

Nuclear entente



“China’s transfers of sensitive technology to Pakistan in violation of the nuclear nonproliferation regime is receiving flak from the US. But Islamabad cites US’ civilian nuclear agreement with New Delhi to claim parity.”

[Sreeram Chaulia](#) 28 January 2014

The recent revelation that China is negotiating to build three new nuclear plants worth \$13 billion in Muzaffargarh district of Pakistan’s Punjab province reinforces the longstanding reality of the former purposefully undermining India’s national security. Even though China’s mega nuclear deals with Pakistan are dressed up as responses to acute electricity shortage crippling the latter, the dualistic civil-cum-military nature of nuclear technology and the history of Sino-Pakistani collusion in nuclear weapons and missiles leave little to the imagination about their true strategic intent.

Claims that Chinese-aided nuclear power will address Pakistan’s electricity blackouts are exaggerated and only believable in a long-term perspective. It is more timely and cost-effective if Pakistan imports power from India, a prospect under discussion between the two neighbours — it could lead to India supplying 2,500 megawatts to relieve Pakistan’s struggling economy.

The real reason behind Sino-Pakistani nuclear energy cooperation is containment of India. India has always been in the crosshairs of the “all-weather alliance” between China and Pakistan since the 1950s. The alliance encompasses conventional and non-conventional military quid pro quos, material and diplomatic assistance to each other during Chinese and Pakistani wars against India, critical infrastructure construction such as the Chinese-built deep-sea port of Gwadar in Balochistan province, tacit understandings for Pakistan to moderate Islamic extremism in China’s restive Xinjiang region, and general foreign policy coordination at multilateral forums with a view to countering India’s positions and opportunities.

To cite Hussain Haqqani, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States, “for China, Pakistan is a low-cost secondary deterrent to India”, while “for Pakistan, China is a high-value guarantor of security against India.” Notwithstanding the tectonic shifts in global geopolitics that accompanied the end of the Cold War, the utility of China to Pakistan and vice versa remains entrenched to this day because of their shared animus towards India.

China has nuanced its hardline pro-Pakistan stance on the Kashmir dispute, but the fundamentals of the Beijing-Islamabad axis are rock solid and manifesting in new avatars like nuclear energy cooperation. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif mentioned the proposed three new Chinese-aided nuclear plants within closed doors to his Cabinet earlier this month. The announcement came on the heels of a prior agreement for China to provide two separate nuclear power reactors worth \$9 billion in the southern metropolis of Karachi.

China’s troublesome transfers of sensitive technology and equipment to Pakistan in violation of the nuclear nonproliferation regime are receiving flak from the US. But Islamabad cites Washington’s civilian nuclear agreement with New Delhi, which had also acquired nuclear weapons while staying out of the nonproliferation treaty (NPT), as a counter-argument to claim parity.

If the US carved out an exception for India to buy civilian nuclear technology through the “123 agreement” and an exemption from rules of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), China feels it is entitled to do the same for its South Asian ally so that the balance of power in South Asia does not become more skewed in India’s favour.

The Wall Street Journal explained this tit-for-tat logic by quoting Mushahid Hussain, chairman of Pakistan’s senate defence committee: “The India-US nuclear deal was discriminatory. It was meant to prop up India against China.” By deepening its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan, China is in turn propping up Pakistan against India so that New Delhi’s capabilities and energies are tied down within South Asia, leaving Asia and the Global South as easy pickings for Chinese domination.

Pakistan enjoys the scary reputation of being the possessor of the “world’s fastest growing nuclear arsenal”. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Pakistan’s nuclear stockpile has risen from a low of 90 bombs to a high of 120 bombs between 2011 and 2012. India’s inventory of nukes remains at least 10 bombs shorter than what Pakistan has. Meanwhile, China’s stockpile has inched up from 240 to 250 nukes in the same period.

It is not publicly known how the rapidity of Pakistan’s vertical proliferation (acquisition of more and more nuclear bombs) is linked to its expanding civilian nuclear cooperation with China. In the mid-1990s, China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) supplied 5,000 ring magnets to the rogue nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan, to help him double Pakistan’s nuclear enrichment capacity at the top secret Kahuta nuclear weapons and missile research facility in Rawalpindi district of Punjab province. Going back further in time, the genesis of the nuclear weapons programme at Kahuta is traced to the presence of on-site Chinese technicians in the early 1980s. The same CNNC, which had a definitive hand in enhancing Pakistan’s nuclear weapons capacities, is now in charge of financing the civilian nuclear power plants in Karachi which are scheduled to come on line by 2019. The total non-transparency with which state-owned Chinese atomic companies like CNNC operate makes it much harder to detect when and in what proportions their civilian technology transfer to Pakistan also morphs into weapons-grade exchange. If Pakistan is able to ramp up its nuclear weapons arsenal at record speed despite being a subject of macroeconomic bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Chinese munificence must be given due credit.

Rebutting Indian and American objections to the escalating Sino-Pakistani nuclear nexus, China’s state-run Global Times has argued that “Pakistan serves as a bridgehead for China to further develop friendly ties with West Asian and North African nations as well as regions situated on the Indian Ocean”. The justification that Pakistan offers a pathway for China to access the Muslim world by virtue of the former’s geographical proximity to the oil-rich Persian Gulf is one rationale for the Beijing-Islamabad axis to survive so many historic shifts and realignments over decades.

However, China wields alternative keys apart from Pakistan to open doors and oil pipelines to Islamic countries of West Asia and North Africa. Beijing also has its own massive political clout in energy-abundant Central Asia.

What is happening in the guise of nuclear energy cooperation between China and Pakistan is old wine in a new bottle, i.e. a routine to keep India under relentless strategic pressure. As long as the Chinese play this game, they cannot expect to win trust or goodwill in India.

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