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Interview of Ambassador Shahid M. Amin, Pakistan

Interview by Professor Swaran Singh

Ambassador (Retired) Shahid M. Amin is a veteran Pakistani diplomat who served in the Pakistan Foreign Service from 1958 to 1997. He held Ambassadorial assignments for 18 years and served respectively as Ambassador to Libya, the Soviet Union, France, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia. He was concurrently Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the OIC (Jeddah) and UNESCO (Paris). He also had postings in New York, Geneva, Kabul, Brussels, Jeddah, New Delhi, Tehran and London. He worked on the Rann of Kutch arbitration case from 1965 to 1969. He opened the Pakistan Embassy in India in 1976 and served as Deputy Ambassador/CDA for two years. Since retirement, he has been involved in teaching, writing and as a TV/radio analyst on national affairs. He has authored four books and has written articles for newspapers and magazines. He holds and MA in English Literature (Punjab University) and an MA in International Relations (Fletcher School, Boston). He stood first in Pakistan in the competition batch of 1958 for the Pakistan Superior Services.

Swaran Singh: I am Swaran Singh, Professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and currently part of an Oral History project on China Studies in South Asia. I have great pleasure of speaking today to Ambassador Shahid Amin, an eminent diplomat and currently Co-Chairman of the Karachi Council on Foreign Relations in Pakistan. We will be talking today on the theme of China’s relations with Pakistan as it is understood by practitioners and intellectuals on foreign affairs. This interview Sir, is a part of our Oral History project on China studies in South Asia. We have already completed a similar project on China Studies in India and that is a book being published by Cambria Press in US this year. For that we had interviewed China scholars, business people, academics, diplomats and intellectuals in India.

We also explain that these interviews involved people who have spent decades of their lives dealing with China and therefore these are normally free flowing reminiscences-based conversations and nothing has to be formally structured for this purpose. In our conversation style interviews Sir, we usually commence the interview by asking a rather simple question i.e. at what stage in your life did the word ‘China’ appear before you or when were your first encounters with the idea or reality of China and how did that occur. In simple words, what are your initial memories of China as a young person?
**Ambassador Amin:** China is a very well known ancient civilization and a neighbouring country of Pakistan. Even as a child I was conscious of the fact that China is a well known ancient civilization and a great country with its own traditions and system. Basically many Chinese people were settled in the subcontinent. Also, as you ask about my early memories of China, I remember there were several Chinese who were known for selling shoes; they seemed to be experts in making shoes. There were Chinese people in Pakistan who had some background of dentistry and were known as good dentists. Therefore, I remember them as dentists. My earliest impression of the Chinese who were settled in Pakistan is as shoe makers and even dentists. They looked different and of course they spoke a different language as well so they were distinct.

Talking about the relations between Pakistan and China, in Pakistan, there is great good will for China. In fact, China is considered as Pakistan’s best friend; a friend who has been with us in good times and bad times. China is considered as a good friend by the people of Pakistan as well. China too, has been using very interesting language to describe its friendship with Pakistan as ‘higher than the Himalayas’ and ‘deeper than the oceans’. They have helped in creating this environment of deep friendship and comradeship between the two nations. Many people, of course, have different interpretations. In India there is a tendency to see this friendship as a kind of collusion by saying that my enemy’s enemy is my friend. For us in Pakistan, this is like putting it in perverse language.

If country A is having problems with country B, it looks to country C to become a friend of that country. To be fair, Pakistan was certainly one of the first countries in the world, certainly the first Muslim country, to recognize the communist regime in China soon after it came to power. We were the first to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1950. Especially, the role played by our Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, who was in power till his assassination in October 1951, is very important. He took the initiative in engaging China and this was to become the most fundamental principle or pillar of Pakistan’s foreign policy for coming times. You will recall that the cold war was at its height and the United States had refused to recognize China. Not only this, China was also kept out of the United Nations system till about 1971. So we were among the few countries at that time to establish diplomatic relations with Communist China.
Moreover, soon in 1950s we were also to join the US sponsored military pact namely, South East Asian Treaty Organisation or SEATO.

