

CHINA IN SOUTH ASIA

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

China is the most populous and fast rising country in the world today and is extending its influence in South and Southeast Asia in keeping with its official doctrine and preordained “National Dream”. With this goal in mind and for security considerations, it has been creating and strengthening bonds with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which increase its leverage on India, especially if the latter aligns with Japan and the US against it. India has reason to fear Chinese encirclement, while the growing assertiveness and self-confidence of the People’s Liberation Army is a cause for concern, as they could push the communist government into foreign military adventures. Building confidence and cooperation between all states in the region is vital for its prosperity and stability.

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For over a decade, the world has been constantly moving towards a multipolar order. Countries with high potential in this regard have been flexing their muscles to come forward and prove their might. Asia has also joined this race with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) taking the lead. The country has a strong economy and military, a “stable” political environment and a fairly large number of countries willing to back its attempt to lead Asia, although there are some nations (like India) that would have difficulty in accepting Beijing’s leadership. However, if China and India could sort out their differences on

mutually acceptable terms, the two could lead South Asia and others would prosper in every field. It is an opportune time for mechanisms to be set forth to promote cooperation among countries in Asia, particularly South Asia, by identifying common strengths and opportunities that could help reduce poverty and ultimately empower the people and make them proud of being Asian.

China and India are the two main countries in Asia where mutual understanding is most needed for successful Asian cooperation. The majority of countries on the continent bear some similarities with either one of these countries in terms of culture, society and value systems. Although these two nations have grown together, differences have also arisen and signs already exist that they will

not hesitate to go to extremes to prove their muscle and might over the other, in order to exhibit seniority and gain assets. Throughout history, one can find a glorious picture of Asia. During the eighteenth century, China and India contributed 50 per cent of the global economy but in the twentieth century, this figure fell drastically to 15 per cent. After 1979 however, China enacted reforms and opened up the country. Aggregated data show that its contribution has risen to reach 35 per cent (Pranab K Bardhan, "Awakening Giants, Feet of Clay: Assessing the

Economic Rise of China and India", Open Lecture, Chatham House, London, 11 February 2011). Both countries are slowly reviving their contributions, which are being clearly felt around the world. China has already become the second largest economy in the world and India may not always lag far behind. This is an opportunity that the world should bank upon rather than dent progress on varying pretexts.

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in *South Asia*, New Delhi: Lancer, 2012, p5). China's relations with these three South Asian countries and its indirect approach in dealing with India have caused misgivings regarding its intentions in the region (*ibid*). In addition, Chinese assistance to the Pakistani nuclear arsenal programme, the tilt of Nepali political parties particularly after the introduction of a secular republican order towards China and the growing ties between the PRC and other countries of the region (Bangladesh, the Maldives, Myanmar and Sri Lanka) have caused alarm in India.

China has been steadily gaining ground in South Asia in recent years. Most countries of the region have been experiencing some sort of political instability and the majority are becoming economically weaker day by day. All the states are therefore looking for opportunities to revive their economic and political stability. As they have failed to receive "positive" support from other countries, they have started leaning towards the PRC for help. Most importantly, Beijing is ready and willing to extend support in both words and deeds. While some may term this as Chinese assertiveness or arrogance in the region, for the majority it is China's confidence that holds magnetic attraction. One can choose one's friends but not one's neighbours. The latter however hold the key to peace, harmony and stability in a neighbourhood. If a strong neighbour becomes irrational, then the rest of the households club together and show solidarity with another strong neighbour for their safety and security ... until the second shows the same trend.

To comprehend Beijing's policy in South Asia, two documents that have been made public need to be analysed. The first is the *Defence White Paper* of 2013, which highlights that China's military is not only substantial and modern but will also keep expanding and having an impact. One of the key tasks of the People's Liberation Army has been outlined as:

"Deepening security cooperation with other nations and fulfilling international obligations" (*Chinese Defence White Paper: The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, Information Office of the State Council, Beijing, April 2013).

This strategy is aimed at providing China enough space to manoeuvre in vulnerable countries like Afghanistan on both counts—by fulfilling international obligations after the United States of America (US) withdraws and by legitimising its presence.

The other important document is the *Chinese Dream*, which outlines the PRC's foreign policy in its neighbourhood. Under the title "Innovations in China's Diplomatic Theory and Practice under New Conditions", China's State Councillor Yang Jiechi has written:

"The important thinking of the *Chinese Dream* has not only energised our

people's determination and confidence in accomplishing the great renewal of the Chinese nation but also substantially boosted China's appeal and influence in the world, enhanced our stature and voice in international affairs and given full expression to the strong synergy between our domestic and external agendas" (*The Kathmandu Post*, 21 August 2013).

