

The Kashmir Conflict and Sino-Indian Rivalry: Geopolitics of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract. In the tumultuous decades following the British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent, a critical fault line has emerged between India and Pakistan, with the Kashmir conflict standing as the most intractable and volatile of these disputes. This long-simmering crisis reached its zenith during the Cold War era, as both the Soviet and American blocs sought to leverage Asia's strategic significance to their respective advantages.

With the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the dawn of American unipolar dominance on the global stage, China has emerged as the preeminent contender for a multipolar world order. Consequently, the competition between Beijing and New Delhi for regional and international influence has intensified, characterized by each side's concerted efforts to disrupt the other's growth and sway in the crucible of Central Asia, while Washington plays its intricate game from afar.

China, as a principal beneficiary of globalization policies, has sought to extend its reach through the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, India has remained a formidable obstacle to Beijing's overland expansion, consistently obstructing its grand designs. Compounding these tensions, China views India's participation in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue mechanism, alongside the United States, Japan, and Australia, as a thinly veiled conspiracy to impede its ascent as a global power.

In this study, we delve into the intricate complexities of the Kashmir issue, illuminating its historical roots and contemporary ramifications. Furthermore, we elucidate China's strategic alliance with Pakistan, unveiling India's multifaceted response within the framework of a perpetual «challenge and response» paradigm. Through this comprehensive analysis, we aim to shed light on the intricate interplay of geopolitical forces shaping the region's volatile dynamics.

Keywords: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), India, International Affairs, Kashmir Conflict, Geopolitical Rivalry, Regional Hegemony, Strategic Alliances

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Introduction

For over half a century, the Kashmir issue has been a persistent flashpoint, fueling regional tensions across South Asia. Its significance has been further amplified in recent decades following the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan, lending grave consequences to this long-simmering conflict within a region that encompasses over a fifth of the global population.

China has emerged as an increasingly pivotal player in the simmering crisis over the disputed Kashmir territory. Beijing has backed Islamabad's request to the UN Security Council to address New Delhi's controversial decision to revoke the semi-autonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir (UN, 2019). The Himalayan region finds itself at the epicenter of a geopolitical quagmire, with territories divided between India, which governs the densely populated Kashmir Valley and the Hindu-majority areas around Jammu; Pakistan, controlling a western strip; and China, administering a sparsely populated high-altitude northern zone (Imširović, 2021). Significantly, China currently lays claim to the Aksai Chin region, parts of which India considers sovereign territory since Beijing's forcible seizure during the 1962 Sino-Indian War. This contentious border demarcation underscores the long-standing mutual distrust between the two nuclear-armed Asian giants. China and Pakistan, on the other hand, share deeply vested strategic interests that have

emerged as a perennial thorn in New Delhi over recent decades. As part of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative to revive ancient Silk Road trade routes, China seeks to make Pakistan a crucial economic and maritime lynchpin. Towards this end, Beijing has commenced work on a transportation corridor linking its Xinjiang province to the Chinese-constructed deep-sea port of Gwadar in Pakistan, granting China a strategic foothold in the Indian Ocean littorals (Murray, 2017).

The \$46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) traverses the Pakistani-administered portion of Kashmir, interlinking with a vast network of Chinese roads, maritime routes, railways, and pipelines. This infrastructure project not only allows Beijing outward access to the Arabian Sea but also positions its forces for potential rapid deployment to Pakistan's aid in any future military confrontation with India, posing a formidable two-front challenge to New Delhi (Hourel, 2015). Reinforcing this burgeoning regional alliance, Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan visited Pakistan in 2019, meeting with then-Prime Minister Imran Khan to sign a raft of bilateral cooperation agreements spanning agriculture, customs administration, and disaster relief management (Xinhua, 2019).

As China deepens its strategic footprint within the Pakistani-controlled territories of Kashmir, it has tacitly signaled that the deepening Sino-Pakistani nexus could progressively tighten the noose on India's long-held position on the Kashmir dispute (Singh, 2021). This evolving dynamic potentially leaves the Indian armed forces contending with a two-front theater of operations should hostilities erupt between either Beijing or Islamabad.

The intractable discord over precisely delineating the Sino-Indian border has persisted since the brief but bloody 1962 war between the two nations. The catalyst for this conflict was India's deployment of military outposts along a land route that China had constructed to connect the Tibet Autonomous Region with its Xinjiang province (Levi, 1963). While overt control over the Aksai Chin region was a key flashpoint, a series of violent border skirmishes preceded the war following India's granting of asylum to the Dalai Lama in the wake of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule (Jian, 2006). The month-long war culminated in a decisive Chinese victory on November 21, 1962, fortifying Beijing's authority over the disputed Aksai Chin.