**Swaran Singh:** It is interesting to see that Pakistan was the first Muslim country, second commonwealth country and third non-communist country to recognize China. Though the popular perception is that China does a great favour to Pakistan by being so friendly with Islamabad, the foundation of their relations was in fact laid in quite a different manner. In reality, to begin with, it was China that was the country that was isolated. Moreover, Pakistan was soon to join SEATO and still continue to support China’s case for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council. Thus in fact Pakistan was the one doing a favour to China. In this context what were the triggers for Pakistan to make efforts to befriend China?

**Ambassador Amin:** Many people seem to forget these historical facts. As far as I know, from the policy maker’s point of view, firstly we recognized China because we thought everyone else would. It was not exactly foreseen in 1950 that there would be such vigorous opposition to Communist China by the United States and that all efforts would be made to keep China away. Pakistan recognized China because we thought other countries would also do the same. We already had a difficult relationship with India and thus it made ample sense for Pakistan to have at least one country in the neighbourhood that was friendly to Pakistan. China was our neighbour and a great power. Therefore China could not be an adversary for Pakistan. In fact, it made no sense to have an unfriendly relationship with a third neighbour. Thus, it was clearly seen as a strategic relationship from the very beginning.

In the 1950s, the Soviet Union had also tilted in favour of India. This was another reason for Pakistan to be friendly to China. In 1949 there was a devaluation of currency and Pakistan did not go ahead with this but India did devalue the Indian rupee. India imposed a ban on trade with Pakistan and we were in a very critical situation. We had to look for some other source for essential commodities like coal that we needed. This also helped to bring Pakistan closer to China. I suppose it was 1954, when there was the Non-Aligned Summit in Bandung. At that time Zhou En Lai seemed to be quite receptive to Pakistan’s point of view. I would not say that he endorsed Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. However, there seemed to be some kind of rivalry
between Zhou En Lai and Jawaharlal Nehru in the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (Indonesia) in April 1955 and it was clear that they were not seeing altogether in harmony. This was not about their border conflict as yet.

For Pakistan that was the first positive diplomatic impact: the meeting between Zhou En Lai and Mohammed Ali Bogra at the Bandung Conference. In that meeting Prime Minister Zhou En Lai invited Prime Minister Bogra to visit China. It was Pakistan’s next Prime Minister Suhrawardy who visited China in 1956 although it was known that he pro-west. We also thought that China can be a friendly country in the overall security environment. Under Chairman Mao Tse Tung China started to develop differences with the post-Stalin Soviet Union. At any rate, the first visit by Prime Minister Suhrawardy, I think, was a great success. When he returned to Pakistan, he made a statement, in the Pakistan parliament and he said that he could see if there was a confrontation of India and Pakistan, a third country would be helpful. However, then China-India relations deteriorated and Pakistan made a formal opening towards China. The border issue (between China and Pakistan) was resolved and there were some other agreements and then President General Ayub Khan made a visit to China. It is often said that, no foreign visitor in China had ever received such enthusiastic welcome which President Ayub Khan received. The reasons of this were probably best known to the Chinese themselves.

The Chinese had their own calculations. They were grateful to Pakistan for recognizing China and for establishing diplomatic relations. They were very isolated people at that time. The fact was that U.S.A. has (had) put China on the sidelines. We established the first air-link with China. The Chinese welcomed these developments. We were like a window for China to the rest of the world. At that time China and Pakistan came close to one another. This was a reflection of China’s isolation. More important factor probably was that China was going through a bad period in terms of its relations with India. There was the 1962 war and the West rushed to help India and there were deep apprehensions in China. The 1960s, on the other hand, were the high peak in relations between China and Pakistan.

Swaran Singh: Would the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s in China be any logical explanation for this high-peak in China-Pakistan relations? And would you also see this anti-India sentiment
growing as the cementing factor in making this close relationship enduring and such a powerful relationship between these two neighbours of India.

