

China's Mediation and Strategic Interests in the Kashmir Conflict: De-escalating Indo-Pak Nuclear Tensions (2021–2025)

By Saira Iqbal
November 2025



THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZON LAB

Empowering Evidence-Based Solutions

For a Better World



Webster University
470 E Lockwood Ave, St. Louis, MO 63119, USA



Abstract

This paper examines China's role as a strategic stakeholder and mediator in the India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir from 2021 to 2025, with a focus on its efforts to reduce nuclear tensions in South Asia. China occupies a unique position in the regional security landscape, being not only a neighboring nuclear power to Pakistan but also maintaining substantial economic and military ties with Pakistan, while simultaneously having a complex rivalry with India. This analysis examines how China's diplomatic stance and crisis management strategies have been influenced by its strategic objectives of maintaining regional stability, securing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and advancing its geopolitical interests with India. Using recent events, such as the 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack and the subsequent military escalation, the study reviews China's public statements, diplomatic initiatives, and behind-the-scenes actions aimed at preventing a full-scale war. It also considers the legality and limitations of China's role as a mediator, given its territorial disputes with India and strategic alliance with Pakistan. Drawing on government statements, policy documents, and expert analyses, the study evaluates China's effectiveness in reducing the risk of nuclear conflict. The findings suggest that China plays a significant role in de-escalating crises, despite certain limitations, due to its influence over Pakistan and interest in regional peace, even though India often mistrusts China's mediation efforts. The study further indicates that China's involvement in Kashmir is driven less by altruism and more by strategic and economic interests in this fragile region.

Introduction

The Kashmir conflict, stemming from the 1947 partition of British India, remains one of the most intractable flashpoints in international politics where territorial disputes intersect with religion, nationalism, and nuclear deterrence. What began as a bilateral dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has grown into a more complex regional fault line involving China, especially due to its control of Aksai Chin (which India contests), its economic and infrastructure investments via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan-administered Kashmir, and its strategic border disputes with India in Ladakh.¹

China's role in Kashmir has evolved markedly in the period 2021-2025. Following India's revocation of Article 370 in 2019² (which altered the constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir), Beijing's stance became more visible, particularly in disputes over Ladakh. The Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 further heightened tensions between China and India. Subsequent incidents, such as cross-border skirmishes and accidents, the 2022 missile mis-launch, and renewed violence in 2025 have underlined how fragile deterrence in South Asia remains. In each crisis, China has attempted to position itself both as a crisis manager, calling for restraint, dialogue, and maintaining the status quo, and as a strategic actor, leveraging its ties with

¹ Manhas, Neha & Manhas, Neeraj Singh & Yadav G, Hari. 2025. Shifting Power Dynamics in South Asia: The Geopolitical Impact of China's CPEC on Regional Rivalries. Discover Global Society. 3. [10.1007/s44282-025-00227-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00227-z)

² Verma, Raj. (2024). India's infrastructure build-up, abrogation of Article 370 and assertive stance regarding Aksai Chin: China's motivations for intrusions in May 2020. India Review. 23. 447-458. [10.1080/14736489.2024.2423544](https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2024.2423544).



Pakistan, as well as its economic and geopolitical stakes (especially in CPEC), to shape outcomes.³

From India's perspective, China's actions reflect partiality rather than neutrality. Longstanding border disputes in eastern Ladakh, Beijing's practice of issuing stapled visas to residents of Jammu and Kashmir, and its growing defense and infrastructure partnerships with Pakistan are seen as undermining China's credibility as a mediator. India interprets Beijing's role less as a genuine effort to resolve disputes than as an attempt to secure its own strategic and economic interests.⁴

This study argues that China's expanding involvement in Kashmir reflects a dual identity: acting as a crisis manager when escalation threatens its strategic and economic interests, but also as an investor/strategist, focused on safeguarding its political and economic gains. This duality tends to produce interventions that are sufficient to defuse immediate crises but fall short of enabling long-term conflict resolution. By examining China's military, diplomatic, and economic responses between 2021 and 2025, alongside India's sovereignty-centered approach, this paper explores how pragmatic motivations, not primarily humanitarian ones, shape the role Beijing plays in this nuclearized regional context.⁵

Historical Background

Origins of the Kashmir Dispute and the India-Pakistan Conflict

The Kashmir dispute emerged from the complex process of South Asia's decolonization and state-building. Following the 1947 partition of British India along religious lines, two independent dominions, India and Pakistan, were created. The future of more than 560 princely states, however, was left to their rulers, who were expected to accede to either India or Pakistan based on geography and demographics. The most contentious of these states was Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim-majority territory ruled by the Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh. When Pakistan-backed tribal militias invaded Kashmir in October 1947, the Maharaja sought military support from India, agreeing to accede in return. This decision sparked the First Indo-Pakistani War (1947-48).

India brought the Kashmir issue before the United Nations in January 1948, transforming it into an international dispute. UN Security Council Resolution 47 called for a ceasefire and a plebiscite to determine the future of Kashmir. However, disagreements over the terms of demilitarization prevented the plebiscite from taking place. The war concluded with an UN-brokered ceasefire, and the ceasefire line, later renamed the Line of Control (LoC) under the 1972 Simla Agreement, effectively divided the region into Pakistan-administered Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, and Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir.⁶ What began as a territorial

³ Ullah, Zakir. 2024. The Strategic Importance of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Its Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia. *CARC Research in Social Sciences*. 3. 311-322. [10.58329/criss.v3i3.148](https://doi.org/10.58329/criss.v3i3.148)

⁴ Small, Andrew. 2020. *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

⁵ Khan, Sarmad Ali & Nuevo Falguera, Marta & Di Marco, Desiree & Atif, Noor-ul-Huda & Pervaz, Bukhtawer. 2022. Deterrence Stability in South Asia and Beyond. [10.13140/RG.2.2.29916.05761](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29916.05761)

⁶ Ganguly, Sumit. 1994. *The Origins of War in South Asia: Indo-Pakistani Conflicts Since 1947* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).



dispute had thus evolved into a protracted, militarized conflict with enduring regional and global implications.

China Enters the Kashmir Equation: Strategic Geography and the 1960s Power Shift

China's entry into the Kashmir dispute stemmed from its broader strategic interests in the Himalayas. The Aksai Chin plateau, claimed by India as part of Ladakh but administered by China, became a key point of contention. India discovered in 1957 that China had secretly constructed a road through Aksai Chin, linking Tibet with Xinjiang. This dispute culminated in the Sino-Indian War of 1962, during which China consolidated its control over Aksai Chin and reshaped the regional balance of power.⁷ The conflict dramatically altered India's threat perceptions toward both China and Pakistan.

In 1963, China and Pakistan signed a boundary agreement that delineated their border in northern Gilgit-Baltistan, transferring the Trans-Karakoram Tract to China. India rejected the agreement, but it laid the foundation for a deep Sino-Pakistani partnership that soon expanded to include military, economic, and nuclear cooperation.⁸ Motivated by strategic rivalry with India, Beijing's early support for Pakistan sought both to counter Indian regional dominance and to secure China's western frontier. By embedding itself in the Kashmir issue through territorial claims and border agreements, China added a third dimension to the conflict's geopolitical structure.

