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Geo Politics Of Sino-Indian Border and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir

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ABSTRACT: In mid-April, a Chinese army unit of 30-odd troops crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh, India, and put up their tents for the night. This event, which is not an isolated incident, caused much consternation in the Indian media and symbolises the mutual suspicion that both countries have towards each other. These sentiments of mistrust are expressed in the fact that both sides have been building up their military presence along the LAC in recent years. Since both India and China are rising powers sharing a 3800 km border, of which large parts remain disputed, there is concern that increased cross-LAC tensions could become a source of potential instability. This article aims to elaborate upon the geostrategic significance of Aksai Chin for China and whether renewed tensions over this disputed land could drag both countries into another war. Like India's struggle with Pakistan over Kashmir, the dispute over Aksai Chin is almost as old as India itself. The origins of the dispute date back to the British Raj, which failed to clearly demarcate the border between its colony and China. By and large, today's border issue revolves around two main boundary designs that have been put forward by the British.

KEYWORDS-Sino-Indian, Pakistan, Kashmir, geo politics, strategy

I.INTRODUCTION

One of them, the Johnson-line, places Aksai Chin under Indian control, whereas the other, the MacDonald-line, classifies it as Chinese territory. However, neither of these boundaries has ever been codified in a binding bilateral treaty. And so, the status of the Indo-Chinese border in the western section at the time of Indian independence remained unsolved. With New Delhi using the Johnson-line as its national border, and Beijing adhering to the MacDonald-line, Aksai Chin became a breeding ground for conflict. In the 1950s, after the People's Liberation Army (PLA) annexed Xinjiang and Tibet, Beijing ordered the construction of a road to connect both regions. Because the road, known as Highway 219, runs through Aksai Chin, China started to take effective control of the area. However, it was not until 1957 that the Indians learnt about the road.[1,2,3,4] A proposal by Zhou Enlai to settle the border issue by recognising Indian control over Arunachal Pradesh and Chinese control over Aksai Chin was rejected by Jawaharlal Nehru. India's move for a forward policy to keep the Chinese forces in check and eventually push them out of Aksai Chin (which the Indians perceive as an integral part of Ladakh) was met with a Chinese military campaign that plunged both countries in a brief but bloody war in 1962, ending in humiliation for India. Since then, the MacDonald-line has been the de facto border in the western sector.[5,6]

Since the border war, Indo-Chinese relations have slowly but surely improved, especially since both countries opened up their economies for foreign trade and investment. Indeed, trade has probably been the main cause for a thaw in bilateral relations. Between FY 1990-91 and 2006-07, trade between the two countries has grown an impressive 522 times. India ranks as the number ten trading partner for China, while China has become the second most important trading partner for India. It thus seems, as the liberal school of international relations theory posits, that increased trade linkages have pacified both sides because it simply makes war too costly of an affair.[7,8,9]

However, increased activity on the Chinese side of the LAC in recent years has still been met with great suspicion in New Delhi. In 2008, before the Olympics when Beijing expected unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, Highway 219 was



renovated. In addition to that, military observation posts and barracks as well as landing strips have been constructed in Aksai Chin. These facilities enhance China's quick mobilization capabilities. India, in turn, has decided to deploy a tank formation in Ladakh, is training a 40,000-strong 'mountain strike corps,' and is planning to turn the airstrip in Nyoma into a fully-fledged air base. The Indian Ministry of Defence claims that these measures are a necessary response to China's military build-up and its altered military doctrine. The latter seems to be a reference to China's growing assertiveness in the South and East China Sea with respect to its territorial claims. Beijing, in response, states that its military growth is commensurate with its "international standing and meets the needs of its security and development interests."