**Ambassador Amin:** That would come later on. In the 1965 war China was already considered as an ally of Pakistan. Even some kind of ultimatum was also given by China to India. I was already in the foreign office in Pakistan. And some words to that effect, that China and Pakistan are comrades in arms were conveyed. I remember Premier Zhou En Lai got a terrific reception in Lahore in the famous Shalimar Bagh. The public perception was also such that China is a great power and neighbour and an ally who is willing help us. When the moment of truth came the United States policy towards Pakistan was seen to be discriminatory. To be fair to the United States, they had never agreed to help Pakistan in a war against India. But the public had this impression. When the hour of truth came, the United States backed off. It can be said that the India factor has helped a great deal in the warming of the relations between China and Pakistan.

**Swaran Singh:** China is also called an ‘all weather friend’ of Pakistan. This especially means that China has been the only country which has come to the help of Pakistan in difficult times and that makes China very special.

**Ambassador Amin:** Again, China was very understanding and helpful to Pakistan in the 1971 war. Although it was realistic as it was helpful. It tried to give good advice to Pakistan. This is clear from the several memoirs written about the 1971 period; they said to us, “You have a problem, please solve it”. The Chinese had never made any specific commitment, but they were very supportive of Pakistan in general. They (Chinese) were very critical of India.

**Swaran Singh:** There was a phase of Cultural Revolution in China. This saw China’s increased indulgence with Pakistan. China was shrillest in supporting, for example, issue of self-determination in Kashmir. China has since climbed down from there.

**Ambassador Amin:** I would slightly disagree with this formulation. The closest the Chinese came to supporting Pakistan on Kashmir was in 1965, just before the war. [Cultural Revolution was still to fully take off.] Zhou En Lai made an open statement in support of Pakistan. He also
spoke about the Soviet Union support for India. During the Cultural Revolution, there was great empathy and support for Pakistan. Pakistan had a great setback in the East after the 1971 war. Pakistan’s importance in international affairs diminished. Its military might had also declined. In diplomacy, people made hard-headed decisions. Thus after 1971, the peak of the relationship did not exist. The warmth in relations was not the same as it was in 1960. Possibly, China gives importance to its national interest and China’s position also changed on Kashmir. It believes that the issue should be settled between India and Pakistan. However, China continues to be a key provider of aid to Pakistan for its military as well as for technical and economical purposes.

Rising China now has a global perception. First they are a very fast rising country and they will become a superpower in two or three decades and they see India as a potential rival. They also see USA, and India’s connection with USA, and view it as a strategic kind of linkage. Whatever China may say about India, they say nice things about India now. So, in relative terms, China-India relations are better. The relations are better because there are fantastic trade figures and there are high level visits between the two countries. At the same time, both China and India have deep reservations about each other. In my opinion this is the case. China sees a global rivalry with the United States, with latter [US] being little subdued at this time. In my prediction it will come up again in the near future.

**Swaran Singh:** You mention that China had not fully calculated the liberation of East Pakistan. After the 1971 war there were several possible choices. One China could have had allies in both East and West of India, but given the fact that initially the new regime in Bangladesh was very friendly to India. Is there something that would explain opening of the relationship with West Pakistan [now Pakistan] that would explain their missile and nuclear technology cooperation in subsequent years? Was this a new thinking on the part of China that they would need to help Pakistan with more potent technologies?

**Ambassador Amin:** China used veto power to prevent the entry of Bangladesh into the United Nations. This was basically done in order to please Pakistan. When Pakistan recognized Bangladesh after 1974 Lahore Summit, China established formal relations with Bangladesh. I
am sure they have good relations. And, this is in no way to downgrade Bangladesh that, I believe, it figures less in traditional calculations of China.

Yes, the traditional support continues to Pakistan and that I think is a constant factor that is unlikely to change. The global realities are that China at some stage will become a greater rival of the United States and this will begin at a global level. The Chinese are playing a waiting game. They are waiting for the right time and they do not want problems on their way to becoming a super power. They discourage Pakistan from having problems with India.

**Swaran Singh**: What about the relations with China after Pakistan went nuclear? Has it changed their enduring equations in any manner?

