

KASHMIR DISPUTE: TERRITORIAL SOVEREIGNTY AND STRATEGIC POLICY ANALYSIS

Policy Analysis for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China

I. ISSUE BRIEF

The Kashmir dispute represents a strategically significant regional conflict affecting China's peripheral security, relations with two major neighboring states, and broader interests in South Asian stability and international order. The former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, comprising approximately 222,236 square kilometers,[1] remains divided among Indian administration (Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh Union Territories, approximately 101,338 square kilometers),[2] Pakistani control (Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, approximately 85,846 square kilometers),[3] and Chinese-controlled areas (Aksai Chin region, approximately 37,555 square kilometers, administered as part of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and Tibet Autonomous Region).[4]

China's position on Kashmir maintains careful balance between strategic interests and diplomatic principles. The PRC characterizes Kashmir as a "dispute left from history" requiring resolution through United Nations Security Council resolutions and bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan,[5] avoiding explicit endorsement of either party's sovereignty claims while consistently supporting Pakistan's positions in international forums. Chinese control over Aksai Chin—acquired through military occupation during the 1950s prior to Indian awareness, consolidated following the 1962 Sino-Indian War, and formalized through the 1963 China-Pakistan Boundary Agreement recognizing Chinese sovereignty over areas transferred by Pakistan[6]—provides critical strategic connectivity between Tibet and Xinjiang, making territorial retention a non-negotiable core interest.

Current operational realities reflect multiple overlapping interests and tensions. The Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India in Ladakh sector, spanning approximately 826 kilometers,[7] remains imprecisely defined and disputed, generating periodic military standoffs including the June 2020 Galwan Valley clash—the first deadly Sino-Indian border confrontation since 1975, resulting in casualties on both sides (Indian sources acknowledge 20 soldiers killed, Chinese casualties officially undisclosed but estimated at 4-5).[8] Chinese military infrastructure development in Aksai Chin and Tibet—including permanent roads, railway lines, airbases, and advanced surveillance systems[9]—provides capabilities for rapid force concentration while supporting broader Tibet stability imperatives and enabling potential Taiwan contingency logistics through western routes.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), flagship Belt and Road Initiative project with investments exceeding \$62 billion,[10] traverses Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, creating direct Chinese economic and strategic stakes in Pakistani territorial control. The corridor provides critical alternative access to the Indian Ocean bypassing the

Malacca Strait vulnerability (through which 80% of Chinese energy imports transit),[11] connecting China's western regions to Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea.[12] Indian objections to CPEC construction through disputed territory[13] create tensions affecting China-India relations, while Pakistani dependence on CPEC reinforces the China-Pakistan strategic partnership characterized by Chinese officials as "all-weather" and "iron brotherhood." [14]

India's August 5, 2019 unilateral constitutional changes—revoking Article 370's special status for Jammu and Kashmir, bifurcating the state into two Union Territories (Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh), and asserting complete central government control[15]—generated Chinese diplomatic responses including rare UN Security Council closed-door discussions (August 16, 2019, first Kashmir-related UNSC meeting since 1971)[16] and statements expressing "serious concern" about unilateral actions potentially affecting regional stability.[17] The creation of Ladakh as separate Union Territory, while officially an internal Indian administrative matter, directly affects border areas adjacent to Chinese-controlled Aksai Chin and complicates boundary negotiations through altered political status of disputed territories.

Strategic implications extend beyond bilateral China-India and China-Pakistan relations to encompass broader regional security architecture and great power competition. Kashmir's unresolved status contributes to India-Pakistan tensions that complicate South Asian regional integration, prevent effective Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) functioning when members face internal conflicts, and create nuclear escalation risks given both India and Pakistan possess nuclear arsenals (India approximately 164 warheads, Pakistan approximately 170 warheads as of 2023).[18] American strategic convergence with India—manifested through defense cooperation agreements, Quad partnership (U.S., Japan, India, Australia), and Indo-Pacific Strategy frameworks[19]—positions India as potential counterweight to Chinese influence, making India-Pakistan tensions both opportunity (constraining Indian capabilities and attention) and risk (potential for conflict triggering international interventions affecting Chinese interests).

The fundamental policy challenge lies in defending territorial integrity over Aksai Chin and adjacent areas against Indian claims, supporting Pakistani positions sufficiently to maintain strategic partnership while avoiding excessive entanglement in bilateral disputes, managing China-India boundary negotiations and military tensions preventing escalation while preserving territorial claims, balancing relations between Pakistan and India given economic interests with both (India bilateral trade \$136 billion, Pakistan bilateral trade \$27 billion in 2023),[20] and positioning China as responsible stakeholder supporting peaceful resolution while advancing strategic interests in outcome that maintains Pakistani alliance, constrains Indian power, and preserves Chinese territorial control.

II. STRATEGIC INTERESTS

Primary Interests:

Preservation of territorial sovereignty over Aksai Chin and adjacent areas constitutes a non-negotiable core interest grounded in strategic necessity and national integrity. Aksai Chin's approximately 37,555 square kilometers,[21] while largely uninhabited high-altitude plateau (average elevation 5,000 meters),[22] provides irreplaceable strategic connectivity between Tibet Autonomous Region and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The G219 highway

(formerly National Highway 219) traversing Aksai Chin enables year-round ground communication between these two critical western regions,[23] essential for: maintaining effective control over Tibet given challenging terrain and sparse infrastructure; rapidly deploying security forces to address separatist threats in either region; ensuring economic integration connecting Xinjiang's energy resources with Tibet's strategic position; and supporting military operations along the China-India border through logistics connectivity.

Historical precedent makes Aksai Chin retention essential for sovereignty credibility. The territory was incorporated into PRC control during the 1950s through road construction and military positioning prior to Indian awareness,[24] consolidated through the 1962 Sino-Indian War where Chinese forces decisively defeated Indian troops and advanced to positions of tactical advantage before unilaterally withdrawing to demonstrate peaceful intentions while retaining Aksai Chin,[25] and formalized through the 1963 Sino-Pakistan Boundary Agreement where Pakistan transferred approximately 5,180 square kilometers of Trans-Karakoram territory to China.[26] Any territorial concession in Aksai Chin would establish precedent potentially encouraging Indian territorial demands elsewhere along the 3,488-kilometer LAC,[27] particularly regarding Arunachal Pradesh (which India controls but China claims as "South Tibet," approximately 90,000 square kilometers).[28] Territorial integrity principles established through decades of boundary disputes—including successful negotiations with 12 of 14 land neighbors[29]—require consistent positions maintaining sovereignty claims and effective control.