Coincidentally, the PLA published a White Paper at around the same time as when the Chinese army unit trespassed across the LAC into Indian territory. The paper elaborates upon PLA policies and priorities in the foreseeable future, though it does not describe a radically new doctrine; it is essentially a continuation and updated version of existing military strategic thinking. For example, the decade-old focus on 'national defence' which includes the principle of 'active defence', an option that allows for defensive pre-emptive strikes, are found in the latest White Paper. Similarly, the statement that the PLA is primarily trained to 'win local wars' is an idea that was put forth by Deng Xiaoping in 1985. Furthermore, PLA efforts to expand its navy's blue water capabilities represent a policy that was originally started under Hu Jintao in order to protect Chinese interests overseas. However, the paper does give an interesting insight in the priorities that it establishes. The US's increased military presence in the Asia-Pacific and the territorial dispute over the Diaoyu (or Senkaku, in Japanese) islets with Japan are given a high priority in its strategic considerations.

Paradoxically, these strategic priorities are fully compatible with the doctrinal principles that have been explained above. As Jonathan Holslag explains in his book *Trapped Giant: China's Military Rise*, China's strategic considerations are affected by its geographic position. The country's demographic, industrial and financial heartland is concentrated the eastern coast. Stability and prosperity in this area is vital for stability in the rest of the country. Around China's heartland is a belt of water and land that China only partially controls but which provides both threats (e.g. Japan, Taiwan, and the Korean peninsula) and opportunities (e.g. the resource rich waters of the South and East China Sea), and which are crucial for the stability, prosperity and sovereignty of the heartland. The next layer is what Holslag calls the belt of uncertainty which is approached by China "with a strong sense of geographical claustrophobia." In this belt of uncertainty, India is located at or near three so-called corridors of peril: the Sino-Pakistani border through which opium and Islamist extremists could enter Xinjiang; the Tibetan plain which connects Tibet with the Tibetan refugees in India, Nepal and Bhutan; and the maritime corridor.

Unable to claim legitimacy from open and fair democratic governance, the Communist Party of China derives much of its legitimacy from the state's ability to generate economic growth that allows higher standards of living for its population. The maritime supply routes from Africa and the Middle East are therefore not only crucial for China's economy but also for its domestic stability. With a 'hot' South China Sea, a Malacca Strait that is effectively under the control of the US and Singaporeans, and an Indian Navy that is on its way to expand its capabilities to project power in the Arabian Sea and Indo-Pacific, it comes as no surprise that Beijing is trying to diversify its logistical lines. One of these alternative supply routes run through Pakistan from its seaport in Baluchistan's Gwadar to Kashgar in Xinjiang via the Karakoram Highway in Gilgit-Baltistan. China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in Pakistan in order to complete the realisation of this alternative supply route. It has even stationed several thousands of PLA troops in the region. While Beijing claims that these troops are there only to assist in the construction efforts, many foreign analysts believe that the PLA is there to stay – an arrangement that would suit both Islamabad and Beijing.

Pakistan's flirtations with democracy do not permeate into Gilgit-Baltistan, which is under direct control of Islamabad and where the Pakistani army has far-reaching authority. This leads to much discontent among the local population against the Pakistani authorities. However, given the fact that a stable Gilgit-Baltistan, being the gateway between China



and the rest of Pakistan, is essential to make the logistical supply route through Pakistan work, China has no interest in any form of potential instability in that region, whether domestically (i.e. the Baltistan) or internationally (cf. the Kashmir-conundrum). China may therefore use its military presence in Gilgit-Baltistan as a lever to substantially increase the threshold for India to engage in a military conflict in that region as it may increase the risk of a military standoff with both Pakistan and China. In the same vein does Aksai Chin provide China a lever to exert pressure on India, namely not to undertake any actions, for example in the Arabian Sea or Indo-Pacific, that may harm fundamental Chinese economic and security interests.

In addition to vested interests involving security and economic concerns, Beijing would be highly unlikely to let go of Aksai Chin because, firstly, Highway 219 is the only veritable all-weather road that connects Tibet and Xinjiang. In that capacity, the road not only facilitates the ability to mobilise troops, but it also connects two of China's least-developed regions. Infrastructure allows the increase of trade volumes and the movement of people and thereby contributes to regional development. Secondly, Aksai Chin is located at the north-western part of the Tibetan plain, clamped between the Kunlun mountain range to its north that separates Tibet from Xinjiang, and the Karakoram Range of the Himalayas to its west which forms a natural barrier between China and India. If it were to fall under Indian control, China would be left strategically exposed.