More recently, New Delhi's legislation to reorganize the region's constitutional status from a semi-autonomous state into two separate federally administered union territories, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh drew sharp criticism from Beijing. China vehemently objected to India's decision to place the Buddhist-majority Ladakh region under the direct administrative control of the central government in New Delhi (Lo, 2019). Presently, the two nations stake conflicting territorial claims along their shared frontier: India accuses China of illegally occupying 38,000 square kilometers in its northwestern Kashmir region, while Beijing conversely lays claim to 90,000 square kilometers in the northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Underscoring the volatility of this border dispute, the India-China frontier witnessed a tense two-week military standoff in September 2014 when Chinese troops transgressed several kilometers into the northern Ladakh sector (Smith, 2014).

In essence, the Kashmir quandary finds itself inextricably intertwined with the complex geopolitical tensions and territorial disputes between India, Pakistan, and China across the restive Himalayan domains. As regional adversaries recalibrate their strategic alignments and spheres of influence, the specter of escalating conflict looms larger over this perennially unsettled region.

1. Geopolitical Aspects

1.1. Location and Territorial Divisions

Straddling the strategic crossroads between Central and South Asia, the Kashmir region shares borders with four nations: India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. Its landmass of 86,023 square miles has remained divided by the ceasefire line instituted in 1949, later formalized as the Line of Control (LoC) under the 1972 Simla Agreement (Lambah, 2012; UN, 1972). The Indian-administered portion, officially designated as the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir, spans 53,665 square miles. Pakistan indirectly controls 32,358 square miles, referred to as Azad Kashmir (Free Kashmir), while China has occupied the Aksai Chin area

since its 1962 military intervention.

At the time of the 1947 partition of British India, Kashmir was composed of five distinct regions: the Kashmir Valley, Jammu, Ladakh, Poonch, Baltistan, and Gilgit. Post-Partition, India assumed control over Jammu, Ladakh, parts of Poonch, and the fertile Kashmir Valley, while Pakistan extended its writ over western Poonch, Muzaffarabad, and sections of Mirpur and Baltistan. Srinagar serves as the summer capital and Jammu as the winter capital under Indian administration, whereas Muzaffarabad is designated the capital of Pakistan's Azad Kashmir territories.

1.2. Demographic Landscape

Population statistics for the Kashmir region remain contested between Pakistani and Indian sources. According to a 1981 indigenous census, the state's population stood at approximately 6 million, comprising 64.2% Muslims, 32.25% Hindus, 2.23% Sikhs, and the remainder distributed among Buddhists, Christians, and other minority groups. However, some accounts suggest the pre-1947 population was nearly 4 million, with 77% Muslims, 20% Hindus and Sikhs, and 3% other minorities. As per the 2011 Indian census, Jammu and Kashmir had an estimated 8.6 million Muslim residents, making it India's seventh-largest Muslim-majority territory (Kramer, 2021). In 2019, Kashmir's semi-autonomous status was revoked, reorganizing it as a union territory under direct administration from New Delhi.

British sources estimate the global Kashmiri diaspora at approximately 13.5 million, with 7.5 million residing in the Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, 4 million in Pakistan's Azad Kashmir, 2 million in the Gilgit-Baltistan regions (BBC, 2011), and 1.5 million Kashmiri emigrants dispersed across the Middle East, Europe, and the United States.

1.3. Ethnic Tapestry

The Kashmiri people represent a vibrant tapestry of diverse racial ancestries and ethnic identities. Predominantly comprising Aryan, Mughal, Turkic, and Afghan lineages, they are further subdivided into distinct ethnic groups, most notably the Kashmiris, Dogras, and Baharis (Raina, 2002). Their linguistic landscape is equally varied, with Kashmiri, Hindi, and Urdu being the most widely spoken tongues, with the latter two utilizing the Arabic script.

1.4. Disputed Political Status

Under international law, Jammu and Kashmir are considered politically disputed territory. India unilaterally annexed the region on October 27, 1947, and imposed temporary provisions, despite earlier pledges to the Kashmiri populace and the United Nations to grant them the right to self-determination. UN Security Council Resolution 47 of 1948 explicitly mandated that the Kashmiri people be afforded this right through a free and impartial plebiscite conducted under UN auspices (UN, 1948).

