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## **Sino-US Kashmir Policy: Analyzing The Bilateral Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Sino-Indian stand-off in Galwan has revived world attention to the dispute in Kashmir. Indian revocation of Article 370 and Article 35-A propped up diverse responses from the international community. China condemned Indian abrogation and the US offered to mediate on Kashmir. Trump's offer of mediation opened up a Pandora box of strong opposition in Indian Lok Sabha. Resolute criticism unleashed on Modi for compromising on Indian national security objectives and territorial integrity. Reflecting the urgency and complications involved in conflict resolution, the propensity of nuclear confrontation in South Asia remains high in Kashmir. US Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has declared Human Rights in Kashmir as integral part of his electoral agenda. The US State Department has declared no change in its historic Kashmir policy, while China has resented Indian unilateral change in the region's status. Great powers' involvement in regional conflicts has been fluid, fluctuating with the change in their national security interests. Broad contours of national security objectives have shaped Sino-US Kashmir policy in the past. Employing qualitative research methodology and theoretical perspective of complex interdependence, the article reviews Sino-US traditional policy roles in conflict resolution on Kashmir. How has the US and Chinese Kashmir policy evolved over the years? What impact does the US and Chinese Kashmir policy have on regional stability? The article argues that great powers' involvement has inflicted more injury than cure, exacerbating regional tensions. Great powers' alignment along opposite poles has increased India-Pakistan bilateral hostilities on Kashmir. Sino-US insistence on Indo-Pakistan bilateral approach for conflict resolution rather than the UN framework has created the impasse on Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** *Bilateralism, strategic, status-quo, Kashmir policy, Bilateral approach*

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### **Introduction**

As a rule, regional conflicts' intensity is measured by their potency to shape great powers' global security interests, which in turn determine their speed, frequency and rigidity of response to regional conflicts. Viewed realistically, in an unequal power equation, territorial, ideological and ethnic conflicts serve as prime venues for great powers' promotion of global security interests. Alternatively, regional conflicts have benefitted small powers in amassing diplomatic, military and economic support internationally. In a nutshell, the form and substance of international response to

regional conflicts is shaped by the big and small powers' convergence of security interests.

In the wake of global transformations, fresh appraisal of Sino-US Kashmir policy in a historical perspective is mandatory. Sino-US interplay of global power politics has granted a new life to the chessboard of South Asian politics. The region holds multidimensional significance for the US and China international, regional, economic, political, and geostrategic interests. Within this context, Sino-Indian border skirmishes in the Himalayan border, involving Beijing's alleged occupation of territory in Galwan has revived international focus on the conflict in Kashmir.

In terms of intensity and consequence, the Kashmir dispute equals the Middle Eastern conflict (Lodhi, 1998). Hampering economic collaboration, the dispute has resulted in poor Human Development Index (HDI) in South Asia. Serving as the global nuclear flash point, India and Pakistan nuclear credentials have complicated conflict resolution (Cohen, 2003). Radicalization along ideological identities and issues of international and regional power balance have complicated the situation even more. Conventional wars, nuclear crises and India-Pakistan military standoffs, however, require a quick resolution of the conflict. Peace dividends of conflict resolution are of un-parallel significance as are the horrendous consequence of the absence of peace (Lodhi, 1998).

Great powers' involvement in regional conflicts has inflicted more injury than cure, exacerbating regional tensions. Traditionally, the US and China global security interests have guided the Kashmir policy. The article argues that Sino-US global security objectives have pinned on maintenance of the status-quo on Kashmir. The argument is predicated on key empirical evidences.

