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The Role of China and Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Kashmir Dispute

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Introduction

Recent developments in Sino-Indian relationship suggest a noticeable shift in China's approach to the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan. Beijing seems to be abandoning a policy of neutrality on Kashmir adopted since the start of the 80s, whereby it simply urged the two countries to bilaterally settle the issue. In its place, China appears to revert to its traditional stand on Kashmir in vogue during the 50s and 60s, which was vocally supportive of Pakistani position on Kashmir and the Kashmiri quest for self-determination. More importantly, contrary to its generally cautious foreign policy approach, China has started to adopt tangible steps depicting its intention to play a proactive role vis-à-vis the Kashmir dispute.

This paper describes four recent tangible indicators reflective of China's growing assertiveness on Kashmir, and then discusses four possible motivations of China explaining its proactive stance on the dispute. The discussion then forms the basis of a few concluding remarks.

Policy Shift

At least four recent instances or steps indicative of China's assertive stance on Kashmir or the increasing extension of Sino-Indian rivalry to this dispute can be cited.

First was the occasion in late 2009 when Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, the moderate Kashmiri leader and President of All-Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), was invited by China while Dalai Lama was visiting the historic town of Tawang in Himachal Pradesh. Diplomatically speaking, this was a tit-for-tat move by China, underscoring its sensitivity towards the border dispute with India, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 violent upsurge in Tibet. However, the fact that a representative Kashmiri leader from a disputed region was invited to pay a state visit to China was symbolically significant for internationalizing the Kashmir cause.¹

¹ Chietigj Bajpae, "China-India Relations: Regional Rivalry Takes the World Stage," China Security, Vol 6, No 2, 2010, p 5.

Second, from late 2009, the Chinese have adopted a new visa policy, whereby the residents of Indian-administered Kashmir are issued stapled paper visas. However, there is no change in China's visa policy in the case of applicants carrying Pakistani passports but residing in Azad Jammu and Kashmir or the Northern Areas of Gilgit-Baltistan. What does this mean is that China considers only the Indian-administered territory of Kashmir as disputed, a position that Pakistan, a vast majority of Kashmiri people and a host of countries subscribe to. In simple words, the message that China has sent to New Delhi is that Kashmir is not an integral part of India, which is a direct rebuke to India's official stand on the region.

Third, in August last year, China refused to issue visa to Lt Gen B S Jaswal, the Head of the Indian Army's Northern Command, for he had commanded the army deployed in the disputed territory to quell the violent Kashmiri resistant movement. Thus, if the refusal to issue normal visas to the residents of Indian administered Kashmir has a political dimension, the impact of the changed Chinese visa policy is now extended to the security domain. The message in this case appears to be that China will not welcome any official of the Indian military who has served in a disputed territory with the mission of suppressing its people's desire for freedom, even if such action disrupts China's military ties with India.

Lastly, what can be described as a broader trend that is not necessarily limited to the afore-mentioned developments expressing the shift in China's Kashmir stance is that the Chinese are engaged in several multi-billion dollar transportation and energy generation projects in both Azad Jammu and Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan region.² Thus, the contrast in the Chinese approach to the two parts of Kashmir divided by the Line of Control is crystal clear: refusal to recognize Indian sovereignty in one part of Kashmir perceived as a disputed territory versus active engagement in developing the other part of Kashmir perceived as a legitimate land worthy of investment and development.

² For details about these projects, see Zafar Iqbal, "Indo-China Diplomatic War over Kashmir," *Counter Currents*, 7 January 2010, <http://www.countercurrents.org/iqbal070110.htm>

Motivating Factors

What has forced or convinced China to be assertive on Kashmir? Why do we see the traditional Sino-Indian rivalry increasingly extending to Kashmir, whereby it is not just India protesting over a piece of territory of the disputed region ceded by Pakistan to China in a 1963 border treaty, even though it is liable to be reviewed upon Kashmiri settlement? What could be the possible Chinese motivations behind the afore-mentioned indicators of a tangible change in China's Kashmir policy?

A logical first answer to these questions lies in the very nature and dynamics of what John Garver³ calls the "protracted contest" between India and China. Asia's two emerging giants may have seen their trade jumping to \$ 60 billion in 2010, but they still considerably subscribe to conflicting narratives of historically-grounded visions of national grandeur. Their rivalry is still characterised by the classical security dilemma, whereby one's move in the security domain compels the other to make a counter-veiling response. This context, as Garver argues, will be decided if India accepts Chinese supremacy in South Asia or China leaves the region for Indian hegemony. If we use this realistic framework of analysis, then China's current assertive stance on Kashmir and the boundary issue is a natural response to India's increasing alignment with the United States, Japan and other South East Asian nations in recent years. The Indo-US nuclear deal may have particularly contributed to a Chinese perception about Washington aiming to use India as a counterpoise to Beijing in future.

