

The China Factor in the India-Pakistan Conflict

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The war clouds in South Asia have receded following high-level US diplomatic efforts and the withdrawal of tens of thousands of Indian and Pakistani troops along their 1,800-mile border. However, concerns over the outbreak of yet another war between India and Pakistan have not completely disappeared, particularly in view of General Pervez Musharraf's inability and unwillingness to deliver on his promise to permanently stop terrorist incursions into Indian-held Kashmir and India's position that it retains the right to take military action if this promise remains unfulfilled.¹ If Islamabad escalates cross-border infiltrations or if militants launch a series of spectacular attacks, then New Delhi will be forced to respond in some way.² Interestingly, India has now appropriated the Bush Administration's doctrine of preemption.

A number of recent developments, such as the emergence of pro-Taliban Islamic parties as the third-largest force in Pakistan's October 2002 parliamentary elections, Islamabad's seemingly halfhearted efforts to tackle the al Qaeda menace, revelations of a Pakistan-North Korea nuclear missile proliferation nexus, and, last but not least, the Indian government's growing disillusionment with Washington's reluctance to get tough with Pakistan for fear of destabilizing the Musharraf regime, suggest that the conditions surrounding the India-Pakistan nuclear standoff are likely to worsen over the next few years.³ The two nuclear-armed countries also have embarked upon an arms-buying spree, preparing themselves for the next war.

The recent India-Pakistan crisis has highlighted again the long shadow that Asia's rising superpower, China, casts on the Indian subcontinent, especially during times of heightened tensions. Though the roots of the India-Pakistan animosity are deep-seated in religion, history, and the politics of revenge—and thus predate India-China hostility—China's strategists recognize the enduring nature

of the India-Pakistan enmity and exploit it to Beijing's advantage. In fact, Beijing has long been the most important player in the India-Pakistan-China triangular relationship. Since the Sino-Indian border war of 1962, China has aligned itself with Pakistan and made heavy strategic and economic investments in that country to keep the common enemy, India, under strategic pressure. Interestingly, China's attempts to improve ties with India since the early 1990s have been accompanied by parallel efforts to bolster the Pakistani military's nuclear and conventional capabilities vis-à-vis India. It was the provision of a Chinese nuclear and missile shield to Pakistan during the late 1980s and 1990s that emboldened Islamabad to wage a "proxy war" in Kashmir without fear of Indian retaliation.⁴

While a certain degree of tension in Kashmir and Pakistan's ability to pin down Indian armed forces on its western frontiers are seen as enhancing China's sense of security, neither an all-out India-Pakistan war nor Pakistan's collapse would serve Beijing's grand strategic objectives. Concerned over the implications of an all-out war on China's southwestern borders since the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, Beijing has been keeping a close watch on the fast-changing situation and has taken several diplomatic-military measures to safeguard its broader geostrategic interests in Asia. Since most war-gaming exercises on the next India-Pakistan war end either in a nuclear exchange or in a Chinese military intervention to prevent the collapse of Beijing's closest ally in Asia, this article examines China's response to the recent India-Pakistan crisis and China's likely response in the event of another war on the Indian subcontinent.

Beijing's Response to India-Pakistan Tensions after 9/11

Since the late 1990s, China had become increasingly concerned over the gradual shift in the regional balance of power in South Asia, driven by the steady rise of India coupled with the growing US-India entente and the talk of "India as a counterweight to China" in Washington's policy circles, and by Pakistan's gradual descent into the ranks of failed states.⁵ Since the end of the Cold War, a politically dysfunctional and economically bankrupt Pakistan's flirtation with Islamic extremism and terrorism, coupled with its nuclear and missile programs, had alienated Washington. However, the 11 September 2001 attacks changed all that. Pakistan saw an opportunity to revive its past close relations with the United States, shed its near pariah status, and enhance its economic and strategic position vis-à-vis

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India by instantaneously becoming a “frontline state” in the international coalition fighting global terrorism. In return, Washington lifted sanctions and agreed to provide Pakistan with billions of dollars in aid and debt rescheduling. From Washington’s perspective, courting Musharraf made geopolitical sense because the Pakistani military not only knew a great deal about the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, and al Qaeda, but also because any US military operation against Afghanistan could not be successful without the bases, logistics, personnel, and airspace in neighboring Pakistan. In Beijing, as a result, there were great expectations of a sharp downturn in US-India relations, because in many ways what happens on the Indian subcontinent is unavoidably a zero-sum game and Pakistan’s new relationship with the United States did affect India negatively.⁶

However, tensions between South Asia’s nuclear-armed rivals rose sharply after the terrorist attacks at the Kashmir Assembly in October 2001 and the Indian Parliament on 13 December 2001. The attack on the Indian Parliament triggered a major deployment of Indian troops along the border with Pakistan, with Islamabad responding in kind. New Delhi warned of retaliatory, punitive military strikes against terrorist camps inside Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Although the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson condemned these attacks, Chinese leaders and South Asia watchers were much more circumspect and ambivalent while lauding Pakistan’s contribution to the war against terrorism. A South Asia specialist from China’s National Defense University, Wang Baofu, noted with satisfaction that under the new circumstances, “The United States, considering its own security interests, readjusted its policies toward South Asian countries and started paying more attention to the important role of Pakistan in the anti-terrorism war, therefore arousing the vigilance and jealousy of India.” Wang criticized India for “defin[ing] resistance activities in Kashmir as terrorism by taking advantage of the US anti-terrorism war in Afghanistan, thus putting more pressure on Pakistan through the United States,” and praised General Musharraf for his “clear-cut attitude toward fighting against international terrorism.”⁷ Such a stance was not unexpected. For almost a decade, China had rejected India’s proposal to issue a joint declaration against terrorism lest it be interpreted as a condemnation of Pakistan.⁸

