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## **On Track for Cold War With China**

The rivalry between the U.S. and China colors everything in the Indo-Pacific, including the chances of another India-Pakistan war.



Military personnel check passports at the Attari-Wagah border crossing near Amritsar, India, April 27.  
PHOTO: ANUSHREE FADNAVIS/REUTERS

### Full text:

It's been another barnburner week in world politics, and for a change some of the biggest events were neither generated by nor centered on [Donald Trump](#).

Not that America's president didn't make waves. Tariffs rose and fell with the usual dizzying speed, and the trade standoff between the U.S. and China began to register in collapsing demand for shipping containers and airfreight deliveries. A dramatic mini-summit between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and President Trump in St. Peter's Basilica heralded a possible thaw in U.S.-Ukrainian relations as more Trump officials expressed frustration with the Kremlin's response to American peace proposals.

While Canada and Australia concluded election campaigns in which Mr. Trump's unpopularity drove the debate, the Trump administration announced an overhaul of the State Department and reversed plans to strip thousands of foreign students of their visas.

Not all the big news stories, however, bore Mr. Trump's fingerprints. An explosion of reportedly Chinese-delivered chemicals used for solid missile fuel devastated Iran's largest port. A terror attack on tourists in Kashmir, with gunmen reportedly shooting people who couldn't or wouldn't recite Islamic verses, left 26 dead as tensions between India and Pakistan soared to their highest levels in a quarter-century. With India threatening military strikes and cuts to river flows from India-controlled areas into Pakistan, the potential for war between two nuclear-armed powers is real.

Meantime, Chinese state media announced that Beijing's coast guard raised the Chinese flag over Sandy Cay, an uninhabited sandbank in a reef strategically located less than 3 miles from a Philippine military outpost. The Philippines responded by raising its own flag on Sandy Cay. Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has begun a visit to Southeast Asia in hope of countering the rise of Chinese influence across the region.

The cascade of events sometimes feels overwhelming, but 100 days into the second Trump administration, some patterns are becoming clear. The Indo-Pacific region has emerged as the most important arena in world politics. The multidimensional competition between the U.S. and China is the dominant force in the unfolding politics of the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. is responding more vigorously but also more chaotically to Chinese competition than ever before, and China is working harder than ever to secure its economic and geopolitical position in the region and beyond.

World tensions are rising, not falling. The danger that escalating tensions between the two superpowers and their associates could trigger a war that nobody wants is more prevalent than ever. Neither China nor the U.S. at this point wants to turn their Cold War hot. Even so, their rivalry increases the escalatory potential of crises wherever their interests collide.

Take the latest crisis between India and Pakistan. Both countries may be more willing than usual to risk a serious conflict. Pakistan resents what it believes is India's support of secessionist rebels in its western province of Balochistan. At a time of serious internal dissension, Islamabad might welcome a confrontation with New Delhi that unites Islamist and nationalist Pakistanis against their foreign foe. And on India's part, the attack in Kashmir calls into question the success of the Bharatiya Janata Party government's policy of trying to integrate Kashmir into the rest of the country. BJP supporters will believe that the challenge demands a strong response, and the opposition will be quick to pounce on any perceived weakness or hesitation. India fears what it sees as the rise of pro-Pakistani Islamist forces in Bangladesh and might hope that a crushing military strike on Pakistani soil would re-establish Pakistani respect for Indian red lines.

Pakistan is weaker and poorer than India. It could ask its Chinese friends for arms, money and diplomatic support. China, unwilling to see an ally humiliated and wanting to put pressure on both India and the U.S., might be responsive. This assurance of support would lead Pakistan to take a tougher stand against India and respond more forcefully to any Indian retaliation for the massacre in Kashmir.

Any sign that Chinese aid to Pakistan could tilt the military or political balance against India would cause a crisis in New Delhi, and the Indians would look to America for support. Responding favorably to India's requests might heighten the risk of nuclear war in South Asia, but an American failure to rally to India's side at a critical moment would cause lasting harm to one of Washington's critical relationships in the Indo-Pacific.

Ugly dilemmas like that were commonplace in the Cold War. We must expect more of them as the world lurches toward Cold War II.