

Chinese Mediation on the Subcontinent?

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AS CHINA EXPANDS ITS INVESTMENTS around the world, its incentives to foster and promote stability grow, as does its third-party leverage to influence state behavior. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a core mechanism of global Chinese geopolitical and economic expansion, stretching out from China through western Asia and the Indian Ocean into Africa and Europe. Expansive economic connectivity initiatives like BRI expose China to new risks, prompting the question of whether and how Chinese interests in facilitating peace and stability have changed. Home to the flagship national bundle of BRI investment projects, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the subcontinent offers a case study of what these new investments and accompanying risks might mean for China's role as a potential mediator of interstate disputes.

South Asia is home to a seven-decade old interstate rivalry that acquired a nuclear tinge in 1998 when India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons. With ample opportunities for conflict, unresolved disputes, and an upwards trend of Chinese stakes in promoting stability, China's historical and possible future mediation role merits review. Chinese mediation on the subcontinent has potential implications for other regions where its presence is growing, as well as for other third parties like the United States with large security, geopolitical, and economic stakes in South Asia.

In past India-Pakistan standoffs, China largely played a backstop to U.S.-led crisis management and mediation efforts. Over time, however, Chinese efforts have gradually increased, paralleling China's rise as a large power and its growing stakes in South Asia. This increasing engagement in the region may result in China reluctantly playing a larger mediation

role in a future India-Pakistan conflict. Planning for how China's changing role in the region could affect crisis dynamics, (de)escalation, and conflict resolution will be important for all parties involved.

Historical Chinese "Mediation"?

Historically, China's role in India-Pakistan crises has been limited, reflecting its policy of non-interference and tracking with shifts in its asymmetric bilateral relations with the two nations.

India's approach to China is as a near-peer competitor and sometimes partner. It does not now view—and is unlikely in the near- to medium-term to accept—China as a mediator in disputes with Pakistan. India's resentment of and diplomatic campaign against hyphenation with Pakistan is pronounced and has key implications for China's capacity to play a third-party role in any India-Pakistan conflict. Although India has allowed some space for third parties, largely the United States, to play a role in major crises with Pakistan, it insists that long-standing tensions like disputed territory in Kashmir are bilateral issues.

By comparison, Sino-Pakistani relations have been strong for decades and key indicators suggest this trend will continue. Pakistan has always had and will likely continue to have an interest in Chinese and U.S. involvement as third parties in any conflict with India. Calling international attention to Kashmir has been a consistent Pakistani policy.

The asymmetric conditions of China's engagement with South Asia limit its potential mediation role. While productively engaging India is important for China's economic and foreign policy aims,

close relations with Pakistan serve as a balancer to India's rise.

Historically, China has played some kind of mediation role in most major India-Pakistan conflicts and disputes including: the Kashmir territorial dispute, crises triggered by terrorism perpetrated in India with ties to Pakistan, and three India-Pakistan wars. China's role has been limited and distinct from the more neutral, third-party role played by the United States and other international actors. This was particularly true for crises prior to the weaponization of nuclear programs on the subcontinent.

Chinese mediation mechanisms for India-Pakistan standoffs since 1950 have included: public statements of neutrality, public support for Pakistan (e.g. the 1965 and 1971 India-Pakistan wars), back-channel communications with Pakistan alone, support of multilateral, international crisis management efforts (e.g. the 1990 "Compound Crisis"), and "shuttle diplomacy" with first Pakistan and later both countries (e.g. the 2008 Mumbai crisis). It was not until the 1999 Kargil crisis that China began engaging more actively as a third-party mediator between its then overtly nuclearized neighbors. By 2008, China engaged in public, shuttle diplomacy with both countries, hosting visits of military and diplomatic officials from and sending its own personnel to Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and New Delhi.

China's position on Kashmir—a dispute dating back to 1947—has similarly shifted over time. China expressed support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir up until around the end of the Cold War when its public position became more neutral, promoting multilateral mediation and later encouraging India and Pakistan to resolve the dispute bilaterally. However, recent activity in Indian Kashmir illustrates how China's mediator potential remains limited by its unique history and stakes in the region and historical bilateral relations with both India and Pakistan. In August 2019, India repealed Article 370 of its constitution, revoking the special, semi-autonomous status of the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Pakistan strongly criticized this reversal of long-standing historical precedent, highlighting concerns of exacerbated human rights problems in Kashmir. India's decision and Pakistan's response come at a time of already heightened bilateral tension. China has several outstanding border disputes with India

that serve as their own sources of bilateral tension. One of these is Aksai Chin, an area within Ladakh in Indian Kashmir that China still claims. China's involvement as a direct party limits its ability to serve as even a nominally neutral broker.