However, over the past seven decades since this resolution, the people of Kashmir have remained embroiled in a bitter conflict, denied the promised opportunity to exercise their democratic will to determine their future political status and allegiances. This long-festering discord has perpetuated an atmosphere of instability, human rights violations, and escalating militarization in one of the world's most volatile territorial disputes.

2. Historical Background

The Kashmir region has witnessed a tumultuous history replete with political conflicts and sectarian strife, particularly between Buddhist and Brahmin communities, with catalysts ranging from religious to social and political factors. A relative period of calm prevailed from the 9th to the 12th century AD, during which Hindu culture flourished across the territory (Singh U., 2008).

Islamic rule held sway over Kashmir for five centuries spanning 1320 to 1819, unfolding in three distinct phases: the reign of independent Sultans (1320–1586), the Mughal imperial sovereignty (1586–1753), and the Afghan dominion (1753–1819) (Parmu, 1969). Over these five centuries, Islam gradually disseminated until the faith embraced the majority of the state's populace. This era witnessed a semblance of stability

and coexistence between religious and ethnic minorities, fostered by the egalitarian principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Concurrently, various industries and handicrafts, notably textiles, thrived during this period.

2.1. The Hindu Dogra Dynasty (1846–1947)

In 1846, the British East India Company presided over the sale of the Jammu and Kashmir territories to the Hindu Dogra dynasty led by Maharaja Gulab Singh for the sum of 7.5 million rupees, as enshrined in the Treaties of Lahore and Amritsar. This inaugurated the Dogra family's reign, which endured until the twilight of the British Raj in 1947 (Khaja, 2016).

As Britain's colonial subjugation ended, the Indian Independence Act of 1947 was enacted by the British Parliament, formally terminating British sovereignty over the subcontinent on August 15 of that year (Parliament, 1947). In the wake of this epochal transition, the outgoing imperial power instructed the erstwhile regal states to accede either to the nascent dominions of India or Pakistan, based on their geographical contiguity and demographics. Accordingly, the nations of India and Pakistan emerged, while three royal states—Hyderabad, Junagadh, and Kashmir—initially demurred from acceding to either domain (Afraz, 2008).

The Muslim ruler of Junagadh eventually opted to accede to Pakistan despite the principality's Hindu majority, prompting vehement opposition and Indian military intervention. A subsequent referendum saw Junagadh's merger with India. A similar sequence unfolded in Hyderabad, where the Muslim Nizam's aspiration for independence was overruled by the Hindu-majority populace, culminating in Indian forces' entry and the state's ultimate accession to the Indian Union in September 1948 (Eagleton, 1950).

Kashmir, however, presented a more intricate quandary. Its Hindu maharaja, Hari Singh, failed in his bid for independence and elected to accede to India, disregarding the aspirations of the Muslim-majority populace and favoring a union with Pakistan as well as the precepts of the British partition plan (Chopra, 1964). While India embraced Kashmir's accession, it simultaneously rejected the accession of Junagadh and Hyderabad to Pakistan based on the whims of their respective rulers.

Apprehensive of the potential backlash from his Muslim subjects, Singh proposed dual standstill agreements with India and Pakistan to maintain the territorial status quo while securing supply lines. Pakistan assented to the pact, whereas India demurred, rapidly precipitating an armed conflict.

2.2. The First Kashmir War (1947-1948)

Events spiraled swiftly as armed clashes erupted between Kashmiri forces and the Indian military in late 1947, culminating in India's occupation of two-thirds of the state's territory (Schofield, 2003). The United Nations intervened in the escalating conflict, and the Security Council adopted Resolution 47 on August 13, 1948, mandating a ceasefire and a plebiscite to determine the region's future status (Das, 1950; Khan, 1969).

Since this watershed resolution, the international community has advocated a settlement entailing the partition of Kashmir between India and Pakistan, with Muslim-majority regions acceding to Pakistan along their approximately 1,000 km shared border, while Hindu-dominated territories adjoining the 300 km Indian frontier would merge with the Indian Union. However, this proposed solution has remained an unfulfilled aspiration on the diplomatic chessboard.

The volatile situation rapidly transgressed into open hostilities between the Indian and Pakistani regular armies. In August 1965, artillery exchanges erupted along the frontiers of Lahore, Sialkot, Kashmir, and Rajasthan, escalating into a 48-day military conflagration that yielded no decisive victory for either side before international mediation brokered a ceasefire on September 23 (Hasan, 1965).

