

COVID-19 CSSPR Webinar Series | University of Lahore

**Trilateral Security Dynamics in South Asia:
Future of Sino-Indo-Pak Relations post-Pandemic**

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in Conversation with

Pravin Sawhney

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CSSPR Webinar Report

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On May 18, 2020, the Center for Security, Strategy and Policy Research (CSSPR), University of Lahore conducted the second webinar of the COVID-19 CSSPR Webinar Series. The webinar titled “**Trilateral Security Dynamics in South Asia: Future of Sino-Indo-Pak Relations post-Pandemic**” featured a conversation with Pravin Sawhney, Editor of India’s premier defense magazine, *Force*, and author of “*Dragon on our Doorstep: Managing China Through Military Power.*” After organizing a webinar on May 5 on “**Kashmir in the Age of Detention: What Changes for the Kashmiris Pre and Post-Pandemic?**”, the idea behind this conversation was to understand how the trilateral security and strategic landscape will affect the future of conflict, including that in Kashmir and/or cooperation between China, India and Pakistan. Bringing his vast experience and scholarship to the discussion, Pravin Sawhney talked about the strategic matrix in South Asia and the repercussions of the transformative nature of the Sino-U.S. rivalry, and the standings of Pakistan and India on the military force-military power pendulum.

The conversation was moderated by Dr. Rabia Akhtar, Director CSSPR, University of Lahore. After giving his opening remarks, Pravin Sawhney was engaged in a Q&A session in which he answered questions posed by the moderator and attendees. The platform for the meeting was Zoom Webinar, and the two-hour -long event was live streamed on CSSPR’s Youtube Channel. The video of the webinar can be viewed here :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kn7y6Myzths>

Opening Remarks by the Moderator, Dr. Rabia Akhtar

Dr. Rabia Akhtar started the webinar by giving her opening remarks that contextualized the importance of discussing the trilateral security landscape in South Asia. Despite the fact that the world is faced with the COVID-19 pandemic that requires a unified fight by all countries, she stated that major powers are flexing their muscles for a showdown. She remarked that it appears as if COVID-19 has given a new reason and fresh impetus for the U.S. and China to take their rivalry to the next level which will be more dangerous. Dr. Akhtar stated that the effects of this growing acrimony on South Asia cannot be emphasized enough. She also highlighted that the strategic direction that the Indo-Sino-Pak trilemma takes will largely depend on how and who exercises power. Commenting on the two behemoth powers in the region, Dr. Akhtar said: “with India and China pitted against each other, the military power differential between the two will be meaningful to discuss.” While referring to Pravin Sawhney’s book *Dragon on our Doorstep* and its central thesis on the imperativeness of military power, Dr. Akhtar said that Pravin Sawhney is ideally positioned to talk about the very military imbalance. Pointing to the ongoing conflagration between China and India, Dr. Akhtar said that there are signs that the military gap is having an effect on how temperatures are rising between China and India up north. Noting the centrality of Pakistan in this trilateral equation, both as an ally and an adversary, Dr. Akhtar contended that Pravin's military power thesis is just what we all should be discussing to make sense of what is to come.

After making her opening observations on the subject, Dr. Akhtar quoted Sun Tzu, “**If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.**” and asked Pravin the following questions:

What does India not know after all these years of coexistence in this neighborhood about Pakistan and China? Does it not know itself? Does it not know its enemy? Or is it neither the enemy nor itself? Why are

you worried about India's inability to win a war with either China or Pakistan? What is the basis of your assessment? Take us through your concept of military force and military power?

Opening Remarks by Pravin Sawhney

Pravin started off his talk by highlighting the importance of understanding the evolving dynamics in the region by placing Beijing, New Delhi and Islamabad in a strategic matrix. Upfront, he dubbed China as a geostrategic player. According to Pravin, a country having the capacity, capabilities and the will to influence events outside its borders is a geostrategic player. While remarking on the difference between a geostrategic player and a major power, Pravin said that **while a geostrategic player is, indeed, a major power, a major power is not necessarily a geostrategic player.** Pravin added that along with China, America and Russia are geostrategic players, who would go on to shape the contours of geopolitics in the future.

