
China's Current Kashmir Policy: Steady Crystallisation

Monika Chansoria

Tracing the Trajectory of China's Kashmir Policy

Due to the complex and intractable nature of the Kashmir issue, any imminent resolution continues to be elusive, thereby placing South Asia on the tenterhooks of a looming conflict and its consequent escalation. The underlying rationales behind China's Kashmir policy need to be gauged within the broader context of China's evolving South Asia policy. The trajectory of China's declared positions, specifically on the Kashmir issue, evolves through five distinct phases. In the 1950s, Beijing upheld a more or less neutral position on Kashmir. The 1960s and 1970s saw a perceptible shift in the Chinese position toward public support of Pakistan's position on the issue as Sino-Indian relations deteriorated. Beijing supported Islamabad's position on the Kashmir issue to demonstrate solidarity with an "all weather" ally during periods of Sino-Indian estrangement and hostility. Since the early 1980s, however, China's and India's moves towards normalisation of bilateral relations necessitated the adoption of a policy of neutrality to avoid needless alienation of India, coupled with running the risk of entrapment.¹ For that matter, the Chinese policy got reflected in Deng Xiaoping's June 1980 statement "... Kashmir ... was a bilateral issue left over from history between India and Pakistan, and

Dr **Monika Chansoria** is Senior Fellow and Head of the China-study programme, Centre for Land Warfare Studies, New Delhi.

should be resolved peacefully...” This carried forward to the decade of the early 1990s, when China’s position became unequivocal that the Kashmir issue is a bilateral matter.² Beijing returned to a position of neutrality even as it sought to balance out the need to satisfy Pakistan’s demands for support and the growing interest in developing a better relationship with India. From a Chinese perspective, the period of the late 1990s saw a gradual shift in the regional balance of power in South Asia, with the steady emergence of India, and the concurrent decline of Pakistan,

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following a series of important events that unfolded in the subcontinent. Most momentous among these was the nuclearisation of South Asia in 1998 which heightened Chinese concerns regarding conflict escalation over Kashmir that could precipitate into a nuclear exchange.³ The Kargil conflict brought into focus the possibility of introduction of nuclear weapons onto the battlefield between India and Pakistan, which caused considerable anxiety in China in that any debate on nuclear weapons’ usage could draw/impact China’s own nuclear arsenal into the fray. This was clearly visible in many Chinese commentaries that emphasised upon the threats to the stability of the entire region, of which China too is an integral part.⁴ During my visit to, and interaction with, Zhao Gancheng at, the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, he pointed out that since the outbreak of the Kargil conflict, China has been increasingly aware of the danger of a potential large-scale conflict that would deal a severe blow to China’s strategic goal of maintaining a stable periphery.⁵

However, the fifth and present phase of the Chinese strategy vis-à-vis Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK), I argue, is seemingly headed

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toward gaining tacit control of the region—both militarily and politico-diplomatically. This objective got further buttressed and advertised with the first joint patrolling by Chinese and Pakistani military troops along the border in July 2016. The exercise emitted multiple signals, both tactically, and strategically. Although Chinese troops are known to have conducted patrols in this area since 2014, joint patrols by the Chinese

People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Pakistan’s border police force along the stretch connecting PoK and China’s Xinjiang, outwardly, remain the first of their kind. What was more precarious was that there was no clarification from either side, on whether the patrolling was being done for the first time, or, whether it was being reported publicly for the first time. The state-run and controlled media in Beijing published dozens of photographs of armed Chinese and Pakistani troops marching along the border and conducting drills, with a caption provided alongside the pictures that read, “... frontier defence regiment of the PLA in Xinjiang, along with a border police force from Pakistan, carry out a joint patrol along the China-Pakistan border.”

