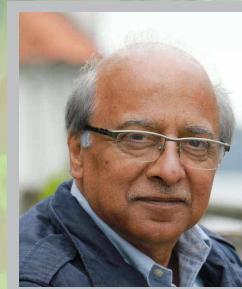


INDO-CHINA DISPUTE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PAKISTAN



Imtiaz Gul

ABSTRACT

A territorial dispute in eastern Ladakh between India and China gave the West another baton in hand to wave at Beijing. It also brought to the fore the intense geopolitical nature of this multi-lateral war of competing interests in Asia, i.e. Indo-US + Allies attempting to contain the expanding China-Pakistan-Russian influence in the region. Most observers in South Asia invariably viewed the Galwan stand in the context of what India had done to the IIOJK; abrogation of the Article 370 on August 5, and the eventual forcible annexation of IIOJK into Indian Territory – a brazen subversion of the UN Security Council resolutions. Current geopolitical conversations make it abundantly clear that both India and Pakistan occupy considerably important positions in the security and commercial calculus of both the United States and China respectively. Pakistan's alliance with China creates 'perception' of superiority – psychological edge – over India. Indian foreign policy experts are asking New Delhi to take Islamabad seriously, especially with the growing Chinese economic interests in Pakistan. These interests, created through development and infrastructure investments, also mean that China is striving for a stable and prosperous South Asia, with or without India. It is therefore imperative to weigh the possible impact of big power rivalries on a country like Pakistan.

Keywords: Territorial Dispute, Eastern Ladakh, Geopolitical, Big Power Rivalries, Multi-Lateral War, IIOJK, Abrogation of the Article 370, Infrastructure Investments.



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Context

The year 2020 will be remembered for long in modern history as a painful intervention by nature, i.e. COVID-19 pandemic that rampaged across the globe for months - infecting millions and killing over a million. But history will remember it also for one of the most apparent geopolitical conflicts between an ascendant China and an increasingly inward-looking US-led West, marked by unprecedented US punitive measures against China, including higher tariffs, legal actions (that went in force on September 15) against Huawei and TikTok – both symbolic of China's phenomenal economic rise.

But Trump's haughty clampdown on Chinese exports into the US, drew the strongest ever rebuke even by a World Trade Organisation (WTO) panel which declared tariffs on \$200bn worth of Chinese goods as "illegal". This was massive vindication for Beijing, even if the United States has all but incapacitated the WTO's ability to hand down a final binding verdict.

The decision marked the first time that Geneva-based trade body ruled against a series of high-profile tariffs that President Donald Trump's Government has imposed on a number of countries - allies and rivals alike.¹

Much before that, as China battled the consequences of COVID-19, President Trump had upped the ante on Beijing, joined in the chorus also by its key allies UK, Germany and France to denigrate it by referring to the pandemic as the "Wuhan or China

All New Delhi could do as retaliation was banning a few Chinese mobile phone apps; hoping that this measure would somewhat subdue the BJP followers calling for a full-blown war with China

virus." As if it were not enough, a territorial dispute in eastern Ladakh between India and China gave the West another baton in hand to wave at Beijing. This also brought to the fore the intense geopolitical nature of this multi-lateral war of competing interests in Asia, i.e. Indo-US + Allies attempting to contain the expanding China-Pakistan-Russian influence in the region.

Most observers in South Asia invariably viewed the Galwan stand-off at one of the few highest battlegrounds – over 3000 metres – in the context of what India had done to Kashmir under its control; abrogation of the Article 370 on August 5, and the eventual forcible annexation of Kashmir into Indian territory – a brazen subversion of the UN Security Council resolutions. And current geopolitical conversations make it abundantly clear that both India and Pakistan occupy considerably important positions in the security and commercial calculus of both the United States and China respectively.

It is therefore imperative to weigh the possible impact of big power rivalries on a country like Pakistan.

Ladakh - Testing Nerves

Until the Chinese and Indian militaries locked horns in the Galwan Valley on the border of Ladakh region in mid-June (2020), nobody had imagined the ferocity that the former displayed during physical bouts. They left about 20 Indian troops dead. It was also reported that during the confrontation, an Indian commanding officer was pushed into the river, which led to hundreds of troops from both sides fighting with clubs and stones. The fatal conflict, India's first with China since 1975, heightened tensions in the region and raised the alarm across the globe.