Pakistan President General Musharraf made three trips to Beijing in less than a year (in December 2001, January 2002, and August 2002) for urgent security consultations with President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji and reportedly obtained “firm assurances of support in the event of a war” with India. At the time of heightened tensions in mid-January 2002, General Zhang Wannian, Vice-Chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, met with General Muhammad Aziz Khan, Chairman of Pakistan’s Joint Chiefs of the Staff Committee, and was quoted as telling Khan: “For many years the militaries of our two nations have maintained exchanges and cooperation at the highest and all levels and in every field. This fully embodies the all-weather friendship our nations maintain.”⁹ Zhang’s reference to “cooperation . . . in every field” (meaning the nuclear and missile fields) was a thinly veiled warning to India to back off. Later, Beijing matched words with deeds

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by rushing two dozen F-7 jet fighters, nuclear and missile components, and other weapon systems to shore up Pakistani defenses in the tense border face-off. A secret “futuristic arms development cooperation” agreement was signed during General Musharraf’s five-day visit to China in December 2001 to construct, among other weapons, an all-solid-fuel Shaheen III missile with a range of 3,500-4,000 kilometers to target all major Indian cities.¹⁰ The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops from the Military Regions of Chengdu and Lanzhou and their respective subdivisions, the Xizang (Tibet) and Wulumuqi (Urumqi), along China’s southern borders, were also put on alert in January to test their war preparedness should the conflict in the Indian subcontinent spill over onto Chinese soil.

The Chinese leaders had reportedly conveyed the following message to Musharraf: “China hopes Pakistan will not initiate any assault. Pakistan should not get involved in wars and instead focus on economic construction. However, if a war does break out between India and Pakistan, Beijing will firmly stand on the side of Islamabad.”¹¹ Soon thereafter, President Musharraf in a televised speech on 12 January 2002 announced a crackdown on extremist organizations waging jihad from Pakistani territory, and as a result, Indo-Pakistani tensions somewhat subsided. The Chinese media claimed some credit for “mediating” between the two sub-continental rivals despite the Indian government’s aversion to the dreaded “m” word: “Mediated by the United States, China, Britain, and Russia, leaders of India and Pakistan recently expressed their desire to try to control the tense situation.”¹² Interestingly, this stance contradicted then Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh’s statement during Premier Zhu’s visit to New Delhi in January 2002 that “China has neither any intention, nor shall it play any mediatory role between India and Pakistan.”¹³ Not only that, the Chinese Foreign Minister also succeeded in persuading his Russian counterpart to issue a “Joint Declaration on the India-Pakistan Situation,” signaling to New Delhi that, for the first time, Beijing and Moscow had a unified stand on the dispute. In concrete policy terms, it meant that New Delhi could no longer count on the Russian veto in the UN Security Council in the event of a war.

Then came the 14 May 2002 terrorist attack on a military base in Jammu that killed 34 people, mostly women and children, once again escalating tensions along the border where more than one million troops backed by heavy armor, warplanes, and missiles were deployed. There was renewed tough talk of war, including nuclear war, on both sides of the border. Beijing called for restraint from

both India and Pakistan and emphasized the need for peaceful dialogue to settle outstanding disputes. Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian also urged both countries to desist from a military conflict and not to threaten each other with nuclear weapons. Describing the US diplomatic moves (i.e., the dispatch of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in early June 2002) to defuse the India-Pakistan military stand-off as “too little too late,” the state-run media accused Washington of showing “no genuine desire to resolve the Kashmir issue.”¹⁴ It noted that Washington had clearly not taken the tensions very seriously when it went on with a ten-day joint military maneuver with India on 16-26 May 2002, thereby implying that the Indo-US joint military exercise had emboldened India to up the ante against Pakistan.¹⁵

On 15 May, a Chinese official accompanying Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan during his visit to Islamabad told Pakistani journalists that China would back Pakistan in any conflict with India. Concerned over the “one-sided nature of public appeals” from Washington, Moscow, London, Paris, and Tokyo to General Musharraf to halt “cross-border terrorism” into Indian Kashmir, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan told US Secretary of State Colin Powell on 27 May 2002 that “the international community should encourage direct dialogue between India and Pakistan in a more balanced and fair manner, which is the most effective way to lead South Asia towards peace and stability.”¹⁶ Apparently, the growing threat of nuclear war and the prospect of Pakistani nuclear weapons falling into the hands of Islamic terrorists have made Washington lean heavily on Islamabad. In contrast, Beijing repeatedly asked New Delhi to do more to end the military stand-off while publicly calling for restraint by both sides and claiming to be even-handed. China continued to covertly side with its long-term ally, however, and is providing military wherewithal to Pakistan.

Meanwhile, in yet another television address on 27 May, Musharraf pledged that all militant infiltration across the Line of Control (LoC) would end, and he announced the banning of Lashkar-e-Toiba, the Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen—the three “*jihadi*” outfits at the forefront of terrorist activity in Indian Kashmir. From New Delhi’s perspective, India’s military deployment had succeeded in bringing the international focus on Pakistan as the home of pan-Islamic *jihadis* after the war in Afghanistan.

At the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia held in Kazakhstan in early June 2002, Chinese President Jiang Zemin pressed Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee to enter into direct talks with Pakistani President Musharraf to prevent the Kashmir conflict from exploding into a full-scale war. But the Indian government was so irked over Musharraf’s playing of “the China card” that Vajpayee refused to budge. Later, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, the Indian Prime Minister complained that he saw “no basic change in China’s policy. China continues to help Pakistan acquire weapons and equipment.”¹⁷ In an article titled “Beijing as Guarantor of Pakistan’s Security,” a Russian weekly, *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (Independent Mil-

itary Review), had reported that new security commitments have indeed been made to Pakistan by China since 9/11.¹⁸ New Delhi expressed its displeasure with Beijing by postponing scheduled visits by Indian Army Chief Padmanabhan and Prime Minister Vajpayee to China in October and November 2002.

