

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Beijing on June 7 (Photo by Reuters)

INDO-PACIFIC

China Advises Pakistan: Adhere to the UN

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Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif returned from a visit to Beijing on June 8th, where he met with President Xi Jinping and the presiding officer of the National People's Congress. Sharif also talked with Premier Li Qiang of the State Council, and the two nations covered a wide range of topics in their discussion. Although the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) took up most of the talk, both also expressed their mutual commitment to Chinese and Pakistani sovereignty, coordination in addressing Afghanistan, and dedication to upholding international law. Notably, the Chinese side advised Pakistan to resolve the situation in Kashmir and Jammu peacefully and in accordance with the United Nations. Jammu and Kashmir is a region under Indian administration but disputed by Pakistan, a dispute that Beijing described as "left over from history" in the recent talks.



Kashmir

The Kashmir region as a whole is subject to territorial disputes between India, Pakistan, and even China. India controls Jammu and Kashmir in the south and Ladakh in the east, Pakistan controls the northwestern areas, and China controls Aksai Chin and the Trans-Karakoram Tract in the northeast. The division of the region by Britain led to conflict that has never been fully resolved, despite the intervention of the UN. India claims a right to the areas of dispute, including the northeastern territories ceded to China in 1963, while Pakistan claims a right to all of Kashmir, except the China-administered parts. Last December, Beijing claimed that the entirety of the western part of the India-China border belongs to China, which India contests. Specifically claimed by Beijing is parts of Ladakh in the Jammu and Kashmir region. The Line of Actual Control, the border between India and China controlled regions in Kashmir, has become militarized and remains highly volatile to this day.



Map of the Kashmir region (Photo from Wikipedia Commons)

Beijing's Advice & Chinese Sovereignty

Despite the conflict between India and China, Pakistan was advised by Beijing to deal with Jammu and Kashmir according to international code.

Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh were split up into union territories by Indian Prime Minister Modi in 2019, which China and Pakistan dispute. Both territories were stripped of locally-elected leaders and placed under central government, reportedly repressing the Muslim Kashmiri majority.

Jammu and Kashmir is subject to many militant and terrorist attacks, and Indian and Pakistani soldiers have exchanged gunfire before. Just recently, on June 9th, nine people were killed after a bus carrying Hindu pilgrims was attacked. Local authorities reportedly blamed it on local Muslim militants. According to Indian media, The Resistance Front, a Pakistani terrorist group, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Beijing's advice to resolve the situation peacefully and appeal to international law is wise, especially in the face of the local polls that New Delhi has agreed to hold in Jammu and Kashmir. The local polls are part of India's general elections, and recently, imprisoned opposition leader Sheikh Abdul Rashid won in a landslide. Kashmiri Indians and Pakistanis alike, then, appear open to change.

But the Chinese side's analysis of the situation as one "left over from history" is odd, given their own continual conflict at India's border, and public condemnation of India's role in Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh last December. Moreover, what a peaceful resolution looks like for both parties according to Beijing is unclear, although backchannel negotiations via a third-party arbitrator have helped India and Pakistan resolve conflict in the past.

Equally strange though, is the advice in the context of Chinese territorial disputes, which it is engaged in with Taiwan, India, the Philippines, Japan, and the East and South China Seas as well. In the discussion, both the Chinese and Pakistani sides praised the UN, expressed their desire for peace in South Asia, and condemned unilateral power. Despite that, the Pakistani side "reaffirmed its firm commitment to the one-China principle," declared Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, and expressed its commitment to supporting China in national reunification.

CPEC, Afghanistan, & Gaza

China and Pakistan reaffirmed their commitment to further developing, protecting, and investing in CPEC, condemning recent terrorist attacks. The importance of the initiative for Pakistani growth was emphasized, although in reality the project has not been a net-gain for Pakistan. Most of the jobs the Corridor has provided have gone to Chinese workers instead of Pakistani ones, and some of the infrastructure has been slow to develop because of targeted attacks against Chinese workers. A large portion of the Corridor is dedicated to developing energy projects (which was also mentioned in the recent talks), energy which the Pakistani government often cannot afford to supply, resulting in government debt to Pakistani energy supply companies.

Both countries also agreed to support Afghanistan, not only in bringing international cooperation toward humanitarian relief in the country but also in bringing the Taliban-led government into the international community.

Finally, a Two-State solution was agreed by both parties to be the only way out of the current war in Gaza and the only means to a Palestinian state.


The Pakistani-Chinese Relationship

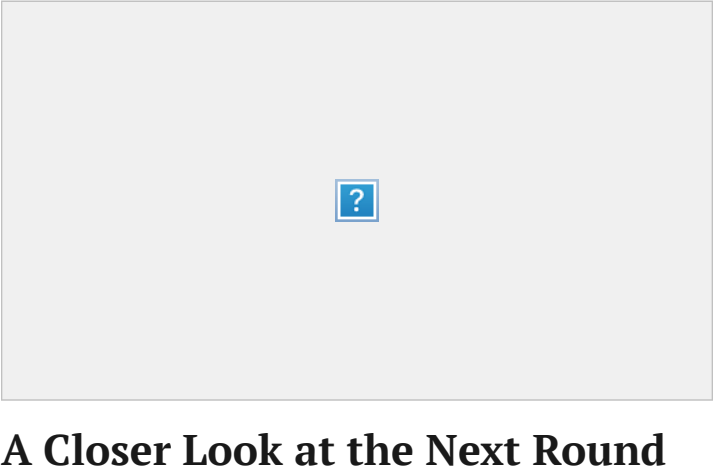
The joint statement by both governments reiterates Islamabad's current dependence on Beijing. Not only has Beijing prevented financial devastation in Pakistan and built infrastructure via the CPEC initiative, but Beijing's advice to Pakistan on the Jammu and Kashmir region is perhaps stronger evidence of the power dynamic between the two nations. Although the condemnation of unilateral power and advice to follow international conflict resolution norms may seem hypocritical when viewed from the lens of China's multiple territorial disputes, the messaging is clear: Pakistan is essential to Chinese foreign policy as a deterrent to India and alternative trade route, and poverty-stricken Pakistan is financially indebted to Beijing. Whether or not these talks between Pakistan and China will result in sustainable development along the CPEC or a resolution of the Pakistani-Indian conflict in Kashmir remains to be seen.


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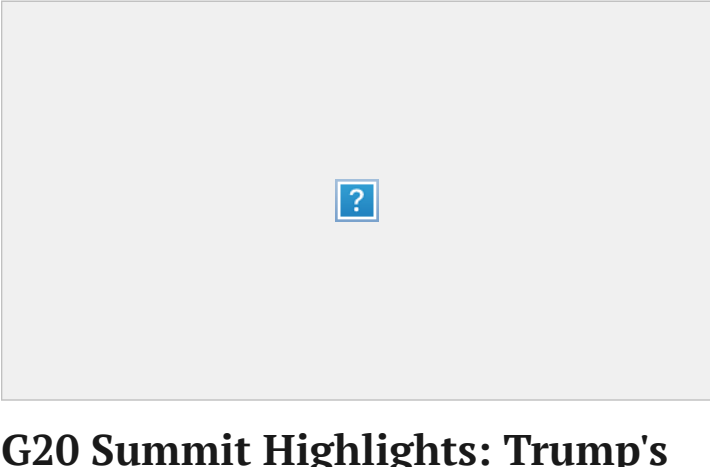
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