

Magnifying Chinese presence in South Asia and the Indian Ocean: Decoding its Consequences for India

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INTRODUCTION

The South Asia- China ties have been in place since very ancient times although they were primarily in the domain of religion and culture (Singh, 2003). Their interaction was decisively impacted upon by the British rule over the Indian sub-continent (ibid). The ties have come a very long way in contemporary times as China has sought to reach out to the South Asian countries with clear-cut strategic focus aided by its nuanced diplomacy. China has consciously developed ties of enormous significance with countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Maldives etc. in the region. "South Asia ranks third in importance after the Northeast and Southeast Asian regions in China's Asia policy" (Malik, 2001:73). It is quite pertinent to mention here:

"Indeed, for reasons of geography, history and politics, South Asia remains a very unique segment of China's foreign policy-making just as China remains integral to South Asian reality and ethos. Since ancient times, South Asia was the only periphery of China which was never described as one inhabited by barbarians yet-to-be-civilized. Instead thanks to the influence and linkages of Buddhism, this subcontinent was always revered as Tian Zhu (western heaven) in Chinese commentaries and epics" (Singh, 2003:11).

The 'geographic proximity' between China and South Asia facilitates ties between them (Werake, 1990:55). "China's bilateral relations with South Asian countries are not marred by the baggage of history and nation-building, which impinge heavily on India's relations with its neighbours" (Wagner, 2016:308). Thus, we see that these factors facilitate China's entry into South Asia.

This article looks at decisive Chinese presence in the South Asian region and the Indian Ocean with their resultant implications on India. Apart from China's presence in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh this article looks into the emerging contours of China's relations with Bhutan and Maldives. The recent events like the Doklam crisis with subsequent opening of boundary negotiations between China and Bhutan and the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Maldives and China are of enormous significance as far the competitive chessboard of South Asian geopolitics is concerned.

Analysing China's South Asia Policy :

The emergence of China as formidable variable in the geopolitics of South Asia has been an issue of titanic significance. Traditionally, China has had an 'India-centric' and 'security-centric' vision of South Asia (Singh 2003). A very renowned scholar, Mohan Malik (2001:74-75) has given the following features of China's South Asia policy:

[Firstly, a key feature of Beijing's South Asia policy has been its 'India-centric' approach, which, in turn, has seen military links with India's neighbours dominating the policy agenda.

Secondly, boundary disputes have shaped China's relations with South Asia.

Thirdly, of all China's relations with South Asian states, those with Pakistan outweigh and overlay any other bilateral relationship.

Fourthly, China remains a major economic aid donor to Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Beijing's economic ties with South Asian states supplement and reinforce its military security objectives and goals.]

The 'connection between China's two problematic regions- Xinjiang and Tibet- with the South Asian region' has also conditioned the contours of China's South Asia policy (Panda, 2010:305). China successfully getting an observer status in the SAARC in 2005 with the able support of India's neighbours was a major milestone in its outreach towards South Asia (ibid). "China's foreign and defence policy initiatives are quite obviously designed to marginalise India in the long-term and reduce India to the status of a sub-regional power by increasing Chinese influence and leverage in the South Asian region" (Kanwal, 1999:1721). However, "India should break out of the claustrophobic confines of South Asia" (Gupta, 1997:309).

The post-cold war era led to a reorientation in Chinese foreign policy (Chen, 1993:240-241). One such change was 'the pursuit of good-neighbor relations with surrounding countries' (ibid). Another scholar has rightly mentioned:

"In the past, Chinese leaders formulated China's foreign policy according to their world view and analysis of global contradictions. There was a neglect of a coherent regional policy. This omission began to be remedied in the 1990s, given the Chinese leadership's recognition of the increasing significance of economic regionalism and regional trading blocs" (Cheng, 2008:237-38).

