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Sadia Tasleem

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# Internal Drivers – The Nexus between Domestic Politics and Bilateral Relations: Exploring India-Pakistan, Pakistan-China, and China-India Dynamics

Sadia Tasleem

Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan

## ABSTRACT

Foreign policy is an extension of domestic politics in myriad ways. However, no meta-theory offers a framework of analysis that could explain the nexus between domestic politics and foreign policy within the bilateral relations of three politically and culturally distinct states i.e. India, Pakistan, and China. In this paper, I explore the nexus between domestic politics and foreign policy to explain what do the contemporary domestic political trends in each state indicate about the future of bilateral relations. For this purpose, I first identify what in my view is the most relevant and important domestic political driver of bilateral relations in each case. I then discuss how it affects the bilateral relations in the respective dyads and what that means for the future of bilateral relations between India – Pakistan, Pakistan – China and China – India. I argue that the situations in which a small elite dominates both the discursive trends and policy making may result in malleable notions of national identity. This provides the elite, flexibility in shaping and reorienting foreign policy (when they want). On the other hand, the situations in which foreign policy is contingent upon national identity conception as articulated by the mainstream political parties with a strong support base among the masses are highly susceptible to the electoral pressures, shrinking the space for major shifts.

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## Introduction

The nexus between domestic politics and foreign policy is complex. International relations theories that explore this nexus tends to focus either on the structural elements of domestic politics e.g. the political system (Weart 1998), distribution of power, and decision-making processes (Allison 1969) within a state, etc., or the processes of identity and interest formation (Katzenstein 1996). The wide variety of literature produced in these categories aims to account for the patterns of conflict and cooperation or enmity and amity in bilateral relations. The existing literature identifies several factors that can singularly or cumulatively affect the foreign policy decision-making within a state. These include, electoral politics and diversionary conflicts, psychology of leadership, ideology and national identity conception, democracy and market economy, role of trade lobbies,

**CONTACT** Sadia Tasleem  [sadia.tasleem@gmail.com](mailto:sadia.tasleem@gmail.com)  Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan

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institutional interests and bureaucratic politics, role of the elite, media, and state narratives. These factors are embedded in (and therefore cannot be isolated from) the larger geopolitical and strategic realities, histories, economies, and cultures.

Some common assumptions that are shared across various theories include the centrality of government and/or leadership, and the role of institutions, bureaucracies, and militaries in making foreign policy decisions, the interest of political leaders in first assuming and then retaining power, and the variation in limits to decision-making power based on the form of government (Schultz 2013). The implications of these assumptions, however, are contested. For instance, political theorists disagree on the extent to which leaders can determine political discourse and policy choices (Schultz 2013)<sup>1</sup> Some scholars argue that leaders drive the policy choices, and they are only accountable *ex-post facto* (Zaller 1992)<sup>2</sup> Others argue that leaders internalize popular opinions/demands and only represent the will of the people (Holsti 1992). Likewise, some theorist claim that state leaders initiate crisis *vis-à-vis* a rival state to divert public attention from domestic political problems or to gain electoral victory (Gelpi 1997). Others claim that the uncertainty about the consequences of a crisis makes it a politically risky move. Similarly, the implications of the form of government on foreign policy making are also disputed. Some scholars argue that autocratic leaders enjoy more freedom of action on foreign policy issues than democratic leaders. Others argue that autocrats are also often bound by domestic political compulsions and may need to exercise high degree of caution in making foreign policy (Weeks 2008). The contested nature of these theoretical arguments weakens their explanatory power.

This chapter aims to explore the nexus of domestic politics and bilateral relations within three dyads, i.e. India – Pakistan, Pakistan – China and China – India. The challenge of studying such diverse states is three-fold. First, all these three states are structurally different from each other. All three show a high degree of variation in their respective domestic political conditions in terms of political institutions, political and organizational cultures, form of governments, types of leadership, history, demography, socialization, economy, international status, and role conception.

Secondly, there is considerable difference in the position that each state holds in the social imagination and national identity conception of the other state within a dyad. This asymmetry plays a crucial role in determining the degree of autonomy or lack thereof, of the leadership in taking foreign policy decisions. Based on these differences, I argue that in some cases political leaders or institutions (e.g. the military) have more leeway in articulating national interest than others. In matters pertaining to bilateral relations, all states and all foreign policy issues are not equally significant in the popular imagination within a state. The political costs of decisions relating to bilateral relations is heavily determined by the significance or centrality of a particular state (with whom the relation is to be examined) in the popular imagination (at least during the times of peace) quite often irrespective of the political system of the subject state. For example, the political cost of a wrong decision made by the Chinese government *vis-à-vis* the United States might be greater than a bad decision in China's India or Pakistan policy. This variation

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<sup>1</sup>Also, see the basic assumptions of the Democratic Peace Theory.

<sup>2</sup>Also, see studies on Iraq War and how the government manipulated public opinion (Kaufmann 2004).

cannot be explained only by way of structural factors like the form of government or psychological factors like the personality of leaders.

Thirdly, national identity and interest formation is a dialectical process where leaders and people mutually constitute and create the social and political discourses. However, national identity-based explanations are not always sufficient to explain the variation within a case in terms of periods of crisis and peace. Social constructivists argue that identities are crucial in forming national interests. Once the identity of a state is established as the other, the enemy, it is difficult to displace (Mitzen 2006). India – Pakistan hostility is often seen through this lens. What is puzzling, however, is to explain the various attempts made and considerable progress achieved by several governments on both sides to give peace a chance. In other words, it is easy to explain the hostility, various crisis and wars between India and Pakistan but what is neglected are the long phases of peace in between. What makes peace possible and how governments in the past managed to overcome the challenges posed by the sedimented identities deserve attention. This is not meant to suggest that identities are immaterial or easy to change. It is only meant to argue that the explanations based on identity may fall short in explaining the contradictions like perpetual hostility and simultaneous efforts for peace.

