

Tracing China's Policy towards the erstwhile state of Jammu & Kashmir

Namrata Hasija*

China's Kashmir policy is an interesting aspect of its foreign policy the trajectory of which can be traced right from 1947 to the recent turbulent times. China has had a special interest in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as through it lay the easiest route to Tibet. In later years it started specifically claiming Ladakh as part of its territory, calling it 'Little Tibet'.

One can classify China's Kashmir policy in several phases with one of being neutral in the 1950s, supporting Pakistan after 1962, and third of advocating peaceful settlement between India and Pakistan. However, if one close reads the Chinese leaders' statements and letters written even in the 1950s, their policy cannot be justified as neutral but is found to be deliberately ambiguous to be used in later years to advocate China's own claims in Ladakh and Aksai Chin. An official Chinese map published in 1954, still used in Chinese school textbooks, depicts territories it claims to have been taken by 'imperialist' powers and which China says it would 'recover'. Ladakh is a part of these territories along with Arunachal Pradesh and even the Andaman Islands. This is a clear indication of Chinese designs in the 1950s, which many analysts naively term as a 'neutral or pro-India' stance by Chinese.

China's position in 1947 was non-partisan as it was under the KMT rule and Dr Tsing, the

Chinese representative was the Chairman of the Security Council which prepared the draft¹ together with India and Pakistan. The draft proposal allowed Indian forces to remain in Kashmir and ordered Pakistani tribesmen to withdraw from Kashmir. The draft, however, was revised after the interference of US, UK and France. The regime in China with the Communists in helm after 1949 saw a further change in the dynamics.

The Indian government became the first non-communist country to recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC), even though Sardar Patel and C. Rajagopalachari wanted to wait and then take a call.² Nehru however, debated in the parliament in favour of recognising the new government in mainland China and also strongly supported its entry in the UN. Kashmir factor contributed majorly towards Nehru's policy towards China as India was looking for support in the international community. Nehru, in his letter to Mohan Sinha, Ambassador of India to Pakistan dated 20.09.1952 wrote that India is only threatened by Pakistan and he (himself) is not the least worried about China and he has also been advised that China could be a major support to India's stance on Kashmir in the coming years.³

This thought also contributed to the fact that India followed a policy of appeasement towards China after it annexed Tibet in 1951 and supported China's claim on Formosa. However, in return,

**Namrata Hasija is currently a Research Associate at Centre for China Analysis and Strategy. She has also been a Taiwan Fellow 2019-2020.*

India did not gain any support for Kashmir and received a major snub when a Chinese cultural delegation refused to visit Kashmir in 1951. The agenda of the delegation included a visit to Kashmir however, the Chinese refused to visit at the last minute after which Nehru expressed displeasure in a letter to his secretariat and wanted them to inform Kaul⁴ in Peking regarding the same.⁵

China, however, maintained total silence on the matter and in fact on the entire Kashmir issue other than a statement in Sri Lanka by Chou En-Lai stating that China and Sri Lanka hoped Kashmir issue could be resolved peacefully by India and Pakistan. The Chinese government continued to give only oral assurances regarding support to India which was highlighted in a note by India's External Affairs Minister to Indian Ambassador in Peking, RK Nehru in 1956 that Zhou En-Lai had said that people of Kashmir had expressed their will (Accession to India had been accepted by the people of Jammu and Kashmir)⁶.

After the 1962 war with India, China finally responded to Pakistan's offer to settle the occupied Kashmir's boundary, which it had initiated in 1959. Foreign Ministers, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Chen Yi, respectively signed their boundary agreement on 3 March 1963 in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, in the presence of the Chairman of the People's Republic of China and Premier Zhou En-lai (The American, Journal of International Law, 1963). Pakistan recognised Chinese sovereignty over hundreds of square kilometres of land in Northern Kashmir and Ladakh (Sino-Pakistan Frontier Agreement and Sino-Pak Boundary Agreement of 1963 between the governments of Pakistan and China).