Pravin reminded the audience that China had a meticulous and systematic approach towards shaping events outside its borders, reflecting the right mix of capabilities and willingness. China, Pravin argued, has a roadmap that is encapsulated in the "China Dream". And the mechanism to achieve that dream is the Belt and Road Initiative. The Digital Silk Road is one of the parts of the BRI that is given less attention as compared to that given to the part that deals with hard infrastructure. The Digital Silk Road has also eluded the focus of academia, and has hence merited lesser scholarship. Delving on the Digital Silk Road, Pravin said that it was added to the BRI in 2015. He highlighted the role that technology will play in adding to China's power by mentioning the induction of the technology road in the Digital Silk Road in 2019. He added that Beijing is looking at a set of technologies that also includes satellites and Artificial Intelligence (AI) to use through the Digital Silk Road map, and share with countries that are onboard BRI. All this is being done in a methodical manner within a timeframe, under a framework called "China Standards 2035".

Appreciating the foresight of the Chinese leadership, Pravin contended that a long-term strategic approach means that China will be able to set the global standards for the next-generation telecommunications, AI and other cutting-edge technologies like cloud-computing in the next 15 years. This will eventually, Pravin said, lead to the creation of global standards of how things are done. He believes that by setting new benchmarks and increasing share in the market, China will augment its interoperability and also collect huge amounts of data.

A comprehensive and inclusive plan in trade and commerce has really strengthened the BRI, said Pravin, while reminding that these additions have been made gradually. All of these standards will greatly help expand China's even-otherwise strong military. The military would be bolstered by improvements in kill chains, sensor-fusion and management, information-support and position navigating and timings of cruise and hypersonic missiles. All this, Pravin added, will enable China to add to its sets of inducements to BRI countries. He said that Beijing offers two things: prosperity and cooperative security. Pravin asserted that China would implore countries to join the BRI by not only showing them the next level and age of technology, but also allowing them to tread that path. China can persuade other countries by giving a very attractive package, while asking if any nation would refuse prosperity and security?"

After placing China in the strategic matrix, Pravin turned to Pakistan, perching it in the matrix as a geopolitical pivot. **A geopolitical pivot, Pravin explained, is a country that is attractive and needed by geopolitical players. He outlined Pakistan 's geography and its professional military as the factors that make Pakistan a pivot.**

Pravin said that these two pillars of strength will position Pakistan to be engaged by both Beijing and Washington. He also included Moscow in the list of powers that may engage Pakistan given that it is coming back in the game of geopolitics. Given these advantages that it has at its disposal, Pakistan has adopted a hedging strategy, which is ideal for Pakistan's security and foreign policies.

While placing India in the matrix, Pravin pointed to and critiqued India's contradiction in regard to its strategic thinking. He said that **India's hedging strategy does not go in-line with its strategic autonomy refrain.** Pravin emphatically said that **both cannot go hand in hand because India's proclamations of maintaining an autonomous foreign policy signal the Americans that it will not be a swing state in the Indian Ocean Region.**

He said that **this lack of clarity at the strategic level permeates down to the military level. The Indian military is unclear about the threat matrix. The military is also not conversant with the nature of war and the technology needed to fight that.** After juxtaposing the three countries in the matrix, Pravin said that **the game will be played in the Asia-Pacific theatre by the lone geostrategic power in the region which is China** not via trade war but through a war for technological supremacy. The war for technological ascendancy has been started by President Trump, but it will continue regardless of changes at the helm at the White House.

Assessing China's power mix in this war domain, Pravin expounded on its weaknesses in creating a formidable AI ecosystem. While it is good in the application of AI, the much-needed chip-sets and semiconductors that are integral to devising a well-knit ecosystem of AI, are all with the United States, and designed and manufactured in Taiwan and South Korea, respectively. He added that China does not have the software frameworks for AI algorithms, those are developed by Microsoft, Google and Apple, which are all American companies.