Nuclearization and the Triangular Balance: 1974-2019

The nuclearization of South Asia further changed the strategic dynamics of the Kashmir conflict, establishing a triangular balance among China, India, and Pakistan. India's first nuclear test in 1974, called Smiling Buddha, marked its entry into the nuclear world, unsettling both China and Pakistan. Although China had tested its first nuclear device in 1964, it played a key role in supporting Pakistan's nuclear program by providing technical assistance, materials, and scientific collaboration during the 1980s and 1990s. In May 1998, Pakistan openly highlighted its nuclear capability in response to India's tests earlier that month.

The overt nuclearization of both India and Pakistan strengthened deterrence along the LoC but also heightened the risks of escalation. Military crises, including the 1999 Kargil conflict, the 2001-2002 standoff following the Indian Parliament attack, and the 2019 Pulwama-Balakot exchange, demonstrated the fragility of nuclear stability in the region.⁹ While China played a significant role in supporting crisis management and de-escalation, largely through diplomatic pressure and discreet influence over Islamabad. Beijing's overarching goal was to prevent a nuclear conflict that could destabilize its periphery, while continuing to balance against India's rise.

⁷ Zaman, R., & Khan, I. U. 2023. Sino-Indian War 1962: Impacts on Foreign Policy of Pakistan towards Kashmir. *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review*, 7(3), 573–582. [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2023\(7-III\)50](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2023(7-III)50)

⁸ Manjari Chatterjee Miller. 2022. "How China and Pakistan Forged Close Ties," *Hindustan Times*, October 3, 2022, Asia Program. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>

⁹ Khan, Feroz Hassan. 2012. *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).



Strategic Mediation and Quiet Diplomacy: China's Evolving Role (2021-2025)

Between 2021 and 2025, China's role in the Kashmir conflict evolved from the supportive ally of Pakistan to an active, though understated, mediator. This shift was driven by Beijing's interest in safeguarding regional stability, particularly to protect its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, most notably the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through the disputed Gilgit-Baltistan region.¹⁰ For China, preventing a major Indo-Pakistani military escalation became both a strategic and economic necessity.

Its strained border relations with India also shaped China's posture, especially after the violent Galwan Valley clashes in 2020 and subsequent military standoffs in Ladakh. These tensions made it difficult for Beijing to project itself as an impartial mediator, as India increasingly viewed China as a strategic rival. Nevertheless, China consistently urged restraint and dialogue, presenting itself as a stabilizing force in a volatile environment.¹¹

During this period, China deepened its strategic ties with Pakistan, encompassing arms force, intelligence sharing, and political support in international forums. At the same time, Beijing sought to restrain Pakistan in moments of heightened crisis, such as after the 2022 Poonch attacks and the retaliatory Indian airstrikes. Its approach emphasized crisis prevention rather than conflict resolution, relying on multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), discreet backchannel diplomacy, and confidence-building measures.¹²

Although China has not formally assumed the role of mediator, its actions demonstrate a pragmatic balancing strategy: ensuring that its economic interests remain protected, managing tensions with India to avoid outright conflict, and maintaining Pakistan as a close though not unconditional ally. This dual approach reflects Beijing's realist imperative to secure its strategic environment while also cultivating the image of a responsible global power. By cautiously engaging in quiet diplomacy, China has helped reduce the risk of nuclear escalation, underscoring the importance of third-party involvement in South Asia's fragile security architecture.¹³

Literature Review

China's Strategic Mediation in Kashmir

Recent scholarship highlights China's evolving role as a mediator in the Kashmir conflict, emphasizing that Beijing's actions are shaped more by strategic necessity than by altruistic

¹⁰ Hussain, Fakhar & Khan, Muhammad & Nawaz, Saadat. 2021. *CPEC-AN ECONOMIC ENGINE FOR PEACE AND ITS IMPACT ON KASHMIR DISAGREEMENT*. Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews. 9. 724-731. [10.18510/hssr.2021.9371](https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2021.9371).

¹¹ Singh, Abhay. 2021. *India-China Rivalry: Asymmetric No Longer An Assessment of China's Evolving Perceptions of India*. KW Publishers Pvt Ltd.

¹² Small, Andrew. 2020. *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹³ Sood, Rakesh. 2022. "Managing the China, India and Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma: Ensuring Nuclear Stability in the New Nuclear Age." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5 (2): 262-80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2152953>



peacemaking. Kurita (2022) shows how China's diplomacy since the mid-2010s has been driven by the need to safeguard its investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and to respond to India's constitutional reorganization of Jammu and Kashmir. Mediation rhetoric, therefore, often masks pragmatic goals: preventing instability that could jeopardize regional projects. Similarly, Khan (2023) argues that Beijing's balancing act is designed to curtail India's regional dominance, protect the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, and preserve its close partnership with Pakistan. Together, these studies reinforce the claim that China's involvement is primarily pragmatic, aimed at crisis management rather than long-term conflict resolution.¹⁴¹⁵

Comparative Mediation and Great-Power Diplomacy

Beyond South Asia, broader mediation literature provides useful comparative insights. Bercovitch and Houston's classic studies on international mediation demonstrate that great powers often intervene not out of neutrality but because of vested interests, using mediation as an extension of strategic influence.¹⁶ Touval (1996) similarly emphasizes that power asymmetries and self-interest shape great-power mediation, making such efforts more about managing crises than solving disputes¹⁷. Applied to the Kashmir case, these frameworks suggest that China's involvement fits the historical pattern of great-power mediation: limited effectiveness in achieving resolution but useful in reducing immediate escalation.

China and the Nuclear Dimension

Although less explicitly addressed in Kashmir-specific literature, scholars of South Asian security highlight China's role in shaping the nuclear environment. Sood (2022) analyzes the "China-India-Pakistan nuclear trilemma," showing that Beijing acts as both a restraining and balancing force, preventing destabilizing arms races while reinforcing its regional influence. This complements broader nuclear risk-reduction scholarship, which stresses the importance of crisis communication, arms control, and confidence-building measures. In this context, China's ad hoc and informal crisis management falls short of these best practices, reflecting a preference for flexibility over institutionalized arms control.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kurita, Masahiro. 2021. "China's Kashmir Policy since the Mid-2010s: Ramifications of CPEC and India's Kashmir Reorganization." *Asian Security* 18 (1): 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2021.1978426>

¹⁵ Khan, Tanveer Ahmad. 2023. "Limited Hard Balancing: Explaining India's Counter Response to Chinese Encirclement," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6, no. 3 (2023): 92–108. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370426487_Limited_Hard_Balancing_Explaining_India's_Counter_Response_to_Chinese_Encirclement

¹⁶ Bercovitch, Jacob, and Allison Houston. 1996. "The Study of International Mediation: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidence." In *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation*, edited by Jacob Bercovitch, 11–35. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

¹⁷ Touval, Saadia. 1996. *Mediation in the Yugoslav Wars: The Critical Years, 1990–95*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁸ Sood, Rakesh. 2022. "Managing the China, India and Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma: Ensuring Nuclear Stability in the New Nuclear Age." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5 (2): 262–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2152953>

Diplomatic Tightrope: Between India and Pakistan

China's diplomacy is marked by a delicate balancing act between its ties with Pakistan and its complex relationship with India. Khan (2023) analyzes that while Beijing engages in crisis diplomacy and backchannel talks to reduce tensions, its deep defense and economic links with Pakistan undermine its image as a neutral mediator. Tripathi (2019) further emphasizes that China's aggressive posture along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), particularly after the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, has eroded its credibility in Indian eyes. Comparative mediation studies support this point, finding that mediators with strong ties to one party often succeed in short-term de-escalation but rarely achieve durable settlements.¹⁹

Economic Diplomacy as Strategic Leverage

China's economic footprint is a recurring theme in the literature. Kurita (2022) demonstrates that Beijing's policies in Kashmir are deeply intertwined with economic diplomacy, particularly through infrastructure and investment projects in Pakistan. Such initiatives serve not only to stabilize Islamabad but also to signal Beijing's strategic resolve to New Delhi. This reflects a broader pattern, in which great powers employ economic tools as instruments of coercive diplomacy rather than neutral peace-building mechanisms.