2.3. The Tashkent Conference (1966)

With the Cold War rivalries between the Soviet Union and the United States reaching an acrimonious zenith in the mid-1960s, Moscow grew apprehensive of regional instability in Central Asia being exploited to the advantage of the Western bloc or its estranged ally, China (Deshpande, 1969). In a bid to defuse the simmering tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi over Kashmir, the Kremlin orchestrated a reconciliation conference in the Soviet city of Tashkent in January 1966. After arduous negotiations, the

adversaries agreed to defer further discussions on the Kashmir question, though the conference's outcome was rendered moot by the sudden demise of Indian Prime Minister Shastri from a heart attack (Gauhar, 1966; Ankit, 2020).

2.4. *The 1971 War*

Renewed hostilities became inevitable after Pakistan accused India of abetting the secessionist movement in East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh), tilting the military balance decidedly in favor of New Delhi (Marwah, 1979). India's decisive victories on the battlegrounds prompted a strategic rethink within Pakistan's military circles while propelling both nations into an intensifying arms race, culminating in their respective quests for nuclear deterrents as the most consequential juncture (Iqbal, 1972). The upshot was the emergence of an independent Bangladesh following its secession from erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971 (Ranjan, 2016).

2.5. *The Simla Agreement (1972)*

Subsequent diplomatic overtures paved the way for the landmark Simla Agreement in 1972, which enshrined the ceasefire line delineated on December 17, 1971, as the de facto Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan (Bakshi, 2007). Under its provisions, India retained the Pakistani territories it had seized during the 1971 war in Kargil, Tithwal, and parts of Azad Kashmir's Poonch sector, while Pakistan retained its holdover-occupied areas in Kashmir's Chhamb region.

Despite these pivotal junctures in the tortuous saga of the Kashmir conflict, the region's fate has remained a festering wound in the geopolitical landscape of South Asia, with neither diplomatic resolutions nor force of arms having delivered a durable settlement over the past seven decades. As regional power dynamics continually realign, the quest for a just and lasting denouement to the Kashmir quandary persists as one of the Indian subcontinent's most intractable and high-stakes conundrums.

3. **The Strategic Significance of Kashmir**

3.1. *Kashmir's Importance for India*

Kashmir holds immense strategic value for India, prompting New Delhi's unwavering determination to retain control over the region for over five decades. This resolute stance has persisted despite the territory's Muslim-majority demographics and the enormously costly wars India has waged to preserve its sovereignty, underscoring the multifaceted significance of Kashmir.

3.1.1. **Containing Cross-Border Instability:** For New Delhi, retaining Kashmir serves as a geographical bulwark against the perceived threat of religious radicalism and instability spilling over from Pakistan's borders, viewed as an existential challenge to India's internal security paradigms (Dhall, 2018).

3.1.2. **Preserving Territorial Integrity:** India remains apprehensive that conceding Kashmir's independence along religious or ethnic lines could catalyze centrifugal forces within its own Muslim-minority territories, potentially unraveling its territorial integrity. With several Indian states harboring dominant ethnic or religious demographics, Kashmir is perceived as a pivotal test case.

3.1.3. **Safeguarding Strategic Depth:** India perceives Kashmir as a critical buffer against the perceived two-front strategic threat posed by China and Pakistan. Losing Kashmir would deprive India of its vital strategic depth along these contested frontiers.

3.2. *Kashmir's Importance for Pakistan*

For Pakistan, the Kashmir issue transcends mere territorial contestation, emblemizing an inviolable red line within its strategic calculus. Islamabad's stance is predicated upon the following pivotal considerations:

3.2.1. **Ensuring Territorial Security:** Pakistan deems Kashmir vital to its territorial security, with two major roadways and a railway network traversing the region in Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province. The prospect of Indian control over these critical overland communications poses an existential threat to Pakistan's defense preparedness.

3.2.2. **Ideological and National Ethos:** For the Islamic Republic founded on the Two-Nation Theory,

the inability to liberate Muslim-majority Kashmir from Indian rule strikes at the very ideological foundations of Pakistan's *raison d'être* as a homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims.

3.2.3. **Safeguarding Water Security:** Three of Pakistan's major rivers, indispensable for its agricultural productivity, originate from the Kashmir territories. Consequently, India's occupation of these water sources is perceived as an acute threat to Pakistan's water security and economic viability (Nadim, 2022).

Transcending the realm of mere territorial contestation, the Kashmir imbroglio has assumed quasi-existential overtones for both India and Pakistan. As two nuclear-armed adversaries jockey for regional primacy, the geopolitical and strategic stakes over Kashmir have soared inexorably, rendering its resolution one of the most intractable and perilous geopolitical conundrums confronting the international community in the 21st century.