Secondary Interests:

The China-Pakistan strategic partnership represents a vital national interest providing counterbalance to India's conventional military superiority and U.S.-India strategic convergence. The relationship, characterized through successive joint statements as "all-weather strategic cooperative partnership," "iron brotherhood," and "higher than mountains, deeper than oceans, sweeter than honey, and stronger than steel,"[30] serves multiple strategic functions: preventing Indian regional hegemony by ensuring Pakistan maintains capabilities constraining Indian strategic freedom; providing diplomatic support through Pakistani votes in international organizations and backing on issues including Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong; enabling military-strategic cooperation including defense equipment sales exceeding \$5 billion since 2000 (JF-17 fighter co-production, frigates, submarines, air defense systems),[31] intelligence sharing regarding Indian military capabilities and U.S. activities in South Asia, and potential Chinese military access to Pakistani facilities if regional contingencies require; and creating economic integration through CPEC's \$62 billion infrastructure investment binding Pakistani economic development to Chinese projects and establishing long-term interdependence.[32]

Kashmir's strategic significance for China-Pakistan relations derives from multiple dimensions. Pakistani control over Gilgit-Baltistan provides the geographic foundation for CPEC, making Pakistani territorial integrity a direct Chinese economic interest given the \$62 billion investment stake.[33] Pakistani positions on Kashmir create perpetual tensions with India that constrain Indian military and diplomatic resources, preventing full Indian focus on China competition and maintaining South Asian strategic balance favorable to Chinese interests. Military cooperation regarding Kashmir—including Chinese provision of equipment useful for mountain warfare, intelligence sharing on Indian military deployments, and potential coordination during crises—reinforces partnership credibility and demonstrates Chinese commitment to Pakistani core interests reciprocating Pakistani support for Chinese

positions.[34] However, the relationship requires careful management avoiding excessive Chinese entanglement in disputes that could trigger unnecessary confrontation with India or international criticism affecting broader Chinese interests.

Management of China-India relations serves important interests despite competitive dynamics. Bilateral trade reaching \$136 billion (2023) makes India a significant economic partner,[35] while India's participation in multilateral forums including Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank provides opportunities for institutional influence and prevents complete Indian alignment with Western-led coalitions.[36] Climate change cooperation, pandemic management, and global governance reform represent areas of potential China-India coordination advancing shared developing country interests against Western dominance.[37] Excessive deterioration of China-India relations—triggered by Kashmir disputes or border conflicts—could push India toward complete strategic alignment with the United States, expand Quad militarization into formal alliance structures, enable permanent U.S. military presence in India, and create two-front security challenges (Indian border and Taiwan contingencies simultaneously) straining PLA capabilities.[38] Therefore, managing tensions below conflict thresholds while maintaining competitive advantages serves Chinese strategic interests.

Tertiary Interests:

Regional stability in South Asia, while secondary to core territorial and partnership interests, serves broader Chinese strategic objectives. China's peripheral diplomacy emphasizes "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness" toward neighboring countries,[39] seeking stable borders enabling internal development focus and preventing U.S. exploitation of regional tensions for anti-China coalition building. India-Pakistan conflicts create risks including: nuclear escalation potential given both sides' arsenals and Pakistan's first-use doctrine,[40] which could generate international intervention, refugee flows, economic disruption, and potential Chinese pressure to mediate or provide security guarantees; regional economic disruption affecting Chinese investments throughout South Asia (beyond CPEC) and limiting South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) effectiveness, preventing regional economic integration that could expand Chinese trade and investment opportunities;[41] international attention and potential U.S. military involvement in South Asian conflicts providing justification for enhanced U.S. regional presence, intelligence collection platforms near Chinese borders, and diplomatic engagement with regional states as security provider competing with Chinese influence.

International law and UN authority preservation serves Chinese interests in defending rules-based order against Western selective application. China consistently emphasizes UN Security Council resolutions on Kashmir (Resolutions 47 and 91) requiring plebiscite implementation,[42] positioning China as defender of international legal frameworks and self-determination principles. This stance provides several benefits: moral authority in other disputes where China advocates for sovereignty principles (Taiwan reunification, South China Sea claims, territorial integrity against separatism); diplomatic alignment with developing countries supporting anti-colonial and self-determination traditions; contrast with Western powers' selective human rights advocacy and intervention, highlighting inconsistencies when Western strategic interests conflict with stated principles (e.g., supporting Israeli occupation while criticizing Kashmir); and institutional leverage within UN

system where consistent positions strengthening UNSC role benefit Chinese permanent member status and prevent Western unilateral actions circumventing UN frameworks.[43]

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) success and credibility depends substantially on CPEC's flagship status and effective implementation. CPEC represents BRI's most substantial single-country investment (\$62 billion),[44] making its success essential for: demonstrating BRI's economic viability and development benefits, encouraging other countries to participate in Chinese infrastructure financing and construction; maintaining confidence among BRI participant countries observing CPEC implementation, reducing criticism about debt sustainability and project execution; showcasing connectivity corridors' strategic value linking Chinese western regions with maritime access, validating BRI's economic logic beyond rhetoric; and establishing precedents for Chinese overseas infrastructure protection, including potential security cooperation or presence if projects face threats.[45] Kashmir stability directly affects CPEC security—militant attacks, India-Pakistan conflicts, or territorial disputes all threaten corridor functionality and investment security, making peaceful Kashmir environment a concrete Chinese economic interest worth diplomatic capital expenditure.

III. CONSTRAINTS

China-India Relations Constraints:

Economic interdependence creates substantial constraints limiting aggressive Kashmir policies. China-India bilateral trade reached \$136 billion (2023), with China running significant trade surplus (\$101 billion Chinese exports, \$35 billion imports from India),[46] making India an important market for Chinese manufactured goods, particularly electronics, machinery, and chemical products. Chinese companies maintain substantial investments in Indian technology sector (including stakes in companies like Paytm, Ola, Swiggy, Zomato),[47] creating stakeholder interests in stable bilateral relations. Indian pharmaceutical active pharmaceutical ingredient dependence on China (approximately 70% of APIs sourced from China)[48] provides leverage but also creates mutual interdependence. Complete breakdown of economic relations would harm Chinese commercial interests, eliminate an important export market during economic growth challenges, and accelerate Indian economic decoupling efforts already underway through "China Plus One" supply chain diversification strategies.[49]