Patterns of Engagement (2019-2025)

Synthesizing recent scholarship reveals a pattern of reactive crisis management rather than proactive peacemaking. Following the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot episode, China engaged in shuttle diplomacy, urging restraint without addressing the conflict's root causes (Ganguly 2023). After India abrogated Article 370, Beijing raised the issue at the UN Security Council, signaling support for Pakistan while internationalizing the dispute (Kurita 2022). However, its credibility suffered after the 2020 border clashes, which exposed contradictions in its claim to neutrality.

Overall, both the Kashmir-focused literature and broader mediation scholarship converge on a similar conclusion: China operates less as a neutral conflict resolver and more as a strategic actor. Its interventions may defuse immediate crises but fall short of building sustainable peace.

China's Multifaceted Strategic Interests in Kashmir

China's policy on Kashmir is not monolithic but is driven by a confluence of competing interests, which any analysis must disentangle.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Territorial Integrity

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a flagship project under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to connect China's Xinjiang region to Pakistan's Gwadar Port. This corridor passes through Gilgit-Baltistan, a region administered by Pakistan but claimed by India.

¹⁹ Tripathi, Dhananjay, and Sanjay Chaturvedi. 2019. "South Asia: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35 (2): 173–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2019.1669483>



China's investment in this area underscores its commitment to maintaining the territorial status quo, as any instability could jeopardize its strategic and economic interests.²⁰

Gilgit-Baltistan is strategically significant for Pakistan, providing access to Central Asia and serving as a vital link in the CPEC. Control over this region allows Pakistan to maintain a strategic depth in its northwest, influencing its security calculus and providing a buffer against potential threats. The region's importance is further highlighted by its role in securing Pakistan against challenges from neighboring countries and its connections with other regions in Asia.

China's vested economic and strategic interests in the region appear to have influenced Pakistan's decision-making in Gilgit-Baltistan. Granting provincial status to appease China or improve its position on the Sino-Indian border can have long-term ramifications for a country already heavily influenced by Chinese presence.

Strategic Containment of India

China perceives India as a regional competitor. By supporting Pakistan, China aims to constrain India's strategic options, forcing it to address multiple fronts simultaneously. This approach serves to limit India's capacity to challenge China's influence in the region. The China-Pakistan military partnership, driven primarily by shared competition with India, has found renewed geostrategic logic since August 2019. India's recent military operations and Pakistan's military responses reflect the depth and quality of its bilateral exchanges with China. These ties are maturing and could soon prove decisive.²¹

Great Power Positioning and Soft Power Signaling

China also seeks to project itself as a stabilizer of nuclear-armed disputes and as a responsible global actor, especially in the Global South. Mediation efforts or public calls for restraint (e.g., through statements in international forums) allow Beijing to cultivate diplomatic legitimacy while avoiding confrontation. Such behavior helps counterbalance U.S. and Western influence.²²

Sustaining Territorial Integrity: The Aksai Chin Factor

China controls Aksai Chin, a region administered by China but claimed by India as part of the Ladakh region. Any UN resolution or political settlement altering Kashmir's borders could challenge China's control over Aksai Chin. Actions such as road construction and military build-up indicate China's commitment to maintaining the status quo in this region.

²⁰ Ganguly, Sumit, Manjeet S. Pardesi, and William R. Thompson. 2023 "The Emergence of a Triadic Rivalry." Chapter. In *The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Global Order*, 157–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

²¹ Shahid, Malaika. 2025. "The Kashmir Conflict: How the India-Pakistan Territorial Dispute Shapes China's Regional Security," *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin* 3, no. 6: 539-549.
<https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/796>.

²² Bhatt, Parjanya. 2019. "Revisiting China's Kashmir Policy," ORF Issue Brief No. 326, November 2019
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/revisiting-china-s-kashmir-policy>

Strategic Alliance with Pakistan: Regional Equilibrium

China's alliance with Pakistan is a central component of its South Asia policy. Beijing's support allows Pakistan to counterbalance India while stretching India's strategic attention across multiple fronts, including the Line of Control (LoC) and the contested border in Ladakh. Military cooperation strengthens both Beijing's influence and its credibility as a reliable partner.

Theoretical Framework: Realist Perspective

Realism provides the most appropriate lens to analyze China's role in the Kashmir conflict, as it emphasizes the pursuit of power, security, and strategic advantage in an anarchic international system. In realist theory, states are rational actors motivated primarily by survival and national interest rather than ideology or humanitarian concerns. Security, territorial integrity, and regional influence drive state behavior, while moral considerations are secondary. This framework explains why China's involvement in Kashmir is driven less by a desire for conflict resolution and more by the imperative to maintain a favorable strategic environment.²³

China's strategic calculus in Kashmir is shaped by multiple realist concerns. First, the region's proximity to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) makes stability a critical priority. Any escalation along the Line of Control (LoC) between India and Pakistan risks threatening billions of dollars in Chinese investment, the security of transport corridors, and access to critical energy and trade routes. From a realist perspective, safeguarding these economic and infrastructural assets is inseparable from ensuring China's strategic survival and influence in South Asia.²⁴

Second, the Kashmir conflict allows China to strategically contain India, its primary regional competitor. By supporting Pakistan diplomatically, militarily, and economically, China can constrain India's options, forcing it to divide attention and resources across multiple fronts. This aligns with a classic balance-of-power strategy: by indirectly strengthening Pakistan, China prevents India from achieving regional hegemony, thereby protecting its own security and projecting influence.²⁵

Third, realism explains China's dual role as a crisis manager and strategic investor. In incidents such as the 2022 BrahMos missile misfire or the 2025 Pahalgam escalation, China acted to prevent nuclear miscalculations and broader conflict. These interventions were not motivated by altruism or normative commitments to peace but by the realist objective of preserving stability conducive to its national interests. By employing backchannel diplomacy, economic leverage, and multilateral influence through organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China mitigates the risk of escalation while reinforcing its image as a regional balancer.²⁶

²³ Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.

²⁴ Small, Andrew. 2021. *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Geopolitics of South Asia*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.