China's interests in Aksai Chin are plentiful. The question that remains is whether the military build-up along the LAC significantly raises chances for armed conflict between India and Pakistan. This does not seem to be the case. With the memories of 1962 still alive, New Delhi would be unlikely to conduct a cross-LAC attack. For one, the Indian armed forces are arguably in the weaker position in terms of military capabilities vis-à-vis the PLA's. And secondly, India would alienate its most important import trading partner and its second-most important overall trade partner. Similarly, Beijing will be ill-interested in engaging in armed conflict with India. Firstly, China's claims that its rise is benign will lose credibility. The tensions between India and China could easily spill over to the Pacific region and would give a reason to the countries in that region to accelerate defensive expenditures and deepen security arrangements among each other against China. Additionally, an armed conflict is likely to push India and the US closer together. Both scenarios diametrically oppose China's priorities and concerns as stated in the most recent White Paper.

China's path to becoming a strong global power is being followed closely by the international community, and India is no exception. The build-up of military capabilities along the LAC in Aksai Chin seems to be primarily designed to safeguard Beijing's economic and security interests in Pakistan, or more specifically in Gilgit-Baltistan, and in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. The increased military presence in Aksai Chin acts as a deterrent and a lever that enables China exert pressure on India not to undertake any action that could harm its interests. India's military build-up on its side of the LAC is of reactionary nature which in turn is the consequence of a classic example of the security dilemma that has pushed New Delhi to undertake action in Ladakh. Although tensions have flared up, chances of seeing another Indo-Chinese border war in the foreseeable future seem far-fetched because the forces that tie the two countries together are stronger than the forces pulling them apart.[10,11,12]

II.DISCUSSION

After decades as a bilateral conflict between the two South Asian nuclear rival nations, India and Pakistan, Kashmir has now become a triangular geopolitical dispute. The clashes between Chinese and Indian forces in the eastern Kashmiri region of Ladakh have created a two-front battlespace for India. Chinese incursions into Indian-administered territory will embolden Pakistan to up its support for Kashmiri separatists, which will greatly aggravate the struggle over the disputed region. From the U.S. perspective, there is an opportunity to align with India to try to gain advantage over a China that has increasingly become a challenge. However, there are also risks of further insecurity and instability in the region.



Indian officials announced June 16 that at least 20 of their soldiers, including a colonel, were killed and over 100 more injured in a clash with Chinese troops in the Galwan Valley on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) – the border separating the Ladakh region of Indian-administered Kashmir and China’s Xinjiang and Tibet regions. China has not said anything about its casualties and thus far has not provided its account of what transpired in this high-altitude conflict zone; it has given only a superficial account of what happened after the two sides agreed to de-escalate an ongoing standoff. India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, in a June 17 televised statement said his country sought peace but warned that it was “capable of giving a fitting reply, be it any kind of situation.”

This is the first incident of fighting between the two sides in Kashmir since 1967, when skirmishes reportedly left scores of dead on both sides — five years after the 1962 Sino-Indian war that ended in China’s favor. But what is most peculiar about this entire matter is that apparently the clashes did not involve any military weapons. “They hit our boys on the head with metal batons wrapped in barbed wire. Our boys fought with bare hands,” is how one unnamed senior Indian military official recounted the incident to the BBC. The official said some 300 Chinese, part of what he described as a “death squad,” pounced upon Indian soldiers.

The only public statement from the Chinese side comes from China’s People’s Liberation Army that blamed the incident on what it referred to as “provocative actions” of India. In a statement on China’s Ministry of Defense website, Zhang Shuili, the spokesman of the Western Theater insisted that “the sovereignty of the Galwan Valley region has always belonged to China.” Shuili claimed that Indian forces “crossed the borderline for illegal activities and deliberately launched provocative attacks,” which resulted in a “serious physical conflict between the two sides.”

