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The China-Pakistan Love Affair



On May 27, 1976, Mao Zedong's last public appearance with Z. A. Bhutto, Pakistan's prime minister.

May has been the lovefest month for China and Pakistan.

Criticizing legalism, moralism, and sentimentalism of American politics, Hans Morgenthau (1904-1980) argued for a policy based on national interests in foreign affairs. In theory, emotionality is rarely part of any bilateral calculus. However, Pakistan and China have forged a geopolitical romance, frequently reaffirmed in magniloquence from both sides, and recently expressed in a love song recorded by two young singers, a male singer from Pakistan and a female singer from China. "The world will see our love," the singers chant in Urdu and Mandarin.

Forty-five years ago, on May 27, 1976, Pakistan prime minister Z. A. Bhutto (1928-1979) met Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976) in his last public appearance. At this meeting,

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Bhutto committed to unwavering support for China's international disputes, and Mao agreed to transfer uranium to Pakistan, enabling Pakistan to acquire atomic weapons later. A few days ago, on May 21, Pakistan opened its China-assisted largest nuclear power plant, the sixth in A ROW, adding 1100 megawatts. This plant opening celebrated the China-Pakistan diplomatic relations established in May 1951.

The lovefest continues as China and Pakistan explore deeper economic relations in the coming years and decades. However, like in most cases, this romance, too, carries hamartia.

Imbalance

Captivating love affairs are rarely between equals, and when they are, they are downright boring. The audience is thrilled, and the literature comes alive when a mighty king falls for a beggar, Pygmalion seeks to animate his sculpture, or a prince marries a commoner. So far, the China-Pakistan love affair has not bewitched the world. Granted, China and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, and their militaries are top-class globally, 3rd and 10th respectively. True, that the countries cooperate to produce fighter jets.

Yet, China and Pakistan are unequal partners from head to toe. China is a superpower with a veto in the United Nations Security Council. Fast emerging as the world's first economy, China has an unprecedented trade surplus worth 422 billion dollars. Pakistan is poor and cash-strapped, carrying budget and trade deficits, sometimes shopping door to door for just a billion dollars to balance payment accounts.

China's seasoned leadership, undemocratic but resourceful, understands statecraft and has done well to pull nearly 100 million people out of poverty. Pakistan's artless leaders, elected and unelected, fight each other like starving primates, spending their days plotting palace coups, utterly lacking the competence to run a modern state. Pakistan's human development index stands at 152nd out of 189 countries, the lowest in South Asia.

China is secular; Pakistan is religious. Article 1 of the China constitution states: "The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants." The Pakistan constitution opens with the following words: "Whereas sovereignty over the entire Universe belongs to Almighty Allah alone, and the authority to be exercised by the people of Pakistan within limits prescribed by Him is a sacred trust."

The contrast is dramatic: China seeds clouds to make rain. Pakistan makes prayers for weather modification.

Due to immigration, Pakistanis are drawn either to the Middle East, the United Kingdom, the United States or Australia, not China. Millions of Pakistani labor and professionals work in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. Likewise, the United Kingdom is the home of the largest number of second and third-generation Pakistanis in Europe. The Pakistani bureaucracy is immensely westernized over the last seven decades. English is still the official language of Pakistan. Pakistani politicians in exile live in England or the Gulf States. The people-to-people contact between Pakistan and China is minimal. Most Pakistani traders and visitors go to Xinjiang, the distressful home of the Uighurs, a point discussed below.

Geopolitics

Despite the socio-economic imbalance, China and Pakistan share a physical border and correlated geopolitical dynamics.

In 1963, China and Pakistan agreed to delimit and demarcate the boundary between China's Xinjiang and Pakistan's "Kashmir." By contrast, India could not construct any such border agreement with China, perpetuating a border dispute that frequently erupts into armed conflict. With the border agreement, Pakistan and China began thinking about constructing a grand corridor connecting Kashgar to the seaports of Karachi and Gwadar. The Karakoram Highway (810 miles), the highest paved international road, meandering through 15,000 feet high mountains, opened in 1986 to mark the China-Pakistan friendship.

Since 2013, China and Pakistan are building a massive connectivity infrastructure worth at least 50 billion dollars as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Gwadar port, the deepest seaport in the world, located on the Arabian Sea, will provide China with a direct land-sea route to the Middle East and Eastern Africa. Geopolitically, Russia and the Central Asian States, mostly landlocked, will also have access to the warm waters at Gwadar.