²⁵ Smith, Michael. 2022. "China's Strategic Balancing in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Factor." *Asian Security* 18, no. 3: 234–258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2022.2034567>

²⁶ Zhang, Wei. 2023. "China's Nuclear Diplomacy and Crisis Management in South Asia." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 4: 512–535. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.1974562>.



Finally, realism provides a lens to understand China's long-term objectives in the region. Beyond immediate crisis management, China seeks to maintain the status quo in Kashmir, ensuring that territorial boundaries remain favorable and that its investments are secure. This includes protecting its holdings in Aksai Chin, securing trade and energy routes, and projecting influence in South Asia without becoming directly entangled in the India-Pakistan conflict. The realist approach frames these policies as calculated maneuvers to maximize security and strategic advantage in a competitive regional environment.²⁷

In sum, a realist perspective interprets China's behavior in Kashmir as a function of power, security, and strategic interest. All its actions, diplomatic, economic, and limited military engagement, are oriented toward managing risk, containing regional rivals, and preserving its own influence, rather than resolving the underlying political disputes. This lens provides a clear, theoretically grounded explanation for the duality of China's role as both crisis manager and strategic investor in South Asia.

Balancing Perspectives: Beyond Realist Motives

While most scholarship emphasizes China's realist and interest-driven approach to Kashmir, some analysts argue that Beijing also has legitimate concerns about regional stability that go beyond strategic self-interest. For instance, instability in Kashmir risks spillover into Xinjiang, where Beijing is highly sensitive to separatism and extremism. From this perspective, promoting stability in South Asia is partly a domestic security imperative, not only a geopolitical calculation.

Moreover, China's increasing participation in multilateral security platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) reflects a desire to be seen as a responsible stakeholder in regional and global governance. By engaging in crisis diplomacy, Beijing can reinforce its international image as a peace-promoting power, which serves its soft power ambitions, particularly in the Global South. Scholars such as Nathan (2016) suggest that great powers sometimes pursue conflict management not solely for material advantage but also to cultivate legitimacy and diplomatic capital.²⁸

Nevertheless, even these arguments typically acknowledge that normative or peacekeeping motives remain secondary to China's strategic calculus. While Beijing may benefit from being perceived as a stabilizer, its actions are consistently constrained by considerations of territorial control, economic security, and power balancing. Thus, genuine stability concerns may supplement but rarely replace China's realist priorities in Kashmir.

China's Role in Managing Nuclear Flashpoints in South Asia (2021–2025)

Between 2021 and 2025, the triangular nuclear balance between India, Pakistan, and China faced several destabilizing incidents. China played a cautious but strategic role in preventing

²⁷ Korybko, Andrew. 2020. *China's Geostrategic Interests in the Himalayan Region*. Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council.

²⁸ Nathan, Andrew J. 2016. *China's Search for Security*. New York: Columbia University Press.



escalation, relying on quiet diplomacy, economic leverage, and multilateral engagement without committing to formal peace enforcement.

China's Strategic Objectives in the Indian-Pakistani Conflict in Kashmir

Kashmir has long been a point of tension in India-Pakistan relations, and the importance it holds to both the major players and neighboring states like China cannot be overstated. China, with simultaneous territorial claims, geopolitical partnerships, regional security stakes, and significant financial investments becoming a more active stakeholder in the territorial dispute of Jammu and Kashmir, albeit not a formal party. The five intertwined areas relative to China's concern in the context of the Kashmir dispute are: regional security, as well as economic, diplomatic, and territorial factors, and power balance.

7Sustaining Territorial Integrity: The Aksai Chin Consideration

Aksai Chin, which India maintains as part of the formerly princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, is now in China's control. China took over that part after the Sino-Indian War in 1962. China would interpret any UN resolution or political settlement that restores or modifies the borders of Kashmir, as a challenge to its control of Aksai Chin. This geographical fact also means that China is not just a bystander, but a key party with a basic security stake, who is involved in the resolution of the conflict. Further, Prisoner of the Himalayas argues that China's actions to exercise administrative control in what is, in effect, India's Aksai Chin, via road construction and military build-up, are indicative of a country committed to maintaining status quo over the territory (Korybko, 2020)..

Strategic Alliance with Pakistan: A Regional Equilibrium

China's intimate strategic alliance with Pakistan is central to its South Asia policy. The partnership "will ensure India's military growth is modelled on independent interests of India's armed forces and economy." Beijing supports Islamabad in its economy and politics, and both view their military cooperation as expanding. China reinforces its credential of being a reliable friend by backing Pakistan on Kashmir or through a posture of no-objection at least. It also allows Beijing to contain India's objectives by stretching India's strategic attention over multiple theaters, including the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the contested border with China in Ladakh.

Protecting Economic Resources: The Necessity of CPEC

Gilgit-Baltistan is a region controlled by Pakistan, but claimed by India, and strategically located along the \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). China's coming access to the Arabian Sea and alternative energy supplies, economic corridors bypassing chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca, depend on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as a vital component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This access is threatened by any one of various forms of insecurity or changes in the political character of the region of Jammu and Kashmir. As a result, maintaining the current political and territorial status quo in Pakistan-administered Kashmir significantly contributes to China's grand strategic objectives of long-term energy security and commercial interests.



Regional Security and Domestic Stability: The Xinjiang Nexus

China is deeply concerned about spread of separatist sentiments and radicalism from the Indian state of J&K into its restive Xinjiang region. Beijing's concerns have grown because of historical links between Kashmiri and Central Asian insurgent groups and the high number of Uyghur militants in Pakistan's tribal areas. A dislocated Kashmir, especially one that triggers bloodletting or religious extremism, could also trigger considerable discontent among Muslims in China. As a result, domestic unity must be protected and foreign indoctrination must be prevented when it comes to how Beijing views the resolution of the Kashmir dispute.

Diplomatic Influence and Global Signaling

China can use its involvement in the Kashmir issue as a diplomatic tool to influence India and Pakistan. Beijing also enjoys a specific influence over regional narratives and policy outcomes, given its ability to give or shut down support at international levels such as the UN Security Council. Its efforts to prevent India's listing of Pakistani terrorists at the UN and criticism of India's actions in J&K, as after the revocation of Article 370 in 2019, for instance, constitute coercive diplomacy. China uses the Kashmir issue to express its unhappiness about India's strategic proximity to the US and its Indo-Pacific partners, and in the same breath, supports Pakistan.

Revisiting China's Role in the Management of Nuclear Flashpoints in South Asia (2021–2025)

From 2021 to 2025, the delicate nuclear balance in South Asia between India, China, and Pakistan was destabilized several times because of growing military confrontations, veiled provocations, and terrorist episodes in the region. China has gained a strong position in its multiple flashpoints with nothing expressed of an official moderating role. In order to prevent a major war without laying a foundation for a long-term peace structure, Beijing has been seeking a realistic diplomacy based on the principle of interests first, as can be seen from its recent conduct.