This paper argues that the situations in which a small elite dominates both the discursive trends and policy making may result in malleable notions of identity. But the situations that capture the popular attention are more susceptible to the limits posed by the sedimentation of identities. Irrespective of the nature of issues involved, the preferences of domestic actors are subject to change across time. However, the causes of variation and the processes involved differ in each situation. Also, the change in the former is relatively easier to bring about as oppose to the latter.

In short, no single theory (whether structural or constructivist/normative) can be used to understand the interplay of domestic politics and bilateral relations among the three dyads that are subject of this study. I will, therefore, draw on the theoretical arguments and assumptions to explain the bilateral relations, various crisis, and peace initiatives in different dyads from the standpoint of the actors involved, rather eclectically and unsystematically. For example, the arguments about diversionary conflict might be useful to explain the Balakot crisis between India and Pakistan but not the Galwan crisis between India and China. Likewise, the social construction of identity in India's political discourse offers a powerful explanation of India's Pakistan policy but the same may not be sufficient to account for Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis India. The theories focusing on the role of elite in articulating national interests and decision-making offer more useful analytical lens to understand the variation in Pakistan's policy toward India. This is not meant to suggest that these factors alone can provide sufficient explanation. All these factors are embedded in other exogenous elements. However, the impact of external factors on bilateral relations is beyond the scope of this chapter.

In the sections that follow, this paper will explore the nexus of domestic politics and bilateral relations within the three dyads, Pakistan – India, China – Pakistan, and India – China. It will identify domestic political factors that play a crucial role in shaping the bilateral dynamics in each dyad and explain how bilateral relations may in turn affect domestic politics.

## Pakistan-India Bilateral Relations

Domestic politics alone cannot explain the complex nature of the bilateral relations between India and Pakistan. The relations between the two sides are deeply rooted in a history that precedes the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent nation-states. The haphazard partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 contained within it the seeds of territorial conflict between the two sides that resulted in mutual mistrust, suspicion, and eventually outright hostility.

Over the past seven decades, several endogenous and exogenous factors have complicated the bilateral relations. Although the two sides identify each other as archrivals, the history of relations is beset by contradictions that emerge from parallel existence of bloody scars of partition and an intimate cultural proximity. Moreover, the geographical contiguity binds the two states in ways that necessitate dialogue on several issues. As a result, we see cycles of violence, crisis and war followed by active efforts to build peace irrespective of the form of government in Pakistan or the ideology of political party in power in India. The question that this section aims to explore is, “how significant are the domestic political imperatives in guiding the foreign policy of India and Pakistan vis-à-vis each other? In what ways does domestic politics affect the bilateral relations? What elements in domestic politics are significant to understand the prospects of peace and crisis between the two states?”

The policies of India and Pakistan vis-à-vis each other are intrinsically linked to the domestic political imperatives given that both sides occupy a considerably important place in each other’s popular political imagination and therefore national identity conception. This then plays out both in ideational and substantive terms.

## National Identity Conception

As mentioned earlier, the history of partition has been instrumental in shaping the identity discourses in both Pakistan and India (Dalrymple 2015). However, it is only partly circumstantial. It would be a fallacy to ignore the various efforts made by several stakeholders on both sides at the discursive construction of the “other” (Pervez 2012, 56). This “othering” is played up in different ways by both the ruling elite and the opposition parties for their vested interests. The impact of this identity politics on electoral outcomes is difficult to determine fully. However, it certainly has implications for the bilateral relations.

## *India as the Other in Pakistan’s Politics*

The Two-Nations Theory, the scars of a bloody partition and the contested futures of the princely states of Kashmir and Junagarh made India the Other in the Pakistani imagination (Schofield 2000). The decision-making elite in Pakistan perceived India’s political elite’s discontent with the partition of India as a source of threat. It was assumed that India will try to undo the partition if an opportunity arises (Haiari 2015). India thus acquired a central place in Pakistan’s national security orientation. The war of 1971 and the cessation of East Pakistan turned India into an existential threat in the national

security narrative. The “India-threat” thus played a pivotal role in strengthening the military’s control over political power since the 1950s (Ali and Patman 2019).

Likewise, the political leaders from Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto to the current leadership of all the mainstream as well as fringe political parties have used the anti-India rhetoric to malign their political opponents for domestic political gains. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto launched his political campaign against General Ayub Khan by accusing him of capitulation at Tashkent in the aftermath of the 1965 war between India and Pakistan (Ahmed 1972). Similar political trends prevail half a century later.

In their political competition, Pakistan’s leading political parties PPP, PML-N and PTI also continue to play the India factor to accuse the ruling party of treason (Hindustan Times 2016; Ali 2018; Express Tribune 2021a). Similarly, Islamist parties, most notably the Jamaat-i-Islami, have a visible anti-India discourse (Dawn 2019). What are the political gains made from such campaigns is not clear. India has never been a determining factor in Pakistan’s electoral politics. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, despite his anti-India rhetoric, won the elections in the 1970 because of his socialist manifesto and the promise of making Pakistan a social welfare state. There is no clear evidence to suggest that his anti-India rhetoric brought him any electoral gains. Even more notable is the recent shift in the political rhetoric of the civilian leaders. Nawaz Sharif in his 2013 election campaign promised to make efforts to bring peace to the region (Shukla and Abbas 2013). PTI’s Imran Khan voiced similar preferences during his four-month-long sit-in in 2014. The anti-India rhetoric can stir some emotions and often result in calls for nation-wide strikes, but it is not an electoral issue.