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This encounter was different from other significant incidents, especially those involving Pakistan and India; the loss of nearly 20 soldiers forced the Indian government into a “face-saving” mode, with even its uber-nationalist media calling for restraint, instead of war-drumming. All of a sudden, they realised that China had managed to dent the Indian army's image by inflicting heavy damage on it. All New Delhi could do as retaliation was banning a few Chinese mobile phone apps; hoping that this measure would somewhat subdue the BJP followers calling for a full-blown war with China.

The standoff at Ladakh continued even after several rounds of diplomatic and military level talks; a partial disengagement commenced, first after Special Representatives (SRs) Ajit Doval and Wang Yi, tasked to hammer out a solution to the boundary dispute, spoke on July 5² and then in September, Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar met on the sidelines of a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow.

“The two Foreign Ministers agreed that the current situation in the border areas is not in the interest of either side. They agreed therefore, that the border troops of both sides should continue their dialogue, quickly disengage, maintain proper distance and ease tensions,” the September statement said.³

Commenting on the statement, daily the Hindu claimed the PLA to be in control of 1,000 square km of Indian territory in Ladakh.

“For a perspective on the amount of land India has traded for peace, here's a comparative figure – the total area of the national capital Delhi is 1,464 square km. The fact that the PLA will not vacate territories occupied through multi-pronged deep intrusions in eastern Ladakh since May, has been accepted by India,” said the paper as quoted by The Wire.⁴

The Wire also pointed out the absence of Indian narrative that the PLA restore the status quo ante – i.e. the April positions – in the joint statement.

Also missing is the reference point of the 1993 Line of Actual Control (LAC), it said.

Conspicuous during the entire crisis was the Chinese restraint and its continued emphasis on dialogue. Hu Xijin, the editor of Chinese daily Global Times, claimed that the Chinese military decided against publishing the casualty numbers to prevent unnecessary speculation on the issue. “My understanding is the Chinese side doesn't want people of the two countries to compare the casualties (sic) number so to avoid stoking public mood. This is goodwill from Beijing”, wrote Xijin on his twitter handle.

Sino-India Relations in Reverse Gear

India's brazen Kashmir annexation and the eastern Ladakh military encounters were, nevertheless, not without diplomatic reversals.

During his October 2019 informal meeting with Chinese President Xi in the southern Indian city of Chennai, Modi had agreed “to designate 2020 as the China-India year of cultural and people-to-people exchanges, and hold 70 events next year to mark the 70th anniversary of the China-India diplomatic relations”.⁵ Modi and Xi also agreed that the “70th anniversary of the establishment of India-China relations in 2020 would be fully utilised to deepen exchanges at all levels including between their respective legislatures, political parties, cultural and youth organisations and militaries”.⁶

With the simmering conflict in eastern Ladakh, also preceded by the debilitating COVID-19 pandemic, all the vows between Modi and Xi hit a dead end, undoing years of carefully calibrated steps President Xi had taken to engage India in the larger interest of the region.

PM Modi's “aggressive” foreign policy posturing that began with an incalcitrant attitude toward Pakistan since March 2016, when Pakistan

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Michael Kugelman



caught the Indian spy Kulboshan Jadhav, a serving Indian naval officer, who carried a passport with the Muslim name Hussein Mubarik Patel.

The February 26 aerial incursion in the name of "surgical strikes at training camps" in Pakistan's north, and the downing of an Indian jet accentuated tensions further, but the August 5 occupation of Kashmir took the bilateral tensions to new levels. Meanwhile, India's arrogance also dented its ties with otherwise friendly neighbours like Nepal and Bangladesh.

Impact on Pakistan

All this had a direct bearing on Pakistan too; in terms of strategic capabilities, Indian engagement with China on the border takes New Delhi's focus away from Pakistan. This also means that reinforcements on the border with China will result in the diversion of military assets from the IIOJK. Australian scholar Dr Claude Rakisits, in this regard, writes,

"Not only will these necessary military reinforcements (in Ladakh) cost India heavily in personnel and treasure, but it also means that the diversion of these military assets will reduce India's force capability to make any military move – were it so inclined – into Pakistan's 'Azad Kashmir' and Gilgit-Baltistan. That would be good news for Pakistan".⁷

US think-tanker and South Asia scholar Michael Kugelman also believes that India's preoccupation with China will directly impact the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan.