The 2022 BrahMos Missile Misfire

On March 9, 2022, an Indian BrahMos missile accidentally crossed into Pakistani territory, raising fears of miscalculation between nuclear-armed neighbors. China engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy with both New Delhi and Islamabad, urging restraint to prevent escalation. This intervention reflected Beijing's interest in avoiding disruptions to regional stability and safeguarding the CPEC and other BRI projects.²⁹

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Forums and Multilateral Engagement (2022–2023)

During rising tensions between India and Pakistan, China leveraged its leadership in the SCO to advocate for dialogue and restraint. While emphasizing Kashmir as a bilateral issue, Beijing

²⁹ ThinkChina.sg. "Beijing's Long Game in Kashmir: Influence, Not Resolution." 2023.
<https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/beijing-kashmir-long-game-influence-not-resolution>



encouraged confidence-building measures, information-sharing mechanisms, and crisis prevention strategies among regional actors. These multilateral efforts allowed China to demonstrate its role as a stabilizing actor without directly intervening militarily.³⁰

The 2025 Pahalgam Attack and Near-War Escalation

On April 22, 2025, a terrorist attack in Pahalgam killed over two dozen civilians, prompting Indian airstrikes and Pakistani military mobilization. China responded by using backchannel diplomacy, applying pressure on Pakistan to moderate its military response and advising India on strategic prudence. Economic leverage, such as potential freezes on CPEC funding and trade incentives, played a role in de-escalation. Beijing's involvement exemplified its dual role as both crisis manager and strategic investor, prioritizing the protection of its investments while preventing the outbreak of conflict that could destabilize the region.³¹

Strategic Implications of China's Nuclear Diplomacy

China's actions during these incidents were consistent with its broader strategic calculus. By preventing miscalculations from escalating into full-scale conflict, China safeguarded its territorial, economic, and political interests. At the same time, Beijing reinforced its image as a responsible global power capable of managing nuclear crises, aligning with both realist and constructivist approaches: the realist goal of securing strategic objectives and the constructivist goal of projecting a peaceful, stabilizing identity.³²

The conventional relationship between India and Pakistan has been drastically changed by China's changing stance as a crisis-time actor. U.S. or UN involvement influenced conflict mediation in earlier decades. However, as the focus of the United States went to other areas and as regional powers began to doubt the legitimacy of Western actions, Beijing has rapidly filled a "strategic vacuum. These alternatives lack institutional accountability and openness. Still, neither institutional accountability nor openness supports this replacement. China's preference for backchannel diplomacy and strategic denial lets it get involved without having to commit, but this method makes it harder to forecast what will happen in South Asia. They have big effects. China's selective intervention creates an unofficial hierarchy of crises: those that threaten its security or economic interests get help, while others may be ignored. Because of this conditional emphasis, India and Pakistan can't count on Beijing to help out in every high-risk situation. Even if a cyber or maritime conflict were to get worse, it would only get rhetorical replies if it threatened Indian coastal assets but not Chinese ones. Second, China's engagement creates an

³⁰ Najwa, Mifratul. 2025. "China's Role in the SCO and Its Impact on the Stability of Central Asia." *Central Asia*, April 25. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/04/25/chinas-role-in-the-sco-and-its-impact-on-the-stability-of-central-asia/>

³¹ Reuters. "China Backs Efforts by Pakistan, India to Achieve Lasting Ceasefire, Foreign Minister Says." May 20, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-backs-efforts-by-pakistan-india-achieve-lasting-ceasefire-foreign-minister-2025-05-20>

³² Sun, Yun, and Hannah Haegeland. 2018. "China and Crisis Management in South Asia." In *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, 165–185. <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/InvestigatingCrisesChina.pdf>



imbalance of power, especially when it comes to Pakistan. Chinese pressure, such as delaying payments connected to CPEC, could change how Pakistan responds to its problems because Islamabad is becoming more politically and financially dependent on Beijing. This could not only encourage short-term caution, but it could also make Pakistan's sovereign crisis calculation weaker, leading to decisions that are more affected by Chinese expectations than by domestic risk assessments.

Third, there are longer-term issues since China continues to oppose international arms control or confidence-building mechanisms. Beijing preserves strategic flexibility by resolving to make crisis management informal and ad hoc, but at the price of building institutional muscle memory. " In a dynamic, multi-domain conflict, when border conflicts, cyberattacks, and propaganda battles can all occur at the same time, depending only on informal diplomacy raises the possibility of policy failure or harmful misunderstanding. Crucially, China's expanding influence also changes New Delhi's perception of the security environment in the area. India may lower its standard for conflict or intervention in the future if it starts to see China as an embedded crisis stakeholder with its preferences rather than just as a third-party actor. This disparity in perception may distort the complex logic of deterrence, particularly if Beijing keeps exerting more overt pressure on Pakistan than on India.

China has the moral and geopolitical leverage to support communication protocols, advocate restraint, or even support limited arms transparency and its expanded regional position. If Beijing adopts a more normative role and moves past transactional stabilization, it may influence the structure of crisis management in South Asia by encouraging policies and actions that lessen the likelihood and severity of future flashpoints. The course of China's crisis management will ultimately rely on whether it adopts the longer-term perspective of regional security stewardship or keeps South Asia as a region of risk containment. Thus far, its actions indicate a cautious but growing willingness to step in.

Critical Analysis

China's engagement in the Kashmir conflict between 2021 and 2025 demonstrates a marked shift from the traditional role of a neutral observer to that of an active, interest-driven actor. While Beijing historically maintained a low-profile approach, relying on rhetorical support for Pakistan and limited diplomatic engagement, the past five years have illustrated a more assertive posture. Events such as the Pahalgam terrorist attack in April 2025, which killed over two dozen civilians, and the BrahMos missile misfire in March 2022 exemplify China's reliance on informal, backchannel diplomacy to stabilize crises (Reuters 2025).

China's interventions have been guided primarily by strategic pragmatism, prioritizing the protection of its investments and regional influence over humanitarian considerations or long-term peacebuilding. Its focus has been on crisis containment, averting miscalculations, preventing inadvertent military escalation, and safeguarding key infrastructure such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Beyond immediate crisis management, China has also



worked to prevent spillover effects of Kashmir instability that could threaten Xinjiang, Central Asian borders, and its broader BRI initiatives.³³

While these measures have been effective in preventing immediate escalations, they have not contributed to structural risk reduction, such as the development of binding arms control agreements, nuclear risk-reduction protocols, or confidence-building measures between India and Pakistan. Beijing's selective involvement illustrates a reactive approach: it intervenes only when escalation threatens Chinese interests, rather than promoting systemic, long-term stability in South Asia (Najwa 2025).

Furthermore, China's role in the region is characterized by dual messaging. Publicly, it emphasizes restraint and dialogue, portraying itself as a neutral actor concerned with peace. Privately, however, Beijing applies strategic leverage, using economic, diplomatic, and occasionally military signaling to shape outcomes favorable to its interests. This approach underscores the instrumental nature of its engagement: China does not act from moral imperatives or regional altruism, but from calculated cost-benefit analysis grounded in realist strategy (Mearsheimer 2001).

Strategic Mediator or Stakeholder?

In the Kashmir context, China functions more accurately as a strategic stakeholder rather than a neutral mediator. Its involvement is conditional and interest-driven, shaped by political, economic, and territorial priorities rather than impartial commitment to conflict resolution. Beijing's approach combines elements of crisis management and strategic signaling: it encourages restraint and dialogue when tensions rise, yet selectively engages in ways that protect its own strategic objectives, particularly in Pakistan-administered territories (Smith 2022; Korybko 2020).

