Book Review

Boni, Filippo. Sino-Pakistani Relations: Politics, Military and Regional Dynamics. 186pp., Routledge 2020

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This book comes out of a doctoral thesis which specifically assesses military prerogatives in Pakistan in the context of the country’s relations with China. By focusing especially on this relationship in the post 9/11 period, Filippo Boni assesses the extent of military influence in Pakistan’s domestic politics. Formulating a continuum of civil-military relations, he applies a scale that is deployed to gauge the military’s sway in four key decision-making areas: internal security, foreign policy, economic policy and elite recruitment. Three case studies are analysed: 1) the development of the port of Gwadar; 2) the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); and 3) Sino-Pakistani relations in the Afghan context. Boni concludes from his research that the continuity that can be observed in Sino-Pakistan relations over many decades hinges on the central role performed by the military in Pakistan as (a) the main port of call and (b) the central interlocutor for relations between the two countries. “(I)t is ultimately in the military dimension where the relationship grounds its roots and which has ensured that even at critical junctures Sino-Pakistani relations remain fundamentally strong” (p. 2). It is the military—more than other institutions—which has played a core role in cementing the ties between the two countries.

Referring to the dynamics which have contributed to the way the strategic relationship has evolved, Boni recalls that “the military retained throughout the country’s history their defence and foreign policy prerogatives” (p. 29). Pakistan’s military, he argues, has used its ultimate institutional autonomy to strengthen its grip in all areas, especially foreign policy and internal stability, that have been considered to be ‘security driven’ since the early years of independence as a result of the military imbalance vis-à-vis India. In the context of Pakistan-China relations this control of decision-making neither encourages civilian institutions towards democratic decision-making, accountability and transparency nor does it empower them to assert an independent foreign policy. This prompts him to speculate whether the expansive nature of military entrenchment stems from a profound distrust of the political parties. The Pakistan army feel uneasy when the provinces press for their development preferences to be accommodated as high priorities. For long it has thought of creating an institution to be led and regulated solely by the army to oversee the implementation of CPEC, serving as yet another example of how deeply Pakistan’s military is involved in the political process (p. 17). This leads the author to state further: “The constant interactions between Chinese authorities and Pakistan’s militaries demonstrate how the Pakistani army represents the backbone of Sino-Pakistani ties” (p. 70).

Boni outlines how, since the 1960s, combined with regional as well as international geopolitical dynamics, “the kaleidoscope of interest of the major players” eventually resulted in Pakistan and China becoming increasingly close on a number of issues. A key factor which induced China and Pakistan to regard each other as possible partners was the shift in the United States’ foreign policy priority from Pakistan to India. The 1962 border war between China and India is yet another factor to be taken into account. Pakistan kept looking for a counterweight to India and China proved rather generous in providing substantial economic and military support. This prompted a major departure for the country’s leadership when it redirected the country’s orientation towards Beijing as the fulcrum of Pakistan’s foreign policy and, even more importantly, as “the balancer of
India’s military superiority” (p. 35). It was in China that Pakistan sought a viable and effective response to secure strategic balance in the region where Indian military might was considered to be far superior (p. 37). For their part, the Chinese responded directly to the Indian nuclear threat by boosting Pakistan’s deterrent capabilities (p. 41).

Boni points out that since its independence in 1947 Pakistan’s foreign policy has been driven by the perception that India poses a major threat to it. Hence the Pakistani establishment has tailored the country’s foreign policy accordingly, relying heavily on external support, provided by the US intermittently but more consistently by China since 1963 (p. 31). Boni argues that it is a pragmatic and well-calculated vision of national interests that has enabled the two countries to develop their multi-layered co-operation (p. 30). In the context of the border conflict between China and India in 1962, Pakistan’s willingness to win over China was among the main causes that facilitated the 1963 border agreement between them.

Turning to how conditions in Pakistan have evolved since the start of the 2000s, the security situation and the domestic environment specifically have been the overriding concerns for successive governments. However, the modernisation of Pakistan’s physical infrastructure, especially its energy grids as well as road and rail communications, was also critical and it was China which stepped forward as the only country willing to invest heavily in this area (p. 2).

Boni’s analysis points to a pattern which places Pakistan’s military at the very centre of relations between Islamabad and Beijing (p. 153). It is primarily the Pakistan Army which determines and drives the stability of relations between the two countries, especially as the army remains apprehensive lest the elected representatives reconsider the terms of engagement of the Pakistan-China equation (p. 156). With regard to Pakistan’s weapons procurement, China was the major exporter of arms to Pakistan between 2010 and 2014, accounting for 51% of Pakistan’s supply of major weapons according to global military expenditure estimates (p. 89).

In recent years there has been a deepening of relations between China and Pakistan, especially since Beijing announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) under which CPEC is a showcase of such close cooperation that “(it) has brought Beijing into the daily political dynamics of Pakistan” (p. 159). The relationship has grown to a level which, to a large extent, defines the infrastructural and socio-economic future of Pakistan and is set to grow firmer over the years, especially at a time when the United States’ presence in and involvement with Pakistan is on the decline while its alignment with India is in the ascendant.

Pakistan’s military have found it in their interest to exercise their power less overtly and to retain control of internal security and foreign policy behind the curtain of a democratic dispensation. The civilians on their part claim that they have eroded military influence in the areas of elite recruitment and economic policy, and boast about their attempts to tackle the energy crisis and winning the 2018 general elections. A pattern of regulated democracy started to take shape in the 2008-2013 period, it became further crystallised in the post-2013 time frame.

Among the new pillars of the economic architecture as foreseen under the BRI will be the port of Gwadar. The dynamics pertaining to the port of Gwadar include a wide range of civil and military considerations that underpin Pakistan’s decision to choose China as its strategic partner. Financial, diplomatic and strategic factors also figure in such calculations after “the United States had imposed sanctions on Pakistan in the wake of the 1998 nuclear test and, as a result, China was the only way out from the diplomatic and economic isolation that Pakistan was facing” (p. 55).

Ever since CPEC got under way, the partnership between Pakistan and China has contributed to “the crystallisation of the system of alliances characterising South Asia over the last years, with the China-Pakistan partnership on the one side, and the US-India cooperation on the other” (p. 66). The remarkable stability and resilience demonstrated by Sino-Pakistani relations since they were established in 1951 has puzzled many observers for the last six decades (p. 2). Boni familiarises his readers with factors which engendered and still maintain much consistency in Pakistan-China bilateral relations by providing a framework for understanding both their evolution and continuity as seen in the quality of relations between the two countries (p. 3). Among his stated objectives, the author professes “a need to debunk the all-weather rhetoric permeating Pakistan-China relations”. He deems it pertinent to consider the long-term view instead of focusing on short-term assessments. To declare that defence cooperation serves as the backbone of Sino-Pakistan ties while relegating civilian stewardship to a secondary and mostly supportive role seems to state the obvious.
Asking if any alternate approaches might have been available to the civilian actors and how they might have interacted differently is what could have made his analysis more insightful and even original.