Military risks from China-India confrontation create constraints on aggressive border policies. While the People's Liberation Army possesses overall military superiority (2.035 million active personnel versus India's 1.46 million),[50] geographic factors in Himalayan terrain favor defensive operations and create logistics challenges for both sides. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash demonstrated escalation risks—what began as patrol-level confrontation resulted in combat casualties, months-long military standoff involving tens of thousands of troops, and significant deterioration of bilateral relations affecting multiple domains.[51] Major military conflict with India would: divert PLA resources and attention from primary Taiwan contingency planning, creating two-front scenarios where simultaneous military operations would strain capabilities; generate international pressure and potential sanctions from Western countries seeking to support India as counterweight to China; risk nuclear dimensions given Indian nuclear arsenal and "no first use" doctrine that could be reconsidered if conventional defeat threatened;[52] damage China's international image as responsible rising power committed to peaceful development, reinforcing containment

narratives; and create domestic political risks if PLA performance disappoints nationalist expectations or casualties mount.[53]

U.S.-India strategic convergence limits Chinese freedom of action. American positioning of India as "Major Defense Partner,"[54] civil nuclear agreement enabling Indian nuclear program expansion,[55] defense cooperation agreements including logistics sharing and communications interoperability,[56] and Quad institutionalization as Indo-Pacific security framework[57] create U.S. stakes in Indian security and potential intervention scenarios if China-India conflicts escalate. Aggressive Chinese Kashmir policies perceived as threatening India could trigger: accelerated U.S. arms sales to India including advanced systems (F-35 fighters, Predator drones, missile defense), currently proceeding cautiously due to Indian Russian equipment dependence but potentially expanding if Chinese threats increase;[58] permanent U.S. military presence in India or enhanced rotational deployments, providing intelligence collection platforms near Chinese borders and complicating PLA operational planning; formal U.S.-India alliance transformation of current partnership, creating NATO-like Article 5 equivalent in Asia directly threatening Chinese security interests; Quad militarization into formal security architecture with joint operational planning, integrated command structures, and collective defense provisions targeting China.[59] Therefore, Kashmir policies must account for potential U.S. responses and avoid triggering dramatic U.S.-India alliance consolidation.

Pakistan Relations Constraints:

Pakistan's economic weaknesses and dependencies create vulnerabilities affecting partnership reliability. Pakistani economy faces chronic structural problems: GDP of \$376 billion (2023),[60] persistent fiscal deficits requiring IMF bailouts (23 IMF programs since 1958),[61] external debt exceeding \$126 billion with significant portion owed to China,[62] political instability affecting governance and policy continuity,[63] and terrorism challenges consuming military resources.[64] These weaknesses create several constraints: limited Pakistani military capacity for sustained confrontation with India, making Pakistan unable to independently balance Indian power without Chinese support but also requiring Chinese recognition that Pakistan cannot achieve major territorial revisions against Indian resistance; CPEC implementation challenges due to Pakistani governance deficits, corruption, security threats to Chinese projects and personnel (multiple attacks killing Chinese workers),[65] and domestic political opposition to Chinese influence; international pressure on Pakistan regarding terrorism, particularly Financial Action Task Force scrutiny that Pakistan struggles to manage,[66] creating reputational costs for Chinese association with Pakistani policies if characterized as supporting terrorism; and potential for Pakistani accommodation with India if economic circumstances become desperate, reducing Chinese leverage and potentially enabling U.S. mediation gaining influence with both South Asian states.[67]

Over-identification with Pakistani positions risks Chinese international reputation and flexibility. Automatic Chinese support for all Pakistani positions on Kashmir could: generate international criticism characterizing China as enabling Pakistani terrorism support (if such support occurs), undermining Chinese claims to responsible great power status and complicating relations with Western countries, Gulf states, and others concerned about terrorism; limit diplomatic flexibility if India-Pakistan tensions require mediation or crisis management, making Chinese neutral arbitration impossible if viewed as committed to Pakistani side; contradict Chinese emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference principles if applied inconsistently (supporting Pakistani claims to Indian-controlled Kashmir while

rejecting any international involvement in Chinese sovereignty questions regarding Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong); and preclude potential China-India boundary settlement possibilities that might require negotiated compromises, if Chinese positions become rigidly aligned with Pakistani territorial claims.[68]

CPEC vulnerabilities create dependencies requiring Pakistani security cooperation beyond Kashmir. The \$62 billion Chinese investment in CPEC infrastructure—roads, railways, ports, power plants, special economic zones[69]—faces multiple security threats including: Baloch separatist groups attacking Chinese projects and killing Chinese workers, motivated by opposition to perceived Chinese exploitation and Pakistani military operations in Balochistan;[70] Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan and other militant groups targeting Chinese interests as punishment for Pakistani government cooperation and Chinese Uyghur policies;[71] sectarian violence affecting stability in areas through which CPEC traverses; and India-Pakistan conflict potentially damaging infrastructure or disrupting operations.[72] Chinese dependency on Pakistani security provision for CPEC creates asymmetric leverage—Pakistan can demand Chinese support on Kashmir and other issues as quid pro quo for protecting Chinese investments and personnel. However, this dependency also constrains Chinese options by making Pakistani stability and territorial integrity essential regardless of Pakistani policy choices, potentially enabling Pakistani moral hazard where Islamabad pursues risky Kashmir policies assuming Chinese support is guaranteed.[73]

International Legal and Diplomatic Constraints:

UN Security Council Resolution positions create diplomatic complexities for Chinese messaging. China consistently references UNSC Resolutions 47 (1948) and 91 (1951) calling for Kashmir plebiscite,[74] supporting Pakistani positions emphasizing self-determination and international legal obligations. However, these resolutions were adopted under Chapter VI (peaceful settlement of disputes) rather than Chapter VII (threats to peace requiring enforcement),[75] creating ambiguity about binding nature and implementation obligations that legal scholars debate.[76] India's position that 1972 Simla Agreement established bilateral framework superseding UN resolutions[77] receives support from some international lawyers and major powers,[78] complicating Chinese arguments and risking perception of selective legal interpretation. Additionally, Chinese emphasis on UN resolutions and international involvement contradicts Chinese positions on Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet where Beijing absolutely rejects any international role characterizing these as internal affairs not subject to external interference.[79] This apparent inconsistency provides ammunition for critics accusing China of double standards—supporting internationalization of disputes when it serves Chinese interests (Kashmir) while rejecting it when contrary to Chinese interests (Taiwan and other sovereignty questions).

Shanghai Cooperation Organization institutional constraints limit multilateral Kashmir approaches. The SCO includes both India and Pakistan as full members (along with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan),[80] creating institutional requirement for consensus and preventing SCO from adopting positions on bilateral member disputes. SCO founding documents emphasize mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and peaceful resolution of disputes,[81] principles applying equally to all members and preventing China from using SCO as vehicle for pressuring India on Kashmir without violating institutional norms. Russian interests in maintaining balanced relations with both India and Pakistan, plus Russian traditional support for Indian positions on Kashmir,[82] further complicate SCO approaches. Therefore, multilateral mechanisms

through SCO remain constrained by institutional design and member dynamics requiring Chinese Kashmir policies to proceed through bilateral channels or UN forums rather than regional organizations.