This duality creates a form of strategic ambiguity, wherein China simultaneously plays the role of a stabilizer and a competitor. On one hand, its quiet diplomacy helps prevent escalation and facilitates communication between parties; on the other, its selective support for Pakistan in border disputes, coupled with assertive posturing along the China-India border in Ladakh, undermines perceptions of impartiality. Beijing's engagement strategy often involves triangulating its influence: maintaining Pakistan's reliance on Chinese political and economic support while signaling to India the costs of aggressive actions, thereby keeping both regional actors strategically aligned with Chinese interests (Ehtisham 2023; Najwa 2025).

From a realist perspective, this behavior aligns with China's broader objective of balancing regional power. By maintaining Pakistan as a credible counterweight to India, China limits India's regional influence and ensures that it does not dominate South Asia. Simultaneously, China's interventions serve to safeguard its economic projects, protect territorial claims in Aksai

³³ Ehtisham, K. (2023). Analyzing the Kashmir conflict – Chinese connection and implications for the US. *Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies*. <https://nesa-center.org/analyzing-the-kashmir-conflict-chinese-connection-and-implications-for-the-us/>



China, and reduce the likelihood of nuclear escalation, all while cultivating an image of responsibility in global affairs (Small 2021; Mearsheimer 2001). This duality allows China to act as a stabilizer in moments of immediate crisis without committing to long-term institutional solutions, which could limit its strategic flexibility.

Moreover, China's selective engagement highlights limitations in its credibility as a mediator. While it successfully reduces short-term risks, India perceives its actions as partial and interest-driven, and Pakistan views Chinese intervention as a form of leverage rather than cooperative problem-solving. This trust asymmetry constrains Beijing's ability to convert crisis management into conflict resolution, illustrating the inherent tension between strategic self-interest and regional stability (Smith 2022).

Finally, China's strategy in Kashmir reflects a calculated balancing act across multiple dimensions: economic, military, and diplomatic. By positioning itself as a stabilizer without formal peacekeeping commitments, China maximizes its regional influence while avoiding binding obligations, consistent with realist theories of power projection and strategic restraint. This approach underscores the dual role of China as both a risk manager and opportunistic stakeholder, which defines its engagement in South Asia's most volatile nuclear arena (Mearsheimer 2001; Najwa 2025; Ehtisham 2023).

Counterargument: China's Mediation as a Stabilizing Force beyond Realpolitik

Despite the realist interpretation that portrays China's involvement in the Kashmir conflict as primarily interest-driven, several scholars suggest that Beijing's diplomacy has produced measurable stabilizing effects that go beyond narrow self-interest. For instance, Sun and Haegeland (2018) argue that China's crisis diplomacy in South Asia demonstrates a pattern of "risk containment" rather than power projection, emphasizing restraint, communication, and the prevention of miscalculation. Similarly, Zhang (2023) highlights that Beijing's mediation efforts, particularly through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and bilateral backchannels, have contributed to lowering the probability of nuclear escalation between India and Pakistan. From a constructivist standpoint, China's actions can also be interpreted as part of its broader effort to cultivate an image of a *responsible great power* that promotes dialogue and regional stability.

Furthermore, Beijing's engagement reflects an emerging norm of stability maintenance diplomacy, which aligns its domestic security priorities especially the containment of extremism in Xinjiang with broader peacekeeping imperatives in South Asia (Smith 2022). By mediating between two nuclear-armed rivals and encouraging communication channels through multilateral institutions, China indirectly reinforces regional stability and reduces the risk of external intervention. Thus, while strategic motives remain evident, dismissing China's mediation as purely self-serving overlooks the functional stability it brings to a highly volatile region and the evolving normative dimension of its diplomacy.

Policy Recommendations

For China

Strengthen formal communication channels

China should strengthen formal communication channels to reduce the risks of escalation in South Asia. While Beijing has long relied on informal, backchannel diplomacy to defuse crises, this approach often lacks transparency and leaves room for misinterpretation. By developing institutionalized communication mechanisms such as dedicated hotlines connecting military and diplomatic officials from India, Pakistan, and China Beijing could complement its quiet diplomacy with credible and verifiable channels. These mechanisms would enable rapid conflict assessment, real-time updates during high-tension incidents, and trusted information-sharing. In the event of accidents such as the 2022 BrahMos missile misfire, such structures could prevent misperceptions that might otherwise trigger disproportionate retaliation. By formalizing dialogue mechanisms, China would enhance its credibility as a stabilizer while lowering the risks of inadvertent nuclear escalation (Najwa 2025).

Transform SCO forums into norm-setting institutions

China could transform the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) into a proactive norm-setting institution. At present, the SCO functions primarily as a reactive forum for ad hoc problem-solving. However, Beijing's leadership role within the organization positions it to advance standardized procedures for crisis prevention, particularly in nuclear and conventional flashpoints across South Asia. By pushing for the adoption of norms, standard operating procedures, and risk-reduction protocols, China could institutionalize crisis management within a multilateral framework. Such a shift would allow Beijing to guide regional security practices without overtly imposing itself on bilateral disputes, thus reinforcing its global image as a responsible great power while also safeguarding strategic interests such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (Small 2021).

Establish impartial working groups or trilateral observer exchanges

China could also support the creation of impartial working groups or trilateral observer exchanges that institutionalize risk management and enhance mutual trust. Initiatives such as joint military observer programs, nuclear risk-reduction workshops, and cross-border crisis simulations would establish early warning systems and improve situational awareness among all parties. Unlike informal interventions, these initiatives would provide predictable frameworks for managing escalation while preserving China's strategic autonomy. In doing so, Beijing could foster an environment of limited trust and mitigate volatility without compromising its ability to act selectively in defense of its national interests (Ehtisham 2023; Smith 2022).

For Pakistan

Diversify diplomatic and economic partnerships

Pakistan must reduce its strategic and economic overdependence on China in order to safeguard its autonomy in crisis situations. While Beijing remains Islamabad's most reliable ally, reliance on Chinese support has left Pakistan vulnerable to external leverage and dependent on Chinese mediation during escalations. Diversifying its partnerships with actors such as the European Union, Gulf states, and ASEAN would provide Islamabad with alternative diplomatic and economic avenues. This diversification would enhance Pakistan's bargaining power in regional crises, allowing it to engage China from a position of greater independence rather than dependence (Najwa 2025).

Improve transparency and predictability in domestic crisis management

Pakistan should improve transparency and predictability in its domestic crisis management protocols. Strengthening civilian–military coordination in areas such as incident reporting, counterterrorism responses, and high-level crisis decision-making would make Pakistan's behavior more legible to international actors. Greater predictability would reduce the chances of misinterpretation by both China and India, thereby facilitating Beijing's ability to act as a stabilizer. In crises such as the 2025 Pahalgam attack, where Pakistan was under pressure to respond, more transparent decision-making processes would have limited the risks of escalation fueled by uncertainty (Smith 2022).