Those shortcomings notwithstanding, the Chinese have made the Americans jittery because of Huawei 5G technology. Pravin said that the Americans are perturbed about the Chinese setting standards and leading in this regard. Pravin linked the United States' denial of microelectronics and chips to the Chinese in an attempt to mitigate China's edge in 5G technologies.

This tiff will continue, allowing China to catch up and plug its deficiencies with regard to AI in the next 8 to 10 years. Pravin emphasized that China is fully cognizant of the need for upping its game in order to achieve self-sufficiency in AI.

After giving an overview of the imperatives of the Sino-U.S. rivalry, Pravin discussed the fallout of the shifting dynamics of this very competition in the region. This global war for technological ascendancy will have a bearing on the Asia-Pacific region and this would increase India's space to maneuver. Pravin lucidly analyzed the strategic landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. He stressed the need for dividing the region into two parts: Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Terming the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries as the fulcrum of the Western Pacific, Pravin assessed that China has firmly ensconced itself in that part of the theatre, since the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has already militarized it, reclaimed land and achieved its objectives. While the Americans keep talking about freedom of navigation, the Chinese have accomplished the task and taken control of the area.

Turning his attention towards the Indian Ocean, Pravin labeled South Asia as its pivot. He said that China has already made great inroads in the region, and countries barring India and Bhutan, are on board with China. Commenting on skepticism over the slow progress of BRI-related projects, Pravin again brought up the significance of the Digital Silk Road. Given that a security dimension is attached to the Digital Silk Road, Pakistan military will

be a vital cog in ensuring that this project succeeds and completes on time. In this backdrop and strategic milieu, Pravin underscored how India has been ensnared in a strategic cul-de-sac. He questioned India's lack of clarity and its hedging strategy vis-à-vis the technologically and militarily-powerful United States. He quipped as to how far India can go with such a strategy when its neighbourhood is insecure. Though he said that tensions and confrontation will continue, he ruled out the possibility of a halt in work on the BRI. He added that when we talk about the BRI, we essentially refer to the Digital Silk Road.

Turning to the question posed by Dr. Akhtar on his military power thesis postulated in his book, Pravin further explained as to why India cannot win a war against Pakistan, let alone China. Explaining that there are three levels of war, strategic, operational and tactical, Pravin argued that, **at the strategic level of war, Pakistan has an edge over India. Pakistan's advantage at the strategic level, he said, is the biggest reason why India's numerical advantage at the tactical level does not translate into one at the operational level.** He iterated that bean counting at the tactical level hardly matters. The operational and strategic levels matter, as decision-making is swifter and better when a country is strong at the strategic level. **Alluding to strengthening Sino-Pak military and strategic relations, Pravin ended his talk by saying that the ever-increasing interoperability between China and Pakistan, coupled with some reforms in the Pakistan military will help the latter take the lead over India at the operational level too.**

Q&A

Question: With Kashmir and Sino-U.S. rivalry being the two elements linking China, India and Pakistan, and military force-military power matrix being all-important in both cases, how do you link military power with India's ability to compel Pakistan and be the net-security provider for the United States in the Indian Ocean? How could all this affect the prospects of conflict-resolution in South Asia?

PS: There are three issues that need to be addressed in this question. On the issue of India being some sort of a net security provider in the region, **the Americans believe that India will work with them in the Indian Ocean Region.** However, **India also has a commitment towards maintaining an autonomous foreign policy.** So, **there is no question of India being a swing state, and working for the Americans.** We will continue having these talks and seminars, but at the end of the day, I am convinced that **India will not commit to any combat operations alongside America.** The other reason as to why India will not commit to doing this, is that **some in India have learnt the lessons from the Doklam Crisis of 2017. The lesson was clear and unambiguous: each country has to look after its own security; the Americans won't come to help you against China.**