Human rights discourse creates rhetorical vulnerabilities. Chinese support for Kashmiri self-determination and criticism of Indian human rights violations in Kashmir[83] invite comparisons with Chinese policies in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong where Western governments and human rights organizations accuse China of systematic repression, cultural genocide (Xinjiang), and autonomy violations (Hong Kong).[84] While China rejects these accusations as interference in internal affairs and fabrications serving geopolitical containment strategies,[85] the parallel rhetoric provides opponents with convenient arguments about hypocrisy. International criticism of Chinese Xinjiang policies—including Uyghur detention facilities, surveillance systems, cultural assimilation programs, and birth rate decline[86]—creates vulnerability when China criticizes Indian Kashmir policies, enabling Indian counterattacks pointing to Chinese treatment of Muslim minorities. This dynamic constrains Chinese human rights messaging on Kashmir and requires careful framing emphasizing legal principles (UN resolutions, self-determination) rather than humanitarian concerns vulnerable to accusations of double standards.[87]

Domestic Political Constraints:

Nationalist public opinion limits perceived territorial compromise flexibility. Chinese social media discourse and nationalist commentary exhibits strong support for firm positions on sovereignty issues including territorial integrity, maritime claims, and border disputes.[88] The "century of humiliation" historical narrative emphasizing China's victimization by imperial powers during 1839-1949 period creates contemporary sensitivity regarding any perception of territorial losses or weakness.[89] While Aksai Chin receives less domestic attention than Taiwan, South China Sea, or Senkaku/Diaoyu islands given remote location and limited public awareness, the principle of territorial integrity brooks no exceptions—any concession in Aksai Chin could generate criticism that leadership is abandoning Chinese sovereignty and repeating historical patterns of territorial loss to foreign pressure.[90] Therefore, boundary negotiations with India face domestic political constraints requiring outcomes that preserve Chinese territorial control over currently-administered areas, limiting flexibility for compromise solutions involving territorial swaps or significant concessions.

Communist Party legitimacy partially derives from nationalist credentials and successful defense of Chinese sovereignty and interests. The CPC's transition from revolutionary party to governing party emphasized performance legitimacy—economic growth, poverty reduction, technological advancement, national strength—and nationalist legitimacy through asserting Chinese power internationally and defending sovereignty.[91] Territorial disputes provide visible tests of these credentials. The 2020 Galwan Valley clash initially created domestic pressure for strong responses demonstrating Chinese resolve,[92] though subsequent governmental messaging emphasized de-escalation and diplomatic resolution while maintaining positions.[93] Perceived failures in sovereignty defense—whether through territorial losses, inadequate responses to Indian provocations, or insufficient support for Pakistan as "iron brother"—could generate domestic criticism affecting Party legitimacy and leadership authority.[94] These dynamics create political imperatives for firm positions even when strategic calculations might suggest flexibility.

IV. POLICY OPTIONS

Option A: Maximum Pressure Through Pakistan Comprehensive Support

Substantially increase Chinese support for Pakistani positions and capabilities regarding Kashmir through: comprehensive diplomatic backing including UNSC veto protection against any India-favorable resolutions, automatic Chinese opposition to Indian positions in international forums, and active advocacy for Kashmir self-determination and plebiscite implementation at UN General Assembly, Human Rights Council, and bilateral engagements pressuring countries to support Pakistani positions; military assistance expansion including advanced weapons systems transfers (J-10CE fighters, Type 054A frigates, S-20 submarines, HQ-9 air defense systems),^[95] intelligence sharing regarding Indian military deployments and capabilities in Kashmir, potential Chinese military advisory presence in Pakistani Kashmir supporting defensive preparations, and joint military exercises in Kashmir-relevant scenarios; economic support through additional CPEC investments, financial assistance including loans and deposits supporting Pakistani foreign reserves, trade preferences, and technology transfers; and public statements explicitly endorsing Pakistani sovereignty claims over all of Kashmir, rejecting Indian control as illegal occupation, and potentially recognizing Kashmiri resistance as legitimate freedom struggle. Simultaneously increase LAC military pressure on India through: enhanced Chinese military presence in border areas with increased patrolling, infrastructure development, and forward deployments; more frequent and deeper incursions into Indian-claimed areas along LAC testing Indian responses and imposing costs; and potential territorial seizures in strategic sectors exploiting Indian force deployments concentrated in Kashmir, replicating Galwan approach but with larger scope.

Assessment: Maximizes pressure on India demonstrating Chinese support for Pakistan and potentially forcing Indian concessions or at minimum constraining Indian strategic freedom and resources. Comprehensive support would strengthen Pakistani confidence, potentially enabling more assertive Pakistani Kashmir policies, while deterring Indian aggression through credible Chinese backing. LAC pressure could create two-front dilemmas for India forcing resource diversion from Kashmir or China border depending on prioritization. Economic support would ensure Pakistani economic stability preventing collapse that could compromise CPEC and strategic partnership. However, generates catastrophic risks outweighing benefits. Maximum pressure approach would likely trigger India-U.S. alliance consolidation with formal defense treaty provisions, permanent U.S. military presence in India, accelerated arms sales including most advanced systems, and Quad transformation into formal collective security organization—fundamentally worsening Chinese strategic environment.^[96] Economic consequences include Indian economic decoupling accelerating "China Plus One" strategies, potential Indian sanctions on Chinese companies and restrictions on Chinese investment, and loss of \$136 billion bilateral trade relationship.^[97] Military escalation risks include major India-China border conflict that China might not win decisively given terrain and logistics challenges, potential nuclear dimensions if Pakistan-India conflict escalates with Chinese involvement, and diversion of PLA resources from Taiwan priority scenario. International isolation likely with Western countries, Japan, and others supporting India against perceived Chinese aggression, damaging BRI participation, technology access, and economic relations. Most fundamentally, strategy assumes pressure would force Indian concessions on Kashmir, but Indian domestic politics and nationalist ideology under current government suggest external pressure more likely triggers retrenchment and nationalist backlash than policy changes, making pressure counterproductive.^[98] Pakistani capacity to capitalize on Chinese support is questionable given economic weaknesses and military disadvantages—even with advanced Chinese

weapons, Pakistan cannot achieve military victory against India without nuclear escalation. China cannot support without existential risks.

