



Has the US-China Cold War begun already?

Implications for Pakistan

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This report is a summary of an online panel discussion held by IPR on 2 July 2020. The speakers were:

- *Mr. Riaz Khokhar, Former Ambassador & Foreign Secretary*
- *Mr. Anatol Lieven, Professor George Town University, Qatar*
- *Lt. General (Rtd) Asad Durrani, Former DG ISI & Ambassador*
- *Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan, Chairman & CEO, IPR*

Moderator: Ashraf M. Hayat, IPR

Mr. Riaz Khokhar

Observations:

- One period of the 'Cold War' was closed with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but now it seems there is an effort to initiate a new 'Cold War' industry. Objectively speaking, there are not any cogent reasons for initiating another intense power competition. The state of the international order, which is in flux, is cause for concern.

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- The COVID-19 pandemic has completely transformed the current situation in the world, there is great unhappiness that the international community has not been able to come together on this issue. Mainly because the principal actor in the world, the United States (US), abandoned its responsibility as a global leader.
- The current US policies are unpredictable and are more about seeking electoral gains in the upcoming elections. With the elections a few months away, the US President may have to act tough against China to appease his nationalist supporters.
- Secondly, President Trump has not seen any foreign policy success so far. For example, President Trump's attempt of rapprochement with North Korea turned out to be a failure with no results. Instead, he has walked out of countless international agreements and treaties.
- At the moment, there seems to be a great psychosis against the Chinese across the United States. Recent surveys taken inside the US also suggest that more than 66% of the US population holds a negative view about China.
- However, if you look at the situation objectively, the threat from China seems to be blown out of proportion. If you look at China's record since 1949, it has never carried out wars of

aggression against its neighbors or other countries in the region. Except with the war against India in 1962 (that too due to India's belligerence), China has only engaged in minor skirmishes.

- At the moment it seems that the US is enforcing its new national security doctrine, prepared under the previous administration of President Obama, which is containment of China.
- The world needs to accept the fact that China has risen and it has a right to find its place under the sun. This does not necessarily mean that China intends to uproot the existing international order. Instead, they want to negotiate and discuss how the new world order is going to be designed. We are shifting towards a multipolar world, and it is going to be more chaotic.
- In the Pacific, it is the US that is pressurizing China, through its military presence and formulating alliances such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. As a result, the Chinese are somewhat under pressure.
- In response, the Chinese have come up with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a geo-economic and geo-political concept to breakthrough and develop interconnectivity throughout Eurasia. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor is an important part of the larger BRI project.
- The recent Sino-Indian clash is a result of India changing the status quo of occupied Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, by converting the area into Union territory. On top of that, the Indian Home Minister made a speech in the Lok Sabha claiming that India was now prepared to recapture parts of Azad Kashmir, Gilgit Baltistan and also Aksai Chin (which is under China's control).
- China's reacted strongly to India's move in occupied Kashmir. They made it clear that China will be forced to take action to safeguard its interests if the Indians did not reconsider their position regarding Aksai Chin and Ladakh.

- Between August 2019 and March 2020, China could not have acted militarily because the area is inhospitable and could not be accessed due to freezing temperatures. Warm weather allowed both sides to commence patrolling and started constructing forward outposts which caused the eventual clash.
- India has been relentless in its oppression in occupied Kashmir and is guilty of genocide and massacre of innocent Kashmiris. It's hostility towards Pakistan and the continuous flare up on the Line of Control is a testament to its aggressive intent for the region.

Mr. Anatol Lieven

- One hopes that a new Cold War can be avoided but it seems that there is a bipartisan consensus in the US to head towards that direction. Therefore we cannot look for much change, irrespective of who wins in the upcoming elections.
- An important fact to remember is that there are great differences in the current situation and the previous 'cold war'.
- Firstly, the US and the Soviet Union (USSR) had virtually no economic relations. Whereas China and the US are economically integrated and inter-dependent.
- Secondly, the threat of Soviet Communism presented a direct threat to the elites of almost every kind all over the world. It was an economic threat to capitalism, it was a threat to traditional landed elites and also a threat to traditional cultural and religious elites. China, is not that kind of threat at all. So the US cannot rely on the same range of local allies as it could against the USSR.
- Lastly, in the past, the US used to be a much more bellicose and self-confident power. Not just bellicose in word, but bellicose in deed. If one remembers, the US did not hesitate to engage in military interventions around the world during that period.