In a different vein, this identity discourse performs important functions for the ruling elite. India’s identity as the enemy makes it an effective excuse for internal policy failures and a tool to control dissent and reinforce the status quo in favor of the powerful stakeholders (Syed and Irfan Raza 2019). Pakistan’s ruling elite has repeatedly used India as a scapegoat for its massive policy failures that resulted in the cessation of East Pakistan and for the ongoing insurgency in Baluchistan (Zakaria 2019; Express Tribune 2010). Similar accusations are levelled against India for terrorist attacks and internal security challenges (Iqbal and Siddiqui 2020). These accusations help divert people’s attention from the incompetence of responsible organizations and leaders. The same trend exists in India (more on that later). It is not to claim that the two sides refrain from exploiting each other’s weaknesses. However, there is a greater need to acknowledge domestic policy failures both in terms of poor governance and intelligence oversight.

India’s identity as the other has also been used as a bid to unify the country but it has apparently not worked. India’s threat is seen as a serious threat in Pakistan, yet India is not considered an irreconcilable enemy by the majority (Gallup Pakistan 2019). Irrespective of the deep sentiments that people feel for Kashmir, peace with India has not been a make-or-break issue in the political space. In the aftermath of the revocation of article 370 by the Indian government in the Indian held Kashmir, the government of Pakistan amped up its diplomatic efforts at the international level but also kept the room for dialogue open with India (Al Jazeera 2021a). This did not undermine the PTI led government’s political power. How do these trends affect the bilateral relations? What other domestic political factors are important in Pakistan’s relations with India?

These trends have had implications in two ways, at least. First, the domestic political discourse can be used as a bargaining leverage to seek concessions in the bilateral

relations. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto effectively did so while negotiating the Simla agreement with Indira Gandhi in the aftermath of the 1971 war (Singh 2017). The possibility to do so in the contemporary situation has, however, drastically diminished.

Second, the negative identity discourse perpetuated for political power reinforces a certain identity conception resulting in generating a circular loop. It may not be sufficient to affect the electoral outcomes, but it is sufficient to sabotage a peace process. The fringe element within the society fed on an anti-India narrative may act independently against India – planning and carrying out a massive terror attack as was done in Mumbai in 2008 – bringing the two states to the verge of war (Haqqani 2016).

Yet, it is intriguing to note that the negative identity construction of India in Pakistan's political discourse has not prevented the various attempts aimed at improving relations with India. Beside backchannel diplomacy and the bilateral agreements on technical issues relating water management, natural disasters, non-attack on each other's critical infrastructure etc., the two sides have made notable progress on cultural interaction and people-to-people contact at different occasions in the past. What accounts for the contradictions reflected in Pakistan's shifting policy preferences vis-à-vis India? Moreover, how does the decision-making elite make the shift from hostility to peace politically acceptable at the domestic level?

### ***The elite-drive Foreign Policy***

The Democratic Peace Theory suggests that democratic governments are more likely to work for peace than the autocratic governments since democracies are accountable to people and people want prosperity. A similar argument is often made in case of Pakistan. It is argued that the political parties work toward peace with India, but the military wants to perpetuate the hostility. It is claimed that the India threat is the *raison d'être* of Pakistan army that claims a huge share in the budget and wields enormous political power and influence by keeping the India threat alive in people's perception (Fair 2014).

The argument can easily be substantiated by referring to the long history of military's direct or indirect involvement in sabotaging the various peace efforts made by the civilian governments during the 1990s. Benazir Bhutto's popularly elected government in her first tenure from 1988–90 was discredited and maligned under the accusations of sharing sensitive information about the Sikh dissidents with her Indian counterpart Rajiv Gandhi (Bhutto 2008). Few years later, the Lahore peace process was sabotaged by the operation that sparked the Kargil crisis. The then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was soon ousted from power by the then Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf (Zehra 2018).

Undoubtedly, Pakistan army has been one of the most important institutions in the history of India – Pakistan relations (given the long periods of military rule and its political control stretching beyond the years of direct rule). It is thus intriguing to note the variation in military's way of dealing with India over the past 70 years. General Ayub Khan was the first military leader to have offered India to form a joint defence pact against China (Week 2020). Disappointed by Nehru's response, he leaned to China and strengthened Pakistan's ties with the United States. General Zia-ul-Haq near the end of his decade long rule also reportedly came very close to signing an agreement with India on Kashmir (Verma 2015). Ironically, Musharraf who happened to be the architect of the Kargil crisis made the most notable progress on the peace process with India (Kasuri

2015). During his tenure, Pakistan and India witnessed a high degree of cultural interaction, inauguration of bus service in the Azad Jammu and Kashmir and the crafting of what was later called the seven points formula to resolve the Kashmir issue.

More recently, Pakistan's current army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa has also notably offered olive branches to India (Jha 2018; Yousaf 2021). How do these efforts fit with the otherwise well-known and well-understood accounts of geostrategic tensions, ideological and territorial conflicts, and identity-based explanations? One may argue that the most important determinant that shapes Pakistan's preferences are the elite's perceptions that are in turn shaped by several internal and external factors. The elite in Pakistan comprises of the military, the civil bureaucracy, the politicians and to a small extent the intellectuals. Elite's control over information makes it control the public perception as well. The fact that the decision-making elite can either ignore or transform public opinion by massive investments in propaganda campaigns can provide the elite with sufficient grounds for maneuverability. Military's control over the flow of information particularly on issues relating India is crucial in this context. This was evident both during Musharraf's rule and more recently in the Post-Pulwama Balakot crisis.