4. Kashmiri Resistance Movements

During the reign of the Hindu Dogra dynasty, Kashmiris endured political oppression, religious persecution, and economic exploitation, fueling the flames of resistance across the region. In Jammu, the Muslim Youth Union Party, led by Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas since its inception in 1922, has emerged as the oldest and most influential of these movements (Malik, 1966). Another prominent group was the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference, founded in 1932 under the leadership of Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, though it wielded comparatively less sway among the masses (Parashar, 2004). By the late 1930s, these entities found themselves imbued with the idealist «one people» doctrine espoused by the Indian National Congress (INC), which posited that the Indian subcontinent, despite its multitude of castes and ethnicities, constituted a single indivisible nation (Habib, 1982). However, this nationalistic philosophy stood at odds with the prevailing sentiment among Kashmir's Muslim and Hindu communities, who perceived themselves as distinct peoples.

This ideological schism fractured the national movement in Kashmir. While figures like Sheikh Abdullah, leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (later renamed the National Conference), embraced the Indian secular nationalist vision and the prospect of coexistence, Chaudhry Ghulam Abbas of the Muslim Youth Union Party vehemently repudiated it. Abbas actively championed the cause of the Kashmir Muslim Conference, culminating in a resolution passed on July 19, 1947, calling for Kashmir's accession to Pakistan (Haque, 2010). As the fissures widened, various factions branded others as fraudulent, spawning a multitude of political and military organizations (Lone, 2014).

In contemporary times, the Kashmiri resistance can broadly be classified into three principal strands: the predominantly political opposition operating from within the Kashmiri territories, epitomized by the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference comprising over 13 Kashmiri factions spanning the entire political spectrum, collectively demanding independence and employing non-violent means to counter the Indian occupation (Chowdhary, 2009); the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which envisions a sovereign Kashmiri state free from the dominion of both India and Pakistan (Tremblay, 1997); and the more militant resistance emanating from Pakistan's territories, encompassing a complex tapestry of military, political, religious, and secular elements interwoven with the diverse ethnicities, nationalities, and ideological sects pervading Pakistani society (Zutshi, 2017).

Numerous Pakistani religious groups maintain an active presence in the Kashmiri theater. Prominent among them is the Hizbul Mujahideen, an offshoot of the broader Jamaat-e-Islami movement in Pakistan, from which the Al-Badr outfit subsequently splintered (Staniland, 2012). The Salafist ideological current finds representation through the Lashkar-e-Taiba (Padukone, 2011) and the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen al-Islami outfits (Bell, 2015). Traditional religious seminaries have spawned entities like the Mujahideen Movement led by Farooq Kashmiri, with the more recent Jaish-e-Mohammed emerging as a breakaway faction (Honawar, 2005).

This intricate web of resistance groups, each with its distinct ideological leanings, power bases, and operational modes, has rendered the pursuit of a negotiated settlement in the Kashmir quagmire an exceedingly complex and hazardous undertaking. As regional tensions intensify and the specter of cross-border militancy grows, the international community faces the increasingly daunting task of facilitating a

durable resolution that addresses the grievances of all stakeholders while preserving regional stability in this geopolitically vital yet highly volatile Himalayan theater.

5. Endeavors a Peaceful Resolution

In the wake of the futility of military force in resolving the Kashmir imbroglio, attempts have been undertaken to seek a negotiated settlement through peaceful diplomacy. Foremost among these was the early intervention by the United Nations, with the UN Security Council issuing a series of resolutions on April 21, 1948, August 13, 1948, and January 5, 1949, presenting recommendations aimed at steering the disputant parties toward a potential middle ground (Shakoor, 1998). These restive yet ultimately fruitless UN efforts culminated in a proposed three-pronged solution (Nawaz, 2018):

- a. Withdrawal of military forces from Kashmir.
- b. Holding a plebiscite to ascertain the will of the Kashmiri people.
- c. Installation of a transitional administration in Kashmir to oversee the referendum process.

However, this UN roadmap was met with reservations and objections from both India and Pakistan. The two nations viewed the proposed plan through contrasting lenses:

a. India maintained that Kashmir's accession was an internal matter solely concerning itself and the Kashmiri populace, dismissing the need for third-party intervention. Pakistan, conversely, asserted parity with India on this issue.

b. While Pakistan advocated for UN monitoring of the proposed plebiscite, India rejected this notion.

c. India rebuffed the proposal for withdrawing its military presence from Kashmir, whereas Pakistan conditioned its acquiescence upon a simultaneous and reciprocal Indian withdrawal.