While the tactical details of the clash remain murky, there is no doubt that it represents a major escalation between the two countries. The last significant event between the world’s two most populous nations was a casualty-free, 73-day standoff in 2017 in the Doklam plateau, a region along the tri-border area between China, India, and Bhutan. India-China border disputes exist at various points across the entire 2,520-mile-long Himalayan boundary that runs from the Arunachal Pradesh- Nyingchi in the east near Myanmar to the Ladakh Aksai-Chin region in the west near Pakistan — but it is this western border region that is tied to broader geopolitical dynamics in southwest Asia.

The Two Kashmiri Conflicts

When most people think of Kashmir, the first thing that comes to mind is the India-Pakistan conflict because the dispute over the region has mostly been between New Delhi and Islamabad. Indeed, most of the violence — including wars in 1947-48, 1965, 1971 and 1999 — has been along the Line of Control (LOC) that separates Pakistan’s Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan regions from the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Since 1989, fighters belonging to different Pakistan-based Islamist militant groups (often with the assistance of Islamabad) have been crossing the LOC in an effort to exploit Muslim separatism on the Indian side through insurgency and terrorism. They have even staged attacks well beyond Kashmir in major urban centers such as Mumbai and New Delhi and military bases elsewhere. This has brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war in 2002, 2008, 2016, and 2019.[12,13,14]

In sharp contrast, the LAC separating the Indian- and Chinese-controlled parts of Kashmir has remained calm even though since the 1962 war, both sides have been steadily fortifying their military positions, especially through the construction of roads and other facilities. But the June clash along the LAC means the Kashmir dispute is no longer simply a function of India-Pakistan bilateral relations. Understanding this battlespace requires a consideration of India’s constraints and imperatives. From the Indian point of view, New Delhi is now faced with the challenge of simultaneously defending its territory from both Pakistan and China.

There is already a great deal of domestic criticism within India over the clash with the Chinese, which is being called an intelligence failure because of a sense that the Indians were caught off-guard. The Modi government is under considerable pressure to respond to the deaths of as many as two dozen troops. This clash comes shortly after the Modi administration revoked the status of Kashmir as an autonomous region and split what it used to refer to as the state of Jammu and Kashmir into the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh. The move set-off a domestic and international backlash as New Delhi placed the entire region under lockdown.

The separation of Ladakh from Jammu and Kashmir was a way for New Delhi to try to better manage the restive region and deal with the dispute with Pakistan. But it appears to have triggered Chinese concerns about the future of their control over large parts of Ladakh. Beijing is not just reacting to New Delhi’s strategic move to reorganize the largest chunk of Kashmir, which is under India’s control. The Indian military has been building roads and bridges along a large



segment of the LAC that separates Chinese-held parts of Kashmir from those under Indian-administration — moves that Beijing feels are likely part of New Delhi's efforts to weaken the Chinese position in Aksai Chin.

In any case, the deadly Indo-Chinese clash in the Galwan Valley has shattered the general state of calm that had existed along the LAC and plunged India and China into uncharted territory. According to a military assessment by a prominent former Indian three-star turned strategic analyst, Retired Lt. Gen. H.S. Panag, the clash took place because Chinese forces have pushed beyond the LAC and now occupy additional Indian territory that most importantly includes several strategic peaks. While there is no comparison between the volume and intensity of violence along the LOC between India and Pakistan with the LAC, from an Indian point of view it can no longer afford to treat the LAC as it has thus far. In some ways, as far as Kashmir is concerned, India must now deal with two hostile borders.

India Between China & Pakistan

China has been the traditional ally of India's principal foe, Pakistan. For decades, the Chinese avoided getting into the India-Pakistan spat over Kashmir — even as Beijing had its own border issues with India in the region. China not only controls significant chunks of territory all along the eastern rim of Kashmir, it also has been in control of large chunks of area in the north-central part of the former princely state of Kashmir that existed during British rule in India. Making matters worse was Pakistan's 1963 move to cede to China the Shaksgam Valley, which the Pakistanis gained control of in the 1947-48 war with India.

