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The China Factor in the India-Pakistan Conflict

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The war clouds in South Asia have receded following high-level U.S. diplomatic efforts and some arm-twisting of Pakistani and Indian leaders. However, concerns over the outbreak of a conflict between India and Pakistan have not completely disappeared. War is still possible given General Musharraf's inability, if not unwillingness, to deliver on his promise to stop permanently terrorist incursions into Indian-held Kashmir and India's position that it retains the right to take military action if this promise remains unfulfilled. The India-Pakistan crisis has also highlighted once again the long shadow that Asia's rising superpower, China, casts on the Indian subcontinent, especially at a time of heightened tensions. 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 Pakistani military's nuclear and conventional capabilities vis-à-vis India. It was the provision of Chinese nuclear and missile capability to Pakistan during the late 1980s and 1990s that emboldened Islamabad to wage a "proxy war" in Kashmir without fear of Indian retaliation.¹

While a certain degree of tension in Kashmir and Pakistan's ability to pin down Indian armed forces on its western frontiers is 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 post-September 11, Beijing has been keeping a close watch on the fast-changing situation and has taken several diplomatic-military measures to safeguard its broader geo-strategic interests in Asia. At the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia held in Kazakhstan in early June, Chinese President Jiang Zemin pressed Indian Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee to enter into direct talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to prevent the Kashmir conflict from exploding into a full-scale war. However, 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."² 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 most allied-ally in Asia, China's response to the recent India-Pakistan crisis and its likely response in the event of another war on the Indian subcontinent are crucial to understand.

Beijing's Response to India-Pakistan Tensions Post-September 11

Since the late 1990s, China had become increasingly concerned over the gradual shift in the regional balance of power in South Asia with the steady rise of India coupled with the growing U.S.-India entente and the talk of "India as a counterweight to China" in Washington's policy circles, and Pakistan's gradual descent into the ranks of failed states.³ 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 has alienated Washington. However, the September 11, 2001, attacks changed much of 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 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 U.S. military operation against Afghanistan could not be successful without the bases, logistics, personnel, and airspace in neighboring Pakistan. In Beijing, there were great expectations of a sharp downturn in U.S.-India relations because in many ways, what happens on the Indian subcontinent is unavoidably a zero-sum game and Pakistan's new relationship with U.S. did affect India negatively.⁴

However, tensions between South Asia's two nuclear-armed rivals rose sharply after the terrorist attacks, first at the Kashmir Assembly in early October 2001 and then on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. New Delhi responded by massing troops on the India-Pakistan border following the terrorist attacks on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 and warned of retaliatory, punitive military strikes against terrorist camps inside Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. While condemning terrorism, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said: "Kashmir is an issue left over by history and needs to be resolved through peaceful means." 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 U.S. 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."⁵ 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 was interpreted as a condemnation of Pakistan.⁶

Pakistani President General Musharraf visited Beijing twice in less than a fortnight in December 2001-January 2002 for consultations with President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji while 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."⁷ Zhang's reference to "cooperation...in every field" (meaning, nuclear and missile fields) was a thinly veiled warning to India to back off. Later, Beijing matched words with deeds 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.⁸ The People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops from the Military Regions of Chengdu and Lanzhou and their respective sub-divisions, 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 stand firmly on the side of Islamabad."⁹ Soon thereafter, President Musharraf, in a televised speech on January 12, 2002, announced a crackdown on extremist organizations waging *jihad* from Pakistani territory, and as a result, Indo-Pakistan 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."¹⁰ Interestingly, this stance contradicted then Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh's statement during Premier Zhu's visit to New Delhi in mid-January that "China has neither any intention, nor shall it play any mediatory role between India and Pakistan."¹¹ Not only that, the Chinese Foreign Minister had 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 have 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.