On the question of resolving the Kashmir dispute and the U.S.-China equation, there are two important things that have happened after August 5 that most people do not know, but which, to my mind, India needs to consider very seriously. The first important development was when, during his visit to India for the Chennai Summit, President Xi talked at length about the trilateral equation and cooperation between the three countries in a one-on-one with the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. This was not reported in the press until it was divulged by China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi. This is significant because **he did not talk about mediation; he talked about cooperation.** It is also noteworthy that prior to President Xi's visit to India for the Chennai Summit, Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan visited China, and had an audience with President Xi; the Pakistan Army Chief, General Bajwa also visited China. Basically, the Chinese were well-updated and informed, and that is when they decided to convey this at the highest level to India. I think this was very significant.

The second significant thing that happened was the week-long visit of General Xu Qiliang, Vice Chairman of Central Military Commission (CMC) to Pakistan. He met all the three service chiefs, Prime Minister and the President. Here we are talking about nothing but interoperability, which goes up to the next level. **The kinds of capabilities that China can offer would need some military reforms in Pakistan, else, it would be difficult for the Pakistan military to fully gear itself for the changing nature and conduct of war.** This is why I had mentioned military reforms in Pakistan in my talk earlier. Also, **India's army-only mindset needs to recede.** So, these two things have happened post-August 5th. China has been very vocal. It was the only country which condemned what India did on August 5; I think the first statement came out after 48 hours. Despite Indian Foreign Minister saying that things have not changed on ground (in Ladakh), the Chinese remained unhappy; they can never be happy. So essentially, **the Chinese are not happy; the public-private partnership has grown very thick, and interoperability will increase.** The results of all this will show in the coming years. These factors were not thought through when the government took the August 5 decision.

Question: If China takes a lead role in global affairs in the post-pandemic world, the conventional thought processing in India would be that Pakistan will be beefed up and harbored vigorously to tackle its enemy. Do you see this mindset developing? Also, do you see a trilateral approach coming in, given the conspicuous strategic and ideological contradiction ?

PS: To be honest, the pandemic has got to do with the way we work. Let's keep it out of the equation; life does not stop. If life has to continue like it is right now, then the violations on the LoC will continue like they did before. As a strategy, violations make sense; the strategy is a good one. There is nothing that India can do about them, as the two sides are matched at the operational level of war. In India, however, we need to re-evaluate and review things, but we are not doing that.

On the Kashmir issue, looking at the bigger picture is important. In a decade or so, India might be surrounded by all BRI countries with PLA also being there under the cooperative security model. This cannot be ruled out. When everyone talks about connectivity, why do we as neighbors and countries that are poor cannot talk? It is not important as to whether it is bilateral or trilateral, what is instrumental is the political will on both sides. The earlier we talk, the better it is. There is no other way to go about it. We could continue with our tirade and recrimination, but if we are fixated on giving peace and better lives to our citizens, we need to talk. **The LoC has to disappear one day; we need to find a solution with mutual respect and mutual accommodation.**

Question: Is India again on the wrong side of history as far as its alliances are concerned by allowing the U.S. to use it as a balancer to China, depriving itself of the opportunity to seize the moment and rise as a power?

I will answer this question by giving some key points. **India has to be clear about its strategic identity, vision and direction. Are we a regional power, an aspiring regional power or a major power? This means that we need to do away with our aberrations between an autonomous foreign policy and a hedging strategy. If we could resolve this problem, I foresee great cooperation with China.** As of today, India believes that somehow it can boost its economic power and match China. However, **there is no competition between India and China; the Chinese are competing with the Americans.** Avenues of cooperation will open up if we realize this fact. **India has to correct its configuration of national power; it has to dovetail the technological preponderance with its traditional hard power. We cannot ignore the quest for technological dominance. If we don't up our game in**

this regard, and continue with our muddled strategic thought, we will certainly be on the wrong side of our national interests.

Question: What is this Indian obsession of beating down Pakistan?