The Sino-US global security objectives have shaped their Kashmir policy. Promising to resolve what he referred to as a 'tar-pit,' in the election campaign, President Obama actually avoided the Kashmir conflict after assuming power. Although by a sheer slip of tongue rather than a consciously crafted strategy, US president Donald Trump plunged into that 'tar-pit,' by offering to mediate on the cob-web of the Kashmir conflict. Unleashing a Pandora box, Trump's offer allowed Indian opposition parties' to create uproar, accusing Modi of compromising on Indian national interests. Congress and opposition parties demanded inquiry of the offer for mediation. A presidential ordinance before long abrogated Article 370 and 35-A and nullified Kashmir's special status. Presidential ordinance soon became the act of parliament, given BJP's majority in Indian Lok Sabha. The abrogation of Article 370 made Ladakh part of the Union territory, inviting Chinese fear of creating an autonomous Buddhist region adjacent to Tibet (Easen, 2002). The dispute has three states' significant stakes involved in the conflict.

### **1. Genesis of Kashmir Conflict:**

Origin of the Kashmir dispute lay in British Indian post partition history. The term Kashmir refers to Indian administered Kashmir, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan on the Pakistan side, and the Chinese part of Kashmir. According to Jammu & Kashmir official portal, the disputed region comprises 86,000 square miles and inhabits 13 million people predominantly Muslims (97.16%), a small minority of Hindus (1.8%), Buddhists (0.11%) and Sikhs (0.88%). India has controlled 43 percent of Kashmir, including Jammu, the Kashmir Valley, Ladakh, and areas in

Baltistan such as Drass, Kargil and Turtuk. Azad Kashmir on the Pakistani side comprises 37 percent of land, including Gilgit-Baltistan. China has administered control on Aksai Chin in Ladakh and the Trans-Karakoram Tract in Indian Occupied Kashmir (IOK). On the Pakistani side, the Chinese portion falls in Hunza and the Shaksgam Valley in Azad Kashmir.

Former Chinese 'celestial empire' provided strategic, economic and spiritual linkage along the ancient Silk Road to Aksai Chin. India, China and Pakistan have held rival claims on Kashmir, along the ancient Silk route (Ali, 1973). China holds historic claims to Aksai Chin, occupying it in Sino-Indian War in 1962. Aksai Chin provides strategic connectivity to China's resource rich Xinjiang and Central Asia. The un-demarcated area of Saichen Glacier is located towards the north. India occupied it in 1984. In the demographic geo-matrix, three differing contentions, i.e., pro-Pakistan, pro-India and pro-independence have prevailed shaping the right of Kashmiri self-determination. Muslims in Kashmir have objected to the historic injustice of the Redcliff Award (Ali, 1973), offering to them what Jinnah referred to as moth-eaten and truncated Pakistan (Colins et al, 1982). Partition has been referred to as the most complex divorce in history. The conflict has aroused contradictory international opinions regarding legitimacy of India –Pakistan claims on Kashmir.

Certain facts support Pakistan's position on Kashmir. According to Chaudhry Muhammad Ali, Indian last viceroy Lord Mountbatten visit to Kashmir, followed by that of Gandhi, manipulated the princely state's accession to India (Ali, 1973). Pakistan terms the controversial visits as violation of the Redcliffe Award rules. Accession followed the majoritarian principle based on the population census--either with Pakistan or India. According to K B. Saeed, Maharaja's speedy decision to sign the controversial 'Instrument of Accession' had been influenced by Mountbatten and Gandhi during visit to the state (Saeed, 1978). Indian position, however, is based on contrasting references from history.

Claiming Jammu and Kashmir as Indian Territory, India has invoked Instrument of Accession to lay claim on Kashmir. Indian Ministry of External Affairs invokes controversial signature by the Maharaja Hari Singh on October 26, 1947, the Government of India Act (1935), Indian Independence Act (1947) and International Law as the foundation of its claim on Kashmir. Following Indian forces invasion of Srinagar and India-Pakistan war in 1948, Nehru sought UN intervention, declaring Kashmir a disputed territory. The UN resolution on Kashmir indicates: India invoked the Security Council itself on Kashmir; the Security Council rejected explicitly Indian ownership and declared Kashmir a disputed territory; and the UN set plebiscite as the principal for conflict resolution.