India long took comfort in the assumption that when it came to Kashmir, China was not going to get involved. However, since at least 2013, China has upgraded its relationship with Pakistan through the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor — the largest investment of Beijing's international Belt & Road Initiative. The corridor's starting point is in China's Xinjiang province and runs through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and from there throughout the length of Pakistan's geography to the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar, which also is under Chinese management. Thus, India has been increasingly concerned about the rapidly growing alignment between China and Pakistani and how that impacts New Delhi's conflict with Islamabad, particularly over Kashmir.

Also significant is that the unprecedented June clash took place in an area in Kashmir along the LAC that is not too far from the LOC, especially the Kargil sector — the scene of the 1999 mini-war between India and Pakistan — so there is a sense of history repeating itself. The difference is that 21 years ago, Pakistani forces supported by irregulars crossed the LOC and occupied heights, whereas in the most recent incident, Chinese troops crossed the LAC to occupy two different areas along the LAC in the Ladakh area.

The Galwan Valley is also not far from the Siachen Glacier, which Indian forces took control of in 1984 by taking advantage of the fact that the LOC that far north was ambiguous. Siachen has been the scene of a decades-long stand-off between Indian and Pakistan troops and represents the highest-elevation battlefield on the planet. By gaining control over it, India not only gained an advantage over Pakistan but also the ability to monitor Chinese movements in the Shaksgam Valley, which it could not before then. This is why the Indians are worried that the Chinese moves in Galwan Valley threaten to undermine the Indian position in this complicated conflict zone. More importantly, the extent to which China and Pakistan are collaborating on Kashmir is, understandably, a key question on the minds of Indian decision-makers as they move to respond to the situation.

At the very least, the Chinese moves on the LAC embolden Pakistan to take greater risks on the LOC. From Pakistan's perspective, China and India fighting over Kashmir is a historic opportunity that it would want to leverage to the maximum possible extent. The Indians have to factor this into their long-term military planning. It will involve allocation of greater resources to the LAC, which means it will have to contend with less on the LOC. The details of how this new emerging dynamic in Kashmir unfolds are unclear. What isn't is the fact that the ball is now in India's court to respond to the Chinese move and in a way that doesn't also cause it to lower its guard on the front with Pakistan.[14,15,16]

Tensions in Kashmir are increasing at a time when the United States has been trying to manage the challenge from China, as well as dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic and domestic unrest ahead of a presidential election. Washington needs to come up with a net assessment on this emerging three-player battlespace that has taken even close observers by surprise. It is indeed an opportunity to try to counter China, which will require aligning with India. But it must be done in a manner that does not create more problems than it solves, especially on the India-Pakistan front, which is linked to the U.S. disengagement from Afghanistan.



China's rapidly growing involvement in the India-Pakistan dynamic, especially now in Kashmir, undermines the U.S. interest to maintain a balance of power between India and Pakistan as Washington is in the midst of bringing closure to the war in Afghanistan. In order to ensure a strategic equilibrium in South Asia and maintain a security architecture in a post-American Afghanistan, the United States will need to work more closely with both India and Pakistan. This is the key prerequisite to using the India-China conflict to counter Beijing on its southern flank.

III.RESULTS

The geopolitical situation in South Asia is witnessing entangled trends, which are reflected as chronic India-Pakistan confrontation, the frigid China-India relationship and the increasing US-China competition. China doesn't want to be involved in the India-Pakistan confrontation, but it's an undeniable fact that the China factor is shaping India-Pakistan interaction to some extent. Though the United States is an extra-regional power, it has a long history of being involved in regional affairs. Considering China, India and Pakistan all possess nuclear weapons, it's extremely important to analyze the geopolitical trends and implications for the nuclear chain. This argues that the United States has been focusing on strategic competition against China, and the bilateral relationship will face fierce challenges before reaching new balance. The China-India relationship is becoming competitive and volatile, and the old framework of stabilizing bilateral relations is disintegrating. The conflicting ideology of nation-building, the extremely contradicted security perception, and the battle for geostrategic advantage in the region all contribute to India-Pakistan confrontation. Though nuclear weapons, functioning as a strategic deterrence tool, will curtail concerning parties from large-scale war, and China strongly advocates for a common and cooperative security concept, the geopolitical entanglement will have serious impact on the regional nuclear situation. This also gives recommendations for managing this interaction. All concerned parties should strive to overcome the security dilemma and maintain peace and stability in this region by strengthening confidence-building measures, conducting nuclear issue dialogues and improving crisis management mechanisms.