The Nuclear Connection

There were other grounds for the cooling of relations between Beijing and New Delhi. In his testimony before the US Senate governmental affairs subcommittee in early June 2002, the Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation, John S. Wolf, revealed that “China recently provided Islamabad with missile-related technologies, which include dual-use missile-related items, raw materials, and other accessories essential for missile manufacturing.”¹⁹ In a sense, China’s nuclear and missile assistance to a volatile Pakistan over the last two decades has now created the risk of a conventional conflict swiftly escalating into nuclear war. Beijing has not only provided Islamabad with nuclear bombs, uranium, and plants (all three Pakistani nuclear plants—Kahuta, Khushab, and Chasma—have been built with Chinese assistance) but also their delivery systems: ready-to-launch M-9 (Ghaznavi/Hatf), M-11 (Shaheen), and a number of Dong Feng 21 (Ghauri) ballistic missiles.²⁰ This cooperation has continued despite Beijing’s growing concerns over the “Talibanization” of the Pakistani state and society. When Islamabad carried out a series of missile tests amidst heightened tensions apparently to warn New Delhi to back off, the Indian government drew the international community’s attention to the Pakistani missiles’ China connection. “We are not impressed by these missile antics, particularly when all that is demonstrated is borrowed or imported ability. . . . The technology used in the missiles is not their own but clandestinely acquired from other countries,” said a spokesperson of the Indian External Affairs Ministry.²¹

Pakistan’s test of its nuclear-capable, medium-range, Shaheen ballistic missile in early October 2002, just days before the parliamentary elections, once again provoked India to level accusations of missile technology proliferation by China. India’s outspoken Defense Minister, George Fernandes, long a critic of China, said that Pakistan’s military had always depended on support from China ever since it was carved out as a homeland for South Asia’s Muslims in 1947 following decolonization of British India. “Everyone knows what Pakistan will be without China. Its ego is boosted purely by the support it gets from China,” Fernandes said at a party convention in Mumbai.²² Earlier, when India weaponized its nuclear capability through a series of tests in May 1998, Fernandes had described “China [as] the mother of Pakistan’s nuclear bomb” and claimed that India’s aim was to counter China’s capability rather than Pakistan’s, drawing protests from Beijing. When Pakistan came in the firing line following revelations in the US media about the missiles-for-nukes barter deal with North Korea, New Delhi argued that blame should also be put on China for making Pakistan a nuclear weapons state.²³

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For New Delhi, Beijing’s military alliance with Islamabad remains a sore point because the Sino-Pakistani nuclear nexus has introduced a new element of uncertainty and complexity in sub-continental strategic equations. While the attention of world leaders and the media has been focused on the nightmarish scenario of a nuclear Armageddon in South Asia and large-scale mutual assured destruction leading to the deaths of 12 to 30 million people, strategic circles in Islamabad and New Delhi have been discussing the pros and cons of a short, limited nuclear war in Kashmir. Media reports based on intelligence leaks have revealed the forward deployment by the Pakistani military of low-yield (five kilotons or less) tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs).²⁴ Such small battlefield nuclear weapons have a one-mile destruction radius and could be used effectively against large troop concentrations and advancing tank formations along the LoC in Kashmir.

The Pakistanis seem to have taken a page out of China’s book on tactical nuclear warfighting capability. Just as persistent Sino-Soviet disputes and the Soviet Union’s conventional military superiority during the 1970s and 1980s gave China strong incentives to develop and deploy TNWs, the decade-long India-Pakistan border tensions and India’s conventional superiority may have added momentum to Islamabad’s efforts to deploy TNWs. Most of Pakistan’s missiles acquired from China, such as the M-9, are short-range, solid-fueled, mobile, nuclear-capable missiles and can be used in a tactical mode.²⁵ Asked to comment on reports that Pakistan has acquired TNWs, the Deputy Chief of the Indian Army, Lieutenant General Raj Kadyan, was quoted as saying that the “Indian Army has trained itself to cope with a tactical nuclear strike in the battlefield.”²⁶ Tactical nukes can be launched over an unpopulated area from field artillery guns or aircraft to halt an enemy advance or in an effort to intimidate a numerically stronger enemy. Since the damage is localized or confined to a certain area, the danger of affecting the civilian population is greatly reduced as compared to a strategic nuclear weapon of the Hiroshima kind and therefore need not evoke massive retaliation by enemy forces. The mountainous terrain in Kashmir provides the perfect setting for their use.

In addition to the United States and Russia, only China is believed to have a large stockpile of about 120 TNWs or “baby nukes.” Some of these were apparently delivered to Pakistan following the visit of PLA Deputy Chief and

military intelligence boss General Xiong Guangkai (arguably China's most important military figure and the man who calls Pakistan "China's Israel") to Islamabad in early March 2002.²⁷ If the reports of China's transfer of TNWs to Pakistan are indeed true, the question then is: Would India, which does not possess TNWs but has strategic nuclear weapons in abundance, keep a nuclear conflict limited or escalate it to the strategic level and respond with massive retaliation? Though New Delhi has long maintained that even a tactical nuclear strike on its forces would be treated as a nuclear first strike, and would invite massive retaliation, some Pakistani generals believe that a tactical strike would circumvent retaliation from India, since such an attack on an advancing tank regiment or infantry battalion (in contrast to a strategic strike killing millions of civilians), would not be provocation enough for all-out retaliation. They contend that the many layers of bureaucracy surrounding India's nuclear capability, the strength of world public opinion, and the fact that strategic command remains in civilian hands places severe doubts on India's willingness and ability to retaliate with a massive nuclear strike against an opponent, particularly in the face of only a limited tactical strike from Pakistan.

