The port, which was inaugurated in 2008, is deep enough to accommodate submarines and aircraft carriers and can function as a “listening post” to monitor US naval activity in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Many analysts describe Gwadar as one of China’s “string of pearls” – a chain of Chinese naval bases traversing the shorelines between the Middle East and East Asia.

Even if China were to turn Gwadar into a naval base, however, the United States and India would continue to dominate the Indian Ocean. India’s navy has seven bases and three listening posts along the shores of the Indian Ocean, and the US navy maintains a large naval presence at Diego Garcia, an island in the southern Indian Ocean. Chinese vessels based at Gwadar would therefore be surrounded by American and Indian ships and isolated from the rest of the Chinese fleet. Perhaps for this reason, China has shown little interest in deploying naval assets to Gwadar, which is currently a commercial port operated by Singapore. When asked about Pakistan’s recent offer to turn Gwadar into a PLA naval base, the spokeswoman for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied its existence, stating: “I have not heard of it. It’s my understanding that during the visit last week this issue was not touched upon.”

The other option for China would be to link Gwadar to Xinjiang over land with railways and oil pipelines. Pakistan has drawn up plans to build a railway between Havellian, a Pakistani city close to Islamabad, and Kashgar in Xinjiang. This railway would roughly parallel the Karakoram Highway, the main link between the two countries. In 2006, Pakistan awarded a $1.2 million contract to an international consortium to carry out a feasibility study for establishing this rail link as well as plans for a 3,300 km oil pipeline between Gwadar and Xinjiang. In June 2006, and again in 2008, Pakistani leaders broached the idea with Chinese President Hu Jintao, but with no apparent results to date.

In fact, many Chinese analysts argue that such overland projects are simply unfeasible. Chinese workers have been kidnapped and killed in at least three separate incidents in the regions that would be traversed by the proposed pipelines and railways. These corridors would also transit a part of Kashmir that, while controlled by Pakistan, is claimed by India, thus raising the specter of geopolitical conflict. In addition, the railways
and pipelines would have to be constructed over some of the world’s most treacherous terrain, and oil would have to be transported or pumped from sea level at Gwadar to 15,000 feet over the Khunjerab Pass, an operation that would require massive amounts of energy. By one assessment, if a Chinese oil company chose to move 250,000 barrels of oil per day overland through Pakistan, it might lose as much as a billion dollars a year compared to moving the oil by sea.\(^{37}\) Most important, the railways and pipelines between Gwadar and China would not significantly reduce China’s dependency on seaborne trade. According to the government of Pakistan, the proposed Gwadar-Xinjiang pipeline would carry twelve million tons of oil every year. This is equivalent to 2–3 percent of China’s current annual oil consumption.\(^{38}\) Moreover, off-loading seaborne crude in Pakistan would be problematic because it is far from China’s mainland economic and military centers. In fact, James Holmes of the US Naval War College claims that it would be easier for the United States to prevent the unloading of oil at Gwadar than to blockade the Strait of Malacca.\(^{39}\) For all these reasons, it appears that, as Andrew Erickson and Gabriel Collins conclude, China’s attempt to reduce its dependence on seaborne trade is a “pipe dream.”\(^{40}\) Many Chinese analysts agree and argue that China should focus on fostering multilateral management of oil transport in the Indian Ocean rather than developing overland energy corridors through Pakistan.\(^{41}\)