Even as India and China find themselves embroiled in yet another border standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), commentators have sounded alarm on how Pakistan could seek to utilize the situation. Concurrently, some have observed that China's transgression at the border is likely to push New Delhi closer to Washington, at a time when Sino-U.S. tensions are running high. A dyadic understanding of the security environment in Southern Asia, either through an India-Pakistan or India-China lens, is thus incomplete and does not account for the triangular dynamics that shape these interactions. To understand regional dynamics, it is critical to understand the India-Pakistan-China triangle and how it is impacted by the strategic chain, including the United States. The contemporary reality of these dynamics is grounded in an early Cold War history, and potential conflict scenarios involving these countries animate the geopolitics of Southern Asia.

A Triangle Made in History

The India-Pakistan-China triangle is mired in a convoluted history of unresolved border disputes, with military confrontations between India and China at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), and India and Pakistan at the Line of Control (LoC) occurring intermittently. In 1947, Britain's hasty withdrawal from the subcontinent as a result of post-war decolonization led to a haphazard redrawing of political boundaries in Southern Asia, leaving some territory contested. The four wars that India and Pakistan have fought since 1947, the Sino-Indian Border War of 1962, and recurrent India-China and India-Pakistan conflicts at the LAC and LoC trace their genesis back to this protracted history. The military dimension of this triangle evolved in the years after the 1962 Sino-Indian Border War, when Beijing and Islamabad signed the border delimitation agreement in 1963. As part of this agreement, Pakistan handed over the Trans-Karakoram tract, a territory in Kashmir that India claimed, to China, turning the dispute into a trilateral one.

Further, during the 1965 India-Pakistan War, Pakistan felt betrayed by a lack of U.S. support, and chose to strengthen relations with China. Pakistan had expected the United States to tilt to its side, due to the 1954 U.S.-Pakistan mutual defense agreement and Pakistan's membership in U.S. engineered alliances like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization and the Central Treaty Organization. However, during and after the 1962 war, the United States showed hitherto unseen willingness to aid and assist India's military against Communist China, making it prudent for China and Pakistan to join hands. Although Washington premised arming both Pakistan and India to achieve its Cold War objective to contain communism in Asia, neither side bought Washington's assurances that its military supplies were not meant to be used against each other. Although China did not provide any direct military help to its new friend Pakistan during the 1965 war, it did engage in a psychological assault against India, repeatedly accusing New Delhi of showing aggression on the India-China border, and threatening Chinese reprisal.



During and after the 1971 India-Pakistan War, the United States tilted towards Pakistan, because it needed Islamabad as a conduit to Beijing during the 1972 Sino-U.S. rapprochement talks. Beginning in 1979, Pakistan played a frontline role for the United States in Afghanistan, in the last Cold War tussle between the United States and Soviet Union. In this context, geopolitics trumped nonproliferation concerns as Washington ignored intelligence that China was helping Pakistan develop a nuclear bomb. These conditions were hardly conducive for a healthy Indo-U.S. relationship, despite efforts at finding convergent points during the Reagan presidency. After the Cold War, the subsequent rise of China as a global power, followed by that of India, shifted dynamics of the India-China dyad, leading to heightened Sino-Indian competition, and tightening Sino-Pakistan military ties. Meanwhile, the India-Pakistan relationship remained volatile, taking an even more sinister turn as cross-border terrorism emanating in Pakistan targeted India, becoming a lingering roadblock to normalizing ties.