Related to the Kashmir dispute, another recurring source of bilateral tension is cross-border terrorism by non-state actors based in Pakistan often perpetrated against official Indian targets in Indian Kashmir. Major interstate crises were prompted by such attacks in 2019, 2016, 2015, 2008, and 2001-02. The most recent, an attack in Pulwama on February 14, 2019, triggered a crisis that escalated to nuclear-armed India and Pakistan conducting cross-border airstrikes. Compelling Pakistan to take more action faster against violent non-state actors operating within its borders is an area where the United States together with other bodies in the international community hopes China will play a greater role. To date, China's pressure on Pakistan about terrorism has seemed limited and private. However, there have been recent indications of this trend shifting as China made changes to its traditional stances on Pakistan in key international fora.

Future Chinese Mediation on the Subcontinent?

Multilateral mediation may be both expedient and necessary in a future India-Pakistan conflict. Key third parties for mediation will likely include the United States and China. Several factors indicate the United States may not be well positioned and/or willing to play the main third-party role it has played in past India-Pakistan standoffs. The asymmetric bilateral relations of the four states will render third-party mediation by only one third party impractical. Thus, coordination among third-parties will be important and will require new mechanisms for dialogue on shared interests in the region. In the event of an outright conventional war breaking out on the nuclearized subcontinent, both China and the United States will be sufficiently incentivized to intervene quickly but may face coordination challenges. Considering the growing defense cooperation between China and Pakistan, and between the United States and India, one route to preparing for coordinated third-party mediation would be to establish Sino-American military-to-military

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communication on crisis management and conflict mediation mechanisms. Coordinated, high-level engagement by third parties with Indian and/or Pakistani militaries could also prove helpful for de-escalation and conflict termination in the event of a war.

One unfolding example in the region that has some comparative value is China's growing role as a third-party mediator in Afghanistan. Examples of Chinese mediation mechanisms include hosting national leaders (including from the Afghan Taliban) in Beijing, participating in dialogues facilitated by other third parties, counterterrorism assistance, and joint training of Afghan diplomats with India. China's engagement in India and Pakistan is much deeper and more complicated than in Afghanistan. However, China's increasing mediation efforts over time in Afghanistan indicate an overall growing willingness to play a large-power role in regional conflicts. While an attempt at duplication would face significant pushback from India, the multilateral approach of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group merits further study as an example of the United States and China working together as third-party mediators engaging South Asian states in a regional dispute.

The prospect of China playing a larger mediating role in a future India-Pakistan dispute comes with many uncertainties, introducing new elements to South Asian conflict management and resolution dynamics. Are there assumptions, considerations, or mechanisms specific to Chinese mediation? For example, how might China's more sanguine views on the risk of uncontrolled escalation impact its approach to conflict mediation and crisis management? China tends to be more dismissive than the United States of the risk that an India-Pakistan crisis will escalate above the nuclear threshold. This view contributes to a more risk-acceptant Chinese approach to Pakistan in terms of military cooperation,

counterterrorism, and crisis escalation and management. As a result, China may initially have an enabling rather than constraining effect on Pakistani behavior in a future standoff. Also worth considering is a low-probability, high-risk event that prompts Chinese involvement as an actor in the conflict and as a mediator in conflict termination. This could be an Indian action that inadvertently but directly hurts Chinese investments or personnel in Pakistan or the Indian Ocean.

Overall, its growing stakes in the region ensure that China will play some role in mediation of any future South Asian conflict. Understanding its approach to and mechanisms for crisis management and conflict mediation will be important for regional and third parties alike.

Conclusion

While Chinese interests could arguably be served in the short term by a small scale conflict continuing, on the whole, China's rise has come hand-in-hand with a growing stake in promoting global stability. Debates will continue over the nature of the order Chinese expansion will help foster and whether that will culminate in a new world order. The baseline implication of China's rise, however, is that its national interests are best served by promoting stability that fosters productive spaces to pursue its economic and geopolitical agendas.

This unfolding development can be leveraged by other countries for which stability in South Asia is a priority, such as the United States, to find common ground with China. In bilateral disputes, India can leverage China's growing stakes to discourage risky Pakistani behavior that threatens stability. Pakistan, in turn, has an increasingly solid geostrategic and economic rationale to use in a future request for Chinese involvement in mediation of a bilateral dispute with India.

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