

PAKISTAN, INDIA, CHINA TRIANGLE: THE CHANGING GEO-STRATEGIC REALITIES AND INDO-PAK CONFLICTS

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Introduction

President Musharraf's recent visit to China and the far reaching developments taking place in South, Central and West Asia, regions after September 11, 2001 undoubtedly influence Indo-Pak relations on the one hand, and Sino-Pak and Sino-Indian relations on the other hand. Warming up of Sino-Indian relations since early 1980s and the normalization of Sino-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union tend to raise a number of questions for the policy-makers of Pakistan. If the Indo-Pak relations are a hostage to the unresolved Kashmir dispute and the lack of meaningful regional cooperation in South Asia is primarily the outcome of New Delhi-Islamabad tension, the role of China in South Asia could be of immense significance.

During the cold war days, the notion, "my enemy's enemy is my friend" worked quite well in the context of Indo-Pak rivalry, U.S-Soviet confrontation, Sino-Soviet discords and Sino-Indian tussle. Pak-U.S strategic alliance, Indo-Soviet security understanding and Pak-China cooperation shaped the dynamics of South Asian security environment during the cold war days. With the shifting of paradigm in the global power politics in the aftermath of the end of the cold war, collapse of the bi-polar structure resulted into new realignments and readjustments by Pakistan, United States, India, China and Russia. Indian-U.S. relations which remained average during the cold war years began to improve after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Likewise, Sino-Soviet relations which remained tense began to improve with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian Federation as the successor state of the USSR. China and India, which fought a border war in 1962, also embarked on the process of normalization. But, in the entire spectrum of global and regional political and security changes

after the end of the cold war, Indo-Pak relations remained conflict ridden and the two neighbors went through a series of crisis after September 11, 2001 threatening peace in the South Asian region.

This paper will examine the triangle of Pakistan, India and China by examining following important realities:-

- The impact of Sino-Indian normalization process on Indo-Pak relations, particularly on the Kashmir dispute.
- The possibility of Beijing playing some sort of conciliatory role in the process of Indo-Pak conflict resolution.

The likelihood of Russia and China following a policy of “engagement” in South Asia with a single aim to defuse Indo-Pak tension and create plausible conditions for the just and peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

The impact on the events of September 11 and after on Sino-Indian, Pak-Indian and Sino-Pak relations. From a pragmatic standpoint, Pakistan’s foreign policy is at the crossroads because if the Kashmir conflict loses its momentum and India is successful in neutralizing popular assertion against New Delhi’s military occupation over the Kashmiri people, it will be highly problematic for Pakistan to put pressure on the international community for supporting the Kashmiri right of self-determination. China has traditionally been supportive to the cause of Kashmiri liberation, but in the recent past, it has modified its position and is advising both India and Pakistan to resolve that conflict bilaterally. Pakistan also supports a peaceful solution of the Kashmir conflict but its predicament is India is unwilling to talk on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir without Islamabad stopping what New Delhi says, “cross border terrorism.” Can Pakistan seek the Chinese support as far as the question of resolving the Kashmir dispute is concerned, or Beijing’s tacit neutrality on that matter is a source of advantage for India?

The Triangle

China, India and Pakistan are situated in geo-politically and geo-strategically sensitive regions of West and South Asia. Although, China's core interests lies in South East and East Asia, its borders with four South Asian countries and its role in South Asia also exists to a large extent.

The triangle of China, India and Pakistan in the changing global scenario after September 11, 2001 provides an opportunity for furthering the process of economic development and effectively dealing with sources of insecurity in South Asia. According to an Indian writer,

India, Pakistan and China, the three powers which determine the strategic profile of this region, constitute a security triangle. The southern Asian Security triangle is characterized by the geo-strategic and geo-political intertwining of the security policies of all three powers. The nature of one country's politics and policy preferences have an immediate impact on, and response from, the other two. The dynamics of the three-power relationship in southern Asia has predominantly been one of enduring antagonism between India and Pakistan, ambivalent friendship and discords between India and China, and close cooperation and strong friendship between Pakistan and China.¹

