

CHINA'S STATUS IN THE KASHMIR CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIA  
AND PAKISTAN

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**Abstract.** This article examines China's influence on the Kashmir conflict in the 21st century. Beijing has long acquired the status of a third party in the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan and is capable of playing a meaningful role in shaping approaches to conflict resolution. The study outlines key events that reflect China's direct involvement in the Kashmir dispute in the contemporary period.

**Keywords:** Kashmir conflict, territorial disputes, China's influence, China–Pakistan Economic Corridor.

China maintains close relations with South Asian states and therefore has a significant impact on the region's political environment. The Kashmir conflict is no exception: China became a de facto third party long ago. Throughout the 20th century, China largely maintained neutrality in the border dispute and carefully balanced its relations with India and Pakistan. However, the 1963 border agreement with Pakistan transformed Beijing's position. Under the agreement, Pakistan ceded part of the Kashmiri territory to China in exchange for diplomatic and military support, effectively giving China the role of a third party in the dispute [18]. At that time, China endorsed holding a plebiscite in Kashmir and even helped Pakistan develop a military strategy to contain India [10].

With Deng Xiaoping's rise to power, China reoriented its priorities toward building stable economic ties with neighboring states. This shift gradually reduced Beijing's involvement in Pakistan's internal affairs and strengthened the principle that bilateral conflicts should be resolved exclusively through peaceful dialogue. Although China continues to publicly uphold a balanced position and avoids direct interference, it indirectly contributes to easing tensions by promoting regional economic integration.

In 2005, India and Pakistan were granted observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Their participation, even at the observer level, created a platform for discussing the Kashmir issue together with China and developing a joint approach to combating terrorism and extremism in the region. While China formally adhered to non-interference, its national interests implicitly aligned it more closely with Pakistan.

Also in 2005, China and Pakistan signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighborly Relations. The treaty committed both sides to maintaining high-level strategic dialogue and continuing defense cooperation [5]. In a joint statement issued in November 2006, China reaffirmed its respect for Pakistan's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity,

and expressed appreciation for Islamabad's efforts to promote peace and stability in South Asia [11]. China's support for Pakistan aligned with its national interests: promoting regional economic integration and countering terrorism and extremism. Beijing was also concerned about the increased militancy among certain Uyghur groups operating from tribal regions in Pakistan. Since 2006, China and Pakistan have conducted regular intelligence exchanges aimed at combating terrorism [7].

In contrast, China views India as a key strategic competitor for regional leadership. Unresolved border disputes continue to hinder the development of bilateral relations. Yet, economic ties between the two states have expanded significantly: bilateral trade grew by an average of 10% annually and reached 90 billion USD by 2018 [13]. Thus, China has managed to maintain economic relations with both rival states while formally remaining neutral in the territorial dispute.

A major turning point occurred in 2008 when a series of terrorist attacks hit Mumbai. The militants responsible were based in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. The attacks, carried out between 26 and 29 November, killed 174 people and injured more than 300 [8]. Indian intelligence established links between the attackers and Pakistani institutions, presenting Pakistan with photo and video evidence, phone recordings, and interrogation materials from the surviving perpetrator. Although Pakistan expected China's support, Beijing instead focused on restoring stability between the two nuclear-armed neighbors. Chinese officials engaged in unprecedented shuttle diplomacy, and Beijing privately pressured Islamabad to arrest those responsible. Pakistan did so temporarily, but refused to extradite them to India, insisting that Pakistani citizens accused of terrorism would be tried domestically [14]. By 2014, many suspects had been released, according to Indian intelligence. India's attempt to impose UN sanctions was blocked by China, revealing Beijing's dual approach: initially supporting India's call for accountability but later shielding Pakistan at the UN Security Council. These actions demonstrate China's careful balancing between the two rivals. During his 2010 visit to India, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stressed that China and India had achieved the level of a "strategic partnership" and that their cooperation contributed to stability throughout Asia [6].

Relations within the China–India–Pakistan triangle changed significantly in 2013, when Beijing introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A major component of the initiative—the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—aimed to create an integrated regional transport and logistics network. Pakistan became a crucial partner in the project, further deepening its ties with China and drawing Beijing more directly into the Kashmir issue. In 2013, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang agreed to strengthen cooperation and signed a memorandum of understanding on long-term collaboration under CPEC [12]. It took two years to develop a full implementation plan, and the project was officially launched during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Pakistan in April 2015. On 20 April 2015, China and Pakistan signed agreements worth 46 billion USD—approximately 20% of Pakistan's annual GDP [15]. Most agreements focused on infrastructure, especially highways and power transmission lines. CPEC links Kashgar in Xinjiang to the port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, extending over 2,700 km.

India strongly opposed CPEC, intensifying anti-Pakistani diplomatic activity on regional and international platforms. New Delhi accused Islamabad and Beijing of violating India's territorial sovereignty by building parts of CPEC through disputed areas of Kashmir. In 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly stated that India's sovereign rights had been infringed. India also argued that CPEC primarily serves China's economic interests and limits India's

access to Central Asian markets. Moreover, tighter China–Pakistan cooperation, in India’s view, risked further escalating the Kashmir conflict.

In September 2016, another escalation occurred when militants attacked an Indian Army base in Uri, killing 17 soldiers. China condemned terrorism and urged both sides to resolve their differences through dialogue and cooperation [3]. Although China maintained its strategic partnership with Pakistan, it again expressed support for India’s security concerns. Beijing also promoted “soft diplomacy,” encouraging India to join the Belt and Road Initiative and emphasizing that a stable Kashmir could serve as India’s gateway to Central Asia.

In February 2019, tensions spiked once more after a suicide attack on an Indian security convoy in Pulwama, which killed 40 personnel [17]. The militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed claimed responsibility. During a trilateral meeting of the foreign ministers of India, Russia, and China, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi condemned terrorism in all its forms. Although he refrained from labeling Pakistan a sponsor of terrorism, he emphasized the importance of eliminating extremist networks [4]. China reiterated its commitment to developing a joint strategy against terrorism in the region.

China remains one of the most influential actors in South and Central Asia, significantly shaping the geopolitical landscape. Despite its declared policy of non-interference, Beijing inevitably becomes involved in the Kashmir conflict. Historically rooted obligations and current geopolitical objectives compel China to maintain a stake in the dispute. A stable Kashmir is essential for ensuring the security of China’s major logistical projects through Pakistan. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation may serve as an effective platform where India and Pakistan—under the mediation of China and Russia—can address their bilateral disagreements on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

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