Pakistan has questioned the transparency of the historic record. Pakistan holds that the Redcliffe Award had been manipulated. The border demarcation had been done at Nehruvian behest. Sir Cyril Redcliffe awarded Pathankot, Ferozpur and Gurdas Pur districts to India. A strategic land access to Kashmir via Aakhnur was granted to India. Canal head works fell into Indian hands, which drained Pakistan's 24 million acres of irrigated land in the Indus basin. Indian occupied Kashmir offers New Delhi the war impetus of hydrological strangulation of Pakistan (Bhatta, 1996). The lower riparian state of Pakistan was drained by the Indus resource of lake Mansrowar in Tibet. Indus river system has irrigated the agriculturally productive Indus basin in Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan holds Kashmir integrally linked to

socio-economic, geographical, social and ideological well-being (Illyas, 1998). A Muslim state contiguous to its boundary reflects the incomplete agenda of partition for Pakistan. India regards Kashmir as indispensable for its secular identity. India and Pakistan dismiss, therefore, the option of independent Kashmir as falling beyond their national security purview.

### **US Kashmir Policy**

This section reviews the US Kashmir policy stance involving a traditional approach. It argues that the US Kashmir policy has been fluid, carved in international perspective. The US policy has oscillated between showing preference for UN resolutions to insistence on India-Pakistan bilateral approach. In the wake of Indian abrogation of Article 370, Morgan Ortagus, the US State Department spokesperson, stated that Washington held no change in its Kashmir policy. Furthermore, urging restraint the spokesperson asked both states to resolve their differences bilaterally.

Washington has emphasized Indo-Pakistan bilateralism for conflict resolution in accordance with the aspiration of Kashmiri people. From Clinton to Bush to Obama, crisis management more than conflict settlement has guided the US approach. The US policy makers have opted to brush Indo-Pakistan hostilities under the carpet over the years. The task of drafting a clearer policy for South Asian rivals has faced complexity due to the US desire to keep balance in India-Pakistan relations. In late 1990s, however, the US tilted to India. A relationship was forged on reciprocity of interests. (Palit, 2001). Anti-American stance would have benefitted Pakistan more in the regional equation in the US dominated unipolar world order. Thus, India forged an alliance partnership with the US aimed at winning strategic gains for New Delhi (Kux, 1994). In building partnership with India, the US sought strategic encirclement of China in Asia (Schaffer, 2012) India's rise in economic stature was another factor in the US de-hyphenation towards New Delhi.

The Clinton administration urged Pakistan to prevent cross-border militant intrusions in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Simultaneously, it cautioned India to improve human rights record in the valley. Washington advised Islamabad to look beyond the impractical demand of UN resolution. Toeing Indian line of the bilateral approach, the US urged Pakistan to reverse internationalization of the Kashmir conflict. The US also urged Indo-Pakistan to take into account wishes of the Kashmiri people. However, nuclearization revived Kashmir's global stature as the world's nuclear flashpoint. (Harrison, 2001) According to Congressional Research Report, Clinton sent Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to South Asia, urging India-Pakistan to exercise restraint. Conflict management rather than long lasting resolution became a priority for the US South Asia policy in late 1990s.

The US clearly fixed itself with India, however, on the Kargil issue. In principle, Washington agreed that diplomacy comprised the best method for conflict resolution. The US approach frustrated Pakistan's attempt to bring Kashmir to the UNSC. The US pressurised Pakistan to diffuse bilateral tensions and maintain the status-quo. Pakistan had to sign the Washington Accord without even India's token attendance. Washington Accord forced Pakistan to agree to the following issues: a) respect for the LoC in Kashmir in accordance with the Simla Agreement; b), withdrawal of infiltrators from Indian Kashmir; c) a bilateral framework for future negotiations between India - and Pakistan.