COUNTERTERRORISM

China’s western Xinjiang region borders northwest Pakistan and is home to nearly nine million Uighurs, a Muslim people of Turkic origin, among whom separatist sentiment has historically run high. In the 1980s, hundreds of Uighurs crossed into Pakistan, enrolled in Madrassas, and, with Chinese government training and arms, fought the Soviets in Afghanistan. Upon returning to Xinjiang via Pakistan, some joined violent Uighur nationalist groups. Between 1990 and 2001, these groups carried out approximately 200 attacks in China that killed 162 people. Following these incidents, the Chinese government launched a massive campaign to quell unrest, providing economic benefits to the Uighurs to erode their ambitions for independence while ruthlessly clamping down on dissent.\(^{42}\) In addition, Chinese resettlement policies have shifted the composition of Xinjiang’s population from 90 percent Uighur in 1949 to 45 percent Uighur today.\(^{43}\) While there have been sporadic terrorist attacks in Xinjiang for the past two decades, there has been a marked drop-off in mass organized protests since 1997, and especially since 2003 when Pakistani forces killed the founder of the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the primary Uighur terrorist group. “Because China’s campaign has been so effective,” Martin Wayne writes, “much of the debate today focuses on whether China genuinely confronts a terrorist threat.”\(^{44}\) Figure 4 shows there are fewer mass incidents in Xinjiang than in several other provinces as a proportion of each region’s population. No doubt, Uighur unrest remains a serious problem for the Chinese government. But it does not seem to be China’s most pressing internal security issue.
On the other hand, the frequency of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang has spiked in recent years. In 2009, major anti-Chinese rioting in Urumqi killed at least 197 people, and in 2011 Chinese government reports say at least three dozen people were killed in three attacks in the cities of Hotan and Kashgar. Some experts believe these incidents will catalyze China-Pakistan counterterrorism cooperation and perhaps even spur China to commit significant resources to bolster Pakistani political stability. So far, however,
China has shunned ambitious nation-building projects in favor of diplomacy designed to sever links between Uighurs and Islamist terrorist groups. For example, Chinese leaders reached agreements with the Taliban to prevent Uighur groups from using Afghan territory for training facilities and compelled Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin and the Muttahida Majils-e-Amal to disavow violence toward China. More important, the threat posed by Uighur separatism is just as likely to drive China and Pakistan apart as to push them together. Chinese leaders openly doubt the commitment and capabilities of Pakistan’s security forces, even accusing them of warning Uighur groups to disperse prior to raids. They also worry that President Zardari’s regime is too weak and unstable to secure China’s interests in Pakistan. Over the last 20 years, China has addressed unrest in Xinjiang by curtailing border trade with Pakistan, closing the Karakoram Highway and erecting security fences along the border. According to Ahmad Farqui, the Chinese government employs these measures “to send a strong signal to the government of Pakistan that China would not hesitate to freeze the close ties between the two neighbors if Pakistan did not stop its backing for Islamic militants.” From a Chinese perspective, therefore, ties to Pakistan may not be the solution to unrest in Xinjiang; they may be part of the problem.

IMPLICATIONS

Chinese and Pakistani leaders often refer to their countries’ relationship as an “all-weather friendship.” Yet an analysis of the key drivers of China’s foreign policy toward Pakistan suggest this is far from the case. While it remains possible that the threats posed by India, energy security, and Uighur separatism will fester and push China and Pakistan closer together, present trends suggest exactly the opposite: China is now more secure and more economically interdependent with India; Chinese analysts widely acknowledge that Beijing’s ambitious plans to build an energy corridor through Pakistan are unlikely to come to fruition anytime soon; and the Chinese government has succeeded in suppressing large-scale unrest in Xinjiang in part by increasing the physical barriers between China and Pakistan. In short, the Sino-Pakistani relationship is not an all-weather friendship, but rather a marriage of convenience centered on a narrow set of issues. And if present trends continue, that is exactly how it will stay.

This conclusion has implications for US foreign policy toward Pakistan. Some experts argue that China’s interests in Pakistan are expanding and that “the time is ripe for the United States and the PRC to add the stability of Pakistan to the top of their bilateral agenda.” Most proposals suggest that the United States should urge China to participate in multilateral efforts to “fix Pakistan,” mediate Indo-Pakistani border negotiations, and develop energy, trade, and transportation corridors. Indeed, a central aim of current US policy is to coax Chinese cooperation out of a “basic framework of largely coincident objectives,” objectives that were spelled out between the two sides.
in 2009 as the mutual desire for “peace, stability, and development in South Asia.”

It is true that many of China’s interests in Pakistan—political stability, economic development, reduction of Islamic terrorism, peace with India—mirror those of the United States. And there may be little harm in pressuring China to play a larger role in accomplishing these objectives. But the United States should not expect too much from China. Most of China’s most pressing problems—maintaining economic growth, maritime security in South China Sea, Taiwan—have little to do with Pakistan. Chinese leaders, therefore, are unlikely to embrace costly proposals to buttress Pakistan’s political institutions or to mediate Pakistan’s conflict with India.

On the other hand, China’s lack of interest in an alliance with Pakistan frees the United States to pursue its own interests in South Asia without fear of damaging US-China relations. Chinese leaders may not be excited about the prospect of democratic consolidation in Pakistan, but they would welcome the stability that such an outcome would bring. While some Chinese analysts will characterize US security and nuclear cooperation with India as an attempt to encircle China, Chinese leaders are unlikely to react by forming an alliance with Pakistan, which in their eyes is as much of a security liability as an asset.

Finally, the lack of Chinese commitment to Pakistan increases American leverage over Pakistan. Some analysts suggested that Pakistan would turn to China in the wake of the killing of Osama bin Laden and that US influence in Pakistan would plummet as a result. Pakistan’s leaders certainly attempted this strategy by asking China to build a naval base at Gwadar. But the fact that Chinese leaders denied that such an offer was even made, tells us a great deal about how they view Pakistan’s potential as an ally.

– Hanna Azemati served as Lead Editor for this article.

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