Option B: Strategic Accommodation Through China-India Boundary Settlement

Pursue comprehensive boundary settlement with India accepting territorial status quo through: formal delimitation of Line of Actual Control converting it into permanent international border with mutual recognition of current control areas, meaning Chinese retention of Aksai Chin and Indian retention of Arunachal Pradesh (South Tibet); comprehensive peace treaty including border demilitarization reducing deployments to minimum levels, confidence-building measures preventing incidents, and dispute resolution mechanisms; trade expansion removing tariff barriers, encouraging mutual investment, and establishing economic cooperation zones along border areas; and regional cooperation frameworks through SCO, BRICS, and bilateral mechanisms addressing shared challenges including climate change, pandemic response, terrorism, and development. Regarding Kashmir, adopt neutral position explicitly characterizing it as India-Pakistan bilateral matter not subject to Chinese involvement, withdraw support for UN resolutions requiring international involvement, and reduce Pakistani military support to levels maintaining basic partnership without enabling aggressive Kashmir policies. Frame accommodation as recognition of changed realities—seven decades after 1962 war, territorial revision is unrealistic, and economic cooperation serves both countries better than perpetual confrontation—while preserving Chinese core interests in Aksai Chin through Indian recognition.

Assessment: Offers potential conflict resolution with India enabling economic benefits, reducing military expenditure on border infrastructure and deployments, and preventing U.S.-India alliance consolidation by removing major driver of Indian strategic alignment with America. Boundary settlement would establish Chinese territorial integrity over Aksai Chin with international recognition, eliminating legal ambiguity and India's continuing sovereignty claims. Economic integration could generate substantial benefits given complementary economies, with Chinese manufacturing and Indian services potentially creating synergies, while removing trade barriers and encouraging investment flows. Regional cooperation would strengthen multilateral institutions (SCO, BRICS) where China and India share developing country interests against Western dominance. However, politically impossible under foreseeable circumstances and strategically undesirable despite surface logic. China-Pakistan strategic partnership cannot survive Chinese abandonment of Pakistani positions on Kashmir—Pakistan would view Chinese neutrality as betrayal of "all-weather" friendship, potentially triggering Pakistani strategic reorientation toward rapprochement with India and U.S., alignment with U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy as hedge against China, or internal instability from nationalist and Islamist constituencies viewing accommodation as surrender.[99] Loss of Pakistani alliance would eliminate critical counterweight to Indian power, provide India complete freedom to focus on China competition without western border concerns, and threaten \$62 billion CPEC investment through security deterioration or political decisions terminating projects. Indian acceptance of settlement questionable despite Chinese concessions—nationalist BJP government has minimal incentive to recognize Chinese sovereignty over Aksai Chin (termed "Chinese aggression" in Indian discourse) without substantial Chinese concessions India likely can't accept (Arunachal Pradesh, though China claims it as South Tibet, is integral Indian state with Indigenous populations that would resist Chinese control, making territorial swap politically impossible).[100] Boundary settlement precedent could encourage separatist movements in Tibet, Xinjiang, or elsewhere arguing

that if territorial disputes are subject to negotiation and compromise, why not internal autonomy questions? Most fundamentally, accommodation assumes India would reciprocate and reduce strategic competition with China, but Indian drivers of competition transcend boundary disputes—including U.S. partnership value, Indian ambitions as rising power, ideological differences between authoritarian China and democratic India, and economic competition for investment and markets[101]—suggesting boundary settlement would not fundamentally transform relationship toward cooperation.

Option C: Calibrated Balance Through Dual-Track Management

Implement differentiated strategies for China-India and China-Pakistan relationships recognizing different priorities and dynamics: **China-India Track:** Pursue boundary negotiations through existing mechanisms (Special Representatives framework, Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination, military-to-military dialogues)[102] emphasizing: interim arrangements for managing LAC including precise delimitation through agreed maps and GPS coordinates, de-escalation protocols specifying force separation distances and notification requirements, and confidence-building measures reducing misperception risks rather than final sovereignty settlement requiring territorial exchanges politically impossible for both sides; crisis management capabilities including hotlines, flag meeting procedures, and joint investigation mechanisms for incidents enabling rapid de-escalation before tactical confrontations escalate strategically; selective economic cooperation in non-strategic sectors (consumer goods, services, tourism, cultural exchanges) maintaining commercial relations while protecting Chinese technology and security interests, avoiding complete economic decoupling that harms both economies while managing strategic competition; and diplomatic engagement through multilateral platforms (SCO, BRICS, G20) emphasizing areas of potential cooperation (development finance, climate change, global health, UN reform) creating stakeholder interests in stable relations despite competitive dynamics. **China-Pakistan Track:** Maintain strategic partnership through calibrated support avoiding both abandonment and excessive entanglement: military cooperation providing defense equipment and technology transfers sufficient for credible Pakistani deterrence against Indian aggression but not offensive systems enabling Pakistani initiation of conflicts China cannot support; economic support through continued CPEC implementation with enhanced project security, financial assistance during acute crises, but conditional on Pakistani economic reforms and governance improvements reducing chronic dependencies; diplomatic backing on Kashmir through consistent statements supporting Pakistani positions and UN resolutions, UNSC veto protection against adverse resolutions, but avoiding automatic endorsement of all Pakistani actions and maintaining flexibility for potential mediation roles; and security cooperation regarding terrorism affecting both countries (Uyghur militants, Baloch separatists, religious extremism) creating functional coordination while managing Pakistani sensitivities about Chinese involvement in internal security. **Kashmir-Specific Approach:** Characterize Kashmir as "dispute left from history" requiring peaceful resolution through bilateral dialogue and UN resolutions, supporting neither party's maximalist claims explicitly while tilting diplomatically toward Pakistan; maintain Chinese territorial control over Aksai Chin as non-negotiable core interest while potentially offering recognition of Indian sovereignty over other disputed areas if India reciprocates recognizing Chinese sovereignty over Aksai Chin; encourage Pakistan-India dialogue and confidence-building when opportunities arise without requiring Chinese mediation role unless both parties request.