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The US tilted towards India more emphatically post 9/11. India's alliance with Washington accrued New Delhi multifarious strategic, economic and political advantages. During Obama administration, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton portrayed Washington's relationship with India as 'an affair of the heart' (Choudhary, 2004). The contrast in approach towards Pakistan was reflected at best in Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta's reference to Pakistan-US relationship as complicated but necessary.

According to Aron Zimmer, the US Kashmir policy responded to the deviation in the US global security interests (Zimmer, 2014). To portray neutrality between India and Pakistan, Washington emphasized bilateralism in line with local Kashmiri aspirations and the Simla Accord (Qazi, 2012. Pakistan joined the Global War on Terror during the Bush administration to save Kashmir (Sharif, 2002). India wanted to employ the god sent historic opportunity to bracket Kashmiri self-determination as terrorism in Kashmir (Shaheen, 2012). India's self-projection of a decade long victimization at the hands of international terrorism and prompt support to GWOT had left Pakistan with little choice. (Sattar, 2008) Caught between devil and the blue sea, Pakistan's support to the US in GWOT remained conditional to non-bracketing of Kashmiri freedom struggle as terrorism in Kashmir.

India remained estranged to the US alliance partnership with Pakistan. In the wake of the Soviet withdrawal and the US action in Afghanistan, Afghan Jihadis had moved to fight in Palestine and Kashmir (Fair, 2010). India developed common cause of anti-terrorism collaboration with the US, complaining of Al-Qaeda intrusgence in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Terrorists' attacks in Srinagar in October 2001 and the Indian Parliament in December 2001 granted a fresh impetus to Indo-US anti-terrorism alliance partnership. Fearing lack of support for GWOT, India-Pakistan military standoff in 2001 led the Bush administration to defuse South Asian tensions. Thus, Bush urged Islamabad to dismantle alleged training camps and stop cross border intrusions into IOK. The US president warned South Asian rivals to concentrate on GWOT and forgo Kashmir for that matter forever. (Puri, 2001)

India-Pakistan bilateral initiatives had been ineffective in Kashmir conflict resolution. Washington's pressure led to the holding of India-Pakistan Agra summit in 2003. However, peace remained vexed to the more urgent task of stability built on prevalence of status-quo than uprooting the cause of conflict. The summit's failure, however, stopped the process of the Composite Dialogue. India made resumption of dialogue conditional to Pakistan's cessation of support to cross border intrusions, a condition it has upheld so far. With the US interest hooked to South Asian stability, Bush administration's two terms in office failed to produce anything tangible on Kashmir.

Obama referred to Kashmir as a tarmac during his election campaign, promising to work for conflict resolution while in office (Schaffer, 2012). India dismissed the proposal s uncalled for intervention in Indian internal affairs. On his first visit, Obama's address to Indian parliament in 2009, however, failed to mention Kashmir. The US urged Pakistan and India for a bilateral dialogue, implying Washington's non-participatory approach on Kashmir. Obama declined to mediate unless wished so by both the parties. Trump's offer of mediation, therefore, offered nothing new on the US traditional policy approach on Kashmir.

In a rational analysis, the US emphasis on bilateralism has condensed available options on Kashmir. Insistence on the bilateral approach for conflict resolution has limited out of the box options, strengthening Indo-Pakistan respective positions on Kashmir. The US needs to revisit its policy of onlooker and bystander, watching from the side line on the conflict in Kashmir. The Kashmir dispute has many a times brought Pakistan and India to the threshold of nuclear confrontation. The US military assistance to India and Pakistan has exacerbated conventional asymmetry, increased suspicions, and hardened the status-quo on Kashmir. The US approach of bilateralism holds Pakistan in an unequal power equation with India. The latter has become less desirous of international mediation in conflict resolution. However, Trump's offer of mediation has been no exception to the US traditional approach on conflict resolution. Insistence on bilateralism rather than UN resolutions has to offer less for long standing peace and stability in South Asia.