This is not an obsession; it is a narrative that garners political mileage and benefits. As far as I am concerned, if we could beat Pakistan, all this terrorism hoopla would have ended long ago. We must understand why countries go to war. The reason is the failure of negotiations and diplomacy. Therefore, a war must have political objectives. When it comes to Pakistan, India does not have a political objective. All that it wants is an end to proxy war. However, this is what India has to think about. Lo and behold, India cannot defeat Pakistan, for the latter is becoming stronger by the day. Pakistan, as I said before, has many strongpoints, including its attractiveness in the region, and the support from China. It is a 2:1 advantage in favor of Pakistan, at the end of the day. So, **this Pakistan-centric hysteria is nothing but a political narrative.**

Question: What do you mean by interoperability? Why do you see Pakistan and China working together in combat, and what is your evidence for it?

PS: It must be stated that it is in the interest of Beijing and Islamabad to have peace with India. That said, the desire for peace and stability does not preclude them from building-up their capabilities. Both countries have identified India as a problem. India is a problem for itself, owing to its incoherent strategic identity and thought. This interoperability is growing. First, let me tell you **what interoperability is. There are four elements in it. The first is the commonality of equipment.** As of today, Pakistanis are getting lots of equipment from the Chinese. **The second is the unlimited supply of products. The third is the harmony in the concepts and doctrines of how wars should be fought. The fourth constituent is how training and exercises are conducted.** There is ample evidence to corroborate that both countries are organizing exercises. Both countries are jointly testing war scenarios in exercises like the Shaheen, for example. Then PLAN and the Pakistan Navy are also doing exercises together.

Given that CPEC is the flagship of the BRI, a project that is enshrined in the Constitution of the CPC, China has invested a lot of prestige in Pakistan. This, coupled with the fact that both countries take serious exceptions to what India did on August 5, 2019 is likely to take the partnership to the next level, which would be marked by the Digital Silk Road. The focus would shift towards 5G and satellites. So, whenever Pakistan decides to elevate itself to the next stage, it will have to come to grips with networking, for that would be critical. The subsequent network-centric warfare between India and Pakistan would make cutting-edge non-kinetic capabilities all the more indispensable. Networks would be exposed to non-kinetic threats like cyber-attacks and electronic warfare. I expect that the PLA will share and is already sharing these capabilities with the Pakistan military. For Pakistan to pounce on the bonanza, it will have to undergo rigorous reforms. The war is going in a very different direction. While India and Pakistan are still struggling to create synergy amongst its services, China has an elaborate system of networks. China has a network from the satellite through which it would fight a war. The Chinese have created a mesh satellite system in the lower-earth orbit to account for cyber-attacks. They are developing a string of quantum sensors. They are also working on war clouds. I believe this would be shared with the Pakistan military on a need-to-know-basis. Let me remind you that the MOUs signed during the visit of Pakistan's President to China, were seemingly about "China Standards 2035." The MOUs include the mechanisms for the transfer of technologies for commercial as well as military purposes.

Question: What do you make of India's constant threats of reclaiming Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). What are your comments on Gen. Rawat's views about India fighting a two and a half-front war?

PS: The two sides are matched at the campaign level. How can we reclaim those places when we haven't been able to stop a proxy war? These statements are political in nature, and for domestic consumption. I can covet all that I want, but I can't attain anything sans capabilities. You can only have a political object that is achievable. Thus, I will leave that for social media to fight and decide as to how we can take those areas back.

On the question of the two-front war, I would say that we have two major problems. We are not certain as to whether it is a war capability-building plan or a warfighting plan. These two things are very different. However, I am assuming that it is a capability-building plan, given that the military leadership did not attach a timeline to its work on preparedness. Either way, it is troublesome. We must understand that India has been facing a two-pronged dilemma since the very beginning. Since the time when the then Indian Army Chief, Gen. Deepak Kapoor articulated his thoughts about a two-front war in 2009, a lot has changed with respect to technology, interoperability and relations between Beijing and Islamabad. The two-front war concept is outdated. Also, India does not realize that the algorithm war China is preparing for, is an entirely different ballgame. While the media can go gung-ho about this term, it is all but redundant, something that someone should remind the current Chief of Defense Staff, Gen. Bipin Rawat about. Thus, it is a military slogan rather than being anything substantive.