The Triangle in Contemporary Times

What characterizes this triangle is the geographical proximity of the three nuclear-armed countries, wherein any military standoff or confrontation is perceived as having the risk of use of nuclear weapons, or the probability of a two-front war for India, against a Sino-Pakistani combined military assault.

Today, both capabilities and intentions play a significant role in shaping perceptions and misperceptions within the India-Pakistan-China triangle. Specifically, Pakistan's power asymmetry relative to that of India, and India's power gap vis-à-vis China drive each state's regional posture. Pakistan's bid to enhance its capabilities, especially through nuclear deterrence and with Chinese assistance, is a means to counter India's conventional superiority. Meanwhile, China's growing military capabilities and defense modernization as well as its increasing role as a development and security partner for not only Pakistan but also a host of other states in India's neighborhood foment concern in New Delhi.[16,17,18]

Additionally, what characterizes this triangle is also the geographical proximity of the three nuclear-armed countries, wherein any military standoff or confrontation is perceived as having the risk of use of nuclear weapons, or the probability of a two-front war for India, against a Sino-Pakistani combined military assault. However, the Pakistani response to any India-China border confrontation, and a Chinese response to an India-Pakistan war or a military standoff at the borders, is more tacit than overt, since the China-Pakistan strategic alliance does not have any unambiguous notion of the two countries coming to each other's help in the event of a war.

More than a Triangle: The Strategic Chain

Strategic analysts increasingly agree that the security dynamics of Southern Asia are best explained as a triangle, rather than as an India-Pakistan dyad. However, external players are crucial in shaping outcomes within this triangle, and so regional dynamics may be better depicted as a strategic chain wherein the United States is the most prominent external agent of influence. The triangle and the strategic chain, as conceptual lenses to understand geopolitics in Southern Asia, are complementary rather than contradictory. While the inherent security dilemma in the India-Pakistan-China triangle continues to be a major determining factor of the regional security scenario, looking at how the U.S. role complicates responses and counter-responses in this triangle, completes the picture. The emerging security environment in the region can be better explained by considering the concerns regarding China's rise that drive the Indo-U.S. relationship, China and Pakistan's threat perceptions vis-à-vis this partnership, and India's worries emanating from the China-Pakistan alliance.

As Chinese influence increases in India's maritime and continental neighborhood, New Delhi has in turn reached out to China's neighbors to build partnerships with countries in Southeast and East Asia. Rising Sino-Indian competition in both continental and maritime realms, along with the global power tussle between China and the United States, has led to a greater strategic embrace between New Delhi and Washington. Beijing, on the one hand, tries to convince New Delhi not to fully align with the United States against China, engaging India in a number of forums such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, Russia, South Africa (BRICS), Russia-India-China (RIC), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and through bilateral top leadership summits. On the other hand, Beijing solidifies its strategic outreach to Pakistan, which inherently isolates India, through controversial projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The interlocking threat perceptions and responses in the triangle hence



cannot be decoupled from the U.S. strategy in the region, making the strategic chain an effective complement to explain the geopolitics of Southern Asia.

Conflict Scenarios

The regional postures of China, India, and Pakistan and the U.S. strategy in Southern Asia intend to maximize interest by capability enhancement, either through internal or external balancing. This makes the security dilemma in the region more acute and creates the possibility of conflict, some scenarios of which are explored below.

Two-front war

Since India's border disputes with China and Pakistan are still unresolved and Beijing and Islamabad have a close strategic and military partnership, India perceives any conflagration with either Pakistan or China as raising the specter of a two-front war. The Indian military establishment is overt in asserting its recognition of and readiness to face such an eventuality. For example, General Bipin Rawat, currently India's Chief of Defense Staff, while serving as the Indian Army Chief, commented, "The two-front is a real scenario. Much has changed from before in terms of our capabilities...The Army, Navy and IAF are now jointly very much prepared for such an eventuality." India's military preparedness for a two-front war involves developing its overall deterrent capability and credibility, advances in terms of acquisition and production of military equipment, recalibrating its military strategy, relevant training efforts to meet exigencies, and border infrastructure development. Infrastructure building in the border areas and the issue of terrain advantage has been a major source of contention, particularly, as seen in the current clashes between Indian and Chinese forces in eastern Ladakh, or in the earlier Doklam standoff.