"We can't divorce the Ladakh crisis from the Kashmir dispute. So long as the LAC (Line of Actual Control between India and China) is tense – and it's likely to be tense for the foreseeable future – the LOC is bound to get hotter",⁸ says Michael Kugelman.

Almost every TV or print media conversation in India invariably draws attention to the Sino-Pakistan relations – which have become more vexatious for the majority of Indian politicians and intellectuals, particularly for the right-wing hardliners



Another apparent Indian anger and concern, particularly for the Indian establishment, stems from their belief that Pakistan might have shared intelligence with China before the Galwan Valley skirmish. Quoting US intelligence sources, Indian online daily The Print recently warned policymakers in New Delhi that China's 'better understanding' of Indian troop positions in the Galwan Valley proves that Islamabad had actively shared intelligence with China.⁹ In addition to that, the Indian 'disillusionment' vis-à-vis Pakistan is also evident in its media discourse; most Indian media outlets blamed the Pakistani social media users for spreading disinformation and "peddling" the Chinese narrative on eastern Ladakh.

Pakistan refrained from officially commenting on such an intelligence-sharing arrangement with China. But, even if true, such cooperation would explain the new dimension that Sino-Pak relations have assumed under CPEC. Nor would such interaction be unusual for two close strategic allies.

Boon for Pakistan?

Pakistan's close alliance with its 'all-weather' friend China implies that 'experts' in India would bring Pakistan into the discourse, at times drawing on flimsy arguments. Almost every TV or print media conversation in India invariably draws attention to the Sino-Pakistan relations – which have become more vexatious for the majority of Indian politicians and intellectuals, particularly for the right-wing hardliners. They tend to often denigrate the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a flagship of China's cross-border Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).



The launch of the September 11 Intra-Afghan negotiations at Doha, top officials from the US, UK, Norway and China showered praise on the Pakistani leadership's role in making the dialogue happen

Cheap and long-term loans and balance of payment support (\$ 8.5 bn) with a grace repayment period of up to 25 years, and over \$ 25 billion investments, which have also ended Pakistan's energy crisis, indeed testify the importance that Beijing accords to Islamabad.

"If Pakistan is in difficulty, we will never pressurise our most trusted friend to repay the loans which have a repayment period of up to 25 years and are less than six per cent of Pakistan's external debt," former ambassador Yao Jing told the author, days before he left Islamabad after completing his three-year tenure.

A \$ 6.8 bn railway project to upgrade over 1800 km long stretch between Karachi and Peshawar, and new motorways as part of CPEC are some other examples of the Chinese keenness to invest in and help Pakistan. A \$ 1.0 bn balance of payments support loan in July after the country retired a loan worth the same amount to Saudi Arabia also underscored new dynamics in the bilateral relations.

Pakistan's Isolation is Over

This multi-faceted Chinese support also helped flatten attempts by the Modi government to internationally isolate Pakistan; on the contrary, as was evident at the launch of the September 11 Intra-Afghan negotiations at Doha, top officials from the US, UK, Norway and China showered praise on the Pakistani leadership's role in making the dialogue happen.

Zalmay Khalilzad, President Trump's point-man for the Afghan peace process, specially flew to Islamabad to express his government's gratitude.

"Ambassador Khalilzad expressed appreciation on behalf of the United States, especially the important role that Prime Minister Imran Khan and General Bajwa played in facilitating the start of the Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in Doha on September 12 and stressed the need for ongoing regional and

international support for this historic opportunity for peace," according to a press release by the US Embassy.¹⁰

Beyond doubt, the CPEC partnership instilled a new confidence in a country that until 2015 appeared battered, politically demoralised, internationally isolated and economically struggling.

But since then the events underscore the emergence of a different image of Pakistan, particularly personified by Prime Minister Imran Khan and the Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, since 2018. Both have moved in sync on most foreign policy issues – talking to their American, Chinese and Arab interlocutors with the same tongue.

This also meant the rehabilitation of Pakistan on the geopolitical map, enjoying the trust of both - the sole superpower USA and China, the direct challenger to the US hegemony of the globe. In fact, special messages by the Chinese and the US ambassadors on August 14, Pakistan's Independence Day, also exemplified the attempts both by Washington and Beijing to endear Islamabad.