Question: Other than an identity crisis, does India have civil-military confusion or rift, too? If yes, who is winning this battle of ideologies in India?

PS: Let me elucidate what I said about the identity crisis in my previous answer. **I discussed the absence of strategic thought in India when it comes to foreign policy and strategy. I was referring to the confusion in the policy circles about India's foreign policy that has significantly enervated its power. I was not pointing towards the identity crisis based on India's ideological groundings but at the strategic level.**

I would firmly state there is no civil-military rift in India. It is simply because the political dispensation in India is strong, and the Indian military has always been subservient. Stories do appear here and there; some also talk about the prospects of a coup in India. Let me explain as to why nothing of this sort can happen. **The Indian Army comprises manpower from all across India. Who will that military leader be who would rally behind support from everyone? Whatever the military is doing has political ratification. To analyze Indian decisions, don't look towards the military.**

Question: You had talked about the need for military reforms in Pakistan if the country wants to attune to the changing nature of war. What kinds of reforms are you referring to?

PS: We first need to look at the difference in approaches followed by China and those adopted by India and Pakistan. India and Pakistan still believe that the army, navy and air force are the three main war domains. For them, **the other domains like cyber, space and electronic warfare are but supporting arms rather than being a force by themselves. They are just deemed as force-multipliers. The Chinese see things differently. They have four domains of war; the Americans have six.** So the question is as to what are the capabilities that can be shared without a show of hand. Here, we need to bring to table a discussion about the cyber domain. Nobody in India understands the magnitude of cyber capabilities and the threat they pose. Cyber capabilities percolate across various

battlefields. **I believe cyber-attacks are more lethal than nuclear attacks, as they have the propensity to bring an entire nation to a standstill.** China, indeed, has that capacity, as of today. Space is another domain, which has much more than a kinetic side to it. The point is how Pakistan will acquire these revolutionary weapons, both kinetic and non-kinetic. Pakistan requires to put in place mechanisms that can help it optimize these capabilities. Battles and campaigns are better fought when war materiel is optimally utilized. For that to happen, a process of reforms must be started.

Question: How does the competition in the South China Sea affect the chances of trilateralism in South Asia, as India ratchets up the issues in the South China Sea in all multilateral settings?

PS: India is joining countries that are demanding investigations on the origins of the Coronavirus. India has been buoyed by the United States that has given it a sense of importance by renaming Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. The Indians can now also term ASEAN central to their foreign policy. However, bereft of capabilities and hard power, all this hardly matters. It could make for good, high-pitched diplomacy, though. I think this hardly complicates the situation. The Chinese are not like India and Pakistan who match caliber to caliber on the LoC. The Chinese approach things in a diametrically different manner. The Chinese see the big board and where they can constrain and pin down the opponent. The idea is to look at the bigger picture and the point where the adversary can be hurt in the long run. That is what exactly the Chinese have done in the South China Sea. **The Chinese have put all kinds of weapons in the South China Sea, including a floating nuclear plant. For all the talk of American missiles, China has broken out of the Western Pacific and entered the Indian Ocean, that too without a fight.** So, we must be clear on the fact that **China looks at the strategic level; it bides time and prefers to win without fighting.**

Question: What are your views on Fifth-Generation Warfare (5GW)? With the 5GW intensifying between India and Pakistan, will China come into it and what could be some of the dimensions of that intervention?

PS: There is something called ‘hybrid war’. The Chinese term it unrestricted war, under which all kinds of conflicts and wars fall. 5GW is simply a nuance. However, owing to the social media colossuses, the information war has come to the fore. China has a structure for this, known as the Strategic Support Force. Within this scaffold, the Chinese have included space, electronic warfare, cyber and psychological operations. That said, the algorithm war will be the future of warfare. Information war will, indeed, play a pivotal role, going forward. However, the coming war would make machines fairly autonomous by making them more intelligent.