Three factors seem to influence the China-India and Pakistan triangle. First, the role of the United States in West and South Asia after September 11 centers on war against terrorism. Pakistan is America's strategic ally in its war against terrorism, whereas, Washington also shares its perceptions with New Delhi on the issue of terrorism and the activities of various terrorist organizations trying to destabilize India, particularly in its controlled parts of Jammu and Kashmir. With China, the United States shares the activities of Islamic extremists in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. For America, India and China, the threat of terrorism backed by religiously motivated extremist groups must be dealt in a comprehensive manner. Second, China, India and Pakistan share their borders with Jammu and Kashmir, a strategically important but

politically volatile region. Since mid-1970s, Beijing has adopted a relative neutral policy on Kashmir, calling upon Pakistan and India to resolve that conflict by direct negotiations. Beijing also refused to support Pakistan's drive to call a special UN session on Kashmir. During the Kargil crisis, China advised Islamabad to deal with that issue in a tactful manner and refused to condemn India. The future of Kashmir is thus significant to China, India and Pakistan because all the three countries understand the fact that instability in that region will negatively affect their domestic situation. Beijing is aware of the fact that the Muslim assertion in Xinjiang province will get an impetus if Muslim extremists gain control in Kashmir. Third, China, India and Pakistan are nuclear powers and are mindful to the fact that sustained unresolved conflicts in South Asia possess the threat of nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan.

In the China, India and Pakistan triangle, it is China which is in a position to play a conciliatory role in South Asia because of its close relations with Islamabad and growing ties with New Delhi. By not taking sides on the Kashmir conflict, China aims to encourage both India and Pakistan deal with their contentious issues bilaterally and peacefully. Apart from Kashmir, there is another dimension to China, India and Pakistan conflict, i.e. the issue of Tibet. With the neutrality of China on the Kashmir dispute, India has also followed a policy on Tibet which accepts Beijing's suzerainty on that area. Since long, India was supporting Tibet's independence movement from China and had also assisted the spiritual leader of Tibet, Dalai Lama to mobilize international support for the cause of Tibetan independence. This may not be the case now as India has moved away from that position.

Sino-Indian Normalization and the Kashmir Dispute

During the visit of the Indian Prime Minister Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee to Beijing in June 2003, the two Asian powers agreed to deepen their relations while disregarding their border dispute. India also agreed to downplay the issue of Tibet and accept the reality of Chinese sovereignty on that territory. Despite the massive economic growth of China, one cannot undermine the fact that India and China are natural competitors in the long run. In that scenario, the United

States sees India capable of countering Beijing in Asia and wants to maintain close relations with New Delhi so as to seek Indian cooperation in this regard.

Since the visit of the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to China in 1988, the process of Sino-Indian normalization has got an impetus. According to a Chinese writer, the signing of the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control on the China-India Border Areas in 1993 and the Agreement on Confidence Building Measures in the military field along the Line of Actual Control on the Indo-China Border Areas in 1996 has shown that both sides have adopted a wise two-step approach on the boundary question. The first step is to ensure peace and tranquility along the LOC for a long period and the second step is to realize the final settlement when the conditions are mature.²

The joint working groups (JWG) established by China and India to deepen their cooperation in trade, commerce, tourism and in other areas were reinforced by the adoption of several confidence-building measures along the disputed sites of Sino-Indian border. As a result one can see the boosting of bilateral trade between the two Asian giants, i.e. China and India and also freezing of their bilateral conflicts. The question is, what are the implications of Sino-Indian rapprochement on Pakistan and how Islamabad should deal with that issue? For some circles, "although the Sino-Pak military equation is likely to remain a contentious issue in Sino-Indian relations, it will be partly countered by the Indian desire to woo China from its pro-Pakistan tilt by a continuation of the policy of Sino-Indian normalization."³

Pakistan and China have made it clear that their relations are independent of Sino-Indian ties. That both Beijing and Islamabad view their friendship to be strong enough to withstand various challenges. But, in reality, one can see a steady change in China's policy vis-à-vis South Asia during 1980s and afterwards. Two divergent perceptions exist in the realm of growing Sino-Indian rapprochement. First, India and China are natural competitors and to some extent are potential enemies because of the fact that the two

major powers of Asia are aspiring to play a global role but at the same time are unable to resolve their contentious issues and effectively deal with the threat perception against each other. For instance, the former Indian Chief of Army Staff, General K. V. Krishna Rao while participating in a get-to-gather program organized by the Vijayawada Book Festival Society on the eve of the inaugural of its 14th book festival said that "China is the real enemy for his country but not Pakistan. A superpower (China) is in the making in our neighborhood. We cannot afford to be passive onlookers to the phenomenon as it (China) has the dubious track record of cheating our country in the past."⁴ Whatever development takes place on the Sino-Indian normalization front, one cannot overlook the presence of a lobby in India which views Beijing with suspicion and asserts the observation that the real threat for New Delhi is not Pakistan but China.