Some analysts attribute the recent lessening of tensions to the belated recognition in India's strategic circles that New Delhi cannot afford to dismiss Pakistan's repeated threats of using nuclear weapons as "mere posturing" or "bluffing" on Islamabad's part. They point to the Pakistani military's strong aversion to fighting a 1965- or 1971-type conventional war with India and offer this as the rationale behind Islamabad's decision to pull back from the brink on several occasions in recent history (in 1987, 1990, 1999, and 2002). Others believe that the tendency of Indian strategic planners to discount the threat of nuclear escalation may well be based on some fundamentally erroneous assumptions:²⁸

- That the United States cannot allow Pakistan to be the first Islamic country to use nuclear weapons to settle a territorial dispute, as it would mean the end of the global nonproliferation regime and encourage other countries to go nuclear to settle their territorial disputes as well.
- That the presence of US forces in Pakistan will be a constraining factor.
- That the international community (the United States, United Kingdom, China, or the United Nations) will intervene in time to prevent such a catastrophe.
- And that India can count on American and Israeli military support to seize or take out Pakistan's nuclear and missile infrastructure.

These assumptions do not seem to be based on cold, clear-headed calculations of the strategic interests and influence of major powers (especially the United States and China) and may well be a sign of wishful thinking on India's part.²⁹ It is worth noting that new strategic and geopolitical realities emerging in Asia since 9/11 have put a question mark over Beijing's older certainties, assumptions, and beliefs.

China's Concerns

Much to Jiang and his Politburo's chagrin, the US-led war on terrorism has developed in ways that could not have been foreseen, with potentially disastrous consequences for China's core strategic interests. A major unintended (and unsettling, from Beijing's standpoint) consequence has been not only to checkmate and roll back China's recent strategic expansion moves in Central, South, and Southeast Asia, thereby severely constricting the strategic latitude that China has enjoyed since the Cold War, but also to tilt the regional balance of power decisively in Washington's favor within a short period. The supposedly brief Unipolar moment in history seems to have turned into a long-lasting Imperial moment—a Pax Americana *par excellence*. More important, recent developments show how tenuous Chinese power remains when compared to that of the United States.³⁰

The fast-changing strategic scene not only undercuts Chinese ambitions to expand Beijing's power and influence in Asia, but also hems in the one country in the world with the most demonstrable capacity to act independently of the United States. Not surprisingly, the beginning of 2002 saw Chinese leaders and generals shedding their earlier inhibitions about publicly expressing concern over the growing "southern discomfort"—that is, ever-expanding US military power and presence in southern Asia after 9/11. China's Chief of the General Staff Fu Quanyou warned the United States against using the war on terrorism to dominate global affairs by saying "counter-terrorism should not be used to practice hegemony."³¹ On an official visit in April 2002 in Iran, Jiang Zemin openly repudiated the US stance against the Iranian and Iraqi regimes, saying, "Our opinion [on terrorism] is not the same as the United States." In Germany, he told the *Welt am Sonntag*: "We all want to fight terrorism. But the states involved in the fight against terror each have their own specific viewpoint."³²

China's initial optimism that new Sino-US-Pakistan triangular cooperation in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 would wean Washington away from New Delhi turned out to be wishful thinking as Bush Administration officials went out of their way to assure India that America's intensifying alliance with Pakistan would not come at India's expense. If anything, the current crisis has strengthened the American commitment to building stronger relations, including defense ties, with South Asia's preeminent power. However, China does not want to see India increasing its power, stature, and profile regionally or internationally. Beijing shares Islamabad's deep mistrust of India's strategic ambitions and seeks to prevent India's emergence as a peer competitor and a major strategic rival in Asia. That is why Chinese strategists have long argued that China's pursuit of great power status is a historical right and perfectly legitimate but India's pursuit of great power status is illegitimate, wrong, dangerous, and a sign of hegemonic, imperial behavior.³³ For its part, New Delhi has long accused Beijing of doing everything it can to undermine India's interests and using its ties with other states to contain India. Beijing is also alarmed over the growing talk in some con-

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servative policy circles in Washington and New Delhi of India emerging as a counterweight to China on the one hand and the fragile, radical Islamic states of West Asia on the other.³⁴

Earlier, when President Bush unveiled his missile defense plan, New Delhi responded far more positively than did most US allies. Some Indian strategic thinkers even see in the emerging US-India quasi-alliance an opportunity for “payback” to China. As G. Parthasarthy, former Indian Ambassador to Pakistan and Burma, put it: “Whether it was the Bangladesh conflict of 1971, or in the Clinton-Jiang Declaration in the aftermath of our nuclear tests, China has never hesitated to use its leverage with the Americans to undermine our security.”³⁵ Growing Chinese strategic pressure on the Malacca Straits has already led to maritime collaboration between India and the United States, with their navies jointly patrolling the straits. More significantly, US-India strategic engagement has scaled new heights with the announcement of a series of measures usually reserved for close US allies and friends: joint military exercises in Alaska that would boost India’s high-altitude warfare capabilities in the Himalayan glaciers of northern Kashmir where it faces Pakistan and China; sale of military hardware including radars, aircraft engines, and surveillance equipment to India; joint naval exercises and the training of India’s special forces; and intelligence sharing as well as the joint naval patrols in the Straits of Malacca. Washington also reportedly gave the green light for Israel to proceed with selling the Phalcon airborne early warning and control system (AWACS) to India—something that was earlier denied to China for fear of enhancing Beijing’s air surveillance and early warning capabilities in the Taiwan Strait.