Question: How do you look at the growing Sino-U.S. Cold War that features a competition between the United States’ militarization of allies and China’s soft inducements? Will it be difficult for the Americans to woo their partners at a time when they are appreciative of China’s economic overtures?

PS: I have a problem with naming the Sino-U.S. acrimony “Cold War”. Where are the proxies and the Iron Curtain? **In a globalized world, there is no longer a war per se. It is a quest for leading in the race for technology.** We should not cling onto the remnants of the Cold War. Now, we are talking about connectivity; people are worried about disruptions in supply chains. **For the want of a better term, let’s call this war the ‘War of Supremacy’.**

As for the Sino-U.S. competition post-pandemic, one would be remiss if one does not delve on the problems in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. **Unlike the BRI that offers prosperity and cooperative security, the Indo-Pacific Strategy only caters for security.** The Trans-Pacific Partnership, a framework that provided a modicum of economic

perquisites, was abandoned by President Trump. It must be stressed that Beijing is working at two levels. China doesn't want to subvert the current architecture. As a matter of fact, it is solidifying it. China is providing aid to 80 countries during this pandemic, while the United States is in doldrums, as a result of the pandemic. China's erection of new edifices, under the BRI arrangement, is not destabilizing the present groupings. For example, China is the second biggest contributor to the United Nations System.

In such a scenario, one could look at the efficacy of the U.S.-led associations' with some skepticism. Have blocs like the Quad conclusively chosen an enemy? What is the threat that they are encountering? Of course, we don't want to go the China route, and want democracies to continue. However, how is this Quad helping you? **All these cohorts are fine but cannot gain potency absent the inclusion of comprehensive and attractive packages for other countries.** I don't see that happening due to China's lead in some areas and the ongoing election season in the United States.

Question: With the Kashmir issue being one of the deadlocks that is likely to bring both India and Pakistan back to a traditional military confrontation, regardless of the trajectory of technological advancements, where do you see it headed?

PS: Let me say that a war between India and Pakistan is completely ruled. Both sides are matched at the operational level. What will you fight for? During Balakot, neither side wanted escalation, and rightly so. The Balakot episode signified that both countries did not and do not want war. Going to war without political aims, will leave us strategically and economically poorer. Economies are wrecked by adopting such a policy. Also, I don't see China allowing Pakistan to go to war with India. It must be stated that the Balakot Crisis was a different case. Given the centrality of airpower at the operational level in the current war between the two countries, it was of import that Pakistan retaliated and showed its capabilities. In the process, it exposed some glaring weaknesses of the Indian Air Force. The question of whether all this could lead to war is an academic one. These altercations won't lead to war. It must be stressed that India's actions in Kashmir have exposed the interior lines. It will be difficult now for India to shift the onus of protecting the interior lines of communication to the paramilitary forces.

As for the Kashmir dispute, it is a dispute that is with the United Nations. Also, it is a veritable reality that India, Pakistan and China hold territory. This is why President Xi's remarks of cooperation at the trilateral level should have rung bells within India. We all know what is happening in Kashmir. From a military standpoint, the situation is getting all the more daunting. At the geopolitical level, China is becoming aggressive by the day.

Question: How do you assess the recent skirmishes between China and India, under a nuclear overhang at a time when the PLA is showing an increasingly aggressive behavior? Also, what future do you see for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), under the twin-challenges stemming from opposition by India and the United States?

PS: **There is no need to bring in the nuclear umbrella in the Sino-Indo equation because it does not exist. There is a lot that the PLA can do; it has so much non-nuclear deterrence.** The Chinese are not bothered about our INS Arihant or the follow-on vessels. In fact, these weapons are our vulnerability now. It is unfortunate that India cited China as the reason for its nuclear tests. India's nuclear policy states that nuclear weapons are for deterrence, and not for warfighting. However, the Chinese are not deterred. So, what are nuclear weapons doing if they are not deterring ?