According to Hu Shisheng, at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, China cannot wait for India and Pakistan to settle the Kashmir issue before going ahead with the transit and transport project that passes through PoK. While comparing the venture to developmental projects in Arunachal Pradesh, which is claimed by Beijing, Hu argued that if India can carry out developmental projects in Arunachal Pradesh, China can do the same in PoK. India can “oppose the project passing through PoK in the same way China continues to oppose schemes in the eastern disputed area” or Arunachal Pradesh.⁶ Hu said China cannot wait for India and Pakistan to settle

their dispute in Kashmir while terrorism spilled over to Xinjiang in the country's northwest, since then, "... China's Xinjiang (which shares a border with PoK) will be full of conflicts... that is too risky." He argued that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is needed because of the radicalisation of Pakistan. "For China, we tend to regard the CPEC as one way to address radicalisation, the extremist issues, terrorism issues, which exist in Pakistan. Because we tend to believe that lack of development and large-scale poverty provides fertile ground for this kind of violent culture," Hu said.⁷

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By virtue of the latest move of joint patrols, China seemingly, sent multiple implicit signals to India. That Beijing is pursuing an aggressive engagement strategy in the region cannot be more apparent. It has been long known that by means of sponsoring and investing in numerous "infrastructure development projects" inside Gilgit-Baltistan, the Chinese Construction Corps—a highly organised paramilitary force—has firmly established its presence in the region. With the latest joint patrols by the frontier defence regiment of the PLA, the presence and potential future deployment of the regular Chinese Army inside Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir remains a foregone conclusion. In fact, I had stated way back in December 2011 that notwithstanding the debate surrounding the actual number of Chinese PLA troops present in PoK at that point, the fact of the matter remains that China has firmly perched itself in PoK alongside the 772-km-long Line of Control (LoC) running between India and Pakistan.⁸ With the reported stationing of a unit of PLA soldiers near the Khunjerab Pass and Chinese military officials frequenting the Field

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Command Office of Gilgit, which happens to be Pakistan's military headquarter in the region, China's pervasive intent of establishing its military edge in India's northern sector cannot be negated, or denied, any longer.

What perhaps is of greater consequence from an Indian standpoint is Beijing's objective of expanding and buttressing its reach, which is only likely to complicate the current complexities surrounding Kashmir. By issuing stapled visas to Indian passport holders from Jammu and Kashmir (J&K), rather than stamping the visas on their passports, as is the norm, Beijing has attempted to question the status of J&K vis-à-vis the Indian Union, and provide inferred support to Pakistan's diplomatic position on the subject. In this backdrop, it would not be entirely incorrect to state that China is not likely to be a "neutral party" to the Kashmir issue any more. More recently, in April 2016, China's official news agency, *Xinhua*, filed one report after the other on Kashmir, stating "...a separatist movement and guerrilla war challenging New Delhi's rule is going on in Indian-controlled Kashmir since 1989." This was followed by another spate of extreme and dangerous reportage coming in from Beijing that narrated "...trouble in Indian-controlled Kashmir ... and Kashmiri protesters throwing stones at Indian police and paramilitary troopers during a protest in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-controlled Kashmir." All this while, China published tourist maps depicting Kashmir as an entirely separate entity. It would be extremely difficult for China to defend and justify its self-styled "consistency" on neutrality over Kashmir in the above-mentioned backdrop.

China's Current Position on Kashmir: Reminiscent of 1965

Furthermore, calling for a "proper settlement of the Kashmir clashes" in July 2016 (the same time around which the first joint patrolling by Chinese

and Pakistani military troops along the PoK border took place), the Chinese Foreign Ministry reiterated that China's position on the Kashmir issue has been consistent. This statement can best be termed as self-contradictory. Beijing has shifted its position on Kashmir, gradually, yet firmly, with each passing decade. It would be apposite to recall China's response during the 1999 Kargil conflict, when it committed itself to a policy of neutrality, which compelled the Nawaz Sharif government, already under immense international pressure, to look for an honourable retreat from the