## **2. China's Kashmir Policy:**

China has called Indian revocation of Article 370 a unilateral action. China has termed Kashmir 'as unsettled dispute left from history' urging resolution in accordance with the UNSC resolutions. To impress urgency and making its position clear, China pressed for holding of UNSC informal consultations on Kashmir.

Rival contentions along the complex topography of Himalayas post Galwan has added to regional complexities. China has revived its claim on Ladakh as third party to the conflict on Kashmir. Chinese support for Kashmir had waned over the years, but recent diplomatic and military pressure by China helped to revoke the dispute's international status. Indian Home Minister Amit Shah's provocation to reclaim Aksai Chin led to Beijing's loss of patience and China-India border skirmishes. Sino-Indian Himalayan border (4057 kms) has witnessed an eyeball to eyeball standstill confrontation in the long high altitude Himalayan region.

China's global security interests have directed its policy stance on Kashmir. The wider historical context of China's relationship with India has determined the historical contours of Beijing's Kashmir policy. Caught in a regional tussle with India, Chinese pro-Pakistan tilt has aimed at realist counterbalancing to the threat posed by Indian alliance with the US in South Asia. To build its mettle against Indian regional preponderance, Beijing has extended diplomatic and military support to Islamabad on Kashmir.

Over the years, China followed different policy twists on Kashmir. From 1949 to 1960s, China oscillated between disinterest to pro-Pakistan stance on the conflict involving Kashmir. Taking partition as an imperial ploy, the CCP had harboured suspicions regarding Pakistan's creation (Burke, 1990). Before the Chinese Communist Party's rise (CCP) to power, the Nationalists in China had supported self-determination for the Kashmiris to determine their future (Mahmood, 2007). Subsequently, with CCP coming to power, disinterest shaped China's Kashmir policy in the early 1950s. China resisted the UN involvement for the fear that it may allow the US military bases control along Chinese borders (Ali, 2005). China has come full circle in its lacklustre support to Pakistan on Kashmir.

Since 1980s, China's policy had shifted from a pro Pakistan stance to a more neutral and balanced one between India and Pakistan on Kashmir. Following global transformations post 9/11, China has favoured self-determination of the Kashmiris,

making the disputed region a key pillar of its grand strategy. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has enclosed Pakistan's north in China's geostrategic sphere of influence linking Kashgar with Gilgit/Baltistan (GB). Kashmir comprises an integral place in the success of BRI strategy, entailing land linkage with energy supply routes in Central Asia.

In line with this mega initiative, China has embarked on a wide range of investment endeavors in Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. The Northern areas of Pakistan satiate China's economic investment in South and Central Asia. Chinese transportation, infrastructure and energy generation projects relate to several mega projects in Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (Iqbal, 2010). China has invested in energy and hydel power projects in the area. However, Beijing's involvement in Gigit & Balochistan has aroused Indian resentment against Pakistan for establishing Chinese control over the disputed region (Harrison, 2010). Indian Army and Indian Naval Chiefs have raised concern about Beijing's presence along the LoC, with serious consequences for security in the region. Passing through the disputed region, bordered on BRI's southern leg, the corridor has in a way aggravated India-Pakistan polarization on Kashmir.

Beijing rejects Tibetan-India boundary line known as the MacMohan Line, negotiated by Sir Henry MacMohan. Indian legitimacy of claim to British inherited boundaries is based on the Customs & Legalistic Approach. China, however, rejects all imperial treaties. Beijing asserts that, invoked forcibly, the treaties exploited Beijing's imperial weakness by western powers. China asserts that Tibetan officials did not represent mainland's authority in signing the treaties. China claims that the treaties were promulgated during the period of Beijing's forcible occupation by the allied powers. Towards its southern and eastern boundary, Beijing lays claim to Arunachal Pradesh, Aksai Chin and Sikkim along the Himalayan boundary.

