

3

The Pakistan, India, and China Triangle

Pakistan's Place in the Sino-Indian Border Dispute

Dr. Maira Qaddos



It is quite evident from the history of Pakistan's relationship with China that Pakistan views Sino-Indian border disputes through a Chinese lens. This is not just because of Pakistani-Chinese friendship, of course, but also because of the rivalry and territorial disputes that have marred India-Pakistan relations since their independence.¹ Just as China and India have longstanding disputes that led to wars in the past (including, recently, the violent clashes in the Galwan Valley in May-June 2020),² so too do Pakistan and

India frequently experience clashes along their shared borders, especially on the *de facto* border of Pakistan-administered and India-administered Kashmir.³

The triangular relationship between India, China, and Pakistan is of critical importance to regional and global stability.⁴ Managing the relationship is an urgent task. Yet, the place of Pakistan in the triangular relationship has sometimes gone overlooked. When India and China were embroiled in the recent military standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC), Pakistan was mentioned only because of an expectation (or fear) that Islamabad would exploit the situation to press its interests in Kashmir. At that time, the Indian-administered portion of Kashmir had been experiencing lockdowns and curfews for months, raising expectations that Pakistan might raise the temperature. But although this insight (that the Sino-Indian clashes would affect Pakistan's strategic interests) was correct, it was incomplete. The focus should not have been on Pakistani opportunism, which did not materialize, but on the fundamental interconnectedness that characterizes the South Asian security situation—of which Sino-Indian border disputes are just one part.

Strategic Triangle in Contemporary Times

The India-China-Pakistan relationship is a strategic triangle of three nuclear powers. Given the geographic and strategic factors at play, it is impossible for these three powers to co-exist in complete isolation from one another; they interact with one another as a matter of ongoing political reality. The only option, then, is for all three governments to understand the implications of their behavior on the other states in the triangle. This means working toward a friendly, peaceful, and amicable neighborhood. The worst outcome for all parties would be if any two powers joined forces against the third, which would run the risk of upsetting the balance of power in South Asia and creating insecurity for the entire region.⁵

When it comes to the Sino-Indian border disputes, some International Relations experts have predicted that Pakistan will be the big winner of a worsening Sino-Indian relationship.⁶ While overstated, this observation rests on the observation that Pakistan and India are engaged in a strategic rivalry while Pakistan and China have maintained a strategic alliance for several decades. Recently, China has expanded its investments and

engagement in various sectors of the Pakistan economy. For example, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is expected to create jobs and infrastructure for the people of Pakistan. Moreover, China is the largest defense and military-equipment supplier for Pakistan, with a full 70 percent of Pakistan's imported weapons coming from China between 2015 and 2019.

From the Indian perspective, a two-front war with both China and Pakistan cannot be ruled out whenever there are tensions along the Sino-Indian border.⁷ India's General Manoj Mukund Naravane, Chief of the Army Staff, expressed his concerns about a two-front war in May 2020. He cautioned that it is not just the military that fights wars, but also other pillars of nations like the bureaucracy and elected officials.⁸ Dealing with two adversaries at the time—especially at a moment when India, China, and Pakistan were all consumed with the Covid-19 pandemic—would pose a grave security and foreign policy challenge for India.⁹

In Pakistan, meanwhile, the fear is that India might one day provoke a border clash with Pakistan if Indian forces were to suffer humiliation or defeat along the Sino-Indian border. Last year, for

example, Islamabad was concerned that Prime Minister Modi would plan a face-saving mission against Pakistan in response to the embarrassment of a setback in Ladakh.¹⁰

The distrust runs both ways. During the Galwan Valley clashes, Indian media outlets claimed that Pakistan and China had coordinated a grand conspiracy against India, with Pakistan allegedly deploying around 20,000 troops in Gilgit-Baltistan at the behest of Chinese generals. According to Pakistani officials, however, Pakistan's troop movements were not extraordinary, but rather a reasonable response to a regional security crisis; a prudent move to deal with any unexpected contingencies.

The Need for Regional Peace and Stability

The reality is that Pakistan had no interest in pursuing an aggressive or opportunistic policy during the clashes along the LAC. To do so would have been to undermine Pakistan's own territorial security. To be sure, there was a general feeling of excitement in Pakistan at the sight of its rival's military struggle to contain China. But Pakistan's approach was to let China fight its war with India on its own, while taking steps to lower the temperature along the Kashmiri line of

control.¹¹ In the end, Pakistan is interested in preserving a stable balance of power in South Asia—a goal not served by a weakened and humiliated Indian neighbor.