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political and military muddle that Pakistan had landed itself into in Kargil. The growing diplomatic isolation of the Pakistani elite was particularly noticeable and contributed the most to the determination by the leadership in Beijing to continue with their policy of neutrality. Following that, came the "stapled visas" phase, wherein China began providing diplomatic support to Pakistan's stated position on Kashmir. Chinese analysts have advocated that Beijing continues to value its traditional ties with Pakistan.⁹ Amid the broader historical backdrop of China's traditional pro-Pakistan policy agenda, which is rooted in China's larger regional vision of how it would like to view and design regional equations in South Asia, any expectation, including that by India, of Beijing maintaining a neutral posture/position on Kashmir, in terms of diplomatic and military posturing, should not be considered a guarantee any more.

The Chinese power elite is accruing its strategic agenda for the region, one, that is becoming far more interventionist, and expansionist. In a meeting on the side lines of the G-20 Summit in Hangzhou in

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September 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping is reported to have conveyed to Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi that “China is willing to work with India to maintain their hard-won sound relations”, further suggesting that “China and India should continue dialogues at various levels and areas, and frequently exchange views on major issues of common interest to enhance understanding and trust”. However, China’s state-controlled and run *Global Times*, affiliated to the *People’s*

Daily—the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party—took on a contrarian and almost diametrically differing note to Xi Jinping’s statement just a week prior to the G-20 Summit, which saw an assembly of the world’s top political leadership. The *Global Times* ran a rancorous commentary on how the Indian PM’s “provocations raise risks for India”, and charged PM Modi of “losing patience and switching to the expected hardline tone of hostility”. The commentary further highlighted Modi’s address to the nation on India’s Independence Day during the course of which, he expressed gratitude to the people of Baluchistan, Gilgit, and Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir. The Chinese state-controlled media termed this gesture as being “so provocative” that it would educe a response by Pakistan, inevitably, thus, drawing the world’s attention at a time “... [Modi’s] government is trying to prevent the issue being internationalized...” What China abjectly failed to acknowledge was that there is hardly any international/regional forum wherein Pakistan, in all these decades, has not raised the “Kashmir issue”? The pages of history are testament to the fact that India and its people remain committed to being at the forefront of the fight against terrorism, and PM Modi stated the same in no less terms at the G-20 forum by making a tacit reference

to Pakistan for “spreading agents of terror and violence in South Asia” and using it as an instrument of state policy. For that matter even the 8th Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) Summit concluded in Goa in October 2016, issued a Joint Declaration “...condemn[ing] the recent several attacks against some BRICS countries, including that in India... strongly condemn terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and stressed that there can be no justification whatsoever for any act of terrorism, whether based upon ideological, religious, political, racial, ethnic or any other reason...”¹⁰

For the Chinese print media to term the “recent events in Indian-controlled Kashmir, hit by massive protests, violence and death in the last 50 days, as a result of the death of Burhan Wani, a young Hizb-ul-Mujahideen commander” is an absurd campaign that is highly misleading to say the least. Wani was a local commander of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, which is a designated terrorist organisation listed by the United States, European Union and India. Wani picked up the gun and was involved in spreading terror, violence and murder of civilians, with the ultimate aim of seceding Kashmir from the Union of India. Burhan Wani should have chosen the route of the “ballot box” to further his cause, as democracies the world over advocate, and not “bullets”, as he chose, and preferred, to do. It is well known that of all the terrorist outfits currently operating in Jammu and Kashmir, the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen is among the largest, with a cadre base that is drawn from indigenous and foreign sources, to perpetrate violence and terror across the state. These commentaries can be referenced back in terms of their tone and tenor to the decade of the 1960s when China endorsed “Kashmir people’s war of self-determination” in a piece that was published on September 05, 1965, in the *People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao)* which read, “...the Chinese people deeply sympathize with the just struggle of the people of Kashmir for their right to self-determination... the Chinese government and people... resolutely support... the Kashmir people’s struggle for national self-

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determination... the Kashmir people will surely realize their desire for national self-determination.”