Mainland China's reclamation of Tibet in 1950-51 restored Beijing's stakes in Kashmir. Resultant rebellion against the mainland and Dalai Lama's exile to northern India deteriorated Sino-Indian relations (Deepak, 2010). Reclamation of Tibet allowed People's Liberation Army (PLA) to control 27,000 sqkms of Aksai Chin. India has claimed this region as part of Ladakh in Indian Occupied Kashmir. Following China's construction of the Xinjiang-Tibetan road via Aksai Chin, relations foiled further between the two. China holds Aksai Chin as the southern stretch of erstwhile Chinese imperial territory. Following its war with India in 1962, China established control on Aksai Chin—the gateway to its strategic resource rich province of Xinjiang. Aksai Chin has provided China with the quickest land link to Xinjiang (Singh, 2006). In 1958, China published a map that showed Aksai Chin as its own territory.

Located in Ladakh in Indian Occupied Kashmir, China's claim on Aksai Chin has made Beijing a permanent stakeholder in Kashmir. Infrastructure investment and border deployment along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) guard Chinese claim on strategically significant Aksai Chin. Indian military build-up in the Himalayan border has remained China-specific. China's moves at the Trig Heights of Aksai Chin have sought to pre-empt Indian defence in Ladakh (Simon, 1967). However, Indian Lok Sabha has resolved to reclaim Aksai Chin territory. Sino-Indian border trouble has continued over the years. Hence, China views India's abrogation of

Article 370 and 35A as Indian violation of Chinese territorial integrity and rules of mutual co-existence.

India has however, contested China's maximalist claim on Sino-Indian boundary. China holds claim on Arunachal Pradesh's 90,000 sq km territory. The claim extends Chinese sphere of influence to East and South China Seas. China regards Arunachal Pradesh as Tibetan southern territory. Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh is culturally and religiously significant to both sides of India-China divide. Tawang can be settled in exchange for 27,000 sqkm Aksai Chin. Bruce Riedel has argued that India hopes if it cedes away Aksai Chin, Beijing must pressurize Pakistan to make LoC a permanent boundary, relenting Islamabad's claim on Jammu and Kashmir (Riedel, 2010).

Pakistan acquiesced to relent 5,180 sq miles of territory in Hunza and Shaksgam valley in the 1963 boundary agreement with China to prevent strategic encirclement on both sides (Sattar, 2008). Beijing's geographical stakes have stretched, thereby, to the Pakistani side of Kashmir. Article 6 of the Pakistan-China boundary agreement provides for renegotiations in case of the dispute's permanent settlement favouring India. In India-Pakistan 1965 and 1971 wars, China out-rightly took a pro-Pakistan stance demanding UN resolutions' implementation on Kashmir. According to Henry Kissinger, China's traditional approach has followed the policy of *wei qei*-prevention of strategic encirclement on both sides. From 1970s-1990s, however, Beijing opted for neutrality on the Kashmir dispute, following Deng Zhioping's liberalization. The policy wielded implications, however, for Pakistan's security. In 1989-1990, China pressed on India-Pakistan bilateralism on Kashmir, declaring it as dispute left-over from history (Garver, 2001). The Chinese Foreign Ministry insisted to pursue peace through bilateral talks since the UN resolutions proved ineffective in conflict resolution. Improvement in China-India relations in 1996 and 2003, further moved China away from self-determination (Frazier, 2000). Both states agreed to maintain peace, open up the Nethu La and achieve \$100 billion trade target by 2015.

During Kargil crisis and India-Pakistan escalation of 2001-2002, China refused to support Pakistan's stance or raise the issue in the UN. China urged to find new ways of conflict resolution through negotiations than military means (Viczianny & et al, 2004). China insisted on bilateralism rather than UN resolutions. Jiang Zemin counselled Musharraf in August 2002 to rather resolve the dispute through negotiations and dialogue (Garver, 2004).

