

India-China relations strained

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Tensions between India and China stepped up a notch last month after reports that thousands of Chinese troops were in the Gilgit-Baltistan area of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir near the border with China.

The controversy was sparked by an inflammatory article by Selig Harrison in the *New York Times* on August 26 declaring that Islamabad was “handing over de facto control” of the strategic region to China by allowing the entry of between 7,000 and 11,000 Chinese soldiers. His article was based on “foreign intelligence sources, Pakistani journalists and Pakistani human rights workers”.

Harrison was compelled to acknowledge that many of the “troops” were in fact involved in construction work on road and rail links between China and Pakistan. That did not prevent him from speculating—without a shred of evidence—that 22 tunnels under construction could be used for “missile storage sites”.

The article had the hallmarks of a story planted by US intelligence to undermine relations between Pakistan and China. Commenting on the land routes from China via Gilgit-Baltistan to Chinese-built ports in southern Pakistan, Harrison declared: “Coupled with its support for the Taliban, Islamabad’s collusion in facilitating Chinese access to the [Persian] Gulf makes clear that Pakistan is not a US ‘ally’.”

In fact, Pakistan broke ties with the Taliban in 2001 and, under US pressure, is waging a vicious war in its border areas to suppress Islamist insurgents fighting the US occupation in neighbouring Afghanistan. As for transit through Gilgit-Baltistan, Harrison is speaking for sections of the US military and foreign policy establishment that oppose Pakistani “collusion” in China’s plans for overland trading and energy routes to the Arabian Sea.

Both Pakistan and China flatly denied the story. China Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told the press: “The story that China has deployed some military in the northern part of Pakistan is totally groundless and out of

ulterior purposes.”

As reported in the *Dawn* on September 1, Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Abdul Basit said: “The Chinese were working on landslide, flood-hit areas and on the destroyed Korakoram Highway with the permission of Pakistani Government ... The statements are based on incomplete information.”

The Indian government and media nevertheless continued to pursue the issue. Gilgit-Baltistan is part of Kashmir, which is claimed by both Pakistan and India. The region has been divided into Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir, and Pakistani-controlled Azad Kashmir since the two countries fought a war for its control immediately after independence and the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

India has repeatedly opposed any Chinese involvement in what it regards as its territory. New Delhi objected to Chinese assistance for the construction of the Bunji dam and hydro-power generation project. India also condemned Pakistan’s decision last year to grant self-government to the region, renaming what was previously the Northern Area as Gilgit-Baltistan.

In response to the *New York Times* article, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh briefed various Indian newspapers on the dangers of China’s alleged military presence in Gilgit-Baltistan. As reported in the *Times of India* on September 7, Singh declared: “China would like to have a foothold in South Asia and we have to reflect on this reality.” He went on to warn of a “new assertiveness among the Chinese”. Singh said China could use India’s “soft underbelly” of Kashmir “to keep India in low-level equilibrium”.

On September 13, India’s defence minister A.K. Antony told a military conference that “we cannot afford to drop our guard” in relation to China. “We want to develop friendly relations with China ... However, we cannot lose sight of the

fact that China has been improving its military and physical infrastructure. In fact, there has been an increasing assertiveness on the part of China,” he said.

While the Indian and Chinese governments have subsequently downplayed the Gilgit-Baltistan issue, it continues to reverberate in the Indian and Pakistani press. Last Sunday, a comment in the *Dawn* denounced Harrison’s article in the *New York Times*, declaring that he had “picked up the Indian script on Gilgit-Baltistan”. In a comment on Wednesday, former Indian foreign and defence minister Jaswant Singh warned of the large number of Chinese troops in Gilgit-Baltistan, warning: “It is now a China hungry for land, water, and raw materials that is flexing its muscles, encroaching on Himalayan redoubts and directly challenging India.”

The continuing controversy is a further sign of friction between the two rising economic powers, which fought a border war in 1962. China also claims about 90,000 square kilometres in what is now the north eastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh; while India asserts its right to 33,000 square kilometres of the Aksai Chin region of China near north western Jammu and Kashmir. In 1962, Chinese forces advanced rapidly into the disputed areas, declared a ceasefire and then voluntarily withdrew in 1963.

The unresolved border claims continue to strain relations. In April 2009, Beijing attempted to block a \$US2.9 billion Asian Development Bank loan to India that included a flood control project in Arunachal Pradesh. India finally obtained the loan in June, apparently with the backing of the US and Japan, but over the protests of China. Also in June 2009, India announced the deployment of 60,000 additional troops, along with tanks and warplanes, to Assam, near Arunachal Pradesh, triggering an angry reaction in the Chinese media.

The border areas are sensitive for both India and China. Arunachal Pradesh is adjacent to Tibet where China has faced repeated protests against Chinese rule. Beijing objects to New Delhi’s hosting of a virtual Tibetan government in exile headed by the Dalai Lama in northern India. The disputed areas of Kashmir and of Aksai Chin are next to the Chinese province of Xinjiang where Beijing confronts a Muslim separatist movement. As for India, China’s collaboration with Pakistan in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir helps undermine New Delhi’s claims to the area.

In late August, China refused a visa to General B. S. Jaswal, who heads the Indian army’s Northern Command, on the basis that he was from Jammu and Kashmir, the

territory disputed by Pakistan. Jaswal was to be part of a high-level Indian military delegation to China. New Delhi responded by refusing entry to two Chinese officers who were scheduled to attend an Indian defence course. A Chinese colonel was denied permission to deliver a speech at an Indian army-run institute.

The key destabilising factor in an already tense situation is the United States, which over the past decade has developed a close strategic relationship with India, aimed at countering growing Chinese influence in Asia. Over the past year, the Obama administration has intensified pressure on China over a range of issues in North East Asia and South East Asia, which will have encouraged India to take a more assertive stance.

An important aspect of US-Indian relations was the signing of a nuclear deal in 2008 opening the door for India to buy fuel and technology to expand its civilian nuclear power program even though it is not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has nuclear weapons. The US, however, has objected to China’s plans to build nuclear reactors for Pakistan, which also has a nuclear arsenal and has not signed the NPT.

Relations in South Asia are further complicated by Washington’s heavy dependence on the Pakistani military to wage a war against Islamist insurgents in areas bordering Afghanistan. US support for the Pakistani government has raised concerns in India about the strength of its own strategic relationship with Washington. At the same time, New Delhi would quietly welcome any US efforts to undercut China’s longstanding relationship with Pakistan—particularly in the sensitive border areas in disputed Kashmir.

By alleging “de facto Chinese control” of Gilgit-Baltistan, the *New York Times* article inflamed a contentious issue and threatened to bring the US into a dispute that involves three nuclear armed powers—India, Pakistan and China.

The author also recommends:

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[15 August 2009]



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