

A DEEPENING ALLIANCE

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There were no dramatic announcements from the meeting between the Pakistan Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, late last week in the Chinese island province of Hainan. It was about the further consolidation of the all-weather partnership between Islamabad and Beijing across a broadening range of issues —from economic and commercial to the political and security. What makes this round of Sino-Pak strategic dialogue significant is the rapid deterioration of India-China ties amidst the unresolved military standoff in eastern Ladakh. India has had to cope with the consequences of the China-Pak partnership that can be traced back to the mid 1950s. Yet, Delhi has continuously underestimated the deepest sources animating it. To make matters worse, Delhi has always over-determined the prospects for its own partnership with China and its ability to transcend the Sino-Pak alliance.

For Delhi, the immediate concern is about intensive Sino-Pak political coordination on Kashmir. China has lent strong support to Islamabad's efforts to mobilise international condemnation of Delhi's constitutional changes in Kashmir since late last year. The joint statement issued after the talks between Wang and Qureshi saw China reaffirm its criticism of India's "unilateral actions" in Kashmir. As part of the commitment on both sides to support the "core interests" of the other, Pakistan expressed support for China's repression of the majority Muslim community in Beijing's far western province of Xinjiang. The point here is not about Pakistan's double standards in raising human rights concerns about Kashmir and supporting China in Xinjiang. Hypocrisy is very much part of international relations. The real story is about the deep foundations of the Sino-Pak alliance that transcend religion and are tied to shared interests of the two nations in containing India.

India, however, has been reluctant to confront this central reality — which continues to express itself in multiple ways. These range from the construction of the Karakoram Highway through Kashmir in the 1970s to the expansive China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the present and from Beijing's nuclear and missile assistance to Pakistan in the 1980s to the integration of Pakistani naval forces and bases into China's ambitious Indian Ocean strategy. Even as it fends off their coordinated attempt to put India in the international dock on Kashmir, Delhi must prepare for a full range of other contingencies — from Sino-Pak joint support to insurgent groups in India's Northeast to probing India's other internal, regional and international vulnerabilities. Recognising the challenge of the Sino-Pak alliance is necessarily the first step in any Indian strategy to cope with it in the days ahead.

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