The military and the civilian leadership exercised restraint and calibrated the official position very carefully. The public anger quickly dissipated, and the popular mood aligned with the government. Here, it is important to mention that the elite's conception of the national interest is not static. It keeps changing. The question that follows then is, what shapes and changes the elite discourses? Several factors can be listed to explain the shift in elite's view of dealing with India over the past two decades.

First and foremost is the war on terrorism that exacerbated internal security challenges and created a new *raison d'être* for the Pakistan Army. The war on terror stretched the Pakistan Army thin on the one hand and gave birth to a new enemy on the other. Although India has consistently been accused of fomenting internal security challenges in Pakistan, the new threats required a shift away from India.

Secondly, Pakistan's growing economic challenges have increased the political and financial costs of continued conflict with India manifold. Pakistan's elite has also been under considerable pressure particularly from the United States to change its policy vis-à-vis India. Pakistan's dependence on the financial assistance provided by the United States during the "war on terror" and a continued reliance on international financial institutions for its economic needs requires Pakistan's elite to convince the international community of its commitment to peace in the region. The commitment to course correction, however, is not only stimulated by external pressures. There is a considerable support within the political government and the intelligentsia to reorient Pakistan's view of the world from geopolitics to geoeconomics (Express Tribune 2021b; Khan 2021). Whether Pakistan can manage to reshape its bilateral relations with India under this new approach depends upon several factors including, among others, India's willingness to reciprocate. What happens in India has a bearing on the domestic political discourse in Pakistan irrespective of the elite's predisposition. Anti-Pakistan rhetoric of the Indian politicians and government officials is quickly picked up by the news media in Pakistan creating pressures on the government to respond. This generates the circular loop problem making Pakistan's reorientation vis-à-vis India contingent upon the political discourse in India. Is the Indian government willing to improve bilateral relations with Pakistan? What does the domestic political situation in India indicate?



How does Pakistan figure in India's national identity conception? The following section will explore these questions.

### ***Pakistan in India's Political Imagination***

Scholarly work on India's domestic politics and foreign policy offers a compelling account of the significance of India's political elite's articulation of "Indianness" for India's relations vis-à-vis Pakistan. Sinderpal Singh argues that "different sets of Indian political elites come to acquire specific conceptions of 'Indian-ness' upon the basis of their contesting representations of Indian state identity" (Singh 2013). Singh explains the variation in India's policy vis-à-vis Pakistan under the Congress rule versus the BJP rule by looking into their respective definitions and discourses of "Indianness". India's secular identity defined by the Indian Congress made it suspicious of the neighboring Pakistan that articulated its identity in religious terms. But it did not turn Pakistan into the irreconcilable other. Contrarily, the BJP's politics rooted in the Hindu nationalist thought posits Pakistan as the enemy that is bent on harming India. These perceptions are rooted in BJP's views of what it considers the possible threat of potential Muslim imperialism (Singh 2013).

This identity construction rooted in the pre-partition history has taken several decades to flourish. For instance, in February 1999, it was the BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee who visited Lahore and negotiated the Lahore declaration. It was only after the Kargil crisis and later the 2001–02 military standoff that the BJP managed to reinvent the idea of India (Singh 2013, 85). BJP's rearticulation of the idea of India in sharp contrast to Congress demanded a recognizable shift in India's political discourse as well as policy decisions. The BJP government under the PM Modi has enacted that shift.

Contrary to the Congress government's restrained response to the Mumbai attacks in 2008, BJP government has not only pursued aggressive response options vis-à-vis Pakistan but also advertised them. The alleged surgical strikes in response to the Uri attacks in 2016 were effectively used to stoke nationalism and a perception of zero tolerance for terrorist attacks under the BJP rule (Shukla 2018; Economic Times 2016). It is important to note here that cross-border strikes along the LoC are not a unique phenomenon (Daga 2018). But PM Modi's government projected them as such.

The post-Pulwama air strikes inside the mainland Pakistan not only expressed the willingness of the incumbent government to take unprecedented risks but the political rhetoric that preceded and followed the strikes also clearly exposed the link between the domestic political agenda and war mongering (Murthy 2019; Ghadyalpatil 2019; Afonso 2019). Some analysts have argued that the post-Pulwama crisis was a diversionary conflict carefully calibrated by the BJP-led government that failed to deliver on its many electoral promises. In the run up to crucial state elections, invoking nationalism under the threat of war helped BJP manipulate the voters (Suraiya 2019).

Pakistan's significance in India's electoral politics certainly cannot be ignored. Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal and Manasvi Shanker Sharma wrote in 2019,

"Pakistan has long been addressed in the election manifestos of the major political parties in India. In 2014, the election manifesto of Indian National Congress stressed the party's commitment to improve relations with the neighbor while holding Pakistan's government

accountable for the 26/11 attacks and putting pressure on Islamabad to eliminate terrorist activities in Pakistan. On the other hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) underlined in its 2014 election manifesto its commitment to address the demands of refugees from Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK)<sup>3</sup> (Moonakal and Shanker Sharma 2019).

BJP's view of Pakistan, as mentioned earlier is deeply rooted in its peculiar definition of Indianness. This view posits Pakistan as an irreconcilable enemy that needs to be dealt with a strong fist. This view has been further strengthened by mainstream Indian media over the past one decade.

Blaming Pakistan for internal security policy failures is not peculiar to the BJP-led governments. The difficult debates on intelligence failures, for example are often evaded under the rhetoric of state-sponsored terrorism allegedly from Pakistan. However, the anti-Pakistan narrative is now more frequently used as device to curtail dissenting voices. Political activists that question the government are charged under sedition law and asked to go to Pakistan (Ketkar 2019). This discourse is strengthening the anti-Pakistan sentiment foreclosing any possibilities for meaningful dialogue and durable peace between the two states.