All of these measures send an implicit signal to China of India’s growing military prowess.³⁶ In a cover story in the authoritative *Beijing Review*, one of China’s noted South Asia specialists expressed concern over the US sale of arms to India which “enables it to become the first country to have close military relations with the world’s two big powers—the United States and Russia.”³⁷ To make matters worse, in early May 2002 Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan, Beijing’s other Asian rival, which sees China representing a clear and future threat to its security, called for a broadening of Japan’s security cooperation with India.³⁸

Many Chinese strategists believe India is using the war on terrorism as a pretext to militarily subdue Pakistan or to destabilize and dismember the country. Pakistan is the only country that stands up to India and thereby prevents Indian hegemony over the region, thus fulfilling a key objective of China's South Asia policy.³⁹ As South Asia watcher Ehsan Ahrari points out: "India may end up intensifying its own rivalry with China by remaining steadfast in its insistence that Musharraf kowtow to its demands, especially if China calculates that US-India ties are harming its own regional interests. China, though still concerned about the continued activism of Islamist groups in Pakistan and contiguous areas, is not at all willing to see the regional balance of power significantly tilt in favor of India."⁴⁰

Though Beijing welcomes the new US commitment to prop up Beijing's "all-weather friend" after a decade of abandonment and estrangement, most Chinese strategists worry about the destabilizing consequences of a prolonged US military presence in Pakistan and increased influence on the future of Sino-Pakistan ties as well as on Pakistan's domestic stability.⁴¹ The Chinese are also believed to be "highly uncomfortable" with the four US military bases in Pakistan.⁴² Of special concern to Beijing is the US presence at Pasni in the Baluchistan region of Pakistan, where China is constructing a deep-water naval port at Gwadar, the inland Makran coastal highway linking it with Karachi, and several oil and gas pipeline projects. Beijing has long been eyeing its construction of the naval base at Gwadar, at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf, as a bulwark against the US presence and India's growing naval power.⁴³ Furthermore, the US military presence in Pakistan could sharpen the divide within the Pakistani military into pro-West and pro-Beijing factions, with China supporting the latter to regain ground lost since 9/11.⁴⁴ The pro-Beijing lobby within the Pakistani military is reportedly getting restive and waiting to strike if and when General Musharraf falters. The pro-China faction within the Pakistani military could also join hands with the pro-Islamic fundamentalist faction opposing the US military presence on Pakistan's soil. Alternatively, it could throw its support behind those nationalist elements that find Pakistan's loss of its "strategic depth" in Afghanistan for elusive diplomatic gains very hard to digest. The US arms sales to India and joint US-Indian military exercises may further sour China's and Pakistan's willingness to assist Washington in its war on terrorism.

War Scenarios

It is said that each conflict simply prepares the ground for the next one or every war contains the seeds of another. The Afghan War of the 1980s against the Soviet occupation culminated in the war on terrorism in 2001. Whether the war on terrorism will lead to another war or a clash of civilizations or a nuclear jihad in South Asia, only time will tell. Pakistan is, in the words of former Italian Foreign Minister Gianni De Michelis, "the fuse of the world."⁴⁵ The provinces close to the Afghan border and home to the US military bases are now controlled by Islamic parties that created the Taliban and are openly sympathetic to the aims and ideals of

“The South Asian military balance of power is neither pro-India nor pro-Pakistan, it has always been pro-China.”

al Qaeda. The rising anti-American sentiment in Pakistan as demonstrated in the recent elections has made the country increasingly unstable. Violence levels in Indian Kashmir also continue to rise. Many observers believe that Washington may have to rethink its strategy vis-à-vis Islamabad if the war on terrorism is to be won decisively.⁴⁶ The complete dismantling of the al Qaeda terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan seems unlikely because of the apprehension within the Pakistani military that doing so would devalue Pakistan’s importance in the US security strategy and once again make the United States turn its back on the country and make the country vulnerable to Western pressure and sanctions. It would also deprive Pakistan of invaluable Western aid and leverage vis-à-vis Washington and New Delhi.⁴⁷

One Chinese national security analyst argues that “what worries China more is the possibility that it could be drawn into a conflict, not between Pakistan and India per se, but between Pakistan and the United States, with the latter using India as a surrogate.”⁴⁸ With the top al Qaeda and Taliban leadership fleeing into Pakistan’s Wild West and Pakistani-held Kashmir, Beijing knows full well that Pakistan is no longer the “frontline state” in the war on terrorism that it once was; it is, in fact, the battlefield in the war on terror.⁴⁹ Should the India-Pakistani conflict escalate into a nuclear one, neither the geopolitical nor the radioactive fallout will remain limited to South Asia. Indeed, the most worrisome scenario would be one where Pakistan is losing a conventional conflict and uses tactical nuclear weapons in a desperate effort to win or to salvage a face-saving defeat that would allow the regime to survive. (The risk-taking nature of the Pakistani military leadership suggests that such a scenario cannot be completely ruled out.) Should India respond by launching strategic nuclear strikes resulting in the complete destruction of the Pakistani state, China would find it difficult to sit idly by.

The next India-Pakistan war also could bring the United States and Pakistan on a collision course, with or without India acting as a US partner. Such a development would obviously present China with difficult choices. Open support for its closest ally would jeopardize China’s relations with the United States and India. But nonintervention on Pakistan’s behalf could encourage India to solve “the Pakistan problem” once and for all, with or without a nuclear exchange, and thereby tilt the regional balance of power decisively in its favor. As Zhang Xiaodong put it: “There is the real possibility that a new Indian-Pakistani war will take place in the future. This war would be disastrous, as it would change

the whole political balance in Central and South Asia,” which is currently tilted in China’s favor.⁵⁰ Unrestrained Indian power could eventually threaten China’s security along its soft underbelly—Tibet and Xinjiang.