Second, we cannot ignore the fact that the Chinese assertion over Kashmir has occurred at a time when the hopes regarding an amicable settlement of the boundary dispute between China and India have almost faded. It was in April 2005 that the leaders of China and India had agreed in Beijing to bilaterally negotiate the boundary dispute. In the last five years, the two countries' high representatives, despite holding 14 rounds of talks, have failed to chalk out the "guiding principles and political parameters" for a final settlement. New Delhi has even stopped re-iterating its support to 'One China' policy by

³ John Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 447p.

refusing to explicitly state its recognition of the Tibet Autonomous Region as part of the Chinese territory.⁴ China's current role in Kashmir, therefore, cannot be seen in isolation from the deterioration in Sino-Indian relations pertaining to their core conflict over Himachal Pradesh/Southern Tibet boundary dispute.

Third, the renewed hostility in Sino-Indian relationship is also denoted by serious tensions over trade and economic issues. Since early 90s, the consistent expansion in the two countries' bilateral trades, which is expected to reach \$100 billion in 2015, has only added to Indian frustration. India's trade deficit with China is too huge, as over 70 per cent of its exports to China are raw materials. On the other hand, almost all of India's imports from China are manufacturing goods, which are far cheaper than its own. Thus, in the end, what New Delhi used to project in the past as a foreign policy success, meaning growing trade partnership with China, has come to haunt it. India's consequent China-specific protectionist business approach is, therefore, quite understandable. The proactive Chinese role vis-à-vis Kashmir dispute is a natural outcome of China's self-sustaining economic rise and political clout in the region and the world, while India still lags behind China in economic and security capability. Since it is China that overwhelmingly gains from its trade and economic ties with India, it can afford to be assertive on Kashmir, especially when it is a core issue for its "all weather friend" in the region, namely Pakistan.

This brings us to explain the last and, perhaps most instrumental, factor underpinning tangible change in China's approach to Kashmir—its long-standing strategic relationship with Pakistan. It is basically this relationship which has shaped Chinese understanding of the Kashmir dispute, and is worth narrating in some detail.

In the 50s, the communist China maintained tactful silence or a neutral stand on the dispute, while pursuing ties with the newly-born India and Pakistan. However, after the 1962 border conflict, it began wholeheartedly supporting Pakistan's position on Kashmir, including the resolution of the issue through the UN-supervised plebiscite. Even during

⁴ Harsh V. Pant, India Plays Hardball with China, *World Politics Review*, 20 December 2010.

the 80s and 90s and beyond when China favoured a Kashmir settlement through bilateral talks between India and Pakistan, its political, security and economic ties with Pakistan grew with a much faster pace than before. The change in China's stance on Kashmir during the period might be because of its sensitivities on the issue of extremism in Xinjiang or due to expansion in trade and economic cooperation with India. So much so that China was alongside the US pressing Pakistan to resolve the Kargil crisis. And when India and Pakistan began peace process, China repeatedly urged them to resolve Kashmir. If this was the case until recently, then what has forced or convinced China to re-think its approach to the dispute?

One answer would be that it shares a common frustration with Pakistan as its most trusted regional partner: the frustration about India not moving an inch from its intransigent outlook on Kashmir, despite several overtures in recent years from Pakistan and the representative Kashmiri leadership to negotiate a settlement even beyond the parameters of a UN-mandated formula as given under UN Security Council resolutions. Another explanation—one that conforms to the oft-cited preference for pragmatism in post-Deng Xiaoping Chinese foreign policy—may be that China has perhaps seen the writing on the wall in Kashmir. If the events of last summer in the Valley of Kashmir and the two summers before indicate anything, it is that the long-standing Kashmiri quest for self-determination has once again found its logical indigenous, spontaneous, populist and non-violent momentum. Since early 90s, the Kashmiri movement for self-determination became of hostage to the forces of extremism in the 90s. After 9/11, it suffered due to a global counter-terrorism approach that undermined even legitimate national liberation movements, which countries like India notorious for suppressing secessionist minorities fully capitalised. If the emerging ground reality in the disputed region contradicts Indian claims of its administrative mismanagement as a cause for three rounds of youth-led Kashmir uprising since the summer of 2008, then it does make sense on the Chinese part to adopt actual measures supportive of Kashmiri self-determination.

