



China Intensifies its Position on Kashmir



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During the third meeting of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Joint Working Group on International Cooperation and Coordination, China and Pakistan, long-term strategic partners, have decided to jointly welcome third countries to join the much acclaimed CPEC. In the past, Pakistan and China have tried offering Afghanistan, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to join CPEC. The corridor was launched in 2013 during former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's tenure and has been proudly projected by the Pakistani leadership as a 'game changer.' It is noteworthy that CPEC has contributed sufficiently to Pakistan's debt burden and the projects have been facing serious challenges. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the cash-strapped nation owes close to 20 per cent of its external public debt to China. The IMF has been extremely cautious in proceeding with Pakistan's loan programme as it's apprehensive of the high probability of the loan being utilised by Pakistan to repay its Chinese debt.

For China, CPEC is part of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative aimed at attaining global and regional supremacy. CPEC, for Beijing, is a regional connector which would provide it with a strategic (and military) footprint through its investments in the struggling economies of the region.

India has expressed its resentment against the recent Sino-Pak decision as the CPEC passes through the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and New Delhi sees this move as an infringement on "India's sovereignty and territorial integrity." New Delhi has opposed the CPEC, which involves the building of massive infrastructure projects on territory illegally occupied by Pakistan.

In recent years, China has intensified its position on Kashmir in support of Pakistan. Beijing continues to hold double standards. It wants to invite countries to join CPEC, and on the other hand, it recently voiced its opinion opposing India's plans to host the G-20 Summit in Jammu and Kashmir next year in 2023. Ironically, for Beijing, the POK is legitimate enough to invest billions of dollars, engage

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thousands of Chinese workers and invite other countries to participate in the CPEC, but it claims Jammu and Kashmir to be illegitimate and disputed, which needs to be resolved bilaterally through dialogue.

The most significant aspects of China's diplomatic backing for Pakistan are China's position on Kashmir and its support for Pakistan in the wars against India. This has been a critical part of China's long-term strategy of strengthening Pakistan's strategic position to balance India. Although China's position on Kashmir has remained by and large in support of Pakistan, its overt position on Kashmir has witnessed some interesting deviations in the intensity of support it has extended to Pakistan. For a long time, Beijing maintained a stance of neutrality on Kashmir, but it continued to strengthen Pakistan militarily, which reflected in Islamabad's aggressive posture in Kashmir through its intensified covert war against India in the 1980s and 1990s.

China started building the Karakoram Highway in 1959 and signed the Shaksgam Valley Agreement in 1963, legitimising Pakistan's illegitimate occupation of parts of Jammu and Kashmir. China's position on Kashmir in early 1964 encouraged Pakistan to initiate the war against India in 1965. During the 1965 India-Pakistan war, China extended diplomatic support and also provided military equipment to Pakistan. On September 19, 1965, in a secret meeting between Chou Enlai, accompanied by Marshal Chen Yi, and Pakistani Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the Chinese Defence Minister, Chou had not only "agreed to his request to up the ante" but also "recommended that Pakistan continue fighting even if they had to retreat to the hills (like the Communist Party had done during the Long March)."¹

Chinese military exports to Pakistan did gain momentum after the 1965 India-Pakistan war, adding to Pakistan's Army and Air Force inventory. During the 1971 Indo-Pak war, China did not supply any military equipment to Pakistan, but it did extend diplomatic military support after the war. In 1972, China used its first-ever veto to block the recognition of Bangladesh. In the 1980s, China extended all-out support in the build-up of Pakistan's nuclear weapons which added to Pakistan's will and capability to intensify the proxy war on Kashmir under the 'nuclear umbrella'. Kashmir became the nuclear flashpoint and Pakistan asserted its doctrine of *offensive-defence*. During the 1999 Kargil war, China did not extend direct military assistance to Pakistan. However, following the war, Chinese defence imports accelerated specifically towards the build-up of the Pakistan Air Force and China expanded its engagement in POK (before the signing of the CPEC). Through the projects, Beijing managed to position itself in POK alongside the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. Getting more aggressive on its position on Kashmir, much to New Delhi's displeasure, China has made efforts to position Jammu and

Kashmir (India) as a separate country. In 2007, China started issuing stapled visas for Indian Kashmir residents and published maps for tourists, projecting the valley as a separate country.

China's position on Kashmir after the revocation of Article 370 by India in August 2019 has projected its frustration, anger, and support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir. It calls India's decision to 'change the status quo in Kashmir illegal and invalid.'² India, on the other hand, holds the position that "the Chinese side has no locus standi whatsoever on this matter (Kashmir) and is advised not to comment on the internal affairs of other nations."³ On Pakistan's perseverance, China raised the issue of Kashmir in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and has repeatedly tried to call meetings of the UNSC to discuss Kashmir. China's recent actions and statements have been aimed at putting Kashmir on the multilateral forums and encouraging larger engagement, even though in its statements it continues to maintain that Kashmir is a bilateral issue.

Beijing is also trying to maintain the pressure on India on the Line of Actual Control (LAC). In the recent provocative moves, Chinese fighter jets violated agreements along the LAC and reports suggest that China plans to build new highways near the LAC.⁴ Even after 16 rounds of Corps Commander-level talks between India and China, there are limited to no signs of easing off the tensions and the Chinese strategy has been to "keep the pot simmering" and not in favour of any de-escalation.⁵

Given the history of China's support for Pakistan on Kashmir, it is not unrealistic to assume that Beijing's strategy on Kashmir is likely to intensify in the future. While New Delhi is carefully evaluating Chinese moves, the regional actors need to understand Beijing's strategy carefully and also, very importantly, assess the cost of Chinese engagement and investment in their countries.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: CPEC, Sino-Pak Nexus, Jammu and Kashmir, 1965 War, 1971 War, Article 370.

Notes:

¹ Jasjit Singh, *The ICON: Marshal of the Indian Air Force ARJAN SINGH, DFC*, (New Delhi, Knowledge World, 2009) p 229.

² Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Wang Wenbin's Regular Press Conference, August 5, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1804251.shtml%202020/08/05. Accessed on October 1, 2020.

³ Geeta Mohan, "China has no locus standi on Kashmir issue: India on Beijing Calling change in J&K illegal" *India Today*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/china-has-no-locus-standi-on-kashmir-issue-india-on-beijing-calling-change-in-jk-illegal-1708191-2020-08-05>. Accessed on August 10, 2020.

⁴ Snehesh Alex Philip, "China's pressure tactics along the LAC continue, aim to keep the pot simmering", *The Print*, July 25, 2022, <https://theprint.in/defence/chinas-pressure-tactics-along-lac-continue-aim-to-keep-the-pot-simmering/1054168/>. Accessed on July 29, 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