Furthermore, profound disagreements emerged over the prospective interim administration to govern Kashmir during the referendum process. India nominated Sheikh Abdullah, a proposition that Pakistan vehemently opposed, questioning his allegiances, and instead proposing direct UN oversight.

These fundamental divergences in stance rendered most peace settlement initiatives, whether under UN auspices, through international mediation, or in bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan in 1953, 1955, 1960, 1962, 1963, and 1972, ultimately futile.

Tensions reignited in the aftermath of the December 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament, which claimed 13 lives, including the six assailants. India alleged the involvement of Pakistan-based Kashmiri militant groups and demanded the dismantling of outfits it deemed terrorist organizations, particularly Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed (Mukherji, 2006).

Despite this turbulent history, the quest for a durable and equitable resolution to the Kashmir conundrum has persisted, underpinned by the realization that the path of force has yielded only escalating violence, human suffering, and intractable enmity. As regional power dynamics continually evolve and new stakeholders emerge, the imperative for a negotiated settlement acquires renewed urgency to avert further destabilization in this nuclear-armed theater. Yet the divergent narratives, entrenched positions, and conflicting interests of the principal parties have consistently thwarted all diplomatic overtures, rendering the Kashmir dispute one of the most enduringly intractable geopolitical crises confronting the international community in the contemporary era.

6. Strategic Calculus: India vs. Pakistan

Amid the simmering tensions over Kashmir, the strategic imperatives driving India and Pakistan's military postures have diverged significantly. India's defense modernization is propelled by ambitions to emerge as a counterweight to China's rising regional clout, whereas Pakistan seeks to develop a credible deterrent capability to preclude any existential threat from its militarily preponderant neighbor.

This asymmetry in motivations has catalyzed arms race dynamic, reflected in India's burgeoning defense budget, which surged to \$70.6 billion in 2022 (Rawat, 2022). The balance of comprehensive national power tilts decisively in New Delhi's favor: India's population of 1.393 billion dwarfs Pakistan's 225.2 million, while its \$3.531 trillion GDP eclipses Islamabad's \$402.129 billion economic output. Indian military expenditures

at \$70.6 billion dwarf Pakistan's modest \$10 billion allocation for 2022 (MacDonald, 2022).

India boasts formidable workforce reserves, with a 471 million-strong labor force overshadowing Pakistan's 47 million. In sheer military might, India fields the world's second-largest standing army after China, with 1.455 million active personnel and 5.137 million reserves under arms. Its aerial forces rank fourth globally, comprising 1,850 aircraft spanning diverse roles and origins, including two aircraft carriers facilitating power projection (Goyal, 2022). India's armored corps wields over 1,000 main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles, outgunning Pakistan's relatively modest holdings (Jazeera, 2019). Most crucially, India's nuclear triad and expanding missile arsenal outmatch Pakistan's fledgling strategic deterrent (Ghoshal, 2022).

For Pakistan, developing a robust deterrent vis-à-vis India has assumed an existential dimension, shaped its strategic doctrine, and drove its quest for tactical nuclear weapons to offset India's conventional superiority. Islamabad's threat perceptions are acutely exacerbated by the enduring conflict over Kashmir, a pivotal geostrategic theater straddling the fault lines of great power rivalries in South Asia.

As India, China, the United States, and Russia all vie to expand their spheres of influence across this pivotal region, Kashmir has emerged as a critical frontier where these intersecting ambitions collide. For New Delhi, retaining its grip over the restive territory is inextricably intertwined with preserving its guiding aspiration—to countervail China's regional preeminence. Beijing, conversely, views unfettered access to the Indian Ocean through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as vital to its transcontinental Belt and Road Infrastructure Initiative.

Concurrently, Washington has deepened its strategic partnership with New Delhi as a bulwark against perceived Chinese expansionism. Yet, it remains tethered to Islamabad through its counter-terrorism nexus, leaving the US precariously poised over the India-Pakistan schism. As for Moscow, its traditional defense ties with New Delhi have frayed under the strains of Ukraine conflict, creating potential openings for Russia to recalibrate its South Asian equities.

Against this combustible backdrop of regional nuclear rivalries and great power machinations, the Kashmir theater has inexorably assumed the mantle of an arena where the trajectory of the 21st century's strategic pivots could well be etched. As the international community grapples with the conundrum of facilitating a durable resolution, the prolongation of the status quo portends grave perils that could ripple across the global order.