Should post-Musharraf Pakistan disintegrate or be taken over by Islamic extremists, a new level of instability would rock the region and increase tensions among Pakistan, India, and China. Another dreadful scenario is one in which Chinese-made Pakistani nuclear weapons fall into the hands of the United States, Israel, or even India in the event of a civil war should al Qaeda or the Taliban declare jihad against Pakistan—the weakest ally in the US-led anti-terrorism coalition.⁵¹ India would be tempted to militarily intervene in Pakistan if Islamists gain control over the nuclear weapons of its neighbor, either through a coup or civil war.⁵² Such a scenario could reveal information regarding China’s own nuclear program and the extent of help provided by Beijing to Islamabad. The scenario of Pakistan in splinters, with one piece becoming a radical Muslim state in possession of nuclear weapons, can no longer be simply rejected as an alarmist fantasy.

Difficult Choices

These scenarios put Beijing on the horns of a dilemma. Some Chinese strategists see in the current South Asian crisis an opportunity to recover lost ground and thwart India’s ambitions to challenge China’s future economic and military primacy in Asia. Should another war between India and Pakistan break out, New Delhi’s high hopes of an India-US alliance to counter China may never materialize, a welcome development from China’s perspective. Some hawks in the PLA see China even benefiting from an India-Pakistani nuclear war. Hideaki Kase, a former special advisor to Japanese Premiers Takeo Fukuda and Yasuhiro Nakasone, believes that “China wants an Indo-Pakistan war, possibly a nuclear conflict, to weaken India.”⁵³ At the time of the 1999 Kargil War, one Chinese military official had reportedly told a Western diplomat that “should India and Pakistan destroy themselves in a nuclear war, there would be peace along China’s southwestern frontiers for at least three decades, and Beijing needs 20 to 30 years to consolidate its hold over restive Tibet and Xinjiang provinces.”⁵⁴ However, this remains a minority viewpoint, as a nuclear war would have worldwide repercussions in terms of global economic depression, humanitarian crises, WMD proliferation, and China’s developmental priorities.

Most Chinese analysts and policymakers believe that Beijing should have absolutely minimum involvement in a situation where there can be no clear winners. Some argue that Beijing should seize the opportunity to coordinate its South Asia policy with Washington as it is in the interests of both countries to avert the world’s first nuclear exchange and to use India-Pakistan tensions to strengthen Sino-US ties.

While the Pakistanis are confident that if war comes with India, China will throw its weight behind Pakistan, diplomatically as well as militarily,⁵⁵ the Indians remain adamant that the Chinese would not do so for fear of India playing

“the Taiwan and Tibet cards.”⁵⁶ Interestingly, on 31 May 2002, the day Pakistan’s new UN Ambassador, Munir Akram, issued an explicit nuclear warning to India, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman denied a *Times of India* report that Chinese President Jiang Zemin had assured a US congressional delegation that China would not favor Pakistan in the existing tensions, and claimed that the report was “not based on facts.”⁵⁷ A Chinese South Asia analyst at Fudan University in Shanghai, Shen Dingli, told *The Wall Street Journal*: “China needs to send a message: For my own security I will intervene.”⁵⁸ Though Beijing may not overtly intervene in a limited war, China’s geopolitical imperative requires it to come to Pakistan’s defense if the latter’s existence as a nation-state is threatened by India. Clearly, there is a great deal more to the Chinese role in South Asia than meets the eye.

In the final analysis, Beijing’s response to the next India-Pakistan war will be shaped by its desire to protect Chinese national interests, no matter what the cost. Geostrategic concerns require China to covertly side with Pakistan, while publicly calling for restraint by both sides and appearing to be even-handed. In the triangular power balance game, the South Asian military balance of power is neither pro-India nor pro-Pakistan, it has always been pro-China. And Beijing will take all means possible, including war, to ensure that the regional power balance does not tilt in India’s favor. Even in the absence of a war, Pakistan hopes to continue to reap significant military and economic payoffs not only from the intensifying Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry in southern Asia but also from what many believe is the coming showdown between China and the United States, which will further increase the significance of China’s strategic ties with Pakistan.⁵⁹ In the meantime, a major consolation for Beijing is that a stronger Pakistan aided by the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and international financial institutions would be better able to balance and contain rival India.

NOTES

1. On 6 June 2002, General Musharraf promised to US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Armitage that he would “permanently end” Pakistan’s support of “terrorist activity in Kashmir.” It now seems that the promise was nothing more than a temporary tactical retreat that would eventually be overridden by Pakistan’s compelling strategic imperative of “bleeding India by a thousand cuts” through a low-intensity conflict. See J. Hoagland, “Misreading Musharraf,” *The Washington Post*, 23 May 2002, p. 33.

2. In a recent interview with the British Broadcasting Corporation’s *Hardtalk* program, India’s National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra warned that “if something big were to happen” India would not hesitate to hit back. See “Pak’s Done Absolutely Nothing, US Promised More: Mishra Hardtalk,” *Indian Express*, 28 November 2002, p. 1; C. W. Dugger, “India-Pakistani Tensions Subside, but Nuclear Fear is Far From Over,” *The New York Times*, 20 June 2002, p. 1.

3. D. W. Jones, “India Hits West on Terror Tactics,” *Washington Times*, 14 November 2002, p. 1; S. Ramachandran, “India: US Credibility on the Line,” *Asia Times Online*, 27 July 2002, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/archive/7_27_2002.html.

4. For details, see J. Mohan Malik, “South Asia in China’s Foreign Relations,” *Pacifica Review*, 13 (February 2001), 73-90; and R. Datta, “Beijing Mind Behind Pak Terrorism,” *Indian Defence Review*, 17 (April-June 2002).

5. Ren Xu, Qian Feng, Fang Hua, “Mei Ri dou la long Indu: Genben mudi shi ezhi Zhongguo” (“America and Japan Rope in India: Their Basic Objective is to Contain China”), *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily), 30 April 2001, p. 4; and J. Mohan Malik, “China Edgy over Clinton’s India Visit,” *Pioneer*, 2 March 2000, p. 8.