**Ambassador Amin**: They know fully well that Pakistan’s safety lies in not going for a war with India. Pakistan should not be foolish enough to go to war with India as it cannot win a war. In fact both the countries will be destroyed in such a war. People in Pakistan now believe that they must establish better relations in the subcontinent. The US thinks that Pakistan has a problem with India in a certain context. We feel that we do not have problems with India in the global context. As far as India is concerned, they can take care of the relations with the US themselves.

**Swaran Singh**: It is a very interesting relationship. It is a relationship which is between two societies – one is Islamic, the other is communist or atheist and they do not believe in religion; one is a totalitarian state, the other has multiparty system; size of countries is very different, and levels of development are different. Still it is an unusually close relationship of unusually strange bedfellows. You feel more comfortable being a part of Gulf or part of South Asia or to be friend of China? So Sir, what could explain this strange combination of friends?

**Ambassador Amin**: Remember that Pakistan played a key role in opening up of relations between USA and China. We helped Communist China to establish diplomatic relations with United States. I think Pakistan-China relationship obviously, is not based on ideology. We are different countries and have different orientation. China remain grateful to Pakistan till now. Thus first there is historic recall of China’s relations with India being uncertain and there is no
doubt that China has been a good friend of Pakistan and Pakistan would want this friendship to continue.

**Swaran Singh:** China has larger trade relations with India. China has not come to having one military alliance with Pakistan; China has not fired a single bullet in favour of Pakistan. China has kept a certain caution and restraint. Its supports has largely been symbolic and in terms of trading materials. Yet, the relationship appears to be one of the strongest relationships from Pakistani perspective.

**Ambassador Amin:** We did not expect that. War has never been an option for Pakistan after Pakistan became a nuclear power. A nuclear war is clearly unthinkable and must never be fought. The Chinese have given critical help in providing Pakistan with Jet Aircrafts and military Tanks and helped us in improving our defence capability. Please remember that Pakistan developed the nuclear programme without the help of China.

**Swaran Singh:** This most people will find difficult to believe. There has been strong civilian cooperation between China and Pakistan in the field of nuclear science and technologies. Beyond this, there have been strong allegations of China’s help in Pakistan’s nuclear and missile programmes. Would you consider that as fig of imagination?

**Ambassador Amin:** I have not seen any evidence that they [China] played a part in nuclear deterrence [of Pakistan]. There was some cooperation on [nuclear] technology. You remember we were under scrutiny by the whole world including the United States in 1983 or 1984 when the bomb was developed. I think Chinese see Pakistan as an important player due to its Geo-strategic location in the Islamic world. Pakistan can help in bringing China closer to the Islamic world. China sees the Islamic world as an important group of countries; Pakistan being one of the larger [Muslim] countries. Pakistan has got a certain influence in the Islamic world. It is the only Muslim country which has produced very eminent writers and philosophers. And we have trained people especially in the gulf countries. I would not exaggerate if I say that Pakistan is very important for other Muslim countries. We are one of the more important Muslim countries. Chinese look at it in this framework. Chinese have taken a long term view and that is why they
will keep the friendship with the Pakistan at the level that it exists. They will not allow it to slide down.

I do not see any likelihood that Pakistan China relations will decline. They [China] are worried about the role of the militants and they are also worried about the problem of extremists. I also believe that the Islamist terrorists are the enemies of the Pakistani State. The Pakistani state is the greatest victim of these wretched extremists. We totally condemn them. The terrorists have terrorized everybody for a long time. They are a threat to our society. I am one of the few voices on Pakistan TV who have always condemned them. If the Taliban take over in Pakistan, they will destroy everything that exists. The role of women, the concept of democracy, political parties, the Parliament; they will take us to primitive times. They [Taliban] will change Pakistan beyond recognition. I get shocked, when it is said that Pakistan is working together with the terrorists. They are our biggest enemies and we have lost thousands of citizens.

**Swaran Singh:** I understand that you have also written a very impressive book. This book has a Chapter devoted especially to China-Pakistan relations. What are your major conclusions and where you think this relationship is going in coming times?