Of course, the Chinese assertion on Kashmir is a reflection of the ever consolidation of Sino-Pak strategic partnership in recent years, with the current one being celebrated as a

year of friendship between the two countries. The period has seen the two countries sign several strategic deals essentially with an eye to the future. The Chinese seem to have fully embraced Islamabad's 2006 offer of Pakistan acting a future Trade and Energy Corridor for China. China has already completed the first phase of the Gwadar Port, while the second phase is currently under way. Chinese firms are working on more than 15 mega projects in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan in power and infrastructure sectors.

Quite often, these projects are portrayed as amounting to China's intrusion in a disputed region—as, for instance, Selig Harrison did recently in an article in *The New York Times*.⁵ He argued that Pakistan had virtually handed over de facto control of Gilgit-Baltistan to China, after stating that some 7,000 to 10,000 soldiers of the Peoples' Liberation Army were present in the region with Pakistani connivance. However, the fact is that the projects the Chinese are undertaking in the region or Azad Jammu and Kashmir are essentially aimed to overcome Pakistan's acute energy crisis, which needs immediate solution. Moreover, a temporary surge in Chinese presence on Pakistan's request can be attributed to the devastation caused by monsoon flooding in the region, especially the landslide creating an artificial lake last summer due to which the Karakoram Highway remains cut off until present. Even otherwise, the Chinese help to develop the infrastructure of Northern Areas has a long history dating back to several decades ago when the Karakoram Highway was built with tremendous Chinese help and sacrifice. Of course, China's own pragmatic interest in undertaking infrastructure projects in Northern Areas is to meet its growing energy needs. In the longer run, Beijing could be logically expected to make use of the enormously friendly land corridor that Pakistan, including the Northern Areas, offer—whether in terms of widening the already prevalent Karakoram Highway, laying down a railway network or building oil and gas pipelines through it.

⁵ Selig S Harrison, "China's Discreet Hold on Pakistan's Northern Borderlands," *The New York Times*, 26 August 2010.

If it is alright for India to undertake an expansive naval quest for the Indian Ocean, what is wrong if an all-whether friend like Pakistan helps China project its Oceanic power? Having said this, however, it is appropriate to underscore that a better framework for explaining China's engagement in Pakistan's northern mountains and southern sea lanes is geo-economic, rather than geo-political. As the East Asian giant rises further, its burgeoning economy needs more hydrocarbon resources. And one of the most viable unexplored routes, among others, is a network of gas and oil pipelines via Pakistan, which has to pass through Northern Areas. China's recent assertiveness over Kashmir, therefore, constitutes a stabilizing factor. If economic growth depicts the single most important imperative of post-Deng Chinese foreign policy in the last over 30 years, then it can be reasonably argued that China would like to have greater stability in South Asia rather than undertake a policy that further contributes to instability in the region.

Conclusion

If India had not wasted the last over six decades refusing to settle Kashmir with Pakistan and Kashmiris, then we might not have been discussing the reasons why Chinese outlook on Kashmir is undergoing a radical shift, one that has made Pakistan happy and one that has won wholehearted applause from almost all of Kashmiri representative parties and factions, including the Hurriyat faction led by hardline Kashmiri leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani.⁶ More than anything else, the best way to judge a policy shift vis-à-vis a conflict zone by as great a rising power as China is how it is being perceived by the indigenous population.

In retrospect, therefore, the proactive Chinese role in Kashmir can also be articulated in moralistic terms. For the rest of the international community, including the United States, has so far paid only lip service to the Kashmiri cause. The current American leadership, for instance, made so many promises during the election campaign, including the pledge of appointing a special US envoy for mediating the dispute. It had made so many

⁶ "Geelani's Party Hails China's Kashmir Stand," *Kashmir Observer*, 29 August 2010, http://www.kashmirobservers.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5409:geelanis-party-hails-chinas-kashmir-stand&catid=15:top-news&Itemid=2

convincing arguments regarding the value of Kashmiri settlement for winning the War on Terror. But there is no follow-up. The Chinese at least deserve the credit for attempting to emphasise Kashmir's continually disputed nature and, by default, highlighting the need to resolve it urgently.

Finally, there is no moral or rational justification to question China's investment and development activities in Azad Jammu and Kashmir as well as Gilgit-Baltistan. Just as Pakistan could not wait forever not to grant the due political rights to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, neither China nor Pakistan can afford to put on permanent hold their respective quest for energy, while letting India continue playing delaying tactics on Kashmir resolution along with a game of death with the people of Kashmir.