This deal between China and Pakistan paved the way to a new policy of Chinese government towards Jammu & Kashmir and China declared in the agreement that there was no document to prove that Chinese government ever acknowledged the entire Jammu & Kashmir region as part of India. This stand was published in an article in Peking Review on 25 February 1964 covering Chou En-Lai's visit to Pakistan where he said that his government never recognised the Indian stand on Kashmir. This was followed by a series of propaganda articles especially in Renmin Ribao, which was published in the Survey of the China Mainland Press in 1965. This document carries the most detailed Chinese position on Kashmir where it clearly supports Pakistan, calls for self-determination of Kashmiri people along with calling India an expansionist power, which had annexed Kashmir. In the same survey, statements of Chou En-lai and Chen Yi have been published supporting Pakistan for the "just support" to Kashmiri people.

The opening up of China in the 1980s and the visit of Rajiv Gandhi, which tried to normalise India-China relations, saw a new phase in China's stance on Jammu & Kashmir. However, its support for Pakistan did not change and China itself continued its claim on Ladakh as part of China, while the way of dealing with it changed. It followed Deng Xiaoping's statement that Kashmir issue is a bilateral issue left over from history between India and Pakistan and thus, is to be resolved bilaterally.⁷ Even though this remained Chinese official line, China consolidated its position in South Asia surrounding India by neighbours influenced by it and kept supporting Pakistan on all issues.

In February 1994, Chinese Foreign Minister

Qian Qichen visited Pakistan and described China-Pakistan relations as time-tested⁸ and “beneficial for the people of both the countries and for regional peace and stability.” In contrast, the Pakistani media sought to project that during the visit Qian had joined Pakistan in expressing concern “at the gross violation of human rights in Indian held Kashmir.” An official Pakistani statement⁹ pointedly asserted that he had described Indian media reports regarding the implications of troop removal from the Sino-Indian border as “played up” in order to give rise to apprehensions, and that “China would never let any such situation take place where India could have the benefit of the relaxation of tension against Pakistan.” At a press conference in Dhaka in February 1994, while on the second leg of his tour to Bangladesh, Qian responded to questions on the Kashmir issue and asserted that “China’s position on the issue remains unchanged and that India and Pakistan could settle the dispute left over by history through peaceful negotiations, taking into account the UN resolutions and the relevant agreements between the two countries.”

China’s position revealed a desire to overtly interfere in the affairs of J&K and coincided with the tacit agreement between Washington and Beijing to cooperate in a bid to jointly resolve contentious issues in South Asia, including Kashmir.

Beijing continued to exert pressure on international organisations such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, to accept its claims, which has resulted in these organisations ceasing to give financial assistance to development projects in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh or to even specifically mention Arunachal Pradesh or J&K in their reports. In addition to this, China

and Pakistan started joint exercises at the border and some sources claimed that up to 10,000 People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops were in Pakistan. In 2011, the Indian Army’s Chief of Army Staff, General V.K. Singh, referred to the presence of nearly 3,500 PLA personnel in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir¹⁰.

From August 2010, China designated the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir as ‘disputed’ and began to issue ‘stapled visas’ to residents of the state, aimed at downplaying the Indian citizenship and nationality of the passport holder. Subsequently, *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (China Youth News), the influential high-circulation official mouthpiece of the Communist Youth League (CYL), published a lengthy article claiming that the Ladakh region “has been part of Tibet since ancient times” and that “Ladakh was under the jurisdiction of the central government of China’s Qing Dynasty until the 1830s.”

In August 2014, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a press conference in New Delhi reiterated Beijing’s stand in a carefully worded statement asserting that issuance of stapled visas was a “unilateral,” “flexible,” and a “goodwill gesture” by China. In other words, the status of Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir remains disputed within the Indian union¹¹.

In an article on Sino-Pak relationship, Indian Sinologist Jayadev Ranade wrote ‘by announcing the construction of several major civil and military infrastructure projects as part of the CPEC in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the areas of Gilgit and Baltistan, China has accorded de facto ‘legitimacy’ to Pakistan’s illegal occupation of Kashmir, Gilgit and Baltistan as well as Pakistan’s

illegal cession in 1963 of the Shaksgam Valley in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) to China'. This coincides with other overt gestures of support to Pakistan; massive propaganda against India in 2017 after Doklam crisis; blocking India in NSG; making deep inroads and facilitating anti-India propaganda in Nepal; maritime expansion in Indo-Pacific region; direct threat to India during the Maldives crisis and joint military exercise of Pakistan and China along the border.