6. J. Mann, "The Asian Challenge: The Unanticipated Consequences of the War in India, Pakistan, China, and Japan," *American Prospect*, 19 November 2001, p. 22.
7. Wang Baofu, "No Winner in Indian-Pakistani Conflicts," *Beijing Review*, 28 February 2002, p. 13.
8. See Press Trust of India (PTI), "China Using Pak against India, Says Farooq," *Indian Express*, 27 May 2002, p. 1; A. Mukarji, "ISI's Main Source of Funds is Now China," *Hindustan Times*, 22 February 2001, p. 1.
9. "China Warns US against Using Terrorism Fight to Expand Influence," Agence France-Presse, 16 January 2002.
10. "Russia Pushing for SMS-12 ABM with India," *Newsinsight.com*, 30 November 2002, <http://www.intelligenceonline.net/allintelligencefull.asp?recno=1551&id=2274262012252>; "China Must Stop Missile Supplies to Pakistan: US," Reuters, 30 November 2001; J. Leahy, "US Warns China over Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Financial Times* (London), 22 January 2002, p. 6; J. Vandehei, "Bush to Press China on Sales of Gear for Weapons of Mass Destruction," *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2002, p. 1; B. Chellaney, "China Frets over Indo-U.S. Ties," *Washington Times*, 2 February 2002, p. 1; and W. R. Hawkins, "Challenging Chessboard of Asia," *Washington Times*, 8 February 2002, p. 21.
11. "Pakistan Seeks China's Support in the India-Pakistan Conflict," *Kanwa News*, 10 January 2002, <http://www.kanwa.com/free/2002/01/e0114b.htm>.
12. Wang, "No Winner in Indian-Pakistani Conflicts," p. 13.
13. Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh was quoted in R. Bedi, "The Chinese Connection," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 2002, p. 7.
14. A. Joseph, "China Critical of US Diplomatic Moves in South Asia," *Hindustan Times*, 4 June 2002, p. 1.
15. For its part, the Indian government was critical of the United States and other major powers for not taking a tough stand on Pakistan's missile tests which amounted to "nuclear blackmail by a terrorism-sponsoring state."
16. Joseph, "China Critical of US Diplomatic Moves in South Asia."
17. "Vajpayee: Keep Your Promise," *The Washington Post*, 23 June 2002, p. B1.
18. "Musharraf Briefs Jiang on Stand-Off," *News International*, 3 August 2002; and PTI, "Pak Offers China Monitoring Facilities on Makrana Coast," *Hindustan Times*, 29 June 2002, p. 1.
19. Cited in PTI, "US Says China Provided Pakistan with Missile-Related Tech," *Hindustan Times*, 8 June 2002, p. 1.
20. Economist Intelligence Unit, "Pakistan: Political Stability Risk," *EIU RiskWire*, 12 June 2002; J. Mohan Malik, "China and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 22 (December 2000), 445-78.
21. "India Unimpressed by Missile Antics," *Times of India*, 28 May 2002, p. 1.
22. R. Devraj, "China Behind Pakistan's Missile Tests, Says India," *Pakistan Today*, 11 October 2002, p. 1.
23. R. Devraj, "North Korea: China also to Blame, Reminds India," *Asia Times Online*, 23 October 2002, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/DJ23Df03.html.
24. See cover story on Pakistan's tactical nukes by N. A. Gokhale, "Small Is Scary," *Outlook*, 10 June 2002; and A. Faruqui, "The U.S. Role in South Asia," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 June 2002, p. 24.
25. On Chinese TNWs, see C. D. Ferguson, E. S. Medeiros, and P. C. Saunders, "Chinese Tactical Nuclear Weapons," in "Tactical Nuclear Weapons," ed. A. Miller, unpublished manuscript, pp. 9-10.
26. PTI, "Army Ready to Face N-Strike," *Hindustan Times*, 26 June 2002, p. 1.
27. N. K. Pant, "Is China Wanting to Have an Indo-Pak War?" *Free Press Journal*, 28 August 2002; William Triplett II, "Gen. Xiong Pays a Visit to Pakistan," *Washington Times*, 19 March 2002, p. 17. Intelligence reports claimed that about 20 to 30 Pakistani nuclear and missile engineers were sent to China in late February 2002.
28. "We Can't Tolerate Pak's N-Strategy: UK," Agence France-Presse, 6 June 2002; A. Faruqui, "China Card Could Yet Trump Musharraf," *Asia Times Online*, 8 June 2002; A. De Borchgrave, "Geopolitical Schizophrenia," *Washington Times*, 6 June 2002.
29. Knowing full well that Washington, with all its powers of persuasion and coercion, could not stop Islamabad from going nuclear and ballistic in 1998, some influential strategic analysts in New Delhi continue to argue that the United States has the power to seize, control, neutralize, or destroy the Pakistani nuclear arsenal. For India's faith in the United States' taking out Pakistani nukes, see P. Hoodbhoy, "Nuclear Gamblers," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September/October 2002, pp. 26-27.
30. "China Feels Encircled," *Economist*, 8-14 June 2002.
31. "China Warns US against Using Terrorism Fight to Expand Influence," Agence France-Presse, 16 January 2002.
32. J. Chan, "Chinese Leaders Seek Allies against US Encirclement," *World Socialist Web Site*, 17 May 2002, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2002/may2002/chin-m17.shtml>.
33. The Chinese certainly do not want to see India playing a role beyond South Asia. See Chen Tiejuan, "People Are Concerned over India's 'Dream of Becoming a Great Power,'" *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao*, 8 May 2001, trans. in FBIS-CHI, 8 May 2001; Shao Zhiyong, "India's Big Power Dream," *Beijing Review*, 12 April 2001, p. 10; and Malik, "South Asia in China's Foreign Relations."

