

Joint military exercise highlights growing Pakistan-China relations

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Joint Sino-Pakistani military exercises, named YOUVI (Friendship), began on November 16. Both countries claimed the exercise aimed to curb terrorism. However, Pakistan is also keen to enhance its ties to China, as its relations with Washington deteriorate.

The lengthy, two-week YOUVI exercise is the fourth in a series of exercises between the two countries. Two of those were conducted in China and two in Pakistan. The latest exercise was unusually large, however. A senior Pakistani security official said, “This is the first time that brigade-level war games are being staged by Pakistan and China,” the *Express Tribune* reported November 14.

Military expert Mahmud Durrani told *China Network Television*: “It’s an anti-terrorist drill for the region of South Asia and the larger region that includes China, Afghanistan and Central Asia. We have a very serious threat of terrorism, particularly in Pakistan, which is not a secret.”

Indian reports said the exercise’s target was India, not terrorism, however. Before the exercise began, the *Times of India* described it as “dangerous for India,” which is Pakistan’s long-standing enemy and now the US’s main strategic partner in South Asia.

The exercise started as sharp conflicts developed between the US and China, with President Barack Obama “shifting” US foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region. The Obama administration has announced new basing arrangements for US Marines in northern Australia, an attempt by the US to undercut China’s growing influence and to dominate the region.

On the other hand, growing US-Pakistan tensions have opened up more space for China to increase its influence in that country. Despite its support for US neo-colonial war in Afghanistan, the Pakistani elite now fears its strategic and geopolitical interests are

being undermined by US support for India at Pakistan’s expense.

The crisis in US-Pakistan relations is still worsening over the Afghan war as well. In September, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, accused Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI) of supporting the Haqqani network, which launches anti-US attacks in Afghanistan. Pakistan’s military so far has refused to attack the Haqqani network, despite repeated US demands.

India recently entered into an agreement with Afghanistan to serve as an ally of the Karzai regime, a move also aimed at both China and Pakistan. The agreement further weakened Pakistan’s position in the region, stirring opposition to the US and India. To counter the US strategy of promoting India, Pakistan increasingly looks to China to shore up its declining influence with the US.

The Indian ruling class is concerned at growing military ties between China and Pakistan, whose latest exercise was held near the Indian border province of Rajasthan. The November 5 *Times of India* reported: “China is believed to be once again trying to put pressure on India through the Pakistani border adjoining Rajasthan.” The report claimed that its army was already in the north-east and opposite Jammu and Kashmir in Pakistan. Several Indian press reports claimed Chinese troop presence in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), citing Indian officials.

The *Times* added: “China is extending strategic help to Pakistan in every way. China is not only providing arms but is also helping upgrade Pakistan’s tank, weapons, UAV, ammunition etc.”

China immediately reacted to Indian reports. In *The Hindu* of November 9, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence dismissed Indian media reports that

the joint military exercise is conducted to exert pressure on India, and said that it is “not targeted at any third nation.”

Fu Xiaoqiang, a scholar at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, a state-run think-tank, dismissed media reports as “groundless” and based on “hearsay.” He added that India “always wears blinkers to examine China’s cooperation with Pakistan. For example, we all know there are many Chinese experts and engineers in Pakistan working on large projects. It is the Indian media which linked that with security issues.”

Indian politicians are continuing to warn of the military implications of growing China-Pakistan ties, however. On November 10 Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi said that Pakistan is taking advantage of its relationship with Beijing, also blaming China: “There is a lot of concern over Chinese troop presence in PoK in India, and particularly in Gujarat as it was a border state.”

These comments come amid rising strategic tensions throughout Asia, most strikingly shown by Obama’s Asian tour. However, China is also increasing its influence in Asia, including Pakistan, against the US and India. It has been developing port facilities in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka and it is also planning to build rail lines in Nepal.

China has invested over \$200 million to help build the deep-sea Gwadar port in Pakistan’s Arabian Sea coast, partly with a view to open an energy and trade corridor from the Gulf, across Pakistan to western China.

According to *Asia Times*, while Pakistan wants China to build a naval base in Gwadar in Balochistan province, Beijing would prefer to set up military bases either in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or in the Federally Administered Northern Areas bordering China’s Xinjiang province.

On October 26, *India Today* reported: “Beijing believes that similar to the American military presence in Pakistan, a Chinese presence would enable its military to effectively counter the Muslim separatists ... [in] trouble-stricken Xinjiang Province.”

The *Economic Times* of November 10 reported, “Claiming that Chinese personnel have assumed de-facto control of the Gilgit-Baltistan region, a Washington-based think-tank told US lawmakers that

the area would end up like Tibet and East Turkestan if China’s unwarranted interventions are not challenged.”

Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed region that remains in tight control of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). East Turkestan is the name previously used for China’s Xinjiang autonomous region, used to provocatively highlight the Turkic roots of its ethnic-Uyghur population.

These moves come amid deepening economic and diplomatic ties between China and Pakistan, as well. President Zardari has visited China eight times in the last three years, apart from Prime Minister Gilani’s four visits. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao paid a visit to Pakistan last year. China has been supporting Pakistan’s claim on Kashmir while Pakistan has extended its support to China on the issues of Xinjiang, Tibet, and Taiwan.

Pakistan plans to buy two atomic power plants with a combined capacity of 2,000 MW from China, despite concerns expressed by Western powers over nuclear cooperation between the two countries. The plants will be installed at the Karachi Nuclear Power Plant complex to address the country’s energy crisis. The China National Nuclear Corporation and Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission will reportedly enter into an agreement for a joint study to finalize design modifications for the new plants.

The leaderships of Pakistan and China are paying special attention to promoting economic relations. Last year bilateral trade was US\$8.7 billion; this year it is projected to cross the \$10 billion mark.



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