Given these trends, it will be politically costly not only for BJP but any political party that comes to power in the next elections to improve the bilateral relations with Pakistan.

In sum, Pakistan's elite driven foreign policy vis-à-vis India makes a reorientation of Pakistan's India policy possible. In India however, the BJP's articulation of the idea of India predicated on an anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan sentiment has reduced possibility of meaningful engagement.

The next section will discuss how Pakistan's and China's elite-driven policies have shaped the bilateral relations between these two states? It will also explore the possible implications of China's introduction in Pakistan's domestic political discourse for the future of bilateral relations.

## **Pakistan – China Relations: A Brief Background**

Historically, Pakistan's relations with China have been driven by strategic imperatives determined by the decision-making elite on both sides. The two states established diplomatic relations in 1950 but the first major breakthrough came only in the wake of the India-China border war of 1962. Pakistan and China signed the boundary agreement in 1963 eliminating the possibility of a territorial conflict in the future. Pakistan also played a crucial role in facilitating the US–China rapprochement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These events cemented the bilateral relationship into a strategic partnership that was further consolidated by Chinese economic and military assistance to Pakistan over the past five decades<sup>3</sup> However, the strategic interaction between the two mostly remained secretive with no political debate about it. Public opinion in Pakistan, about China was largely shaped by the elite's discourses about China.

More recently, the elite's perceptions of Pakistan's domestic needs became instrumental in the expansion of Pakistan's economic relations with China. The conceptualization of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its framing as a game-

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<sup>3</sup>For a detailed account of the strategic nature of Pakistan – China bilateral relations see Small (2015).

changer for Pakistan's ailing economy has however subjected the bilateral relationship to Pakistan's wider domestic political discourse (Hameed 2018).

The PML-N government led by the former PM Nawaz Sharif had won the general elections in 2013 on the promise of bringing economic prosperity and an end to the energy crisis. CPEC opened the prospects of building power projects and infrastructure required to increase investment opportunities and the possibilities for industrial growth (Nation 2016). The domestic political imperatives in this sense led to the expansion of Pak-China ties in the economic sphere. This however also means that the erstwhile sacrosanct bilateral relation has become part of public scrutiny and political debate.

Despite a consensus, among the major power wielders on the significance of CPEC, demands for transparency in the agreements negotiated with China, details about fiscal implications in the long term and concerns about debt traps possibly resulting in neo-imperialism have appeared in Pakistan's leading newspaper editorials and columns (Akhtar 2018).

The small Left in Pakistan also stands divided. Some are optimistic about the likely impacts of China's growing presence in the region, while others have warned the government to exercise great caution in planning projects that can perpetuate the neo-liberal economic order further (Akhtar 2018). Likewise, the marginalized regions have registered their repeated protest over the inequitable distribution of dividends (Hameed 2018). Most of this opposition is not directed against China or the CPEC per se but the way it is operationalized. Only the Baloch nationalists have vehemently opposed the CPEC – seeing it as an extension of the neocolonial practices of the state against the periphery (Akhtar 2007; Shahid 2016).

What does this tell us about the nexus of domestic politics and bilateral relations? Where does China stand in Pakistan's domestic political imagination? And how the current trends in the bilateral relations are interacting with domestic politics and what would this interaction entail for the future of relations between the two states? Following section will explore these issues.

### ***China in Pakistan's Political Imagination***

Pakistan's warming up to China in the post-1962 Sino-India war was largely driven by Pakistan's view of China as a counterweight to India. Despite the realization of the limits of this view in the wake of the Indo-Pak war of 1971 and later in 1999 Kargil crisis, this perception has not completely dwindled. However, a more expansive view of China as Pakistan's most reliable friend has evolved considerably over the past five decades. It is almost a cliché for Pakistan's political and military elite to describe Pakistan – China friendship as higher than the Himalayas, deeper than the oceans, and sweeter than honey. Yet, it is difficult to explain this “friendship” in ideational terms.

Certainly, back in the 1970s when socialism was still fashionable in Pakistan, despite the history of military alliance with the United States, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's tilt toward China was comprehensible. Intriguingly, the relationship continued to grow irrespective of massive shift in Pakistan's ideological spectrum under the Zia regime. Zia's anti-communist politics and his use of Islam for political purposes both at home and abroad placed Pakistan and China ideologically in sharp contrast. This has not changed much since then. Although Pakistan's incumbent PM Imran Khan has also projected China as

a role model in the context of China's poverty alleviation programs, there is little in the socio-cultural space that Pakistan and Pakistanis can identify with, when it comes to China. Yet, China enjoys a highly favorable status in Pakistan (Pew Research Center 2014).

What explains this "love" for China among the ordinary Pakistanis? At the substantive level, China's small but consistent steps in support of Pakistan starting from the war of 1965 to the veto against the recognition of Bangladesh after the East Pakistan seceded from the West Pakistan to its assistance in Pakistan's nuclear program, diplomatic support at the multilateral platforms and, more recently, blocking of India's entry into the NSG, have not gone unnoticed. These actions have created China's identity as a different but "all-weather" friend.

China's all-weather friend identity in the popular consciousness means that strengthening of bilateral ties has not entailed any serious political risk for both the political and military leadership at least so far. However, this identity will go through some pressure under the growing interaction between China and Pakistan both at the political and social levels.

CPEC has offered a huge economic opportunity to Pakistan. But for the bilateral relations, it is equally a challenge. CPEC will likely have consequences for Pakistan's domestic politics. These consequences will in turn have the potential to affect the bilateral relations. Below, I will explain why.