Now, let's talk about what is happening on the ground. All this is more than tactics; it is military coercion whereby the PLA brings its entire weight to the point. Yes, the pinpricks on the LoC fall under tactics. Insofar as Sino-India flare-up is concerned, it is more about a military line that has not been demarcated and defined. The Chinese then bring their entire military war wherewithal to that line and show that to the Indians.

Coming to your point on CPEC, my sense is that the focus is now not on hard infrastructure. Now, the focus of the BRI has shifted towards the Digital Silk Road and the computational components of the project. The issues with CPEC are more about your internal political bickering; the jostling is over who gets what. I would again repeat that **one of the pillars of your power is the Pakistan military. The military will be duly focused on the Digital Silk Road given its beneficial military dimensions.** This is why I think this gargantuan project will work. If it still doesn't, then people at the helm of affairs in Pakistan must think long and hard.

On Washington's criticism and pressure on CPEC, I think the Chinese are unfazed about that. The United States' pressure is receding, given the administration's urgency to pull out of Afghanistan .

I want to clarify that I did not talk about an identity crisis, in some of my previous responses. I was critiquing the lack of a coherent strategic thought and vision in India, owing to conflicting narratives. Also, given that I am conversant with the culture and demography of the Indian military, I can say with certitude that the politicians decide how and when military force and power is to be used.

Conclusion

At the end, Dr. Akhtar sought Pravin's prognosis of the future of this trilateral relations, Sino-Indo bilateral and the Indo-Pak bilateral. While listing all the encumbrances and logjams involved in Indo-Pak relations, Dr. Akhtar asked Pravin as to whether there is space for an Indo-Pak dialogue, going forward.

PS: You have raised two brilliant points. Let me start with the bilateral one first. As I said, **India has a hedging strategy, and is hedging its bets on both the United States and China. This is because we have a territorial dispute with China; the northern borders are our Achilles heels.** So, if that appropriate push comes at an appropriate time, I see no reason why both countries will not talk. I know Pakistan is ready for talks. Dialogue is difficult but not impossible. Nobody knows how the situation unfolds and the geopolitical equation turns out to be between the U.S. and China after the pandemic. Could something then compel or push India to start talks with Pakistan? We don't have an answer for that, as yet. We have to start the talks. Nobody expects miraculous breakthroughs in a short period of time, but still, we must sit down and talk. We must talk about resolution, not CBMs.

On your question about trilateralism, I would say it is actually trilateral because the Chinese are no longer a phantom or a shadow. They are real; they are here. In the next five years, the Indians will see them here. They will get everything. Along with the BRI and the Digital Silk Road will come everything, to include the cooperative security model, PLAN ships and PLAAF aircraft. This is why we need to think ahead. This also convinces me that India needs to jump up and say that it wants to mend fences with Pakistan. We need to shed light on what is transpiring between India and China. Whilst India has rebuked BRI, China has taken out the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor from the list of BRI projects. Instead, they have brought two more corridors within the BRI framework, to include the China-Nepal corridor and the China-Myanmar corridor. Now, they have three corridors including CPEC. What is India doing? Indians also need money and prosperity. Chinese FDI is coming into India

rapidly. They are investing in our projects; our Chief Ministers are meeting their counterparts. The whole idea of BRI was to sit and talk about cooperation. This can only happen if India understands that it is not in competition with China. The Chinese would not wait for us to catch up; they are in competition with the Americans. **As a strategy watcher, it is my conviction that every day not talking to Pakistan is a loss to India's national interests and for better lives for the Indians.** We can cope and cooperate with China if we resolve the issues on the LoC. We never know, the situation on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) may ameliorate. However, India's dichotomy in its strategic thought and orientation is one of the biggest impediments to starting a dialogue process with Pakistan.