For China that is intently keeping a tab on, and highlighting, the “excessive use of force by the Indian government to suppress local calls for autonomy”, one would be compelled to raise a few critical observations and facts about its own dark reality that confronts the very basics of a democratic way of life and governance, the freedom to express and the freedom to choose. India, with its successively elected and

chosen democratic governments, has, indeed, provided the space, and scope for peaceful protests, as can be viewed lucidly from the current situation in Jammu and Kashmir. India has accepted voices of dissent expressing themselves and being heard—something that is completely unheard of in China—a Communist nation that exercises the most tight-fisted and repressive political and military control over its “Autonomous Regions”, including Tibet and Xinjiang by means of ruthlessly repressing its ethnic minority communities in western China. The public massacre of protesting students at Tiananmen Square in 1989 will remain etched in the world’s memory forever. The continuing atrocities and crackdown against the Tibetans and Uyghurs, who are seething under the brutal Chinese onslaught, resulting in a society filled with trepidation and unease, are well documented. The use of repressive means to stifle dissent has been a routine occurrence, but the implications of this for arguments about the right of peaceful protest are seldom raised. If the state represses dissent, this undermines the arguments that protesters should first work through the orthodox channels and remain non-violent, and otherwise follow

the strictures of the constitutionally-minded theorists on civil disobedience. The reality of repression undercuts the liberal assumption of a free and pluralist society and provides support for the idea that protest, and arguments about the justification of protest are part of a wider political struggle.¹¹ With the current tightening of control on online social networks and suppression of political dissent and activism, laced

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with a defence budget that continues to raise spending to tackle internal security, Beijing has far too much to address, and answer for within its own boundaries, than passing judgements on democratically-elected governments and their people.

Interestingly, China and Pakistan came up with differing versions of the September 21, 2016, meeting between Premier Li Keqiang and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at the United Nations. Islamabad interpreted that during the meeting, Li backed Pakistan's position on Kashmir. The Lahore office of Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif claimed in a press release that the Chinese Consul General in Lahore, Yu Boren pledged China's support to the country "...in case of any foreign aggression our country will extend its full support to Pakistan". Yu was also quoted as saying China "...will side with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue" and there were "no justification for atrocities on unarmed Kashmiris".¹² On the contrary, the Chinese statement made no such reference to Kashmir. In fact, it pointedly called on Pakistan to take further steps to protect Chinese personnel present there. This was the second time in a week that Beijing distanced itself from Islamabad's statement on Kashmir, with the two sides offering very different accounts of meetings between their top officials. China contradicted reports being floated in the Pakistani

media that Beijing would side with Pakistan in case of any aggression, as well as on backing it on the Kashmir issue. However, Beijing declined to confirm the comments attributed to its Consul General in Lahore, with the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang stating, “I am not aware of the situation you mentioned.” A few days later, the Chinese diplomatic doublespeak was at its best by stating that China “attaches importance” to Pakistan’s stand on Kashmir. During an interaction with a special Pakistani delegation on Kashmir in Beijing, China’s Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin said China wants the “relevant parties” to resolve the issue through consultation and “emphasised that China pays attention to the recent situation in Kashmir and attaches importance to Pakistan’s relevant position.” Recall that China had earlier snubbed Pakistan by declining to back well-publicised reports being published in Islamabad that claimed “Beijing’s support in the event of any aggression and for its stand on Kashmir.”¹³