### ***CPEC, Domestic Politics, and Bilateral Relations***

The burgeoning literature on Pak-China relations in the recent years has paid considerable attention to the implications of bilateral relations – particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – on domestic politics but there is not enough engagement with the impact of domestic politics on Pakistan-China relations. The existing literature explores the implications of bilateral relations particularly for civil-military relations (Wolf 2020), democratic structures and institutions in Pakistan (Ahmed 2019; International Crisis Group 2018), the relationship between the Center and the provinces mainly Baluchistan and Sindh (Abb 2022), and Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis the militant groups (Ahmad, Mi, and Fernald 2020).

It is argued that despite China's policy of non-intervention in the internal politics of other states, the process that has been put in place to make the CPEC viable, might influence the power distribution among various state organs in Pakistan. Given that the military has not only taken the responsibility for the security of the CPEC-related projects, but it is also pushing its weight to increase its say in the planning and operationalization of CPEC, the likelihood of military's increased influence in domestic politics appear high. Some scholars have argued that the military's central role in ensuring the security of the CPEC-related projects, quelling the militancy, and suppressing dissent has already strengthened the "garrison state" (Hameed 2018). At the domestic political level, these trends might also exacerbate the tensions between the Center and the periphery.

These trends, if continued, will likely strengthen Pak-China relations further in the future. Given the history of strategic ties between China and Pakistan, it is easy for the Chinese government to deal with the military leadership. Likewise, the military, given its

massive power at the domestic political level can substantively influence both policy decisions and public opinion. However, three issues will be critical here:

First, military's credibility to deliver on its CPEC-related commitments will depend on its status at the domestic political level and its ability to ensure the safety and security of Chinese citizens and critical infrastructure, as well as to protect the interests of the Chinese investors in Pakistan. In case Afghanistan becomes unstable again, the security challenges for the military will grow momentarily. Likewise, military's influence in the domestic politics and the society at large cannot be taken as a constant.

Second, it remains to be seen how the Islamic political parties and militant organizations would engage with the issue of the plight of Uighur Muslims once the issue is widely known. Thirdly, how the ordinary people will respond to growing Chinese presence in local neighborhoods?

The contemporary political trends largely look favorable to a strong bilateral relationship but the many unknowns at the societal level mentioned above can pose some challenges.

### ***Pakistan in China's Domestic Politics***

On his visit to Pakistan in 2013, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang declared, "If you love China, love Pakistan too" (BBC News 2013). From the standpoint of international politics this is an extraordinary statement. Chinese political leaders often describe Pakistan as China's "Iron brother". The memory of Pakistan's critical role in facilitating the Sino-US rapprochement in 1972 and Pakistan's diplomatic support on several occasions is often reiterated in the official discourse. However, Pakistan did not figure prominently in the Chinese public imagination until 2008. Pakistan's enormous support to China in the aftermath of the earthquake in the Sichuan region in 2008, won favorable opinion. The Chinese government applauded Pakistan's generous support. The media coverage and official narrative also helped garner favorable opinion of Pakistan among the Chinese people<sup>4</sup>

Unlike the past, CPEC is enhancing businesses, people-to-people contact and cultural exchange programs on both sides. It remains to be seen how this increased interaction would turn out for the relations between the two states. So far, China's relation with Pakistan has been elite-driven. Before the operationalization of CPEC, it was not a costly relationship in political terms. However, just like the situation in Pakistan, CPEC has made the bilateral relationship more relevant to China's domestic politics.

For China's political leadership, domestic political stability and economic growth are the top priorities. Both these factors tie into China's growing relations with Pakistan.

Economic objectives and political stability in Xinjiang: China needs Pakistan's support to ensure political stability in its restless Muslim-majority province of Xinjiang. Pakistan is relevant in at least three ways. First, the Uyghur Muslims are a disenfranchised and politically alienated segment of the Chinese society. Their resentment against the state has resulted in a massive crackdown of what the Chinese government considers militancy fueled by "extremist Islamic groups" operating across the region (Roberts 2020). China

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<sup>4</sup>"China overwhelmed by Pakistan's generous help during earthquake,"

(20 June 2008) [http://pk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx2/200806/t20080620\\_1196342.htm](http://pk.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgxx2/200806/t20080620_1196342.htm).

needs Pakistan's support to root out militants and to prevent their movement across borders. Pakistan has been highly responsive to the Chinese demands. Andrew Small, an expert of Pakistan-China relations wrote that the military operation undertaken by the Pakistan Army in 2015 in the erstwhile FATA region was, along with other factors, spurred by China's pressure (Small 2015). China will continue to require Pakistan's support to stabilize Xinjiang more so with the destabilizing developments in Afghanistan.

Second, Pakistan's public silence over the reports of alleged mistreatment of the Uyghur Muslims is critical to China. China would not want to see a rise in anti-Chinese sentiments across the Muslim world. This will seriously jeopardize China's developmental projects particularly the One Belt One Road Initiative.

Finally, the economic development of the Xinjiang region is also dependent on improved connectivity with Pakistan. Pakistan's position is extremely important in China's future economic policy. President XI has hailed the CPEC as a "flagship project of the BRI". Its success or failure would be crucial to China's credibility as a viable exporter of its developmental model (Afzal 2020, 6). It is also crucial for bolstering China's international image.

Success in Xinjiang would help Chinese political elite to ensure internal cohesion and stability. The strategic significance of China and Pakistan for each other will continue to dominate the bilateral relations; however, over the next decade, the relationship is likely to become a prominent factor in the domestic politics in both countries. Any untoward challenges or failures in CPEC-related projects would be politically costly for the leadership on both sides. For Xi, CPEC can become a barometer of the success of BRI. For Pakistani political elite, it is an opportunity that they cannot afford to lose.