**Ambassador Amin:** This is a book I wrote about 12 years ago called *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: A Re-appraisal*. Now a revised edition has come out. It was considered unconventional then, but I am glad to say that many of those ideas have since been accepted. It was said by me that Pakistan society believes that there must be good relations with India. The argument was very much there as we now accept it. A war with India will be suicidal. Wars have not solved the Kashmir problem we have to learn to live together.

The book was written soon after the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan. I strongly opposed the nuclear explosions in Pakistan. I was on TV opposing the [nuclear] tests. I said Pakistan is more important than Kashmir. For the sake of Kashmir, it makes no sense to destroy the security of entire Pakistan. We believe that there must be limits to what we must do in the context of Kashmir. Of course peace is the only way forward.
**Swaran Singh**: Other than your very impressive and forward-looking views on Pakistan-India relations, what were the main arguments in your chapter on China-Pakistan relations? Was initially China upset about the Pakistan’s nuclear tests? What was your assessment of China’s responses on this subject?

**Ambassador Amin**: It is not a relationship based on perverse ulterior motives. After all, there have been so many changes of Government in Pakistan. Even China is not China of Chairman Mao. There are good positive reasons why this relationship has survived and must survive. I think, Pakistan must do everything to ensure that this friendship continues with China at the level it exists. China has proved itself to be a friend and Pakistan must cultivate China irrespective of other pressures. It must not bow to any pressures from the USA.

**Swaran Singh**: Let us shift gears and take another subject of critical importance to China-Pakistan relations in coming times. There is great deal of talk about US and international forces exiting Afghanistan. If America was to exit from Afghanistan, two important neighbouring countries to be impacted upon by this would are Pakistan and China. Is there any understanding evolving between Pakistan and China as to how the regional neighbouring countries could participate in ensuring stability and peace in Afghanistan in the period of post-US exit? In my view Afghanistan will be the next important trigger to bring the Pakistan and China closure again.

**Ambassador Amin**: I am sure some consultations must be going on. China is quite concerned about Islamist fundamentalism and about the role of the militants. China is vulnerable in this Xinjiang province [of theirs]; some elements from this region have been going there [in Afghanistan]. The Uighur population has never been happy under the Chinese rule; they are very different from the Han population and so the Chinese do regard it as a soft underbelly of some sort and they look to this area as a potential trouble. They look to Pakistan for help. Pakistan has got all these groups including the Jehadi type and some have gone into Xinjiang also. This has been a cause of complaint for long. The Chinese are wise people they are very patient and they understand. When we joined the SEATO; we explained to them [China] that we were not worried about communism which was a powerful force.
There is another very interesting historical fact that needs to be considered…

**Swaran Singh:** It is an interesting reflection of how Pakistan has been repeatedly emphasizing on selective historic facts….

**Ambassador Amin:** Our relations with United States took a serious decline in 1960s because Pakistan was getting very close to China. We were arguing with the United States that China is an important country. The USA now realizes that Pakistan was trying to narrow the differences between USA and China. Another thing which comes up very often is that it is Kashmir which is looked at [as core issue] in a [India-Pakistan] bilateral context. Kashmir …actually involves China also…there is a territory which is ceded to China.

**Swaran Singh:** Since we continuously describe Kashmir to be a fundamental issue, is there some kind of a common understanding for South Asian security between China and Pakistan which needs to be expanded to Pakistan’s other relationships across the region?

**Ambassador Amin:** As you know the Chinese position was initially neutral [in Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan] and then it was openly supportive of Pakistan, then again neutral and then it shifted again. But when we signed the border treaty [in March 1963 for settling Pakistan’s boundary with China] involving Kashmir territory, we put in a clause …we did not write off the issue… China has no intention of giving up the part of Jammu and Kashmir which India says is its integral part. But they are not an active player in Kashmir, they do not like jehadi activities, they do not like cross border activities because they are hurt by cross border activities themselves. So I don’t think they are enthusiastic about what is happening in the context of Kashmir. They are not really supportive.