The new stance in China's policy reflected transformations in global reality. In the aftermath of South Asia nuclearization, Chinese global interest entrenched on stability and avoidance of conflict along its southern periphery. Nuclearization had induced the US and China proximity on conflict avoidance in South Asia. In the 2001-2002 India-Pakistan military stand-off saw lack of Beijing's support on Kashmir. In January 2003, China stated that Kashmir dispute needed to be resolved bilaterally through India and Pakistan direct dialogue to restraint and resort to peaceful means.

The imperative of global security interests has directed Beijing to toe a pro-Pakistan position on Kashmir. China has adopted a pro-active role manifested in investment endeavours in Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir. Simultaneously, Beijing has invoked the disputed status of Kashmir, indulging in a level playing field



with New Delhi. Dalai Lama's controversial visit to Tawang led to China's extension of invitation to Mir Waiz Umer Farooq to Beijing. Issuance of staple paper visas to residents of Indian Kashmir is another instance in Chinese policy approach. In 2010, China declined a visit visa to an Indian General for human rights violations in Occupied Kashmir.

Although Chinese Premier Li Ke Qiang had offered India a handshake across the Himalayas in 2013, border skirmishes continued to foil political atmosphere between the two states. A platoon of Chinese soldiers moved 20 km into the mountains of Ladakh in Indian Occupied Kashmir in 2013. A three weeks' tense stand-off ensued between the two Asian giants, ending with retreat to the pre-existing status quo. The latest episode in Galwan in 2020 has been a natural consequence of simmering in bilateral tensions on the conflict in Kashmir.

### **3. Sino-US Kashmir Policy and Implications for Regional Stability**

The disputed status of Kashmir has allowed Sino-US to play the role of the 'King's party.' Involving the interplay of great power politics, Sino-US national security interests thrive on the conflict in Kashmir to create strategic leverage in South Asia. Great powers regional alignment along South Asian opposite poles has stranded conflict resolution on Kashmir, aggravating India-Pakistan hostilities in the region. Over the past years, the US and China have adopted a fluctuating and inconsistent policy approach, acting like silent spectators to the Kashmir conflict. During South Asian crises, prevention of Indo-Pakistan war and concern for regional stability rather than political consideration of conflict resolution led Sino-US to work closely to mitigate regional tensions. The US and China Kashmir policy pinned on crisis management efforts and regional stability in South Asia.

The option of independent Kashmir falls outside the security purview of the US and China. Beijing has historically referred to Kashmir conflict as unfinished agenda pending resolution. However, the option of an independent Kashmir creates a contiguous region of Muslim states along China's Xinjiang. For the US, the option of an independent Kashmir is unworkable: it creates a block of Islamic states till Malaysia (Kapila, 2010). To China, independent Kashmir may serve as the US base, creating western leverage along Chinese periphery.

Over the years, the US and China Kashmir policy has portrayed convergence to maintain standstill on Kashmir. First, the dispute's unresolved status has allowed China and the US to pursue their regional objectives. Washington has tended to counterbalance China's expansionist ambitions, while Beijing has tabbed Indo-US strategic nexus in South Asia. For China, India-Pakistan power squabble on Kashmir has prevented New Delhi's access to Central Asia. It also prevents Indian dominance of South Asia. Second, the dispute has immense global security ramifications. Kashmir offers a prime venue to the US and China to enhance global security interests. Besides providing a venue for global strategic counterbalancing, Kashmir offers a lucrative market for great powers arms sales and technology transfers. Third, the conflict on Kashmir offers possibilities for polarization with regional players along rival camps of Indo-US and Sino-Pakistan alliance partnership.

The US Kashmir policy corresponds to the US global objectives in South Asia. The dispute allows the US to bargain support for the peace process in Afghanistan, squeezing India on Kashmir (Zimmer, 2013). Over the decades, the US has played

on both sides of the divide. Ironically, the US has tended to de-fuse India-Pakistan tensions rather than resolve differences. The US inducement has been resumption of bilateral dialogue rather than a genuine attempt involving the wider spectre of resolving differences as far as Afghanistan. The US has favoured the status-quo on Kashmir. The dispute has granted the US a bargaining chip to extract concessions from South Asian rivals.