While the Indian military establishment understandably projects its readiness, others are more skeptical. The case of Pakistan taking the opportunity of an India-China conflict and opening a second front at the LoC is seen as most probable. Other scenarios include China opening a second front at the LAC or in the Indian Ocean region in the event of an India-Pakistan conflict, or a more sinister case of a pre-planned China-Pakistan military assault against India. Indian Army Chief M M Naravane said earlier this year, "[...]Though it can take place at any level, Siachen and Shaksgam Valley are the places where territory of these two countries meet. Threat of collusion is maximum in the strategically important glacier which forces us to keep our possession." Talking about identifying a primary and secondary front in such a scenario, he added, "For years, we have been focusing on western border on the basis of threats. Now, we have to rebalance our deployment towards northern sector." Irrespective of how probable such a scenario is, the perception of such a threat is likely to dictate both the reality and signalling of India's military preparedness.

Friction in the Strategic Chain

The India-Pakistan-China triangle is determined by relative national power and mutual threat perceptions, further complicated by the regional implications of the growing confrontation between the United States and China. Pakistan remains the most steadfast ally of China in India's neighborhood, while India remains the only country in the region that comes closest to competing with growing Chinese influence.

Stress in the strategic chain may act as a contributing factor to conflict in the region. The potential for the India-China-Pakistan-United States strategic chain to complicate matters in Southern Asia can be seen in the case of India's candidacy for Nuclear Suppliers Group membership. Washington supports India's bid while the Chinese oppose it, citing India's refusal to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and equating India's candidature to that of Pakistan. Moreover, Beijing has been resistant to supporting international efforts to list Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) leader Masood Azhar as a global terrorist at the United Nations Security Council, and withdrew their technical hold only last year. Additionally, Afghan security in the midst of American withdrawal is another issue impacting this strategic chain: China's politico-economic role in Afghanistan passes through Pakistan. Islamabad has been instrumental in bringing the Chinese establishment closer to the Taliban, as China hopes to checkmate links between Uighur separatists in Xinjiang Province and militants in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Such developments are significant from New Delhi's view, as it needs to become more pragmatic to deal with all forces that are central to the future of Afghanistan. This should include talking to the Taliban, to secure its interest in Afghanistan, in the event of an American withdrawal, the return of the Taliban as a political force and Pakistan's intention to undercut Indian influence. These frictions in the strategic chain exacerbate the inherent tensions in the India-Pakistan-China triad, making differences more intractable and protracted.



IV. CONCLUSION

The India-Pakistan-China triangle is determined by relative national power and mutual threat perceptions, further complicated by the regional implications of the growing confrontation between the United States and China. Pakistan remains the most steadfast ally of China in India's neighborhood, while India remains the only country in the region that comes closest to competing with growing Chinese influence. The power asymmetry between India and Pakistan in the former's favor, and the growing power imbalance between India and China in the latter's favor will continue to reinforce the inherent security dilemma of the triangle, justifying China-Pakistan collusion, in order to checkmate India's rise in the region. Moreover, Chinese perceptions of a U.S. containment strategy that involves India additionally impacts the triangle. The broad mistrust and zero-sum perceptions in the triangle will continue to determine the probability of crises and conflict playing out at the LAC and LoC. Besides the more volatile responses and counter-responses over the disputed borders, differences will simmer at global forums over issues such as counterterrorism and nonproliferation, and over the regional security situation in Afghanistan. Despite attempts at diplomatic maneuvers and confidence building measures to arrest uncontrolled escalation and inadvertent conflict in the triangle, the complex dynamics of the India-Pakistan-China triangle, further reinforced by the role of the United States in the region, make conflict a regular phenomenon that has to be managed, rather than eliminated.[19]

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