This is a clear indication that Beijing wants to bring back its historical authority as the Middle Kingdom, with a sphere of influence that definitely includes South Asia. The way China is developing its economy and is desirous of expanding its reach through economic measures, signifies two major facts. It wants a peaceful neighbourhood ready to share its achievements and not have incidents, deliberate or otherwise, that could lead to disturbances on its domestic front. In 2013, Beijing was active in South Asia mainly in three sectors—developing infrastructure, exploiting natural resources and strengthening military ties.

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In Bangladesh, the Chinese military has promised to strengthen ties across "all fields and at all levels" (*UPI*, 27 August 2013). This assurance was extended by the Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan to the visiting Bangladeshi Army Chief of Staff Iqbal Karim Bhuiyan. The expression and intent of Chinese support was given under the framework of a joint statement between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Bangladesh (online at <http://bd.china-embassy.org>) issued during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's official visit to China in March 2010. The joint statement clearly stipulates to

"Closer comprehensive partnership of cooperation between China and Bangladesh from a strategic perspective and on the basis of the principles of longstanding friendship, equality and mutual benefit".

Moreover, to quote Malladi Rama Rao ("Dynamics of China–Bangladesh Relations", online at <http://defence.pk>):

"China is adopting the time tested East India Company route to gain access to Chittagong Port. It has promised development of the port for enhanced trade. Perched here it should be easy for China to monitor Indian missile tests

at Chandipur-on-Sea near Balasore (on the Indian east coast) and keep tabs on naval activity in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal by inter-linking its electronic listening systems at Coco Island (Myanmar) and the staging/listening systems deployed on Bangladeshi soil”.

In Afghanistan, the PRC has taken a number of initiatives to strengthen its presence like heavily investing in roads and mines. It knows that once Western troops withdraw, an immense gap might be created, which could lead to some anti-China elements gaining an upper hand, especially if the Afghan Army and *Taliban* are still locked in combat. In such a scenario, China is worried that the Uighurs or the East Turkmenistan Independence Movement, which it regards as a terrorist group, might find refuge in *Taliban*-controlled zones. Beijing also fears an upsurge of drug smuggling through Xinjiang. In addition, a security vacuum in Afghanistan could prompt a proxy conflict between India and Pakistan, further complicating the PRC’s position (“World: Asia–Pacific”, 6 June 2012, *The Christian Science Monitor*, online at www.csmonitor.com). For these reasons during Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s visit to China in 2012, the two countries established a strategic cooperative partnership. Since then, to attract more support and investment, the Afghan government has been adopting measures to provide Chinese investors with a favourable environment.

Furthermore, during his September 2013 visit to Beijing, Karzai is quoted by Chinese officials as having stated:

“China is a very stable, very important and very wise neighbour and both countries have developed a strong relationship based on commonality of interests between the two” (*Xinhua News*, online at <http://www.news.xinhuanet.com>).

The joint statement issued after talks stated that both sides had agreed to sign a treaty of extradition, reflecting China’s concerns on Xinjiang. The two also agreed to

“intensify exchanges and cooperation in the security field by way of jointly combating transnational threats including illegal immigration and trafficking in persons, arms or drugs, among others” (Ananth Krishnan, “Xi Signals Greater Role for China in Afghanistan”, *The Hindu*, 29 September 2013).

Such a space for China has been indirectly created by the US, which does not want to see Afghanistan fall prey to yet another chaotic situation after its own planned withdrawal. Thus while China wants to protect its western borders, the US wishes to find means to enhance Afghan security. This issue could create a basis for building cooperation between the two, while avoiding the tension stemming from the Asia–Pacific region (Jeffrey Payne, “Afghanistan: A Dilemma for China

and the US”, *The Diplomat*, 28 July 2013, online at www.thediplomat.com).

Chinese relations with India have continued to grow despite some hitches like border incursions along the actual line of control in Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh and the stapled visa issue. Although 2013 was encouraging for Sino–Indian friendship, India is worried about China’s relations with Pakistan.

“Pakistan is Beijing’s answer to every step India takes to expand its influence in the South China Sea. To the extent that India evinces a willingness to either support the aspirations of China’s smaller neighbours or ally with China’s more serious antagonists (such as Japan and the US), China can respond by increasing the size and sophistication of its arms shipments to Pakistan, as well as supporting Pakistan in various international forums” (“China all Weather Threat to India”, *The Diplomat*, 8 August 2013 online at *ibid*).

