

## COMMENT 213 - Pakistan: development calls for freedom and democracy!

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### *Introduction*

Chinese and Pakistani authorities celebrated on the past 21<sup>st</sup> of May the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relations. A series of events and ceremonies included the launching of the song ‘Pakistan has stolen my heart’, which reportedly instantaneously ‘became viral’ ([Global Times, 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 2021](#)), a commemorative coin ([Xinhua, 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 2021](#)) and a “‘Culture Day’ launched in Beijing to celebrate China-Pakistan relations” ([Global Times, 6 of June, 2021](#)). Since the early 1950s, China and Pakistan developed what has been called an ‘all-weather’ friendship. Historically, relations between the two nations were based on their common enmity towards India; they materialised in a strong security and defence cooperation ([Chaudury, R, 2017](#)). The 1963 agreement ceding a part of Pakistani-occupied Kashmir to China led to a significant consolidation of the alliance. Said alliance gained a strategic dimension through the pivotal role by Pakistan in facilitating the Sino-US rapprochement, which also led to further Sino-Pakistani military cooperation, particularly nuclear cooperation ([Hassan, 2017, p.2](#)).

In the post-9/11 era, Beijing and Islamabad ostensibly kept an official line of strategic cooperation in fighting terrorism in the region and building peace in Afghanistan. This was recently reaffirmed (see China’s, Pakistan’s and Afghanistan’s [joint declaration](#) of 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2021). However, in reality, China mistrusts the strategic capacity of the Pakistani deep state to control the jihadist

movement it set in motion – and the cooperation is less than strategic.<sup>1</sup>

A new landmark on this bilateral relation was the establishment of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of China’s external projection of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was set to become a ‘game changer’ for Pakistan’s economy and political future (Wolf, 2020). Siegfried Wolf’s work (2020) analysed the BRI through its most important component, the CPEC, and proposed a conceptual framework for evaluating the consistency of contemporary economic corridors wherein an articulated ‘common culture and history’ is seen as an essential pillar, ‘especially in those funded by China’ (p. 29).

### *1. The impossible cultural equation*

As Wolf (2020, p.9) emphasises by quoting Andrew Small, the creator of the Asia Programme for the German Marshall Fund of the United States, China and Pakistan ‘do not share any cultural reference points or values, and their militaries come from radically different traditions’. In a conclusion that is fully adapted to the official statements on the Seventieth anniversary of diplomatic relations, ‘Despite their enthusiastic rhetoric, Pakistan and China have little in common in terms of either history, culture, or language. The two countries have different political and social systems.’ (Wolf, 2020, p.150)

Both countries, being apparently conscious of this reality, believe that a forceful cultural engineering attitude will eventually bridge the gap. A recent report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, titled ‘The Local Roots of Chinese Engagement in Pakistan’ (Safdar, June 2021) makes an enthusiastic appraisal of the Chinese cultural diplomacy achievements in Pakistan.

As regards education; these achievements rely on three fundamental instruments: ‘university scholarships, vocational training programs, and Chinese language courses.’ (p.5) Both in the five Confucius Institutes in operation in the country and in other schools, 25.000 Pakistanis were learning Mandarin in 2018 and 28.000 Pakistani students were studying in China, 7000 of them with Chinese scholarships – far more than is the case of any other country, and more than the combined figure for the US, UK and Australia. Several educational initiatives, in particular at the

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<sup>1</sup> This was quite apparent to the author of these lines during his presence, from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> of December, 2016, in the Fifth China-South Asia Cultural Forum organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies from the University of Chengdu.

higher education level, tie Chinese and Pakistani institutions.

An insightful look at the question of language and cultural ‘homogenisation’ would certainly lead us to a considerably more cautious attitude. From its creation, Pakistan decided to impose a language largely alien to most of its people: Urdu. The attempt to erase Bengali as a national language in Bangladesh – although Bengali was at the time the language native to the majority of the country’s population – led to genocidal acts and ultimately to the break-away of Bangladesh from the rest of country. The issue is far from resolved and it is estimated that Urdu is a native language to only circa 8% of the Pakistani population. The downgrading or repression of native languages and cultures continues to be a major hurdle in the country.

China’s ‘policy of Sinicization’ (Wolf, 2020, p. 59) towards its own minorities in Tibet and East Turkestan (Xizang and Xinjiang, respectively) stand as the harshest cultural forced assimilation we can find in the world today and is hardly reassuring for neighbouring countries such as Pakistan.

The imposition of Mandarin is a crucial aspect of this policy, as Zhou ([East Asia Forum, 4<sup>th</sup> of June, 2021](#)) recently underlined: ‘learning to speak Mandarin is considered critical in the identification with the unified Chinese nation. In recent years, minorities in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Tibet and other minority communities have been coerced into learning Mandarin. Resistance to this approach leads to punishments, including re-education camps, detentions, job loss and financial retribution. Bilingual teaching and research became a political taboo in Xinjiang and other minority areas, with the government forcing academic journals on the topic to close and scholars to instead research Mandarin education.’ Chinese cultural diplomacy should therefore be seen with caution, especially taking in consideration Pakistani’s reminiscent persecution of native languages.