In his video message on occasion, the then U.S. Ambassador Paul Jones said America was "proud to partner with Pakistan because when Pakistan thrives, the world is a better and safer place."

Yao Jing, the Chinese envoy, offered even a stronger message, "I use this opportunity to present my best wishes to the whole Pakistan nation on your Independence Day. My best wishes to our brotherly nation of Pakistan. May Pakistan enjoy peace and prosperity".

Song Tao, the head of the International Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, went a step further during a Pakistan-China webinar with Pakistani politicians.

"We can give up gold but not our friendship with Pakistan",¹¹ Tao said, pleasantly surprising all the

Several Indian military strategists are meanwhile wary of PM Modi's aggressive posturing vis-à-vis some neighbours, which they believe has also exposed their military's limitations, particularly in eastern Ladakh



Pakistan's alliance with China also creates a 'perception' superiority – psychological edge – over India

online participants with his unusual characterisation of relations with Pakistan, which Chinese officials believe may soon become a regional hub for trade and vast connectivity once projects under CPEC mature and the free industrial zone at Gwadar becomes operational.

Several Indian military strategists are meanwhile wary of PM Modi's aggressive posturing vis-à-vis some neighbours, which they believe has also exposed their military's limitations, particularly in eastern Ladakh.

Past encounters with China and Pakistan notwithstanding, the almost simultaneous heating up of both the Line of Control (with Pakistan) and the Line of Actual Control (with China) at the same time, triggered fears that both China and Pakistan might "gang up" on India at a time with the coronavirus pandemic is ravaging vast swathes of the country.

"New Delhi is clearly under great pressure, whether from COVID-19, along the Line of Control in Kashmir or from China," said Ian Hall, professor of international relations at Griffiths University Australia, who expresses similar concerns for India.¹² However, this situation also creates a dangerous predicament for Pakistan. To prove to his supporters that "India is still strong", Modi might engage in another (mis)adventure against Pakistan.

Mahmud Durrani, retired General and Pakistan's former national security advisor believes that "China is obviously a major embarrassment for India... due to China's strength, it cannot attack China and throw them out." He thinks that "the fallout of that can be that to prove their strength and muscles, they are going to do something with Pakistan — the smaller partner of China".¹³

However, following the embarrassment of the Balakot "surgical strike" fiasco (February 2019), which resulted in the capture of its pilot Abhinandan, New Delhi would now think twice before engaging Pakistan. Moreover, even Indian defence and air force experts have openly admitted that the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), even with a smaller budget and resources, is strategically far superior to the Indian Air Force (IAF).

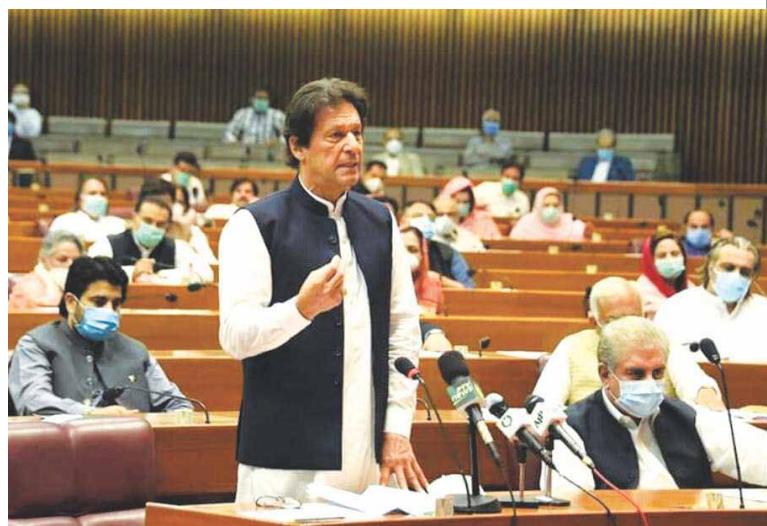
A report in The Print argues that "Pakistan is armed with better fighter planes, Beyond Visual Range (BVR) air-to-air missiles like AMRAAMs and backed by state-of-the-art SAAB airborne warning and control systems (AWACS)", which leaves the IAF wanting in many places.¹⁴

Besides, Pakistan's alliance with China also creates a 'perception' superiority – psychological edge – over India. Some Indian foreign policy experts are asking New Delhi to take Islamabad seriously, especially with the growing Chinese economic interests in Pakistan. These interests, created through development and infrastructure investments, also mean that China is striving for a stable and prosperous South Asia, with or without India. It, therefore, comes as no surprise that the recent spate of terrorism in Pakistan has shifted from the Afghan border in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to Balochistan; the centre of CPEC projects including the all-important Gwadar port.