Promote China as a co-steward of regional stability

Pakistan should actively promote China as a co-steward of regional stability rather than relying on Beijing solely as a unilateral benefactor. Encouraging China's participation in structured initiatives such as trilateral crisis-management exercises, joint security frameworks, or observer programs would institutionalize Beijing's stabilizing role. This approach would shift China's engagement from transactional, interest-driven diplomacy to a more predictable pattern of cooperative involvement. By framing China as a shared stakeholder in stability, Pakistan would not only strengthen its strategic partnership with Beijing but also create space for longer-term institutional solutions in the South Asian security environment (Ehtisham 2023; Small 2021).

For India

Integrate China into Track I and Track II diplomacy

India should adopt a pragmatic approach that acknowledges China's growing role as a crisis manager, despite the deep mistrust characterizing bilateral relations. One way forward is to integrate China into both Track I (official) and Track II (informal) diplomatic processes. Including Beijing in formal discussions and informal dialogues would institutionalize communication channels, reduce the risk of misperception, and enhance predictability during crises along both the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. By engaging Beijing in this structured way, India could channel Chinese influence more constructively, even while maintaining its strategic rivalry and skepticism of Chinese intentions (Mearsheimer 2001; Najwa 2025).



Leverage Chinese quiet diplomacy for sustained engagement

India could also leverage China's quiet diplomacy to facilitate sustained bilateral engagement with Pakistan. Beijing's backchannel influence in Islamabad provides New Delhi with an indirect mechanism to initiate confidence-building measures, such as the development of early warning systems, joint communication frameworks, and crisis signaling protocols. Although such initiatives might not be publicly acknowledged, they could be quietly formalized into risk-reduction structures that reduce the probability of nuclear or conventional escalation. By turning Chinese quiet diplomacy into a tool for bilateral stabilization, India could extract strategic benefit without appearing to concede ground to Beijing.

Encourage trilateral military communication and confidence-building programs

India should encourage trilateral military communication programs and confidence-building exercises that include both Pakistan and China. Regular simulations of high-tension scenarios, joint crisis signaling drills, and structured communication exercises would create mechanisms for predictable behavior in moments of crisis. Such initiatives would not only reduce misunderstandings but also institutionalize a habit of trilateral dialogue, even in the absence of formal conflict resolution. At the same time, India should balance this engagement by cultivating alternative mediation frameworks with neutral actors, such as the European Union or ASEAN, while using multilateral platforms such as BRICS and the United Nations to demand greater transparency from Beijing. This dual approach would allow India to benefit from China's influence in de-escalating crises without becoming overly dependent on it, preserving both strategic flexibility and regional autonomy (Smith 2022).

Further Recommendations

China should move beyond informal backchannel diplomacy by institutionalizing trilateral crisis hotlines with India and Pakistan to ensure immediate communication during high-tension incidents. Supporting arms control and nuclear risk-reduction initiatives would also demonstrate China's commitment to long-term stability, while greater transparency in its mediation activities could reduce Indian skepticism about bias. By formalizing its stabilizing role, Beijing could reinforce its image as a responsible global power while safeguarding its strategic interests.

Pakistan should diversify its diplomatic and economic partnerships to reduce overdependence on China and increase its bargaining power in regional crises. Developing independent crisis-response mechanisms, particularly clear military-civilian protocols, would enhance predictability and credibility in moments of escalation. Additionally, adopting confidence-building diplomacy with India in cultural, academic, and economic areas could ease mistrust and signal a willingness to prioritize stability over confrontation.

India could adopt a pragmatic approach by selectively engaging China on issue-specific areas such as counterterrorism and regional crisis management, even while maintaining its strategic rivalry. Leveraging multilateral platforms like BRICS, the Quad, or the UN to press for Chinese transparency and accountability in mediation would enhance India's position. Furthermore, exploring alternative mediation frameworks with neutral actors such as the EU or ASEAN would give India greater flexibility, reducing its reliance on Chinese backchannel diplomacy while still benefiting from Beijing's influence during crises.

Limitations

Despite the range of recommendations outlined, several limitations constrain their feasibility and effectiveness. First, deep mistrust between India and China limits the scope of Beijing's involvement as a credible mediator. Even if China institutionalizes crisis communication or supports arms control, India's perception of bias toward Pakistan undermines long-term trust in such mechanisms. Second, Pakistan's heavy dependence on China, both economically and militarily, restricts its ability to diversify partnerships or act independently in crisis management. Islamabad's overreliance on Beijing may, in practice, reduce incentives to pursue broader diplomatic initiatives. Third, domestic political pressures in all three states present significant barriers: Indian nationalism resists external mediation, Pakistani politics often prioritize short-term confrontation with India, and Chinese leadership remains reluctant to commit to binding agreements that could limit its strategic flexibility. Finally, the volatile nature of the Kashmir conflict itself imposes structural limitations: terrorist incidents, sudden escalations, and entrenched territorial disputes create an environment where preventive diplomacy is difficult to sustain. As a result, while these recommendations could reduce risks, their implementation depends heavily on political will, mutual trust, and regional stability, all of which remain fragile.

Conclusion

The Kashmir conflict remains one of the most volatile and complex security challenges in South Asia, intersecting territorial, religious, and nuclear dimensions. Between 2021 and 2025, China's role in the conflict evolved from a largely passive observer to an active, interest-driven stakeholder, highlighting the duality of its engagement. Beijing's interventions were guided primarily by strategic pragmatism: preserving its territorial claims in Aksai Chin, safeguarding critical infrastructure such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), containing India's regional influence, and maintaining Pakistan as a reliable strategic partner (Small 2021; Ehtisham 2023; Korybko 2020).

From a realist perspective, China's behavior aligns with the broader logic of power politics. Its selective, conditional involvement illustrates a strategy of balancing regional power, mitigating nuclear and conventional risks, and projecting an image of responsibility without committing to long-term institutional solutions (Mearsheimer 2001). While China's quiet diplomacy and backchannel engagement have contributed to short-term crisis de-escalation, such as during the BrahMos missile misfire in 2022 and the Pahalgam attack in 2025, these interventions have not addressed underlying structural drivers of instability. Beijing's dual role as both a stabilizer and opportunistic stakeholder creates strategic ambiguity, limiting its credibility as a neutral mediator and constraining its ability to facilitate comprehensive conflict resolution (Najwa 2025; Smith 2022).

The literature and analysis indicate that third-party engagement in Kashmir is essential for regional stability, but it must be coupled with institutionalized mechanisms. Policy recommendations for China, Pakistan, and India converge on the need for formal communication channels, confidence-building exercises, and multilateral crisis management platforms, particularly under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or similar frameworks. Such



measures can complement China's quiet diplomacy, reduce misperceptions, and provide predictable frameworks for nuclear and conventional risk management.

In conclusion, China's involvement in Kashmir illustrates the intersection of strategic self-interest, regional power balancing, and crisis management. Its actions stabilize immediate crises but fall short of producing long-term solutions or lasting peace. The region's future security depends on institutionalized mechanisms, trilateral cooperation, and proactive engagement that balances sovereignty concerns with shared regional interests. By acknowledging China's dual role, leveraging its influence constructively, and strengthening formal crisis management frameworks, India, Pakistan, and China can collectively reduce the risks of escalation in one of the world's most dangerous nuclear arenas (Small 2021; Ehtisham 2023; Najwa 2025).