Some people in Pakistan think it is their moral duty to help in the liberation of Kashmir. No, clearly the Pakistan government is not supportive of them and China too was never supportive of this. Chinese thinking on Kashmir is not identical to that of Pakistan.
Swaran Singh: Another side of the same argument is that because China is so concerned about Islamic fundamentalism, they want to have an influence in these areas including in Pakistan. This is also seen as an excuse to send Chinese soldiers to the region of Pakistan controlled Kashmir …to try to eliminate these threats or to insulate their own territories from such potential threats.

Ambassador Amin: Chinese are not thinking of any military involvement or presence in the [Kashmir] region. Some came for earthquake relief and disaster management. I would not read too much into this. Chinese are quite capable of handling India without the support of Pakistan. As a friend they tried to help. So did other countries – both USA and India as well. Whatever happens between India and China will not be [of relevance] in Kashmir. Definitely not in Kashmir…It could be somewhere else.

Swaran Singh: Since wars are now ruled out; very often there issues like border dispute are seen as other medium of signalling displeasure to the other side. Very often these are seen as indications, such as the issue of stapled visas… there is a certain orchestration that one notices between Pakistan and China which in recent times have clearly moved away from China’s stance of neutrality on Kashmir dispute.

Ambassador Amin: There are some in India who in their heart are very critical of China. They were critical of Stapled visas. China has never accepted Kashmir as a part of India and it has its own logic for this. So why should China not have stapled visas for Kashmiris?

Swaran Singh: What we do see is that territorial boundaries are gradually disappearing, becoming less relevant. Many people believe that the Westphalian system is changing. In fact, all our major security and development challenges as nation-states need us now to work together, rather than insulate us from each other. In the longer run therefore if this is an argument that will hold, will it, in some ways, change the way we perceive relations between China, India and Pakistan who have been fighting over their boundary disputes. How will such a transformation impact on the Pakistan-China relationship?
Ambassador Amin: While we know that war is out of question…we have to find a *modus operandi* to live together. We are neighbours and that is a fact. The great possibilities of collaboration and progress should be given priority which has not been given so far. The greatest sufferers of the India-Pakistan [problematic] relationship have been the common people. They are living at starvation levels or subsistence levels because resources are diverted to the military [expenditures]. Neither one country nor the other country has gained. They are unable to improve because of the diversion of resources to building defence capabilities. So I think that Pakistan and India must learn to coexist and improve economic linkages.

China is doing so very well economically. They are helpful to us, but our future lies elsewhere. In some way Chinese trade is a problem for Pakistan. They are destroying local industry. Local traders are becoming quite unhappy with Chinese goods coming in [at extremely cheap prices]. So there cannot be a common market [between China and South Asia]. We should be looking this way [the South Asian way inside South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or SAARC].

Swaran Singh: China is again integrating in a major way inside SAARC…the new slogan is that China should be made a full member of the SAARC. Pakistan has been a strong supporter of China becoming in as an Observer country. This is Pakistan’s desire to make China now a full member of SAARC. China is already seen as a very influential player in SAARC. Would this influence the Pakistan-China relationship and would this change in relationship to China’s influence inside SAARC. China has been trying hard to encourage China’s engagement with South Asia in several cross-regional forums.

Ambassador Amin: We will feel more comfortable …remember there are other [regional] bodies as well. So it has become like a concurrent need, though I have some scepticism about the utility [of these mushrooming regional forums].

Swaran Singh: India has always been seen as an influential play in South Asia. Now China is fast becoming an integral part of South Asian multilateralism and an influential force in the region. China has several new ideas like SAARC Free Trade Area or China-South Asia Business
Forum and so on. China has been inviting large delegations from South Asia and engaging all components of these states and societies. How does Pakistan see this rapidly evolving character of South Asian multilateralism?

**Ambassador Amin:** The pertinent question is how soon will such a transformation come about? This seems still work in progress; work hand in hand. Chinese now have a kind of benign diplomacy; they value their relationship with India. For the time being it seems to me that they say very nice things about India. This is the transformation which has implications for China-Pakistan relations in the long run.

**Swaran Singh:** Thank you very much Sir for your time and for sharing your views with us and we look forward to your continued contributions to the evolution of China-Pakistan relations and to these relations contributing to peace and stability in South Asia. Thank you.