China in the Indian Ocean :

As a part of clear-cut strategy, China has increased its presence in the region. "China's maritime relations with South Asia are interpreted as part of a perceived 'Chinese encirclement' of India" (Fernando, 2012:462). "The articulation of China's 'string of pearls' brings into sharp focus the maritime dimension of this 'encirclement'" (ibid). Regarding the strategic rationale of China's presence in the Indian Ocean region, Professor Swaran Singh says:

"China's forays into the Indian Ocean have also been facilitated (even encouraged) by its successful engagement of Southeast Asian states and also by India's smaller neighbours who have always looked at China as a counter-balancing force in their asymmetric relationship with their oversized neighbour, India" (Singh, 2011:246).

China's presence here is also inextricably inter-connected with its quest for energy security and safety of trading routes (ibid). Regarding Indian Ocean, Scott (2013:486) says India has the following 'geopolitical advantages':

Firstly, it has a very lengthy coastline of 7516.6 km.

Secondly, India has the geographical location in the central part of the northern Indian Ocean.

Thirdly, a long Indian peninsula extends out further southwards into the Indian Ocean reaches.

China's outreach towards the Indian Ocean has been viewed with concern by India (Khurana, 2008). "As China seeks to overcome its geographic weakness in the Indian Ocean, it runs headlong into India which is determined to keep out extra-regional powers that it deems hostile" (Mohan, 2009:5). "China's strategic vulnerability in the Indian Ocean is principally a function of geography" (Brewster, 2015:49-51). It is further 'reinforced by the scarcity of overland transport connections between it and the Indian Ocean' (ibid). In order 'to mitigate its vulnerabilities' China is trying to get 'greater access for its naval vessels to ports in the Indian Ocean' (ibid). Thus, China has made strategic investment in ports like Gwadar (Pakistan), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Hambantota (Sri Lanka) in the region besides increasing its presence in Maldives and Seychelles.

The Gwadar port is quite important for Pakistan and China in the following ways:

Firstly, "The Gwadar complex would substantially diminish India's ability to blockade Pakistan in wartime. It would also substantially increase the capability of China to supply Pakistan by sea and land in wartime" (Garver, 2002).

Secondly, "The Gwadar project fits with long-standing Pakistani ambitions of establishing Pakistan as the main corridor for trade and transport between the newly independent Central Asian Republics and the outside world" (ibid).

Thirdly, "In terms of energy security, Gwadar could act as a strategic hedge, giving Beijing a workaround should the United States blockade the Malacca Strait during the Taiwan contingency or some other Sino-US clash" (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2008).

Fourthly, "From a military standpoint, Gwadar already offers a useful installation for monitoring commercial and military traffic through the critical chokepoint at Hormuz" (ibid).

China has also been aiding Pakistan's naval nuclearisation which is a matter of serious concern (Rehman, 2012). "The shifting of both Pakistan's and India's nuclear deterrents from land to sea will have highly adverse effects on the regional balance of power, as will the potential future presence of Chinese nuclear forces in the Indian Ocean" (ibid).

The Chinese investment in Hambantota port in Sri Lanka is also very strategic in nature. "The Hambantota Deep Seaport may be an example of China acting with its economic and geopolitical goals in unison (Brunjes *et al.*, 2013:30). During the Fourth Eelam war (2006-09), India was hesitant in providing military help to the Rajapaksa government in Sri Lanka which led to China and Pakistan emerging 'as main suppliers to Sri Lanka' (Pant, 2012:245-48). "For China, its ties with Colombo give it a foothold near crucial sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean as well as entry into what India considers its sphere of influence" (ibid). Similarly, "the development of Chittagong port along the line of Gwadar in Pakistan is aimed at facilitating China's entry into the Bay of Bengal" (ibid).