Pakistan is exposed to the Sino-Indian border disputes in complicated and cross-cutting ways. In some respects, the Sino-Indian border conflict of 2020 was detrimental to Pakistani interests. For example, the conflict diverted the attention of the global community from India's controversial actions in Jammu and Kashmir, which were regarded as atrocities in Pakistan and elsewhere.¹² India's abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, a move that eliminated special status for the Indian-administered states of Jammu and Kashmir, is a topic that Pakistan would like the international community to focus upon. However, the issue garners less attention than would otherwise be the case whenever violence erupts on the Sino-Indian border. On the other hand, Pakistan has benefited indirectly from the Sino-Indian conflict insofar as it has spurred Sino-Pakistani cooperation. In July 2020, China and Pakistan signed a hydropower agreement worth \$2.4 billion, with the project to be launched in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Part of the CPEC, this project is expected to deliver

around 3.3 billion units of reusable energy upon its completion in 2026.¹³ Because the project is being pursued in Pakistan-administered Kashmir (claimed by India), this decision can be regarded as bolstering Pakistan's position—a diplomatic and strategic win. Pakistani officials deny that they have wanted to exploit a worsened security situation for economic benefit.¹⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, it may be argued that Pakistan has a strong interest in managing periods of tension and rivalry between China and India. To be sure, there are many factors that push Pakistan toward taking a pro-China position. This cannot be denied. Not only is Pakistan working with China on the CPEC megaproject, but it also has close defense ties with Beijing. Both countries have a strategic partnership that spans various fields and has persisted for several decades. Even so, it is notable that Pakistan tried to maintain a comparatively neutral stance during the Galwan Valley conflict. It instead put great energy into de-escalating the conflict. This is because the spillover effects of bloodshed and rivalry can only sabotage the economic activities, developmental programs, and overall peace process of the whole

region.

The governments of India, China, and Pakistan ought to each realize that their actions and interactions affect one another in profound ways. Right now, the world faces a bigger challenge than border disputes, in the form of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic. There is a pressing need to put collective effort into fighting this scourge, instead of waging violent conflicts. Unfortunately, the future of the India-China-Pakistan triangle seems to be quite unstable. A lot of diplomatic work will be required to understand the importance of building a peaceful neighborhood, let alone implement such a vision. ■

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Notes

¹ Muhammad Akbar Notazai, "What Does the China-India Standoff in Ladakh Mean for Pakistan?" *The Diplomat*, June 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/what-does-the-china-india-standoff-in-ladakh-mean-for-pakistan/>.

² The clashes in Ladakh resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers. See Alyssa Ayres, "The China-India Border Dispute: What to Know?", *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/china-india-border-dispute-what-know>.

³ Notazai, "China-India Standoff."

⁴ Monish Tourangbam, "The China-India-Pakistan Triangle: Origins, Contemporary Perceptions, and Future", *Stimson*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.stimson.org/2020/the-china-india-pakistan-triangle-origins-contemporary-perceptions-and-future/>. The history of these political conflicts is grounded in Cold War. Anik Joshi, "China Is Pushing India Closer to the United States," *Foreign Policy*, June 09, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/09/china-india-border-united-states-pakistan/>.

⁵ Satyabrata Sinha, "The Strategic Triangle: India-China-Pakistan," *China Report*, 40, no. 2 (2004): 221-25; Haans J. Freddy, "China, India & Pakistan strategic triangle – the Pakistan factor in Sino-Indian relations," *Global Affairs*, 6, no. 4-5 (2020): 559-75.

⁶ Claude Rakisits, "Why India-China Border Conflict is Music to Pakistan's ears?," *The Quint*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.thequint.com/voices/opinion/india-china-border-conflict-kashmir-issue-benefits-to-pakistan-belt-and-road-cpec-projects>.

⁷ Shalini Chawla, "Indo-China Conflict- What's in it for Pakistan?," *Financial Express*, September 16, 2020,

<https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/indo-china-conflict-whats-in-it-for-pakistan/2084091/>.

⁸ "First China, now Pakistan: How India's battling on two fronts," *The Economic Times*, Last modified July 03, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/first-china-now-pakistan-how-indias-battling-on-two-fronts/articleshow/76761327.cms?from=mdrSoutik>

⁹ Soutik Biswas, "India-China clash: 20 Indian Troops Killed in Ladakh Fighting," *BBC*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.

¹⁰ Tom Hussain, "China-India Clash Marks a Huge Regional Shift and Pakistan is its epicenter," *TRT World*, July 01, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/china-india-clash-marks-a-huge-regional-shift-and-pakistan-is-its-epicentre-37775>.

¹¹ Ayesha Siddiqi, "Why Pakistan is keeping mum about India-China LAC conflict?," *The Print*, July 04, 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-pakistan-is-keeping-mum-about-india-china-lac-conflict/454034/>.

¹² Maham S. Gillani, "India-China Border Dispute has Implications for Pakistan and Region," *Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies*, July 15, 2020, <https://casstt.com/post/india-china-border-dispute-has-implications-for-pakistan-and-region/229>.

¹³ "Pakistan, China sign \$1.5 billion Hydropower Project Agreement," *The News International*, July 06, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/682889-pakistan-china-sign-15-billion-power-project-agreement>.

¹⁴ Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan Benefits from China-India Clash with Hydropower Deal," *Nikkei Asia*, July 06, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-benefits-from-China-India-clash-with-hydropower-deal>.