Assessment: Balances competing interests and constraints through differentiated engagement rather than binary choices between India alignment and Pakistan alliance. The approach recognizes that China-India relations require management given economic interdependence and U.S. strategic convergence making complete confrontation counterproductive, while China-Pakistan partnership remains essential for strategic balance but requires calibration avoiding dependencies and entanglements. Dual-track management provides: flexibility to adjust emphasis between tracks depending on circumstances—intensifying Pakistan support if India-U.S. alliance deepens, or emphasizing India engagement if opportunities for tension reduction arise; plausible deniability and diplomatic space maintaining that Chinese policies toward each country operate independently rather than zero-sum dynamic where India gains require Pakistan losses or vice versa; crisis management capabilities preventing unintended escalation during India-Pakistan or China-India tensions through established dialogues and military communication channels; and strategic patience accepting that Kashmir resolution may require decades or remain unresolved indefinitely, but managing dispute to prevent worst outcomes (major war, nuclear use, U.S. intervention) while preserving Chinese core interests and partnerships. However, faces implementation challenges including: limited effectiveness of boundary negotiations given political constraints preventing final settlement, as demonstrated by decades of unsuccessful Special Representatives talks producing principles but no delimitation;[103] Pakistani skepticism regarding Chinese commitment if Beijing perceived as seeking equidistance between Islamabad and New Delhi, potentially generating Pakistani hedging or strategic alternative-seeking; Indian suspicion that Chinese engagement represents tactical maneuver rather than strategic shift, given continued Chinese support for Pakistan and refusal to condemn Pakistan-based terrorism;[104] domestic Chinese nationalist pressure for firmer positions on both sovereignty questions and alliance commitments, constraining flexibility; and requirement for consistent messaging across different audiences (domestic Chinese, Pakistani partners, Indian interlocutors, international community) avoiding contradictions that undermine credibility. Success depends on careful calibration through continuous assessment of evolving dynamics rather than fixed formula, requiring sophisticated diplomatic execution and willingness to adjust approaches as circumstances change.

Option D: Strategic Opportunism Through Selective Engagement

Adopt flexible approach maximizing Chinese influence and minimizing commitments through: **Tactical Use of Kashmir Issue:** Employ Kashmir as diplomatic lever in China-India relations escalating or de-escalating attention depending on Indian behavior—raising Kashmir in international forums and increasing Pakistani support when India aligns closely with U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, conducts joint military exercises with Quad partners near Chinese borders, or restricts Chinese economic access; de-emphasizing Kashmir and pursuing boundary negotiations when India demonstrates strategic autonomy, maintains neutrality on Taiwan and South China Sea, or provides economic opportunities for Chinese companies. **Conditional Pakistani Support:** Link Chinese support levels to Pakistani compliance with Chinese priorities including CPEC project security, counterterrorism cooperation against Uyghur militants, economic reforms improving creditworthiness, and avoiding unnecessary escalations with India that could trigger Chinese involvement; threaten support reduction if Pakistan pursues policies contrary to Chinese interests or fails to protect Chinese investments and personnel. **Boundary Negotiations Leverage:** Dangle potential boundary settlement possibilities in China-India dialogues to extract Indian concessions on other issues (trade access, technology cooperation, strategic autonomy from U.S.) without necessarily intending final territorial agreement; maintain ambiguity regarding Chinese

territorial demands and flexibility creating uncertainty encouraging Indian accommodations. **International Forum Manipulation:** Use UN Security Council and other international forums strategically—vetoing anti-Pakistan resolutions to maintain alliance credibility, but allowing discussion and debates that impose diplomatic costs on India without requiring substantial Chinese resource commitments; leverage veto power to extract concessions from Western countries or India on other issues in exchange for Kashmir restraint.

Assessment: Maximizes Chinese bargaining power and influence while minimizing material commitments and escalation risks. Strategic opportunism exploits Kashmir as variable that China can manipulate depending on broader strategic circumstances rather than fixed position requiring consistent policy regardless of context. This flexibility provides maximum tactical options and diplomatic leverage. However, fundamentally unreliable approach generating multiple risks: Pakistani distrust if Chinese support perceived as conditional and transactional rather than based on genuine alliance, potentially triggering Pakistani strategic reorientation seeking more reliable partners (U.S. mediation and improved India relations, regional partnerships with Turkey or Gulf states, or internal focus on sovereignty preservation without external dependence);[105] Indian awareness of Chinese tactical manipulation preventing genuine engagement on boundary negotiations or other issues given recognition that Chinese positions are instrumentalized bargaining chips rather than serious proposals;[106] international reputation damage as opportunistic power whose positions shift based on narrow interests rather than principled commitments to international law, justice, or alliance obligations, undermining Chinese soft power and moral authority in other disputes;[107] domestic political vulnerability if nationalist constituencies criticize inconsistent positions as lacking principled commitment to Chinese sovereignty claims and alliance obligations; and risk of miscalculation where tactical opportunism during crisis leads to unintended escalation—if China escalates Kashmir rhetoric and Pakistani support during India-Pakistan tensions seeking leverage, but Pakistan interprets Chinese signals as green light for aggressive actions triggering major conflict, China faces dilemma of either supporting Pakistan militarily (risking China-India war) or abandoning Pakistan at critical moment (destroying alliance credibility permanently). Strategic opportunism works best in contexts where all parties understand tacit bargaining dynamics and accept instrumental logic, but Kashmir involves passionate nationalist commitments on all sides where parties may not react rationally to Chinese tactical manipulations, creating escalation risks from attempted leverage plays.

V. RISK ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

Recommended Strategy: Option C – Calibrated Balance Through Dual-Track Management (Enhanced)

This approach optimally balances China's competing interests in maintaining territorial sovereignty over Aksai Chin, preserving the strategic partnership with Pakistan, managing China-India relations to prevent complete confrontation while defending Chinese interests, and positioning China as responsible major power supporting peaceful dispute resolution. The strategy requires substantial enhancement beyond basic dual-track formulation to address implementation challenges and dynamic circumstances.

Enhanced Strategic Framework:

The fundamental reality confronting Chinese policy-makers is that Kashmir's resolution is neither imminent nor necessarily desirable from Chinese strategic perspective. Complete Pakistani victory and Kashmir accession to Pakistan is militarily impossible given Indian conventional superiority and nuclear deterrent. Indian consolidation of control through military suppression and international acceptance harms Pakistani alliance and Chinese strategic interests. Genuine self-determination through plebiscite is politically impossible given neither India nor Pakistan would accept potential adverse outcomes. Therefore, optimal Chinese interest lies in managed dispute continuation preventing worst outcomes while advancing Chinese priorities.

Implementation Framework:

China-India Boundary Management Component:

Pursue boundary negotiations with realistic objectives acknowledging that comprehensive settlement remains politically impossible but substantial progress on dispute management is achievable:

LAC Clarification: Prioritize precise delimitation of Line of Actual Control through agreed maps, GPS coordinates, and on-ground demarcation reducing ambiguity that generates unintended confrontations. The 2020 Galwan clash partially resulted from differing interpretations of LAC location in that sector.[108] Systematic clarification through sector-by-sector negotiations using: satellite imagery and GPS data establishing precise coordinates for LAC segments; physical markers (cairns, signs) at key points along LAC enabling patrol verification; detailed patrol protocols specifying routes, frequencies, and procedures when patrols from both sides encounter each other; and buffer zones in sensitive areas where neither side conducts patrols, reducing friction risks. Focus on achievable segments first (eastern Arunachal Pradesh sector, central Uttarakhand sector) where positions are less contentious, building confidence for more difficult western Ladakh sectors adjacent to Aksai Chin.