However, the May 14, 2002 terrorist attack on a military base in Jammu that killed 34 people, mostly women and children, once again highlighted the danger of escalation along the border where more than one million troops backed by heavy armor, warplanes and missiles are 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 U.S.' diplomatic moves (i.e., the dispatch of Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in early June) 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."¹² It noted that Washington had clearly not taken the tensions very seriously when it went on with a 10-day joint military maneuver with India on May 16-26, 2002, thereby implying that recent Indo-U.S. joint military exercise had emboldened India to up the ante against Pakistan.¹³ Concerned over the "one-sided nature of public appeals" to General Musharraf to halt "cross-border terrorism" into Indian Kashmir from Washington, Moscow, London, Paris and Tokyo, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, told U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell on May 27 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."¹⁴ 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. While publicly calling for restraint by both sides and claiming to be even-handed, China has not only continued to covertly side with its long-term ally but also militarily supported Pakistan. At the same time, Beijing repeatedly asked New Delhi to do more to end the military stand-off.

The Nuclear Connection

In a prepared testimony before the U.S. Senate governmental affairs subcommittee in early June, Assistant Secretary of State for Non-proliferation John S. Wolf has 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."¹⁵ 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 the world's first 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.¹⁶ 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 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.¹⁷

More importantly, the Sino-Pakistani nuclear nexus seems to have introduced a new element of uncertainty and complexity in sub-continental strategic equations. While world leaders' and the media's attention is focused on the nightmarish scenario of a nuclear Armageddon in South Asia and large-scale mutual assured destruction leading to the death 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 following media reports based on intelligence leaks about the forward deployment by the Pakistani military of low-yield (five kilotons or less) tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs).¹⁸ Such miniaturized battlefield nuclear weapons have a one-mile destruction radius and can be used effectively against large troop concentrations and advancing tank formations along the Line of Control in Kashmir.

The Pakistanis seem to have taken a leaf out of China's book and are reportedly toying with the idea of deploying a nuclear war-fighting capability. Just as persistent Sino-Soviet disputes and the Soviet Union's con-

ventional 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 Pakistani missiles acquired from China such as the M-9 are short-range, solid-fueled, mobile nuclear-capable missiles and can be used in tactical mode.¹⁹ Asked to comment on reports that Pakistan has acquired tactical nuclear weapons, the Deputy Chief of Indian Army Staff, Lt.Gen. Raj Kadyan, was quoted as saying that the "Indian Army has trained itself to cope with a tactical nuclear strike in the battlefield."²⁰ Tactical nukes can be launched over an unpopulated area from field artillery guns or aircraft to halt enemy advance in an effort to intimidate a numerically stronger enemy. Since the damage is localized or confined to a certain area, the danger of impacting on 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 stockpile of about 120 TNWs or "baby nukes". Some of these may have been delivered to Pakistan following PLA deputy chief and military intelligence boss General Xiong Guangkai's (arguably China's most important military figure and the man who calls Pakistan "China's Israel") visit to Islamabad in early March 2002.²¹ If the reports of Chinese transfer of tactical nuclear weapons to Pakistan are true, the question then is: Will India, which does not possess TNWs but has strategic nuclear weapons in abundance, keep the nuclear conflict limited or escalate to the strategic level and respond with massive retaliation? Though New Delhi has long maintained that even a tactical nuclear strike on its forces will be treated as a nuclear first strike, and shall 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), would not be provocation enough for all-out retaliation.

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 1990, 1999 and 2002). Others believe that Indian strategic planners' tendency to discount the threat of nuclear escalation may well be based on some fundamentally erroneous assumptions:²²

- That the United States cannot allow Pakistan to be the first Islamic country (and the second nation after the United States) as it would mean the end of the global non-proliferation regime and encourage other countries to go nuclear to settle their territorial disputes as well;
- That the presence of United States 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 the American and Israeli military support to seize and/or take out Pakistan's nuclear and missile infrastructure.

These assumptions do not seem to be based on cold, hard-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.²³ It is worth noting that new strategic and geopolitical realities emerging in Asia post-9/11 have put a question mark over Beijing's earlier certainties, assumptions and beliefs.