Afghanistan, under the U.S. occupation since 2001, is likely to join the China-Pakistan economic corridor. However, whether the U.S. would be willing to leave Afghanistan to the Taliban remains to be seen. Furthermore, if Pakistan declines its airspace and land routes to the U.S. armed forces, the U.S. will have no way to access Afghanistan except through Iran. If China were to pressure Pakistan to deny access to the Pentagon, Pakistan would have no option but to obey orders.

Unless it joins the regional powers and resolves its disputes with Pakistan and China, India is likely to face a daunting geopolitical difficulty. The U.S. is wooing India into

a partnership with Japan and Australia to build a shared resistance to the Chinese influence in the region and elsewhere. Unfortunately, an anti-China India will gather more enemies than friends, facing perpetual security and economic threat. Possibly, a post-Modi India might prefer regional peace over global combat between the U.S. and China.

Relativity

Unlike the U.S. and the Soviet Union, China, for the most part, does not promote its national ideology in international relations or economic ties. The U.S. sells democracy to the world, though its domestic sociology remains highly racist. The Soviet Union sold communism to the world, though its ruling elite was corrupt to the core. Ignoring Morgenthau's concept of national interests, the U.S. continues to engage in duplicitous moralism.

China has little interest in supporting "the dictatorship of workers and peasants." China is an ideologically skeptical state as it has moved from controlled communism to a controlled free market. Perhaps through the wisdom of sages, such as Kongzi and Lao Tze, or sheer self-serving pragmatism, China knows that no one political system works for all nations. China rules with an iron hand to enforce its domestic policies and tolerates little dissent. On the international scene, however, China adopts ideological relativity.

To some extent, ideological relativity is consistent with international law and the U.N. Charter. Each nation is entitled to "political independence" within the constraints of human rights and the rule of law. Liberal democracy, capitalism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, secularism, or religionism, each system has a place in the Chinese pantheon of ideologies concerning foreign affairs.

For example, China has given no hints that Pakistan must dilute its Islamic orientation to maintain a friendship with China. Unlike the U.S., China would be willing to work even with the Taliban in Afghanistan. The ideological neutrality of a hegemon does not threaten the ruling elites of small nations. Furthermore, China shows no interest in reaching the people of a country at the expense of the rulers. It is too early to tell whether China would abandon its ideological neutrality in international relations.

Domestically, China is more vulnerable.

Uighurs

The Xinjiang Uighurs are the wild card in an otherwise triumphant script of the Chinese ascendancy in the region and the world. Xinjiang and its Muslim population — located next to numerous Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — share cultural and religious heritage with neighboring populations much more than the Han Chinese who rule China.

The U.S. and other Western nations have begun to protest the plight of Uighurs in detention camps accused of torture, forced labor, and sexual abuse. However, Pakistan and other regional Muslim countries say little about the treatment of Uighurs. Pakistan, for example, goes out of its way to condemn the Indian atrocities in Kashmir and the Israeli cruelty in Palestine. Still, Pakistan seals its lips when it comes to defending the Uighurs. Pakistan says that it privately engages China over the Uighurs issue.

Still, China will be unable to suppress the Uighurs for long. The mantra that the Uighurs are “terrorists” will not work. China understands that the Uighur issue is the weakest chain in the Belt and Road connectivity. While Muslim rulers may stay quiet, the Muslim populations will not. In a recent visit of China’s foreign minister to Turkey, there was a sizable public protest in Istanbul against the ill-treatment of the Uighurs. Suppose the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies allocate more resources to sensitize the Uighur issue to the Muslims in South Asia and elsewhere, which will most likely weaken China’s rise. In that case, the Uighur issue will create a profound ill-will among more than a billion Muslims, as does the ill-treatment of the Palestinians, Kashmiris, and Rohingyas. Because of its proximity to Xinjiang, Pakistan will be a front-line state to confront the Uighur issue, spoiling the lovefest with China.

Conclusion

Pakistan and China conceive their bilateral relationship in the language of love and friendship, much more than national interests. Economically weak, Pakistan relies on China for assistance and the road to modernization. Even though Pakistan is an Islamic state ruled by a chaotic succession of incompetent rulers with little knowledge of statecraft, China seldom interferes with Pakistan’s domestic politics. Focused on reaching the Middle East and East Africa through the world’s deepest seaport at Gwadar, the Chinese leadership is crystal clear in national priorities. For this, China is willing to spend vast amounts of money to uplift Pakistan, frequently teetering at the brink of bankruptcy. Wisely, China is not interested in exporting its governing model to Islamic Pakistan, certainly a love breaker. Nonetheless, the simmering Uighur problem, as the Achilles’ heel, may suddenly burst open to blight the China-Pakistan lovefest.

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