The trigger to Kashmir issue came when 44 Indian personnel were killed with impunity in a terrorist attack on Pulwama, which was claimed by the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) terrorist group that operates in Pakistan. China denounced the terrorist attack against India, with the Chinese ambassador also sharing a minute of silence for those killed at the Chinese Embassy in New Delhi. However, it must be noted that on March 14, China again blocked a United Nations Security Council Committee from declaring JeM leader Masood Azhar a terrorist. This clearly demonstrated that though superficially China condemned the attack in front of the global community, it continues to strongly support Pakistan, irrespective of its support to terrorism. Though eventually after 10 years China changed its stance on Masood Azhar in April 2019, the Chinese and Pakistani military collaboration is getting stronger with each passing day.

The abolition of Article 370 in Kashmir resulted in Pakistan unilaterally downgrading diplomatic relations with India and suspending all bilateral trade. The Chinese reaction was initially guarded and somehow limited to only Ladakh but the current border skirmish which started on 6 May 2020 speaks loudly of China's intentions towards

Ladakh. Few publications from China after the abolition of Article 370 and China's moves clearly highlight the long term plan it had for Kashmir.

After the removal of Article 370, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said that China opposes India's inclusion of the Chinese territory in the western sector of the China-India boundary into its administrative jurisdiction. China urged India to exercise prudence in words and deeds concerning the boundary question, to strictly abide by relevant agreements concluded between the two sides and refrain from making moves that may further complicate the boundary question.

Yang Haisheng, an expert with the Collaborative Innovation Centre for Security and Development of China's Western Frontiers of Sichuan University, pointed out in an interview with Global Times on 15 August 2019 that India's move attempts to reduce its importance and sensitivity in the international arena by changing the political and geographical maps of Kashmir.¹² At the same time, it is hoped that this will promote the influx of migrants from other parts of India and change the current ethnic distribution in the region.

The Global Times published a strongly worded article on August 12, 2019, stating that the Kashmir issue is by no means an "internal matter"¹³. It is a violation of China's territorial sovereignty and damages China's interests. It violates the relevant agreements between the two countries on maintaining peace and tranquillity in the border areas, and the leaders of the two countries on the proper control of disputes. The Chinese stand is that Aksai Chin is located in Hetian, Xinjiang, China. It is the place where the Chinese Uygur and Kirgiz people have lived for generations. The

place-name itself is the meaning of the Uyghur language “White Rock Beach in China”¹⁴, which clearly shows that the place has been Chinese territory since ancient times. If the Indian side does not learn a lesson and continues to declare the so-called “sovereignty,” it will only worsen the border situation, aggravate the border dispute, endanger the peace and tranquillity of the border areas of the two countries, and will not help the proper resolution of the border issue and the healthy development of China-India relations.”

Pakistan’s new ambassador to China, Nagmana Hashmi, said in an exclusive interview with the *Global Times* on 19 September¹⁵ that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project will not be affected by India’s removal of Kashmir’s “special status” and Pakistan will remain close to China in cooperating and fully promote the completion of the project. She also said that unless India withdraws its legal amendments to Kashmir’s status and withdraws its troops, Pakistan will not return to the negotiating table.

Lin Minwang, a researcher at the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, said in an article published by *People’s Daily* on 27 August, that on the one hand, China must resist India’s violations and safeguard its own interests; on the other, it must play the role of China being a responsible big country on the international stage and actively play a coordinating role in cooling and stabilising the regional situation.¹⁶

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visited Islamabad on September 7, 2019 to attend the third China-Afghanistan-Pakistan trilateral foreign ministers dialogue held in Islamabad, Pakistan on 7 Sep 2019. In a veiled reference to Kashmir, Wang

Yi conveyed that in the face of uncertain international and regional situations, it is even more important to strengthen strategic communication and cooperation between China and Pakistan. China thanked Pakistan for its firm standing with the Chinese side on issues involving China’s core interests, including Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang. ‘We will also continue to firmly support Pakistan in safeguarding national sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity and safeguarding its legitimate rights and interests’, said Wang Yi (another veiled reference to Kashmir).¹⁷

China’s Foreign Minister’s official website reported on 10 September that the two sides exchanged views on the situation in Kashmir. Pakistan conveyed the situation in the Kashmir region to the Chinese side, including Pakistan’s concerns, positions and urgent humanitarian issues. China indicated that it is paying close attention to the situation in Kashmir and reiterated that the Kashmir issue is a legacy of history and should be properly resolved peacefully in accordance with the UN Charter, relevant Security Council resolutions and bilateral agreements. China opposes any unilateral actions that may complicate the situation.