The next section will explore the evolution and contemporary dynamics of India-China relations in view of domestic politics.

## **India – China Relations: An Overview**

India's relations with China have not been a prominent element in India's electoral politics yet the relations have been deeply intertwined with India's domestic political dynamics. The beginning of the diplomatic relations between the two states was marked by a high degree of optimism. There were important and recognizable commonalities between the two states both in terms of their role-conception and worldview. The post-partition India and the post-revolution People's Republic of China shared their anti-colonial sentiment, saw themselves as inheritors of great civilizational past and supported the ideals of peaceful coexistence (Baruah 2015).

In the early 1950s "Hindi-Chini bhai bhai", i.e. Indians and Chinese are brothers, was a popular slogan. However, the positive spirit of the early years did not last long. The leadership on both sides soon found itself caught in contested territorial claims, resulting in the Indo-China War of 1962. The war resulted in a humiliating defeat for the Indian armed forces. In India, this seriously undermined confidence over Nehru's political vision vis-à-vis China. The bilateral relations turned from bad to worse over the next 15 years.

It was only after the Indian elections in 1977, that the rule of the Congress Party came to an end for a brief interval. The change in the government in 1977 made a breakthrough in the relations possible. The Janata Party that came to power made a big move and

reestablished diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979. From that time onwards, both sides have invested considerable amount of time and diplomatic effort to clear the roadblocks and institute bilateral mechanisms to manage disputes. Since then, the bilateral relations have been mostly stable, marked by cooperation, and competition (Malone and Mukherjee 2010). Despite the territorial dispute between the two states, both managed to foster greater economic interdependence (with the balance of trade favoring China more than India). The two states also managed to have highly stable nuclear relations. Nuclear weapons have not figured prominently in the bilateral relations. Apart from few episodes of minor escalation of tensions in the bordering regions, China and India developed and institutionalized mechanisms of border management rather successfully (Singh 2020a).

It was first in 2013 at the Depsang bulge and later in 2017 at Doklam that tensions flared up between the two sides. On both occasions the problem was resolved without any loss of life<sup>5</sup> It was only in 2020 at the Galwan valley in Ladakh that the border patrolling and construction work eventually resulted in what turned out to be a major escalation between the two states over the past four decades. It was the first time that the border skirmishes resulted in the loss of lives on both sides. At least 20 Indian soldiers and 4 Chinese soldiers died in the combat (Al Jazeera 2021b). Based on the past record of India-China border management, this was unprecedented and led to serious escalation of tensions.

Some analysts have argued that this massive shift in India-China relations is a consequence of the growing India-US relations, China's expanding footprint in the region and the perceptions about the leadership styles of PM Modi and President Xi in Beijing and New Delhi, respectively. The last of these factors falls in the ambit of domestic politics and will be explored further in the following section.

The political pundits in India have also argued that the recent tensions have brought China into India's domestic political discourse and that from now on it will be an important factor in how the Indian political parties deal with China (Pant and Kaura 2020; Singh 2020b). What role China occupies in India's domestic politics? How it is changing and what does that mean for the bilateral relations are the questions that the following section will address.

### ***India's Domestic Political Imperatives: China's Significance***

From 1980s onwards, India's relations with China have been heavily determined by India's strategic and economic considerations. Popular perceptions about China have varied across time and geographical space but the bilateral relations have not been affected by these perceptions. China is India's largest trading partner and the territorial disputes between the two states have not prevented the economic cooperation between the two (Krishnan 2021).

Although the relations with China have not been central to the popular imagination in India, the Indian strategic community had been supportive of pragmatic but cautious building of cooperative relations with China until 2013 (Wojczewski 2016; Indian Foreign Affairs Journal 2014). However, a deeper suspicion and skepticism about

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<sup>5</sup>For a detailed analysis of these two crises see, Singh 2020a, 89–93).

President Xi's foreign policy goals grew after his announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as the flagship project of the BRI (Shah 2017). A former Indian ambassador to China, Vijay Gokhale wrote, "Xi's China is seen as more willing to trample on India's concerns if India does not acquiesce to China's national objective of "moving closer to the center of the world stage" (Gokhale 2021).

President Xi's commitment to expand China's economic footprint in the region and secure sea-lines of communication in the South China Sea have also been viewed by the Indian analysts as evidence of China's growing assertiveness. However, it was only after the death of Indian soldiers at Galwan valley in 2020 that the popular sentiment in many parts of India turned massively against China. Although, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi initially attempted to downplay the crisis (Migliani and Ghoshal 2020) – probably fully realizing the possible fallout for post-crisis India's foreign policy. But the hyper-nationalist and sensationalist media channels stoked anti-China rhetoric. The anti-China campaign sparked with calls for boycott of the Chinese products followed by display of public anger resulting in burning the "made in China" products (Rediff.com 2020). However, the sale of the Chinese products suffered briefly, and the United States managed to surpass China as India's largest trading part in the early months of 2021. China regained its earlier position few months later (Banerji 2021).

At the official level, both sides withdrew their forces from the disputed forward positions (Sharma 2021). However, it remains to be seen how the scars of the Galwan crisis have affected the public consciousness in India. Is this only a temporary phase or will it become sedimented in Indian polity, redefining India's identity with China as the "Other", the enemy?

Some experts believe that the skirmishes in the Galwan valley and the death of Indian soldiers have turned the popular sentiment against China beyond repair. Boycotting the Chinese products and the surge in anger might be a temporary phenomenon but it might as well be an instrumental factor in identity construction in India vis-à-vis China.