7. Reasons for China's support for Pakistan

The strategic reasons for China's support for Pakistan in the recent crisis are as follows:

7.1. Border disputes:

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan, which controls a strip of territory in the west of the region; China, which administers a sparsely populated area in the north; and China claims about 90,000 square kilometers in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which is informally referred to by Chinese officials as "southern Tibet" (Bork, 2015). India claims sovereignty over 38,000 square kilometers of the Aksai Chin Plateau, which lies in the north (Fahmy, 2022).

East of the disputed region of Ladakh, the importance of Aksai Chen's location to China lies in the fact that it is a vast desert that forms part of the far west of China's troubled Muslim-majority region of Xinjiang (Davis, 2008). China is seeking to impose its control over this area for reasons related to securing the Xinjiang-Tibet route (Khan S. S., 2011).

China has repeatedly pressured India to drop its claim to Aksai Chin. In exchange, Beijing has agreed to cede another disputed area along the McMahon Line known to India as Arunachal Pradesh, but China's efforts have failed.

This was reflected in the angry statements of the Chinese side (Madan, 2022), with the spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Hua Chunying, stating in August 2019 that "China has always opposed India's inclusion of Chinese territory in the western sector of the China-India border within its administrative

jurisdiction.» China urged India to be cautious in its words and deeds on the border issue. This is to strictly abide by the relevant agreements concluded between the two sides and avoid taking any steps that may further complicate the border issue. Chunying added that India has recently continued to undermine China's territorial sovereignty by unilaterally changing its domestic law, and India's action is unacceptable and will have no legal effect (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

The two countries were embroiled in a 2017 standoff in the Doklam border region (Qaddos, 2018). This conflict occurred after the Indian military sent troops to prevent China from building a military road, and after two months of tension, their troops withdrew from the area. The Indian prime minister then met with the Chinese president in April 2018 to get bilateral relations back on track (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PM Modi's China Tour, 2015). However, in February 2019, bilateral relations were significantly strained considering China's protest the Indian prime minister's visit to the disputed state of Arunachal Pradesh (Martina, 2015).

7.2. Indo-Chinese Rivalry:

The tension in the relationship between China and India is not only due to border disputes, but several factors combine with this to make relations between the two countries strained, the most prominent of which is their awareness that each is a regional competitor to the other, as both are motivated to secure energy sources and both have conflicting interests in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean (Wang, 2011).

The Pakistani factor also exerts its influence through the support that Islamabad receives from Beijing, especially in the field of nuclear technology (Joshi, 2011). Add to that the aggravation of India's fears that the submarines that China has begun to build could be transferred to the waters of the Indian Ocean.

The India-Pakistan conflict can be understood considering strained Sino-American relations. India's decision towards Kashmir came in full coordination with the United States to tighten the noose on China and open more fronts to drain and disperse China's powers. This analysis is supported by the US reaction to the Indian decision, with US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus stating that "we are concerned about reports of detentions and urge respect for individual rights and discussion with those in affected communities." Although she stated that the Indian government described these actions as a purely internal matter, she urged all parties to maintain peace and stability in the region, and the US "calls on all parties to maintain peace and stability along the Line of Control" (Wroughton, 2019). These statements make it clear that the United States does not oppose India's move but merely monitors the situation and calls for peace in the region.

In return, China has bolstered its relations with Pakistan, India's traditional rival, by investing \$57 billion in Pakistani infrastructure and energy projects—more than any other South Asian country (Jorgic, 2017). The distinguished relations between the two countries have been further strengthened under the "Belt and Road" initiative, where China is establishing a Sino-Pakistani economic corridor to connect China with the Pakistani port of Gwadar located on the Arabian Sea, which passes through a disputed area (Khan M. Z., 2019). This port is the closest port to the industrial region of Xinjiang compared to the Chinese ports located to its east. Eventually, Chinese trade will cross by land through the roads established between China and Pakistan until it reaches the port of Gwadar. From there, goods are transported to Gulf countries and the Middle East.

Despite the strength of China-Pakistan relations, it is not in China's interest for the conflict to develop into an armed confrontation and for the two countries to resort to violence because China is one of India's largest trading partners, and it is difficult for Beijing to sacrifice economic gains for a country with a huge market like India (BBC, China regains slot as India's top trade partner despite tensions, 2021).

China will not be able to intervene more directly in support of Pakistan. Instead, Beijing wants to avoid New Delhi escalating its relationship with Washington as interference in China's regional supremacy and Asian internal affairs. This is the same argument that China uses to address any international criticism of it on issues related to Tibet, Xinjiang, the demonstrations sweeping Hong Kong, and the threat of invading Taiwan.