## *2. Smothering of a once vibrant public opinion*

Safdar also highlights the Chinese news agencies’ advancement in the Pakistani media panorama: ‘Xinhua launched a Xinhua Pakistan Service in October 2019 in partnership with Independent News Pakistan, a local media organization. According to the agreement, Independent News Pakistan has agreed to translate Xinhua’s English service news into Urdu and then disseminate these stories into the country’s wider media ecosystem. Independent News Pakistan’s website has a

specific section devoted to the Xinhua Pakistan Service, and the local Pakistani media outfit maintains bilateral news exchange arrangements with Xinhua and China Radio International that involves translating and publishing. The expansion of Xinhua's Urdu service is significant, as Urdu news audiences account for much of the domestic market. This move seems to be in sync with Beijing's broader strategy of localizing information and disseminating it through partners within the country.' (...) 'Leading Pakistani media houses and outlets—including the Jang Group, the Daily Pakistan, Nawa-iWaqt, the Associated Press of Pakistan, the Daily Times, Hum News, and Pakistan Today—have signed on to Xinhua's subscription services. Furthermore, the China Daily has placed its newsfeed prominently on Dawn's homepage. The news stories do not focus on Pakistan exclusively but also highlight China's views on key issues of global interest, China's technological achievements, and its ongoing support for developing countries in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. Other leading newspapers like the Express Tribune regularly print stories on the benefits of the CPEC and China's economic support to Pakistan. Many of these stories originally appeared in China Economic Net, an initiative of the Chinese state-affiliated Economic Daily. It was designated one of China's eight key media websites by the Information Office of the State Council in 2003.' (pp. 11-12).

Special attention is given to people-to-people contacts, and in 2018 alone eighteen delegations of journalists were invited to visit China (p.13). Social media is another relevant arena, as both Chinese government and state-owned enterprises enjoy an increasing presence in platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn and in particular twitter (pp.14-15). Zaho, the former Chinese diplomat that inspired the above-mentioned song 'Pakistan has stolen my heart'— according to the report, better known in the West as an epigone of the 'Wolf warrior diplomacy' – attained 950.000 followers on twitter.

What the report by the 'Carnegie Endowment for International Peace' does not mention, but which is much telling about this Chinese cultural embrace, is the increased persecution and censorship of independent journalists that dare challenge the official line and Sinification of the media. According to the Freedom Network State of Press Freedom Report [2021](#) issued on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 'A dramatic escalation in the climate of intimidation and harassment of media and its practitioners adversely affecting freedom of expression and access to information

environment was discovered’ (...) ‘The report reveals that invisible and visible hands have joined forces to tighten the screws on media in Pakistan through various means of coercive censorship, including murders, legal cases, assaults, abductions, detentions and threats, resulting in squeezing the space for freedom of expression and media freedoms resulting in increasing silence and erosion of public-interest journalism. The data shows that no place in all the four provinces or federal capital Islamabad is safe – attacks against journalists are taking place everywhere and that shockingly, the state and its functionaries have emerged as the principal threat actor wielding the biggest stick to browbeat the media into submission and growing silence.’

Reporters without Borders, which classified Pakistan in the 145<sup>th</sup> position on its Press Freedom Index 2021, [considered](#) that ‘The Pakistani media, which have a long tradition of being very lively, have become a priority target for the country’s “deep state,” a euphemism for the military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the main military intelligence agency, and the significant degree of control they exercise over the civilian executive. The influence of this military “establishment,” which cannot stand independent journalism, has increased dramatically since Imran Khan became prime minister in July 2018.’

According to Safdar, a special assistant to the Prime-Minister, the ultimate aim is clear: ‘close coordination among Pakistani and Chinese media outlets [is] vital in the defence of national and economic interests of both countries and [for] defeat[ing] the negative propaganda against projects that are proving [to be a] game changer for the entire region.’ (p.12)

### *Concluding remarks*

Pakistan, a country created from scratch seven decades ago, has been obsessed with the need to create a new identity that would justify the swift separation from the rest of the Indian sub-continent – where it belongs and where its peoples played a vital role in the past thousands of years. This effort was translated into the downplaying – in some domains, erasing – of all identity traits that do not relate to the Islamic colonisation. The hypertrophic, fanatic reading of Islam and the denial of its ancient cultural identity, most obviously existing mother tongues, constitute two dramatic side effects.

Islamic fanaticism has been promoted as the new cultural identity and as the main

instrument of foreign policy. This seriously hindered the cultural heritage of the country's different peoples as well as the nation's capacity to embrace modernity, freedom, and development. Furthermore, the domestically cultivated Islamic fanaticism became difficult to control by its own creators, as contemporary Jihadism aims at blurring any sort of national identity in the design of a new caliphate.

However, for the deep state, the once vibrant civil society and the cultural diversity of its peoples remain a problem, a problem which may be managed through a sort of authoritarian mind-set alternative to Islamic fanaticism – that is, the authoritarian mind-set offered by the Chinese Communist Party, which, in the name of growth and development, would further subdue the country's cultural diversity, freedom of expression, and the remains of the Pakistani democratic building.

There are alternatives to this state of affairs. The [EU-India Connectivity Partnership](#) approved in the summit of May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021 which took place in Porto, Portugal, is based on 'shared values of democracy, freedom, rule of law and respect for human rights – comprising four chapters, (1) digital; (2) transport; (3) energy and (4) people-to-people in 'a transparent, viable, inclusive, sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based approach' to connectivity.

What I call the 'spicy-network'<sup>2</sup> is seeing its first steps being built through this connectivity partnership, which is worked at a larger scale and with wider ambitions in the '[Build Back Better World \(B3W\) initiative](#)' launched by the G-7 June 2021 Summit – aiming to influence, broadly within a decade, 40 trillion dollars-worth of worldwide investments.

Pakistan would be short-sighted to ignore this opportunity! Learning foreign languages is a must, and this obviously applies to Mandarin, the most spoken language in the world; however, it should never be endeavoured at the expense of mother tongues. Gaining access to information is also positive, but to be submitted to an information-control foreign framework is disastrous.

To engage in the 'spicy network' is to engage in development within a democratic and free framework, respectful of identities and human core values. Pakistan should look into this alternative direction!

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<sup>2</sup> Paper in draft to be published soon.

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