Message from Doklam standoff :

The Doklam plateau is near India's critical tri-junction point and so India objected to Chinese road-building activity in the area by taking Bhutan into confidence. China had certain strategic goals in mind in this dispute. All the countries in the Asian region especially in the geopolitical space of South Asia have acknowledged the magnifying strength of China and recalibrated their foreign

policy strategies accordingly. Apart from the notable exception of Bhutan, all countries in South Asia have cultivated closer security ties with China. Bhutan does not have full-scale diplomatic ties with China which is considered as an affront to the otherwise rising stature of China in the region. This Doklam standoff is a burning example of how China is trying to pressurise Bhutan. According to renowned Bhutan expert, Professor Rajesh Kharat, “It is a matter of prestige for the Chinese because Bhutan is the only country in China’s neighborhood with the possible exception of Taiwan, which does not have diplomatic relations with it” (Cited in *The Times of India*, 8th July 2017). He further mentions that “Besides, China cannot complete its encirclement of India without having full-fledged diplomatic relations with Bhutan” (ibid).

“Bhutan is the last outpost of Indian dominance in South Asia,” aptly mentions Shashank Joshi, a fellow at London’s Royal United Services Institute (Cited in *The Financial Times*, 13th August 2017). But here also China is trying to dislodge Indian predominance and hence, P. Stobdan, a Senior fellow at the IDSA has aptly mentioned that: “It is not just the Doklam border issue. The entire thing is about focusing on Bhutan.....to change the status quo or create a rift between India and Bhutan... that is the real game” (Cited in *The Straits Times*, 28th July, 2017).

The Chinese tried the misadventure in Doklam in mid-2017 precisely because of two reasons. Firstly, China perceived the global geopolitical situation in its favour because of its closest relationship with Russia in decades. Conversely, the Indo-Russian relations were not that great. Unsurprisingly, no Russian statement came in favour of India even when the Chinese propaganda machinery was active. Secondly, a logically related factor has been that the USA under Trump exhibited streaks of an ‘isolationist’ foreign policy and so China calculated in advance that the US support for India is going to be muted on the Doklam issue. Japan was the only major power to issue a significant statement in favour of India and Bhutan during the Doklam standoff with China.

China-Maldives FTA :

This free trade agreement (FTA) is another instance of the lamentable decline of India’s influence in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region. This is Maldives first FTA with any country, it China’s second FTA with any country in South Asia after Pakistan and what is strikingly more important is that Maldives does not have such FTA with India (The Indian Express, 15th December 2017). India’s policy of engaging with Maldives’ opposition might have incentivized the incumbent government there to exclude India and India is apprehensive that the FTA might catalyse further cooperation between China and Maldives in the security domain (The Hindu, 7th December 2017). Recently, China has even threatened India not to intervene in Maldives following the imposition of emergency there (Chellaney in The Nikkei Asian Review, 20th February 2018). Brahma Chellaney further mentions:

“China’s strategy in southern Asia and beyond is aimed at fashioning a Sinosphere of trade, communication, transportation and security links. By financially shackling smaller states through projects it funds and builds, it is crimping their decision-making autonomy in a way that helps bring them within its strategic orbit” (ibid).

Thus, we see that China’s glittering success in the politico-strategic as well as the economic domain is increasing its leverage in the region *vis-à-vis* India.

Conclusion :

As stated earlier, one of the strategic goals in China’s mind was to pressurise Bhutan through the Doklam standoff. Recently, China and Bhutan have announced resumption of their boundary

negotiations. India needs to closely watch the situation and at the same time focus on supporting Bhutan more in all its endeavours concerning peace, prosperity and development. India needs to decipher future foreign policy trajectory of Bhutan in the forthcoming decades. “Each country in the neighbourhood has a constituency that is opposed to the idea of friendship with India” (Behuria *et al.*, 2012:241). This general trend in our neighbourhood must be kept in mind while keeping a tab on the situation in Bhutan especially as its democracy consolidates further. There might be a situation that some anti-India political force erupts in the Himalayan kingdom ably incentivized by China. So, India needs to be watchful in its vicinity.

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