- If you look at the US today, there is a striking difference. The aftermath of the failure in the Vietnam war has left a deep impact on US public and its military and political establishment. The US now suffers from a 'Vietnam syndrome', the fear of massive casualties in an unending war.
- This fear may have been suspended for a few years due to the shock caused by the 9/11 attacks, which the Bush administration used a pretext to initiate military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. But both these wars led to the same results as in Vietnam and now there is tremendous bipartisan opposition in the US public and even in the military establishment for military adventurism in the future.
- Regarding the recent Sino-Indian tensions, the key question will be just how far the US will go in supporting and backing India, as part of the US strategy to counter China.
- There are two factors that need to be kept in mind. First, the Indians will do well to keep in mind that when push came to shove, the US only talked about alliances, and when the real risks appeared, did nothing to help. If the Indians think that the US will help them militarily in Aksai Chin or Arunachal Pradesh against China, they are in for a very big disappointment.
- Secondly, Indians have always had this intense sense of belief of becoming a great power. However, the US is incapable of treating any other country as an equal or truly as an ally. The US always prefers to dominate in any partnership it establishes. This aspect is psychologically and politically unacceptable for the Indians.
- Pakistan's role in the growing rivalry between the US and China is going to become extremely complicated and could lead to a potentially dangerous situation. But it also presents potential advantages, as we have seen through the initiation of the CPEC project. However, despite the rhetoric of the Pakistani media and perception in Pakistan that China is an ally, there is no formal agreement or treaty between two countries to assist each other militarily in an event of war. China did not intervene militarily in 1965 or 1971 against

India. Therefore, China views Pakistan as important strategic partner, but offers no support militarily, as of yet.

- The most important thing of all, is that when it comes to international policy towards China and the US, the political and military establishment in Pakistan must continue to maintain a united policy, (which it has managed to do so far). The most disastrous thing for Pakistan would be if this rivalry were to spread to Pakistan's internal politics.

Lt. General (Rtd) Asad Durrani

- It seems that the US and China are heading towards a 'Thucydides trap', which is when a rising power threatens to displace the ruling power and the end result is war. Whatever that is happening between the US and China, it seems that a conflict is almost inevitable.
- It was Pakistan that initiated China's relationship with the US in the aftermath of the Soviet-Sino split. At that time, this trilateral understanding was considered to be good for all parties involved. China benefited tremendously on the economic front as it got the opportunity to rapidly modernize its economy, whereas the US started to become economically dependent on China for cheap labour.
- China presents a different dimension of challenge to US hegemony. After the initial cooperation, this rivalry was bound to happen because of the way China has transformed not only its economy, but its geo-political relationship with the rest of the world. China's emergence as a great power was going to raise these concerns in the US.
- The next phase that we should expect, and are already witnessing, is the formulation of alliances and counter alliances. Currently, we have four powers on one side, led by the US then followed by Japan, Australia, and India (the Quad). In response, China is positioning itself to ally with Russia, Pakistan and possibly Iran in case if intense power competition is involved.

Mr. Humayun Akhtar Khan

- This is a rivalry whose evolution may determine how events unfold in the coming years, for the world in general and our region, in particular. And though the competition between US and China seems an uneven one, it is nonetheless real.
- So far, Pakistan has done a commendable job of not allowing its relations with one country to impact on the other. I hope Pakistan will try to stay with this strategy.
- Of late, USA and China have visibly hardened their positions. In normal times, a pandemic would have deepened cooperation between all countries for a common strategy against the virus. As it turns out, it has bred acrimony and a traffic in conspiracy theories. In USA, credible thinkers and academia have talked about the inevitability of a conflict between the two countries. China too has shown that it would not easily balk. Whether the rhetoric in USA moderates after the elections is something that we may hope for, but is not guaranteed.
- For our region, this is a vital issue and holds the key to how our part of the world evolves. There is the promise arising from considerations of geography, connectivity and shifting economic gravity. Until now, many people thought that prosperity in the region is possible depending on whether its leaders agree to work together and how each country takes up internal reforms.
- But a lose-lose rivalry between two world powers, that could unravel the global trade and investment infrastructure, carefully put together since the 1950s, and which could conceivably divide the world economy into two competing camps would be a setback. To begin with, it would diminish both US and China. And it will hurt all economies.
- Added to this is the risk of South Asian countries taking sides in the rivalry. That could slowdown progress in our region even more. As it is, SAARC, in whatever form it still exists, is the least integrated region in the world.