In keeping the nuclear flashpoint alive, Washington seeks to coerce concessions from Pakistan on the western front. In 2009, Obama secretly offered to nudge New Delhi on Kashmir in return for Pakistan's reversal of support to the Taliban. Trump administration neutrality on Kashmir reflects the US global security interests. With security interests in Pakistan and economic priorities in India, the US holds a clear focus to refrain from taking clear positions on Kashmir. Kashmir has global dividends for Washington's policy on China. Transatlantic global transformations require keeping a tab on Beijing's global power ambitions. The dispute engages China in a regional squabble against India (Schaffer, 2011). The US can rely on Occupied Kashmir as a military base in case of down turn of relations with Beijing.

China has held geo-strategic stakes in the status-quo on Kashmir. In building relations with South Asian states, Beijing's seeks to contain India in South Asia (Yahuda, 2020). India's multi-dimensional influence manifests in Neighbourhood First Policy in South Asia. It remains inimical to Beijing's expansion of economic and corporate interests in South Asia. Several factors underlay China's Kashmir policy. First, for China, Kashmir is a geo-strategic bottleneck, bordering the province of Xinjiang. Independent Kashmir will act as terrorist safe-haven in the hands of western powers instigating instability in Tibet and Xinjiang. Second, China's global ambitions hinge on the implementation of the BRI and its southern component of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Kashmir settlement will hand over Gilgit-Baltistan, cutting off land access to China. Third, China will have to let go of 5,180 sq km area, it enjoys control of under the Pakistani border agreement. Fourth, even soft borders or open corridor will exacerbate western and Indian influence along Chinese periphery. Moreover, a domino-effect for East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM) and pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong might spring from the grant of self-determination to the Kashmiris.

Stability built on status-quo is a neo-structural drive China shares in common with the US in Kashmir. World opinion on the right of self-determination has transformed, allowing China to curb state separatism in Xinjiang and Tibet. In the context, self-determination becomes a liability in Kashmir. Also, Kashmir serves wider designs for Chinese security interests in the region. For China, the Kashmir dispute catches Indian power in a regional squabble with Pakistan. The Kashmir card breaks Indian power in the region. Pakistan constitutes the pivotal link in China's revival strategy Shisheng, 2020). Struggling to rebuild its feeble economy, China seeks to ward off the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

From a realist perspective, the disputed region of Kashmir allows great power room for regional involvement and manoeuvrability. The Kashmir dispute holds direct relevance to the US and Chinese global security interests. The dispute has created space for great powers' regional alignment and intervention in South Asia. The US

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approach on Kashmir has created leverage to manipulate India-Pakistan rivalry. Given the gap in India-Pakistan conventional military balance, the US insistence on bilateral approach rather than the UN resolutions has led to a stalemate in India-Pakistan negotiations on Kashmir. Strengthening the Indian position, the US has tilted the regional balance in favour of New Delhi by acting as silent spectator on Modi's abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35-A in Kashmir.

South Asian security is inextricably linked to peace in Afghanistan and resolution of the dispute in Kashmir. India and Pakistan hold differing conceptions of regional security. Anti-terrorism, for India, means tackling the threat of militancy in occupied Kashmir. For Pakistan, security along eastern and western flanks is interlinked to having a peace settlement in Kashmir. For long lasting success on both fronts, the US must adopt equality of policy approach in South Asia. Pentagon must mediate to resolve the conflict. Within Kashmir, the stalemate has mobilized popular support against the US and India (Afridi, 2009). The Trump administration must use his good offices with Modi to improve India-Pakistan tensions. The Kashmir dispute has held world-wide implications with the new line of global division running right through Kashmir.

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