China's Concerns

Much to Jiang and his politburo's chagrin, the U.S.-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 of the U.S.-led War on Terrorism has not only been 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 post-Cold War, but also to tilt the regional balance of power decisively in Washington's favor within a short period. More importantly, recent developments show how tenuous Chinese power remains when compared to that of the United States. The Chinese believe that Russia, India, and Japan have all been big winners post-September 11, and that the United States is probably going to have a better relationship with all of them, leaving China out in the cold.²⁴

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 U.S. military power and presence in southern Asia post-9/11. China's Chief of the General Staff Fu Quanyou has 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."²⁵ On an official visit in April in Iran, Jiang Zemin openly repudiated the U.S. stance against the Iranian and Iraqi regimes, saying: "Our opinion [on terrorism] is not the same as the United States'," while 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."²⁶

China's initial optimism that new Sino-U.S.-Pakistan triangular cooperation in the aftermath of September 11 will wean Washington away from New Delhi turned out to be wishful thinking as the 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 pre-eminent power. However, China does not want to see India raising its power, stature and profile regionally or internationally. 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.²⁷ 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 conservative policy circles in Washington and New Delhi of India as emerging as a counterweight to China on the one hand and the fragile, radical Islamic states of West Asia on the other.²⁸

Earlier, when President Bush unveiled his missile defense plan, New Delhi responded far more positively than did most U.S. allies. Some Indian strategic thinkers even see in the emerging U.S.-India quasi-alliance an opportunity for "payback" to China. As former Indian Ambassador to Pakistan and Burma, G. Parthasarthy, 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."²⁹ 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, U.S.-India strategic engagement has scaled new heights with the announcement of a series of measures usually reserved for close U.S. 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 and joint naval patrols between the Straits of Malacca and the Straits of Hormuz. Washington also gave the green light for Israel to proceed with the sale of 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 Straits. All these measures send an implicit signal to China of India's growing military prowess.³⁰ A cover-story in the authoritative *Beijing Review* by China's noted South Asia specialists expressed concern over the U.S. 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."³¹ To make matters worse, in early May 2002 Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan called for a broadening of Japan's security cooperation with India. Some in Japan, who see China as a potential threat, have favored increasing cooperation with regional powers such as India to counterbalance China.³²

Many Chinese strategists believe that India is now using the War on Terrorism as a pretext to use the military option to subdue Pakistan and/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 the key objective of China's South Asia policy. 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 U.S.-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 willing to see the regional balance of power significantly tilt in favor of India."³³ In an article titled "Beijing as Guarantor of Pakistan's Security" a Russian weekly reported that new security commitments have indeed been made to Pakistan by China post-9/11.³⁴

Though Beijing welcomes the new U.S. 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 prolonged U.S. military presence in Pakistan and increased influence on the future of Sino-Pakistan ties as well as on Pakistan's domestic stability.³⁵ The Chinese are also believed to be "highly uncomfortable" with the four U.S. military bases in Pakistan at Jacobabad, Pasni, Dalbandhin and Shamsi.³⁶ The U.S. presence at Pasni in Baluchistan is of special concern to Beijing, which complicates China's construction of a 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 Gwadar base at the mouth of Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf as a bulwark against the United States presence and India's growing naval power.³⁷ Furthermore, the United States 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 lost ground post-9/11.³⁸ 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 opposed to the United States 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 United States arms sales to India and joint U.S.-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 war. The Afghan War of the 1980s against the Soviet occupation culminated in the War of Terrorism in 2001. Whether the War on Terrorism will lead to another war, 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."³⁹ 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 U.S., with the latter using India as a surrogate."⁴⁰ With the top *al-Qaeda*/Taliban leadership fleeing into Pakistan's "Wild West" and Pakistani-held Kashmir, Beijing knows full well that Pakistan is no longer the "frontline state" it was once; in fact, the War against Terrorism is zeroing in on Pakistan as the next battlefield.⁴¹