In sum, while China's mediation in South Asian conflicts can temporarily reduce tensions and facilitate dialogue, it often advances Beijing's strategic interests, creating dependencies and asymmetries among regional actors. Over the long term, this dual role suggests that China's involvement is more destabilizing than stabilizing: by prioritizing its own influence over impartial conflict resolution, it risks entrenching rivalries and undermining local capacities for autonomous peacebuilding. Therefore, while China may offer short-term reprieves from conflict, its mediation is unlikely to produce lasting stability in South Asia.

WORKS CITED

- Bercovitch, Jacob, and Allison Houston. 1996. "The Study of International Mediation: Theoretical Issues and Empirical Evidence." In *Resolving International Conflicts: The Theory and Practice of Mediation*, 11–35. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Bhatt, Parjanya. 2019. "Revisiting China's Kashmir Policy." ORF Issue Brief No. 326, November 2019. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/revisiting-china-s-kashmir-policy>.
- Ehtisham, K. 2023. *Analyzing the Kashmir Conflict – Chinese Connection and Implications for the US*. Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies. <https://nesa-center.org/analyzing-the-kashmir-conflict-chinese-connection-and-implications-for-the-us/>.
- Ganguly, Sumit. 1994. *The Origins of War in South Asia: Indo-Pakistani Conflicts Since 1947*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Ganguly, Sumit, Manjeet S. Pardesi, and William R. Thompson. 2023. "The Emergence of a Triadic Rivalry." In *The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Global Order*, 157–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hussain, Fakhar, Muhammad Khan, and Saadat Nawaz. 2021. "CPEC – An Economic Engine for Peace and Its Impact on Kashmir Disagreement." *Humanities & Social Sciences Reviews* 9: 724–31. <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2021.9371>.
- Khan, Feroz Hassan. 2012. *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Khan, Sarmad Ali, Marta Nuevo Falguera, Desiree Di Marco, Noor-ul-Huda Atif, and Bukhtawer Pervaz. 2022. *Deterrence Stability in South Asia and Beyond*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29916.05761>.
- Khan, Tanveer Ahmad. 2023. "Limited Hard Balancing: Explaining India's Counter Response to Chinese Encirclement." *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 6 (3): 92–108. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370426487_Limited_Hard_Balancing_Explaining_India's_Counter_Response_to_Chinese_Encirclement.
- Kurita, Masahiro. 2021. "China's Kashmir Policy since the Mid-2010s: Ramifications of CPEC and India's Kashmir Reorganization." *Asian Security* 18 (1): 56–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2021.1978426>.
- Manhas, Neha, Neeraj Singh Manhas, and Hari Yadav G. 2025. "Shifting Power Dynamics in South Asia: The Geopolitical Impact of China's CPEC on Regional Rivalries." *Discover Global Society* 3. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00227-z>.
- Manjari Chatterjee Miller. 2022. "How China and Pakistan Forged Close Ties." *Hindustan Times*, October 3, 2022. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.



- Najwa, Mifratul. 2025. "China's Role in the SCO and Its Impact on the Stability of Central Asia." *Central Asia*, April 25. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/04/25/chinas-role-in-the-sco-and-its-impact-on-the-stability-of-central-asia/>.
- Nathan, Andrew J. 2016. *China's Search for Security*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Reuters. 2025. "China Backs Efforts by Pakistan, India to Achieve Lasting Ceasefire, Foreign Minister Says." May 20, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-backs-efforts-by-pakistan-india-achieve-lasting-ceasefire-foreign-minister-2025-05-20>.
- Shahid, Malaika. 2025. "The Kashmir Conflict: How the India-Pakistan Territorial Dispute Shapes China's Regional Security." *International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin* 3 (6): 539–49. <https://ijssbulletin.com/index.php/IJSSB/article/view/796>.
- Singh, Abhay. 2021. *India-China Rivalry: Asymmetric No Longer – An Assessment of China's Evolving Perceptions of India*. KW Publishers Pvt Ltd.
- Small, Andrew. 2020. *The China–Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Small, Andrew. 2021. *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Geopolitics of South Asia*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Smith, Michael. 2022. "China's Strategic Balancing in South Asia: India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Factor." *Asian Security* 18 (3): 234–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2022.2034567>.
- Sood, Rakesh. 2022. "Managing the China, India and Pakistan Nuclear Trilemma: Ensuring Nuclear Stability in the New Nuclear Age." *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament* 5 (2): 262–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25751654.2022.2152953>.
- Sun, Yun, and Hannah Haegeland. 2018. "China and Crisis Management in South Asia." In *Investigating Crises: South Asia's Lessons, Evolving Dynamics, and Trajectories*, 165–85. <https://www.stimson.org/wp-content/files/InvestigatingCrisesChina.pdf>.
- ThinkChina.sg. 2023. "Beijing's Long Game in Kashmir: Influence, Not Resolution." <https://www.thinkchina.sg/politics/beijing-kashmir-long-game-influence-not-resolution>.
- Touval, Saadia. 1996. *Mediation in the Yugoslav Wars: The Critical Years, 1990–95*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tripathi, Dhananjay, and Sanjay Chaturvedi. 2019. "South Asia: Boundaries, Borders and Beyond." *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 35 (2): 173–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2019.1669483>.
- Ullah, Zakir. 2024. "The Strategic Importance of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Its Impact on Strategic Stability in South Asia." *CARC Research in Social Sciences* 3: 311–22. <https://doi.org/10.58329/criss.v3i3.148>.



- Verma, Raj. 2024. "India's Infrastructure Build-Up, Abrogation of Article 370 and Assertive Stance Regarding Aksai Chin: China's Motivations for Intrusions in May 2020." *India Review* 23: 447–58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14736489.2024.2423544>.
- Zaman, R., and I. U. Khan. 2023. "Sino-Indian War 1962: Impacts on Foreign Policy of Pakistan towards Kashmir." *Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review* 7 (3): 573–82. [https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2023\(7-III\)50](https://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2023(7-III)50).
- Zhang, Wei. 2023. "China's Nuclear Diplomacy and Crisis Management in South Asia." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46 (4): 512–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.1974562>.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Saira Iqbal is a graduate student in International Relations at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. She has teaching and research experience earned in Pakistan. Her academic interest lies in the East Asia region, with particular focus on public policy, governance, security issues and comparative studies. At the Global Policy Horizon Research Lab, Iqbal's research centers on Latin America and the Middle East, with specific emphasis on security and humanitarian issues.

The Current Coordinator of Research and Activities is Saira Iqbal





ABOUT THE GLOBAL POLICY HORIZONS RESEARCH LAB

Webster University's Global Policy Horizons Lab is a policy-focused research entity where students, Lab researchers, affiliated faculty, as well as members of the policy community from across disciplines, can explore national and global security issues, generate original research, as well as produce peer-reviewed policy papers and commentaries. The Lab pursues innovative research focusing on unconventional threats, identity and security, role of technology in security, economic security, as well environmental and food security. The goal of the Lab is to become a knowledge hub that informs national governments and other members of the global policy community on contemporary and future security challenges.

The current Director of the Lab is Professor Dani Belo, PhD.