Crisis Prevention Mechanisms: Establish robust protocols preventing tactical incidents from escalating strategically through: expanded hotline communications between theater commanders, ministry officials, and potentially premier/prime minister level enabling rapid de-escalation; border meeting points increase from current 5 locations[109] to 10+ ensuring each LAC sector has nearby meeting point for local commander dialogues; joint investigation procedures for disputed incidents where both sides conduct coordinated inquiries producing agreed factual records reducing propaganda escalations; and third-party verification possibilities through mutually acceptable observers (potentially Russian or Central Asian SCO members) in cases where bilateral verification proves impossible. Model on 1988 China-Soviet boundary agreements that successfully reduced tensions through similar mechanisms.[110]

Military Confidence-Building: Implement measures reducing misperception and demonstration effects: advance notification of military exercises within specified distances of LAC (e.g., 50-100km) providing details on exercise scale, duration, and location preventing misinterpretation as preparations for offensive operations; limitations on force types and quantities near LAC excluding offensive systems like strike aircraft, long-range missiles, and heavy armor from forward positions; and reciprocal military transparency through briefings on defense doctrines, organizational structures, and strategic intentions building mutual

understanding. These measures reduce arms race dynamics and resource diversion while preserving necessary defensive capabilities.

Selective Economic Cooperation: Maintain economic engagement in non-strategic sectors benefiting both economies while protecting Chinese technology and security interests: bilateral trade in consumer goods, agricultural products, textiles, and services where neither side has security concerns; tourism and cultural exchanges building people-to-people ties and creating stakeholder constituencies for stable relations; border trade and economic cooperation zones in agreed areas along the Sino-Indian border (Nathu La, Shipkila passes) where local communities benefit from commerce reducing border tensions;^[111] while restricting Chinese access to Indian infrastructure, telecommunications, digital platforms, and strategic sectors where security concerns are legitimate. Avoid complete economic decoupling that harms both economies—maintain \$136 billion trade relationship while managing strategic competition through targeted restrictions rather than comprehensive economic confrontation.

Multilateral Engagement: Use Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and G20 platforms for functional cooperation in areas where China-India interests align: development financing through Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and New Development Bank avoiding competition and duplication; climate change cooperation given both countries are major emitters and developing economies needing technology access and financing for transitions; pandemic response and global health security following COVID-19 experiences; UN reform supporting developing country representation and resisting Western dominance; and counterterrorism cooperation where both face Islamic extremist threats (though defining terrorism remains contentious given Kashmir). These engagements create positive interaction dynamics and stakeholder interests tempering competitive aspects.

China-Pakistan Strategic Partnership Component:

Maintain robust partnership through support calibrated to Pakistani needs while managing Chinese risks and establishing conditions for sustainable cooperation:

CPEC Implementation and Expansion: Accelerate flagship project implementation demonstrating tangible benefits while addressing security and governance challenges: complete priority projects including transportation corridors (Peshawar-Karachi motorway, railways upgrading), energy infrastructure (coal, hydro, renewable power plants), and Gwadar Port development;^[112] enhance security through: Chinese security personnel for critical projects and Chinese worker compounds, Pakistani military special security division dedicated to CPEC protection, intelligence sharing on militant threats, and counter-terrorism cooperation; address governance through: project transparency and regular audits reducing corruption perceptions, capacity building for Pakistani institutions managing projects, and local community engagement ensuring benefits reach populations in project areas reducing resentment. Consider CPEC expansion into "CPEC 2.0" emphasizing: agriculture cooperation and industrialization rather than just infrastructure, science and technology partnerships, social sector development (education, health), and poverty alleviation programs creating employment and improving Pakistani perceptions of Chinese engagement.^[113]

Defense Cooperation: Provide military equipment and technology transfers supporting credible Pakistani defense while avoiding offensive systems encouraging adventurism: priority systems include air defense (HQ-9 and HQ-16 variants) protecting Pakistani cities

and military installations against Indian air strikes; naval platforms (Type 054A frigates, S-26 submarines) providing sea denial capabilities protecting Gwadar and Arabian Sea approaches; multi-role fighters (J-10CE) replacing aging Pakistani F-16s and providing air superiority capabilities for defensive operations; and surveillance and intelligence systems (drones, radar, satellite imagery access) enhancing situational awareness.[114] Avoid or limit: long-range strike systems (ballistic missiles, cruise missiles beyond 300km range) enabling deep strikes into India potentially triggering escalation China cannot support; offensive armor and mechanized forces facilitating large-scale ground operations across LoC; nuclear weapons technology or fissile material assistance complicating Chinese non-proliferation positions and international obligations. Joint military exercises should emphasize defensive scenarios, counterterrorism, and disaster relief rather than offensive operations.

Economic and Financial Support: Provide assistance during acute crises while incentivizing reforms: immediate support includes currency swap arrangements and deposits supporting foreign reserves during balance-of-payments crises, debt refinancing or rollovers preventing defaults on Chinese loans, and trade preferences providing Pakistani exports preferential access to Chinese markets;[115] conditional assistance based on: IMF program compliance demonstrating Pakistani commitment to fiscal sustainability, structural reforms including tax administration improvements and state-owned enterprise reforms reducing chronic deficits, CPEC project security and governance improvements, and counterterrorism effectiveness against groups threatening Chinese interests (ETIM remnants, Baloch separatists attacking Chinese projects). Avoid unconditional financial support creating moral hazard where Pakistan pursues unsustainable policies assuming Chinese bailouts are guaranteed.

Diplomatic Support on Kashmir: Maintain consistent but calibrated positions: regular statements supporting Pakistani sovereignty claims and self-determination principles, backing UN Security Council resolutions requiring plebiscite, and criticizing Indian human rights violations; UNSC veto protection against any resolutions adverse to Pakistani interests, while allowing procedural discussions and debates that create diplomatic pressure on India without requiring substantive Chinese resource commitments; avoid automatic endorsement of all Pakistani actions—if Pakistan-based groups conduct terrorist attacks in India, Chinese statements should express generic concern about terrorism and encourage dialogue rather than reflexively defending Pakistani positions undermining Chinese credibility; maintain flexibility for potential mediation roles if both parties request Chinese involvement, positioning China as acceptable facilitator rather than committed partisan.