Even though Pakistan’s bid to internalise the Kashmir issue suffered a setback, China gave full support to Pakistan. On the other hand, China very clearly and strongly laid its claim in Ladakh which is highlighted in a very detailed article published in *Duowei news* on 18 May 2019¹⁸ before the abrogation of Article 370. The article clearly states that China is a stakeholder in Kashmir and quotes historical incidents including treaties during the British domination in India to reiterate their claim

on Ladakh (being linked to Tibetan culture) and Aksai Chin. The article states that China followed a non-intervention policy in Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan but changed its position after the 1962 Sino-Indian war.

The article piquantly lays claim on Ladakh but also calls for the three nations to work together against terrorism, clearly ignoring the fact that Pakistan is a terrorist nation. China's subtle support to Pakistan in front of the international community but strong support in form of Pakistani military personnel trained at Chinese institutions, sale of arms besides carrying out joint military and counter-terrorism exercises.

The visit of Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Xu Qiliang to Pakistan after the announcement of abrogation of Article 370 was reported by the China-owned US-based news outlet Duowei News with the caption 'the situation in India and Pakistan is escalating'. He visited the Pakistan Naval Headquarters in Islamabad, Pakistan, on August 27, 2019, and met with Pakistan's Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Zafar Mahmood Abbasi and discussed the escalating tensions.

The Chinese also raised objections on the issue of Ladakh during Indian External Affairs Minister's visit in August 2019 along with its implications on the India-China border issue. This, coupled with growing China-Pakistan nexus, was highlighted by Jayadeva Ranade in an article in Indian weekly *The Sunday Guardian* on February 2, 2019, where he said, "clear indicators that China is not only strengthening Pakistan to restrict India's growth by keeping it under direct military pressure but that it plans to use Pakistan as the outpost for its

extended global maritime reach". This was always a menace for India which only started unfolding this year in May 2020.

The recent border skirmish is an extension of PRC's policy on Kashmir but with a larger agenda this time. The skirmish that started on May 6 escalated on June 15 after which a statement issued by the PLA WTC on June 16¹⁹ expands China's territorial claims and asserts that China has for a "long time had sovereignty" over the Galwan Valley. This is the second time since the current confrontation began that China has extended its claims over the "entire Galwan Valley". The statement puts forth that the Indian forces repeatedly crossed the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and warned India to "strictly restrain its front-line troops, immediately stop all provocative actions and return to the correct track of dialogue and resolve differences".¹²¹

Pertinent to note is that 1962 war has again been used to warn Indians by the Chinese media, the same way it was done in 2017, which happened after 3-4 decades. This time though, the articles have not directly targeted PM Modi, as they did in 2017. One such article was published on June 17 in *Global Times* which advised PM Modi to improve the economy to ease border tensions hinting that if the economy that he has failed to revive will be on track, people will not display such strong nationalist emotions²². He was however directly targeted in a tweet on June 19, 2020 by @Tangtianru (a Chinese female Army officer) who is followed by Chinese Consul Generals' of Karachi and Kolkata directly targeting PM Modi that the Indian media is not questioning the fact that Indian PM has hidden the number of Indian

soldiers who died on June 15th, 2020. She also posted a tweet on the same day that India should get out of Kashmir. The recent escalation of tensions has not stemmed out only because of China's claims on Ladakh and India's abolition of Article 370. It is definitely due to multiple factors along with the growing mistrust in the relationship starting from the announcement of CPEC by President Xi.

However, on the Kashmir issue after analysing China's position on Kashmir, its growing military

support to Pakistan, the recent escalation of border tension between India and China, stationing of Chinese defence personnel in POK, making Gwadar as a logistic base for Chinese army and moves in South Asia to undermine India clearly demonstrate that China could be a bigger threat in destabilising Kashmir rather than Pakistan. It might use Pakistan to reiterate its position in Kashmir. But Indian strategic circles must note that it is China and not Pakistan which might be a major factor in Kashmir for India in the near future.

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