The nature of India's contemporary domestic politics with the centrality of nationalist rhetoric suggests that damage control will require exceptionally high degree of commitment on the part of the Indian government. Opposition parties would like to play the China issue against the ruling BJP in their electoral campaigns. Once bilateral relations enter the electoral politics, they become hostage to vote-seeking and emotional rhetoric. If this happens, there will be serious consequences for the future of India – China relations.

### ***China's Domestic Political Imperatives in Sino-Indian Relations***

Experts on China often note that China's strategic objectives are not isolated from its domestic politics. Instead, China's domestic political objectives determine China's foreign policy (Yin 2019). Chinese key domestic political objectives in the post-Mao period have been internal political stability and sustained economic growth. This understanding has resulted in a greater realization to have peaceful borders and access to global markets. For this purpose, China has adopted a carefully calibrated approach that favors conflict management to create conducive environment to promote economic interaction in the region. This has been the core of China's policy vis-à-vis India over the past three decades. There has been a clear concern regarding the possibility of India playing an



active part in the US-led containment of China. As a result, the Chinese leadership has exercised great caution and restraint in its relations with India. This is evident both in the various episodes of high-level engagement of the Chinese leadership with the Indian leadership and in China's reluctance to play an active part in any military crisis between India and Pakistan. China also made attempts to allay the Indian concerns regarding the CPEC by offering India to join the BRI project (Naqvi 2017; Mitra 2017).

Given China's clear preference to have stable relations with India, the crisis in Galwan raised many questions. Who initiated the conflict remains contested. Analysts continue to explore the possible causes behind the crisis. Some speculate that the crisis is a manifestation of the diversionary tactics used by Xi Jinping to consolidate his hold on the domestic politics (Gupta 2020; Bhaumik 2020). Others argue that it reflects China's growing assertiveness in the region (Kaura 2020; Sharma 2020; Tyson 2020).

It is, however, notable that the Chinese government exercised enormous restraint in disseminating information about the escalation of tensions in Galwan and released the death toll half a year after the conflict (Xin and Yuandan 2021). The Chinese media does not operate in the same manner as the Indian media does. The state control over the media and state's preference for restraint made sensational coverage impossible. The Chinese refrain from sensational coverage of the crisis undermines the arguments about diversionary conflict.

On the other hand, the Chinese experts hold the BJP government under the PM Narendra Modi responsible for the deterioration of Sino-Indian relations. The Chinese experts believe that the Indian government is not sensitive to China's core concerns (Shisheng and Jue 2020).

Gokhale argues that China's concerns about the style of leadership emanate from the fact that this is the first time that China is dealing with a government that enjoys majority in the Indian parliament. From 1988 to 2004, China dealt with the coalition governments that enjoyed less flexibility than the current government (Gokhale 2021). This might be true particularly in the context of India's visibly growing tilt toward the United States under the current government. This in turn affects the Chinese perceptions of India and weaken the bilateral relations. What does this mean for the future of China-India relations?

A combination of domestic political factors like the composition of future government in New Delhi, the style of leadership in Beijing and Delhi, economic imperatives, and popular sentiment at least in India, combined with the broader foreign policies of both China and India vis-à-vis other regional actors and major powers will determine the nature of future relations. But the contemporary trends do not offer an optimistic picture.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I explored the nexus between domestic politics and bilateral relations within the three dyads, India – Pakistan, Pakistan – China, and China – India. Given the variation in the domestic political structures and decision-making processes in the three states, no single theory offers a suitable framework of analysis. For the sake of analytical clarity, I identified one key domestic political determinant in each case to discuss the contemporary trends and prospects in the bilateral relations within each dyad.

I argue that China's bilateral relations with India and Pakistan – in so far as domestic political imperatives are concerned – are mainly driven by the decision-making elite and centered around two priorities i.e. internal stability, and economic growth. Therefore, China will likely pursue policies that promote stability in her relations with both states.

In Pakistan, China has only gained prominence in the popular consciousness and domestic political discourse after the inauguration of China-Pakistan economic corridor in 2015. Although some regional political parties and dissident groups have expressed their reservations regarding CPEC, the concerns mostly emanate from what is perceived as inequitable distribution of dividends and not the CPEC itself. At this point, the domestic political trends do not pose any significant challenge to the bilateral relations.

In Pakistan's relations vis-à-vis India, despite a highly negative rhetoric and a long history of portraying India as an existential threat, the change in Pakistan's India policy is not as unlikely as it may seem. An elite-driven foreign policy and the establishment's control over information empowers the decision makers to manipulate popular opinion according to their preferences. More recently, Pakistan's internal and external challenges including a weak economy, dependence on international financial institutions, internal security issues and international concerns have cumulatively forced the leadership in Pakistan to reevaluate the possibility of sustaining a military competition vis-à-vis India.

On the Indian side, Pakistan's centrality to the BJP's politics in its definition of the idea of India (or Indianness) is increasingly playing a prominent role. The public consumption of this identity conception of Pakistan as an irreconcilable, "Muslim other" has become an important issue in electoral politics with potentially serious consequences, making the bilateral relations fragile.

Contrary to Pakistan, China has not been central to the popular imagination in India, at least in the past. However, the death of Indian soldiers at Galwan valley in 2020 turned the popular sentiment heavily against China. The political pundits in India have argued that the recent tensions have brought China into India's domestic political discourse and the rise of anti-China sentiment in India has made the relationship more vulnerable to the demands of electoral politics. How this will play out in the long term is yet to be seen but the future of peace in Southern Asia will be heavily contingent upon – along with several exogenous factors – domestic political trends in India.

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## Notes on Contributor

*Sadia Tasleem* teaches at the Department of Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University, Pakistan and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her PhD research focuses on the hegemony of nuclear deterrence in Pakistan. She is a member of the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network for Disarmament.

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