Opening more fronts of conflict with India will come at an exceedingly prohibitive cost at this time,

especially since China is dealing with several serious and sensitive domestic and global issues, the foremost of which is the trade war with the United States (Zhang, 2018).

Beijing also wants to complete its plans for the Belt and Road Initiative. India has spared no effort to declare its opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, which infuriates it because it passes through parts of the disputed territory between India and Pakistan, and the establishment of such a corridor will strengthen Pakistan's economic situation, which India undoubtedly fears. Therefore, any violence in this region will disrupt China's plans to complete its projects under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Beijing may be upset by New Delhi's decision; however, it has no interest in igniting conflict in the region, and it is likely to pressure Pakistan not to resort to any violent escalation of the crisis. China will take advantage of this crisis to enhance its role and image as a country that maintains balance in the South Asian region. This scenario is reinforced by the fact that Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi indicated that "Beijing is ready to exercise strategic restraint and set a framework for the crisis" as an issue that must be settled by peaceful means (Das K. N., 2022). The Chinese foreign minister described his country's relations with China as positive and said that it is not a relationship of bilateral dimensions but of global dimensions.

Concluding Remarks: The Grand Chessboard of Sino-Indian Rivalry

The strategic divergences between India and China extend far beyond the contentious border disputes and economic competition that characterize their turbulent relationship. At the heart of this complex rivalry lies a high-stakes contest for regional supremacy and influence, a grand chessboard where alliances and spheres of influence are constantly shifting.

India's aspirations to benefit from the economic windfall promised by China's Belt and Road Initiative are tempered by deep-seated fears about Beijing's growing clout in the Indian Ocean and South Asia. New Delhi views the financial support and infrastructure investments China provides to its neighboring nations as a thinly veiled attempt to encircle and subordinate these countries, eroding India's historical spheres of influence.

China's increasing footprint in the Maldives, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka has only heightened Indian policymakers' concerns about Beijing's penetration into their strategic backyard. The governments of these nations, chafing under what they perceive as New Delhi's excessive interference in their internal affairs, have welcomed China's role as a counterweight to India's dominance, strengthening their bargaining power in the process.

Pakistan, India's traditional rival and a pivotal node in China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, represents a particularly thorny challenge. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which links China's mainland with the strategic port of Gwadar on the Indian Ocean, traverses the disputed Pakistani-controlled territory of Kashmir. India's acceptance of this project would effectively validate Pakistan's control over the region, as well as Gwadar's proximity to vital Indian sea lanes that supply over 70% of the country's oil imports.

In response, India has sought to dissuade countries like Sri Lanka from embracing Beijing's strategic overtures, warning of the potential debt traps lurking beneath the Belt and Road Initiative's alluring facade. New Delhi has also cultivated ties with China's neighbors, particularly Japan, in a bid to bolster its influence in its dealings with the regional behemoth.

India's cooperation with Vietnam in mineral exploration in the South China Sea, its pursuit of Brahmo's missile sales, and the development of Iran's Chabahar port in the Indian Ocean represent ambitious economic and strategic gambits. The Chabahar port is envisioned as a gateway to the Middle East, opening new access routes to West and Central Asia, and expanding India's influence in landlocked Afghanistan—a direct challenge to China's quest for regional dominance.

For its part, China has long viewed India as more of an annoyance than an existential threat, given the lopsided balance of economic and military might in Beijing's favor. However, underestimating India's regional power and military capabilities would be a grave miscalculation. China's strategic alliance with the United States, its formidable rival, and the emergence of blocs like the Quad Security Alliance—comprising

the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia—aimed at countering China’s rise underscore the complexity of this geopolitical chessboard.

Beijing’s fears of potential trade route disruptions in the event of a conflict with Washington lend India a pivotal role, given its strategic position astride the Indian Ocean, a vital conduit for energy supplies from the Middle East, resource flows from Africa, and trade with European markets. The «Malacca predicament,» as former Chinese President Hu Jintao termed it, remains a stark reality, with India’s threats to choke off access to the Strait of Malacca during the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1971 and 1999 serving as a sobering reminder of its strategic leverage.

In essence, the most striking characteristic of Sino-Indian relations is the profound lack of trust and the divergence of strategic interests between the two titans. Competition, and perhaps even limited conflict, seems an inevitable feature of this intricate dynamic. Yet, both nations remain acutely aware of the perils of escalation, mindful of the lessons learned from their war in the 1960s, and cognizant of the age-old adage that in the realm of realpolitik, there are no permanent friendships or enmities, only enduring national interests.

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