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 find a face-saving defeat that would allow the regime to survive. (The risk-prone 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 could also bring the United States and Pakistan on a collision course, with or without India acting as a U.S. partner. Such a development would obviously present China with difficult choices. Open support for its most allied ally would jeopardize China's relations with the U.S. and India. But non-intervention 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. An 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, from China's perspective, is one in which Chinese-made Pakistani nuclear weapons fall into the hands of the United States, Israel or even India. This might occur in the event of a civil war in which *al-Qaeda*/Taliban declare *jihad* against Pakistan - the weakest ally in the U.S.-led anti-terrorism coalition.⁴² Such a scenario may lead to 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 a nuclear weapon, can no longer be simply rejected as 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 the 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 U.S.-India 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-Pakistan nuclear war. For example, at the time of the 1999 Kargil War, one Chinese military official reportedly told a Western diplomat that "should India and Pakistan destroy themselves in a nuclear war, there would be peace along China's south-western frontiers for at least three decades, and Beijing needs 20 to 30 years to consolidate its hold over restive Tibet and Xinjiang provinces."⁴³ However, this remains a minority viewpoint as a nuclear war will have worldwide repercussions in terms of global economic depression, humanitarian crises, WMD proliferation and China's developmental priorities. The majority of 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. It is noteworthy that this is precisely what the Clinton-Jiang Joint Declaration of June 1998 had proposed regarding South Asia.

While recent lessening of tensions and announcement of de-escalatory measures are welcome signs, the risk of another war between India and Pakistan remains high because the *jehadis* and powerful sections of the Pakistani military establishment have openly expressed their anger over General Musharraf's submission to the

U.S. demands and may launch devastating strikes against India sooner rather than later, in turn forcing New Delhi to retaliate. This was evident from the mid-July attack in Kashmir in which 28 civilians died in gunfire on a shantytown near Jammu. Recent reports suggest the Pakistan army will continue its policy of solidarity with the Kashmiri armed struggle and its commitment to boycotting the elections scheduled for October 2002.⁴⁴ While the Pakistanis are confident that in case of a war with India, China will throw its weight behind Pakistan, diplomatically as well as militarily,⁴⁵ the Indians believe the Chinese would not do so for fear of India playing "the Taiwan and Tibet cards".⁴⁶ On May 15 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. Interestingly, two weeks later, on May 31 2002, the day Pakistan's new UN Ambassador, Munir Akram, issued an explicit nuclear warning to India, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman denied the *Times of India* report that Chinese President Jiang Zemin had assured a U.S. Congressional delegation that China would not favor Pakistan in the existing tensions, and claimed that the report was "not based on facts."⁴⁷ A Chinese South Asia analyst at Fudan University in Shanghai, Shen Dingli, added: "China needs to send a message: For my own security I will intervene."⁴⁸ Though Beijing may not overtly intervene in a limited war, it will have to come to Pakistan's defense if the latter's very 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. And, geo-strategic concerns require China to covertly side with Pakistan, while publicly calling for restraint by both sides and appearing to be even-handed. Even in the absence of a war, Pakistan hopes to continue to benefit not only from the intensifying Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry in southern Asia but also from what many Chinese believe is the coming showdown between China and the United States which will further increase the significance of China's strategic ties with Pakistan.⁴⁹ In the meantime, however, 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 rival India.

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¹ For details see, John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (University of Washington Press, 2001); J. Mohan Malik, "South Asia in China's Foreign Relations," *Pacifica Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1, February 2001, pp. 73-90.

² "Vajpayee: Keep Your Promise," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2002, p. B1.

³ 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), April 30, 2001, p. 4; and J. Mohan Malik, "China edgy over Clinton's India visit," *Pioneer*, March 2, 2000, p. 8.

⁴ Jim Mann, "The Asian Challenge: The Unanticipated Consequences of the War in India, Pakistan, China, and Japan," *American Prospect*, November 19, 2001, p. 22.

⁵ Wang Baofu, "No Winner in Indian-Pakistani Conflicts," *Beijing Review*, February 28, 2002, p. 13. Italics mine.

⁶ See PTI, "China using Pak against India, says Farooq," *Indian Express*, May 27, 2002, p. 1.

⁷ "China warns US against using terrorism fight to expand influence," *Agence France Presse*, January 16, 2002. Italics mine.

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