China-sponsored “development projects” in Gilgit-Baltistan render the region’s strategic calculus far more unstable. This is in addition to the rather overambitious 3,000-km CPEC announced in 2015, passing through Pakistan’s restive Baluchistan province, linking northwestern China to southern Pakistan’s Arabian Sea coastline through a network of roads, railways and pipelines, starting from Kashgar in China, the traditional business centre of Xinjiang province, subsequently passing through the 1,300-km Karakorum Highway and, finally, ending in the Chinese-funded Gwadar port (south of Baluchistan) in the Arabian Sea. Pakistan is expecting the Xi Jinping administration to eventually roll out contracts worth an estimated Rs 157 billion (\$46 billion) on this corridor. However, what portion of the promised sum shall ultimately get invested on the ground remains to be seen, given China’s history of making big-ticket announcements and not delivering as much on them. Chinese companies are reportedly kick-starting with an investment of \$22.5 billion in coal-fired, hydro, wind and solar energy projects in Pakistan – quite a few of which will

be situated in the Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir region. As the Chinese government provides concessional loans for these infrastructure projects, Pakistan has great hopes that the economic corridor shall provide a much-needed boost to the nation's sluggish economy, and bring some respite to its ostensibly ceaseless economic woes, while providing employment opportunities.

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For the same, Gwadar is being given top priority primarily since it is the entry point for the CPEC where China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) project converges. Pakistan's Senator Mushahid Hussain the underlined the role of Baluchistan and Gwadar port, as was reported by *The Frontier Post*, stating that without these two "there would be no CPEC". Not surprisingly, Hussain is one among many in Pakistan who firmly believe that the "CPEC is the future of Pakistan".

Conclusion

Notwithstanding these statements, Pakistan's economic corridor and its centrality to Xi Jinping's OBOR project has drawn the Chinese even more intrinsically to the regional geostrategic arithmetic vis-à-vis Kashmir. The growing Chinese stakes in Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir by virtue of heavy economic investments and the presence of Chinese personnel (civilian workers, paramilitary and the Construction Corps of the PLA) make China, an indispensable 'factor' in the Kashmir debate. China continues to retain control of nearly 20 percent of territory of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir illegally, and thus, serious cognisance needs to be credited to the reality that China is not likely to remain virtuously 'neutral' in the quintessential sense, both diplomatically, and militarily, in the event of a limited or protracted India-Pakistan conflict in the near or distant future.

Notes

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2. Ibid.
3. For related references, see Wang Guoqiang, “*Yinba guanxi chixu jinzhang gei nanya anquan zaocheng yanzhong yingxiang*” (The Continued Tensions in Indo-Pakistani Relations Cause Serious Consequences for South Asian Security), *Heping yu fazhan (Peace and Development)*, No. 4, November 1999, pp. 28-32; also see, Sun Shulin, “*Yinba hejunbei jingsai bukequ*” (Undesirable Nuclear Armament Race between India and Pakistan), *Nanya yanjiu (South Asian Studies)*, No. 2, 1998, pp. 8-12.
4. Shao Zongwei, “Call for Talks to End Fight”, *China Daily*, June 30, 1999, p. 1; also see, Jin Zeqing, “War Never Ends Disputes”, *China Daily*, June 05, 1999, p. 4.
5. The author’s meeting with Zhao Gancheng, Director of the South Asia Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, Shanghai, China, 2012.
6. Hu Shisheng, cited in “China Can’t Wait for India, Pak to Settle Kashmir Issue: Expert,” *Hindustan Times*, Hangzhou, September 07, 2016.
7. Ibid.
8. For more details, see Monika Chansoria, “China Makes its Presence Felt in Pak-Occupied-Kashmir,” *The Sunday Guardian*, December 11, 2011.
9. For details, see Zhang Mingju, ed., *Zhongyin guanxi yanjiu (1947-2003) (Sino-Indian Relations 1947-2003)* (Beijing University Press, 2004); also see, Zhang Guihong, “Sino-Indian Security Relations: Bilateral Issues, External Factors and Regional Implications,” *South Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 1, January-June 2005, pp. 61-74.
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11. Brian Martin, “Protest in a Liberal Democracy,” *Philosophy and Social Action*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, January-June 1994, pp. 13-24.
12. Press release cited in ANI, Lahore, September 24, 2016.
13. As per a PTI report, “China Attaches Importance to Pakistan’s Kashmir Stand: Minister,” September 28, 2016.