34. Ren Xu, et al., "Mei Ri dou la long Indu" ("America and Japan Rope-in India"); P. Chawla, "Desperately Seeking India: Indo-US Military Alliance," *India Today*, 19 November 2001, pp. 12, 15.
35. G. Parthasarthy, "Tomorrow's Security—Missile Defence," *Pioneer*, 10 May 2001, p. 8.
36. E. Luce, "Indian Navy Agrees to Protect US Shipping," *Financial Times* (London), 6 February 2002, p. 10; A. Dhillon, "US Troops Cement Indian Alliance," *South China Morning Post*, 14 May 2002, p. 7; V. Thapar, "India, US Begin Joint Patrolling," *Hindustan Times*, 19 April 2002, p. 1.
37. See Rong Ying, "Can India Become a Military Power?" *Beijing Review*, 28 February 2002, pp. 14-15. Discussion here is largely based on the author's private conversations with Chinese diplomats and military officials during December 2001 to April 2002.
38. Japan's 2000 Defense White Paper, for the first time, described China as a threat to the country's security. "China Shows Concern as Japan Reviews Military Role," *People's Daily Online*, 19 April 2002; Mohan Malik, "Japan Wary of Assertive China," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 12 (December 2000), 22-25; Stratfor company, "China Downplaying Japan Nuclear Issue . . . For Now," 9 April 2002, <http://www.stratfor.com>.
39. For example, see Zhang Xiaodong, "China and the Western Regions," *Asia Times Online*, 10 July 2002, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China/DG10Ad03.html>.
40. E. Ahrari, "The Waiting Game in South Asia," *Asia Times Online*, 15 May 2002.
41. R. Marquand, "China Worries about US Troops in Pakistan," *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 September 2001, p. 1. Information here is based on private conversations with Chinese and Pakistani analysts, September 2001 to June 2002.
42. See *Pakistan Today*, 11 January 2002; "China Threatens to Walk Out of Pak Military Port Project," 7 January 2002, <http://www.rediff.com>.
43. Bedi, "The Chinese Connection."
44. S. S. Shahzad, "Army on Collision Course with Musharraf," *Asia Times Online*, 17 July 2002.
45. Cited in F. Sisci, "Mega-NATO: China Out in the Cold," *Asia Times Online*, 24 May 2002, <http://www.atimes.com/china/DE24Ad01.html>.
46. E. Neuffer, "A US Concern: Pakistan's Arsenal," *Boston Globe*, 16 August 2002, p. 1. "Pakistan is the new Afghanistan, a privileged sanctuary for hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters and Taliban operatives," writes A. de Borchgrave, "The New Afghanistan," *Washington Times*, 2 September 2002, p. 1.
47. For Pakistan, the *jihadi* network represents an invaluable "fifth column" able to tie down hundreds of thousands of Indian security forces in Kashmir.
48. Quoted in Ching Cheong, "China Faces Strategic Dilemma in South Asia," *Straits Times* (Singapore), 7 January 2002, p. 18. Also see W. Specht, "India, Pakistan and U.S. Troops? If Full-Scale War Erupts, Americans Might Get Sent In, Some Experts Say," *Pacific Star & Stripes*, 17 June 2002.
49. R. Scarborough, "Pentagon Poised to Send Troops into Western Pakistan," *Washington Times*, 27 June 2002, p. 16.
50. Zhang, "China and the Western Regions."
51. News reports during operations against the Taliban and al Qaeda in October 2001 speculated on a possible joint Israeli-US attack on the Pakistani nuclear weapons cache to prevent *jihadis* within the military from gaining control of it. Unconfirmed reports talked of moving Pakistani nukes to China for safekeeping. See B. Fenton, "US Special Unit 'Stands By to Steal Atomic Warheads,'" *The Times* (London), 29 October 2001, p. 1.
52. PTI, "India May Militarily Intervene if Islamists Gain Pak N-Weapons," *Hindustan Times*, 18 October 2002, p.1.
53. PTI, "China Wants Indo-Pak War: Japanese Expert," *Hindustan Times*, 11 August 2002, p. 1; and for Chinese rebuttal, see PTI, "China Rejects Japanese Scholar as 'Groundless,'" *Hindustan Times*, 13 August 2002.
54. Private conversation with a Western diplomat, 17 September 1999.
55. On Pakistani expectations of Chinese support in the event of a war, see E. Haider, "Our Lack of Knowledge about China," *Friday Times*, 31 May - 6 June 2002.
56. See S. Gupta, "Keeping the Heat On," *India Today*, 20 May 2002, p. 27. India's China specialists argue that "China will not be allowed to repeat the 1965-type intervention on Pakistan's behalf" and that "New Delhi would raise significant costs for Beijing by extending diplomatic recognition to Taiwan and the Tibetan government-in-exile." Discussions with India's China specialists at the Institute for Defense Studies & Analyses and Center for Policy Research, New Delhi, 1-4 May 2002.
57. "China Denies Indian Report on Stand-Off," *Dawn*, 31 May 2002, p. 1.
58. Cited in C. Hutzler, "China Contends It Has a Role to Play in India-Pakistan Crisis," *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 June 2002, p. 1.
59. On the "inevitability" of a Sino-US showdown, see Lo Bing and Li Tzu-ching, "Military Leaders Pursuing Hard Anti-USA Stance," *Cheng Ming*, 1 May 1994, cited in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 13 May 1994; Chan, "Chinese Leaders Seek Allies against US Encirclement"; R. Bernstein and R. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); and T. Donnelly, "China without Illusions," *Weekly Standard*, 29 July 2002.