Second, there exists another element in India which is quite optimistic about the future of Sino-Indian ties and considers it essential for a successful foreign policy. Gone are days when tension and propaganda warfare between the two neighbors used to have support base in the official circles of Beijing and New Delhi. In a speech delivered at a conference held by the Indian Institute of Defense and Strategic Analysis, New Delhi, the Indian External Affairs Minister, Yashwant Sinha categorically rejected the contention of theorists that a conflict between India and China is inevitable because a substantial measures of success has been achieved by now in the endeavor to establish mutual understanding between India and China."⁵ The benefits of Sino-Indian cooperation are manifold than active conflict between the two neighbors. China is India's biggest neighbor and India is China's second biggest neighbor. Both countries, after the end of the cold war and in the post-September 11 situation need each other instead of getting bogged down in unresolved issues.

As far as the implications of Sino-Indian peace process on the Kashmir dispute are concerned, it has become quite obvious that unlike 1960s and mid 1970s when Beijing used to render clear support to Islamabad's stand on that dispute, a qualitative change has taken place in China's policy. According to a Pakistani writer,

Factually, a visible improvement in the tone and context of Sino-Indian relations had been achieved with China stressing the need to settle the Kashmir dispute through bilateral negotiations between India and Pakistan, without formally abandoning its stance that the state was a disputed territory, in deciding whose future both the UN resolutions and the Simla agreement remained relevant.⁶

In retrospect, the first public expression of the revised Chinese approach to the Kashmir problem was made by Deng Xiaoping in his interview given to an Indian journal *Vikrant* in June 1980. In that interview he described Kashmir as a bilateral problem between Pakistan and India which the two countries should settle amicably.⁷ Since then, China has moved from its traditional support to Islamabad on the Kashmir cause while advising both India and Pakistan to resolve that contentious issue through a process of dialogue.

During the 1994 UN Human Rights Conference in Geneva, Pakistan failed to seek the support of China in order to raise the Kashmir dispute from that forum. According to Beijing's judgment, the Kashmir conflict in its present form will only harm peace in South Asia. But, the Chinese leadership has not been able to suggest to Pakistan what to do in a situation when New Delhi is unwilling to seriously talk on the Kashmir dispute and has kept a massive military force to quell insurgency in that area. China's position on the Kashmir dispute is somewhat described by a Chinese writer who argues that,

In recent years, China has adopted a separate policy in its relations with India and Pakistan. China's stand on the Kashmir question was clearly explained by Chairman Li Ruihuan during his visit to India in 1993. He pointed out to the Indian journalist that both India and Pakistan were China's neighbors and friends and China seriously hoped that India and Pakistan could settle this problem in an appropriate manner through peaceful negotiations.⁸

Therefore, sensing the futility of conflict between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir, the Chinese leaders emphasized negotiated settlement of the Kashmir problem at the bilateral level

and through dialogue.⁹ At times, they called for dealing with the Kashmir problem in accordance with the Simla Agreement and the relevant resolution of the United Nations. Yet, as remarked by a Pakistani writer, "China cannot be indifferent to the present and future developments in Kashmir. What happens there has implications for China's internal security and peace and stability in the region. China is not in favor of a military solution of the Kashmir problem."¹⁰ The reason shaping China's approach on the Kashmir dispute is not difficult to figure out. China feels that, and India subscribes to such a feeling, that when Beijing and New Delhi can agree to normalize their relations, despite the presence of border conflict, why cannot India and Pakistan follow that model? It is yet to be seen to what extent there is semblance between the Kashmir dispute and the territorial dispute between China and India.

China's Potential Role in Indo-Pak Reconciliation

As mentioned earlier, change in Chinese foreign policy in late 1970s resulted into a new security situation in South Asia with Beijing dropping an all out support to Pakistan on its conflicts with India and urging both neighbors to settle their discords through a process of dialogue. Therefore, it is not wrong to argue that, "any improvement in Sino-Indian ties is not directed at Pakistan and China wants to deal with South Asia on a regional basis while forging good neighborly relations with all states. Hence Beijing welcomes peace moves between Islamabad and New Delhi, but it would avoid getting involved in any way in an India-Pakistan peace moves."¹¹ According to Chinese Central Television, Chinese President Hu Jintao said that, "China as always supports Pakistan-Indian reconciliation and will play a constructive role in South Asian peace and stability."¹² Beijing is supportive for a peaceful and stable South Asia because of two main reasons. First, China's policy of modernization and development requires peace with its neighbors. That is the reason why Beijing, despite unresolved conflicts, decided to promote good neighborly relations with New Delhi. Second, China understands that by siding with Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute, it will not be able to secure a better position in the region. On this account, one can quote a Chinese writer who argues that China emphasizes the common interests that can be