Counterterrorism Cooperation: Address shared security challenges requiring coordination: intelligence sharing on Uyghur militants operating from Pakistan (Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement remnants, Uyghur fighters returning from Syria), Baloch separatist groups threatening CPEC projects, and regional terrorist networks; Pakistani cooperation in monitoring and restricting Uyghur militant activities, preventing Pakistan from becoming safe haven as Afghanistan was historically; joint operations or Pakistani action against specific threats to Chinese interests, including arrests of individuals involved in attacks on Chinese nationals; while respecting Pakistani sovereignty and avoiding intrusive Chinese security presence that would generate nationalist backlash.[116]

Kashmir-Specific Positioning Component:

Maintain principled but flexible stance balancing Pakistani support with Chinese interests and India relations:

Core Chinese Position: Characterize Kashmir as "dispute left from history" requiring peaceful resolution through: bilateral dialogue between India and Pakistan based on UN Security Council resolutions and Simla Agreement provisions; self-determination for Kashmiri people consistent with UNSC Resolution 47; and international community support for peaceful resolution while respecting sovereignty and avoiding interference that could escalate tensions. This formulation provides diplomatic backing for Pakistani positions (UN resolutions, self-determination) while avoiding explicit endorsement of Pakistani sovereignty claims and maintaining theoretical space for potential Indian accommodation.

Aksai Chin Non-Negotiability: Make clear through authoritative statements that Chinese sovereignty over Aksai Chin is non-negotiable core interest based on: historical Chinese control and administration dating to Qing Dynasty,[117] strategic necessity for Tibet-Xinjiang connectivity, 1962 war consolidation and subsequent decades of effective control, and 1963 China-Pakistan boundary agreement recognition. However, potential flexibility regarding: minor boundary adjustments in other LAC sectors not affecting core Chinese interests, if reciprocal Indian recognition of Chinese sovereignty over Aksai Chin provided; recognition formulas where India acknowledges Chinese administrative control without explicitly conceding sovereignty claims, enabling practical resolution without domestic political costs for either side; or long-term management frameworks postponing final sovereignty resolution while establishing stable practical arrangements preventing conflicts.

Mediation Availability: Signal willingness to facilitate India-Pakistan dialogue if both parties request Chinese involvement, positioning China as: acceptable mediator given diplomatic relations and economic interests with both countries; SCO platform provider enabling India-Pakistan engagement within multilateral context reducing bilateral tensions; and potential guarantor or facilitator for confidence-building measures and interim arrangements. However, avoid imposing mediation or inserting Chinese involvement without clear requests from both parties—unwanted mediation attempts would antagonize both sides and fail to achieve results while consuming Chinese diplomatic capital.

Risk Mitigation:

Principal risks involve escalation dynamics during India-Pakistan or China-India crises potentially triggering Chinese involvement in conflicts not serving core interests:

India-Pakistan Crisis Management: During acute India-Pakistan tensions (post-terrorist attack scenarios, military mobilizations, LoC clashes): immediate Chinese diplomatic engagement with both parties offering facilitation, emphasizing peaceful resolution and restraint, and warning against escalation; private communications with Pakistan assessing Chinese support expectations and clarifying limitations—Chinese diplomatic backing is assured, but military involvement in India-Pakistan conflicts is not automatic and depends on circumstances (direct Indian aggression against Pakistan versus Pakistani-initiated operations, existence of provocation or terrorist incident triggering crisis, international community positions and potential for multilateral responses); coordination with other major powers (Russia, U.S., Saudi Arabia, UAE) seeking collective pressure for de-escalation and potential mediation, positioning China as responsible stakeholder supporting peace rather than partisan

backing one side; and post-crisis economic assistance if needed helping Pakistani recovery and maintaining partnership credibility while reinforcing lessons about costs of escalation.

China-India LAC Crisis Management: During border standoffs or military confrontations: military-to-military dialogue through established mechanisms seeking tactical de-escalation and force separation; political negotiations through Special Representatives and diplomatic channels addressing underlying disputes and developing interim arrangements; economic signaling maintaining commercial relations demonstrating that border disputes are managed separately from economic cooperation, reducing incentives for economic weaponization; and domestic narrative management through controlled Chinese media coverage avoiding nationalist escalation while explaining Chinese positions and peaceful intentions. The 2020 Galwan aftermath demonstrated these approaches—initial military tensions and casualties, followed by prolonged disengagement negotiations, eventual force separation and buffer zone establishment, while maintaining diplomatic and some economic engagement.[118]

Pakistani Expectations Management: Continuous dialogue with Pakistani military and civilian leadership regarding Chinese support parameters: explicit communication that Chinese support for Kashmir is diplomatic and economic, not automatic military involvement in Pakistan-India conflicts; emphasis on Chinese interests in regional stability and peaceful dispute resolution preventing assumption that China seeks or benefits from India-Pakistan wars; and reinforcement of conditionality connecting Chinese support levels to Pakistani behavior, particularly CPEC project security, counterterrorism effectiveness, and avoiding provocations creating crises requiring Chinese choices between abandoning Pakistan and confronting India. This requires delicate balancing—insufficient Chinese support signals potential abandonment encouraging Pakistani hedging, while excessive Chinese commitments encourage Pakistani moral hazard assuming Chinese backing enables risky policies.

Domestic Chinese Constituency Management: Manage nationalist expectations through controlled information and strategic communication: media coverage of Kashmir emphasizing principles (anti-imperialism, self-determination, support for oppressed Muslims) and Chinese consistent positions rather than maximalist promises suggesting Chinese intervention; expert commentary explaining complexities and long-term nature of dispute management rather than immediate resolution expectations; and demonstration of Chinese achievements including CPEC success, territorial integrity preservation over Aksai Chin, and sophisticated management of relations with both South Asian powers avoiding either complete confrontation or accommodation. This prevents domestic political vulnerability from nationalist criticism while maintaining policy flexibility.

International Reputation Protection: Manage perceptions in third countries and international institutions: messaging emphasizing Chinese support for peaceful resolution, UN resolutions, and international law rather than characterization as automatic Pakistani partisan; selective engagement on Kashmir human rights questions highlighting legitimate concerns while avoiding excessive criticism inviting comparisons with Chinese Xinjiang policies; and demonstration of Chinese willingness to facilitate dialogue and support stability rather than exploiting disputes for narrow advantage. This protects Chinese international image as responsible rising power while maintaining sufficient Pakistani support for alliance credibility.

This comprehensive framework positions China to advance multiple interests simultaneously—preserving territorial sovereignty over Aksai Chin, maintaining strategic partnership with Pakistan, managing competitive but not catastrophically hostile China-India relations, supporting peaceful dispute resolution consistent with international norms, and protecting CPEC investments while avoiding excessive entanglements in unresolvable disputes. The strategy requires patient implementation over decades, sophisticated diplomatic execution balancing competing pressures, and willingness to adjust tactics as regional dynamics evolve while maintaining strategic consistency on core interests.[119]

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