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Cooperation and rivalry: The United States and China deal with Pakistan

Ted Galen Carpenter - U.S. and the World - 14/10/2011

One prominent feature of the China-US relationship is the number of security issues that involve roughly equal elements of cooperation and rivalry. That is certainly the case with respect to the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs. Both Washington and Beijing would prefer to keep Tehran and Pyongyang out of the global nuclear weapons club. But the overlap in interests largely ends at that point. The United States is far more intense than China about achieving that objective, and Washington would love to see the two rogue regimes ousted from power. China, on the other hand, has important relations with both Iran and North Korea that PRC officials want to preserve. Iran is a significant supplier of energy to China's voracious economy and serves as a brake on US hegemony in the oil rich Persian Gulf. North Korea is seen as an essential geostrategic buffer state between the Chinese homeland and the rest of East Asia that the United States and its allies control.

A similar mixture of mutual interests and conflicting objectives is evident with respect to US and Chinese policy toward Pakistan. Both governments are deeply worried about the stability of the Pakistani state, and they have a vested interest in helping to prop up the current, beleaguered system. Indeed, Washington and Beijing share very specific worries. One is that a radical Islamist regime might come to power in Islamabad and provide extensive support for terrorist organizations that target the United States and China. The other worry is that an unraveling Pakistani state could compromise the security of that country's nuclear arsenal.

Consequently, both Beijing and Washington want to see the current quasi-secular political and military elite in Pakistan remain in power. But as in the case of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues, US and Chinese common interests do not extend much beyond that point. Indeed, on several other matters, the objectives of the two countries are largely at odds.

One glaring difference is the attitude toward Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan. For the United States, Islamabad's cooperation against the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan is crucial, and Washington is increasingly unhappy about the behavior of the Pakistani military and government. In fact, US officials cite growing evidence that Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) apparatus has aided the Taliban and al Qaeda rather than assisting the United States to combat those groups. Some members of the policy community in Washington now even regard Pakistan as an enemy instead of an ally of US counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts.

China is far more sympathetic to Pakistan's stance, largely for broader geostrategic reasons. Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf recently confirmed what a number of regional experts have argued for years - that much of the fighting in Afghanistan is a proxy war between India and Pakistan. There is ample evidence for that thesis. Pakistan has long sought to have a

friendly regime on its western flank, lest a pro-Indian government in Kabul create a situation in which Islamabad must deal with a security threat on both borders. Indeed, worry about India gaining decisive influence in Afghanistan was a key reason why Pakistan helped the Afghan Taliban gain power in the 1990s. Pakistani officials regard Afghan President Hamid Karzai as a stooge of India, and relations between Islamabad and Kabul have been frosty, at best, despite Washington's intense pressure for cooperation.

China shares Pakistan's concerns about India's influence in Afghanistan. Given China's broader regional rivalry with India, the prospect of Indian preeminence in Afghanistan, and the corresponding weakening of China's ally, Pakistan, is not viewed favorably in Beijing. Hence, Chinese officials quietly back Islamabad's actions to undermine Karzai's regime, even though that course runs directly counter to US policy.

There is another key feature that suggests at least as much rivalry as cooperation between Washington and Beijing regarding policy toward Pakistan. US leaders see Pakistan as, at most, an ally of necessity - and an unreliable one - in that part of the world. But for China, Pakistan is a crucial and generally reliable strategic partner. One major manifestation is Islamabad's agreement this spring to allow China to operate a naval base out of the Pakistani port of Gwadar. That installation is part of Beijing's long-term "string of pearls" strategy to build a series of naval bases along the rim of the Indian Ocean.

Washington regards the string of pearls objective in general and a Chinese naval presence in Gwadar as an unwelcome development. Most US policymakers want to see India, not China, become the leading regional military power in that part of the world. And in any case, US strategists do not want to see China's military capabilities creep closer to the oil riches of the Persian Gulf and the oil lifeline from that region to US allies in East Asia.

The bottom line is that Beijing and Washington have some common objectives in Pakistan, and those are probably sufficient to sustain cooperation at least in the near to medium term. But it is a wary, uneasy cooperation, since underlying those mutual goals are other, radically different interests and objectives.

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