China is the largest investor in Pakistan’s deep-water port at Gwadar, located north of the Strait of Hormuz. In the long run, both countries hope to connect Kashgar in Western China to Gwadar. At the same time, Pakistan views China as a regional counterweight to the US, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and India. Just as Beijing supports Islamabad’s position on Kashmir, Pakistan supports China on the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

“Looking to the future, China’s expanding influence in Central Asia and its interest in overland access to the Arabian Sea could motivate even stronger links with Pakistan” (Daniel Markey, “Growing Pakistan–China Relation: Impact on the US and India”, online at <http://www.cfr.org>).

Similarly, China and Sri Lanka have agreed to upgrade their relations to a strategic cooperative partnership. The new consensus was reached during President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s official visit to China in May 2013.

“The two countries will maintain high-level exchanges, enhance political communication and support each other’s efforts in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity” (*Xinhua News*, 28 May 2013, online at *ibid*).

The joint communiqué (online at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn>) issued after this visit underlines

“The establishment of a joint committee on coastal and marine cooperation to promote cooperation in the areas of ocean observation, ecosystem protection, marine and coastal zone management, etc. Both sides agree to strengthen cooperation in maritime security combating piracy, search and rescue and navigational safety”.

This new development in bilateral relations between the two countries could have serious implications on previously dominant regional powers. A mood of

confrontation could arise in the near future, due to a change in the rules of the game. However, Nihal Rodrigo, the former secretary general of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and honorary advisor to Rajapaksa on foreign affairs maintains:

“The relationship between China and Sri Lanka is neither ideology driven nor party based, rather it is in line with the development concept of (former) Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to promote economic linkages within the region” (“China–Sri Lanka Relations in Review”, *The Daily Mirror Sri Lanka*, online at www.dailymirror.lk).

China’s strategic concern in the region deepened in 2013 with its growing interest in Nepal. Military relations between the two countries have been further consolidated with China pledging huge moral and material support to the Nepali Army. China’s Chief of General Staff, General Fang Fenghui has emphasised that the Chinese Army is keen to deepen cooperation including through personnel exchanges and training, to push forward ties under the new situation. Nepali Army Chief General Gaurab Sumsher Rana reciprocated the Chinese gesture by saying:

“Nepal unswervingly adheres to the one China policy and will never allow any force to take advantage of Nepalese territory to engage in anti-China activities. Nepal sees the Chinese military as a reliable friend” (“China–Nepal agree to Deepen Military Ties”, *The Hindu*, online at <http://www.thehindu.com>).

Thus, it is evident that China is keenly interested in South Asia. It shares a 4,700 kilometre long border with SAARC countries and became a SAARC observer in 2006 following a proposal brought forth by Nepal. In 2012, China appointed its ambassador in Nepal as its resident representative to SAARC.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the situation in South Asia over the past fifty years evinces that in the name of democracy, various human rights promoters and governance stakeholders with clear and ulterior motives have gained tremendously by exploiting the human and natural resources of the region. As a result no country in South Asia is stable in terms of democracy, governance or rights—tools that have been used to exploit the region. On the other hand, the PRC has continued to develop its economy, becoming the second largest in the world. Instead of being fearful of China, South Asian countries should define and realise their own national objectives by cooperating with each other and strengthening bilateral

and multilateral ties with Beijing. They must not uphold the malicious intentions of anti-South Asian and anti-Chinese propagators from outside the region. If this could be achieved, relations with China could provide an opportunity to all South Asian countries. However, if these nations choose the alternate path and join hands with outsiders to contain China, they could lose on many fronts, from the economy to security and may be even enter a never-ending dispute.

In recent years realising the Communist Party's dependency on it, China's military has become more assertive on foreign policy matters. However, any adventurism on its part could have a catastrophic impact not only on South Asia but also on the Asian continent as a whole. China's military adventures in the past (territorial pre-emption in Korea in 1959, India in 1962, the former Soviet Union in 1969 or Vietnam in 1979) had taken place when the country was neither a strong military or economic power. Moreover, the Communist Party today is facing social problems ranging from its one child policy to the rights of ethnic people against assimilation into the Han majority. Thus to keep the country and its people united under communist rule through the "threat theory", the military could trigger some sort of an adventure. Head-on confrontation between China and India would largely destroy these ancient civilisations. On the contrary, the prospect for peace could bring prosperity to not only South Asia, but the greater Asian region as well. Almost half of the population of the world would reap the benefits from this. ❖

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