In June this year, when terrorists belonging to the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) attacked the Pakistan Stock Exchange, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, while speaking in the Parliament, made it clear that terrorist groups based in Balochistan were allegedly backed by India.

Previously in 2018, the BLA also took responsibility for an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi as well as the storming of the Pearl Continental Hotel at Gwadar in May 2019.

What else would be the motive of these groups, officials wonder when linking terror groups with India? "No well-meaning Baloch would want to destabilise the province, drive Chinese away and perpetuate the cycle of poverty and backwardness of the province," argued a





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Baloch teacher in Gwadar, requesting not to be named, when trying to explain the rationale of terrorism in the region.

PM Khan was much forthright in his diagnosis. "There is no doubt that India is behind the attacks",¹⁵ said in his address to the Parliament in August 2020.

These attacks indicate that India might, in the future, try to use such proxy elements to further hurt the CPEC and cause fissures in the Pak-China friendship; this flows not only from publicly stated opposition to CPEC by various US and Indian officials and experts but also from the latter's objections to some CPEC projects being located in Gilgit Baltistan, a territory it claims is part of the disputed larger Kashmir region. But Beijing has snubbed these objections, saying it will undertake projects in places of Pakistan's choice.

The imminent rise of China provides an automatic pretext to the US and India to close ranks and deepen their strategic partnership as a bulwark against expanding Chinese footprint across the globe.

The US strategy towards Asia vis-à-vis India took a new turn when the US President Donald Trump embraced a new term, i.e. Indo-Pacific. When asked for an explanation on this term, US policymakers contend

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that "we talk about 'Indo-Pacific' in part because that phrase captures the importance of India's rise".¹⁶

More recently, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar and reiterated "the strength of the United States-India relationship to advance peace, prosperity, and security in the Indo-Pacific and around the globe".¹⁷ This renewed partnership also includes Japan and Australia – known as the Quad – and other smaller regional states. Even though the anti-China US alliance in the Indo-Pacific does not explicitly intend to hurt Pakistan, its focus on China does create strategic implications for Islamabad and place a heavy responsibility on Pakistani leaders to carefully handle Beijing as a long-time trusted friend of the country, which clearly desires a politically stable and economically developing friend on the Arabian Sea.

PM Khan articulated the importance of this inter-twined relationship like no other Pakistani leader;

"Pakistan's future is tied to China. We should be clear on this that our country's [economic] development has now been intertwined with China," Khan said in interviews with the Doha-based Al-Jazeera TV and Dunya News TV in August. "We are fortunate that we have a friend that stood by us through thick and thin. None of our other friends have stood by us like China politically supported and defended us on all fronts," Khan told Dunya TV.¹⁸

The recent negotiations between Iran and China for economic and defence cooperation, with billions of dollars, added to the Indian worries because it had hedged all its bets on the Chabahar Port as shorter access via the Arabian Sea.

A potential China-Iran cooperation also benefits Pakistan, as it might help rub-off occasional frictions between Islamabad and Tehran, often rooted in instances of terrorism in Iranian border provinces being perpetrated by radical Sunni groups, which allegedly operate out of Balochistan's border towns. If both Tehran and Islamabad went by the Chinese advice, they could be in a more sustainable cooperative mode against all shades of terrorists than the occasional acrimonious outbursts.





With Chinese investments and strengthened partnership with Iran, Islamabad can now look up to Beijing to mediate in case of a future border conflict with Tehran

Finally, the China-Iran deal appears to be backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, who have often engaged in skirmishes with the Pakistani military. With Chinese investments and strengthened partnership with Iran, Islamabad can now look up to Beijing to mediate in case of a future border conflict with Tehran.

One may therefore conclude that:-

- Beijing has every now and then come to Pakistan's rescue – be it financial bail-outs such as the balance of payment support, concessional loans or long-term investments in critical energy and infrastructure projects.
- The Sino-India standoff has not only shaken the Indian security establishment but also further cemented the Sino-Pakistan partnership which as a win-win model has become the subject of envy and jealousy for many.

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