maximally accepted by all countries and which can bring a healthy atmosphere to the whole region. A stable and prosperous South Asia is suitable for Chinese interests as long as China maintain good neighborly relations with India and Pakistan. But it does not prevent China from showing its sympathy for a certain country or countries on certain events under diplomatic principles.¹³

Another important dimension of China's policy in South Asia is the security and strategic perceptions which it shares with Russia on the issue of terrorism and Islamic extremism. China and Russia, along with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are important members of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and they view with concern the activities of terrorist groups in Central, West and South Asian regions and feel that India and Pakistan should share with them information and other important issues concerning terrorism. Without Indo-Pak reconciliation, it will be difficult for SCO to curb militancy and terrorism particularly when the two major instable areas i.e. Afghanistan and Kashmir provide a fertile ground to religious extremist groups.

Conclusion

With the unleashing of normalization process between China and India and the possible thaw in Indo-Pak relations, it is possible that the triangle of Pakistan, India and China will get a new shape. All the three countries, having a history of conflicts, have made it clear that their relations with each other must not be misinterpreted and misunderstood. If Indian and Chinese relations are warming up, it doesn't mean that Pakistan should feel insecure, or the close ties between Beijing and Islamabad must not send wrong signals to New Delhi. Such an approach is positive in nature. The only thing which matters in the changing dynamics of global and South Asian politics is the ability of China, Pakistan and India to ameliorate their relations so that peace and stability could be ensured in the region and the decades old confrontation going, on particularly between India and Pakistan, is reduced.

At some stage, India and Pakistan can also think of linking up with SCO so that the two countries, which have suffered greatly because of the menace of terrorism, can share with China, Russia and the Central Asian states the modalities for dealing with that issue. China is no doubt a viable link for India and Pakistan as far as promoting security cooperation with Russia and Central Asia is concerned.

End Notes

1. See Anil Joseph Chandy, "India, China and Pakistan" in Kanti Bajpai and Amitabh Mattoo (eds.), *Peacock And The Dragon* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2000), p. 298.
2. Cheng Ruisheng, "China And India Transforming Historical Sino-Indian Relations" *World Affairs* (New Delhi), Vol. 5, No. 4, October-December 2001, p. 23.
3. "Sino-Indian Relations In a Changing World," *Spotlight On Regional Affairs* (Islamabad), Vol. XII, No. 5, May 1993, p. 42.
4. "China is the real danger: Khrishna Rao," *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), January 2, 2003.
5. Amt Baruch, "Forward -- looking approach to China," *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), January 29, 2003.
6. Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti, "Pakistan-China Relations In The 21st Century," *Regional Studies*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 83-84.
7. R. K. Jain, (ed.), *China-South Asian Relations, 1947-88* Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1991), p. 544 quoted by Hasan Askari Rizvi in, "China and the Kashmir Problem," *Regional Studies*, Vol. xii, No. 3, Summer 1994, p. 94.
8. Cheng Ruisheng, "China and India Transforming Historical Sino-Indian Relations," *World Affairs* (New Delhi), Vol. 5, No. 4, October-December, 2001, pp. 24-25.
9. jGhayoor Ahmed, "Musharraf's visit to China," *Dawn*, (Karachi), November 1, 2003.
10. Hasan Askari Rizvi, *Op.cit.*, p. 98.
11. Zubeida Mustafa, "How effective is the China card," *Dawn*, November 12, 2003.
12. See *The News International* (Karachi), November 3, 2003. Although China would not like to play the role of a mediator in Indo-Pak conflict resolution, it is certainly not ready to continue favor Pakistan

over India. Sohail Mahmood, "China and South Asia: Current Foreign Policy Dynamics" in *National Development and Security* (Rawalpindi) Vol. VI, No. 1, August 1997, p. 34.

13. "Searching for convergence: China's policy toward South Asia in the post-cold war era," *Peace Initiatives (Mumbai)* Vol. II, No. 1, March 1996, p. 18.

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