



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

BHARAT'S STRATEGY TO COUNTER CHINA IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract: Bharat is one of the fastest growing economies in the world which because of its geographical location holds special importance. In spite of being land-locked from its Northern borders it's still dominates Indian Ocean Region which is the fulcrum and only connectivity between West and East. In last three decades China has seen a massive rise of its economic might and it is expanding its territory both in land as well as sea. By launching BRI project, it has been getting large number of smaller economies into debt trap. Today China sees India as only power which has the potential to challenge its race towards 2049, which is the centenary year of its Independence. Re-kindling and re-igniting the border issuer with India at Doklam, Galwan and Arunachal Pradesh are some of the signals which it wants to give to India to toe in line with People Republic of China or be ready for the consequences. In this situation, India has been checking China both diplomatically and militarily. But the same is not enough as India needs to engage its neighbors as never before, that too very soon. Each neighbor of India in South Asia has different interests and choices. Is Bharat doing enough to regain confidence of its neighbors except Pakistan in South Asia?

INTRODUCTION

China is fast moving on its path of economic and military strength which is very prominent and evident in last two decades. China under the leadership of Xi Jinping had set two centenary goals (Liang ge yibai nina) which would be achieved by years 2021 and 2049, coinciding with centenaries of Chinese Communist Party and Republic of China respectively. First goal is to build moderately prosperous society in all aspects with targeted reduction of poverty and improvement of quality of life. Second goal is to build China a modern socialist state which is strong, democratic, prosperous, harmonious and culturally advanced. To achieve the foregoing, China has been openly asserting its economic and military might in the region by following the principle of "with me or against me". Militarily by rekindling old border disputes and economic assertion by debt trap. In this paper countries which have been considered to be part of South Asia are India, China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives. In South Asia except India, all the nations are literally bowing to the dictator and hegemonic tactics of China. Therefore, China perceives India as biggest threat in its rise to global power with particular influence in South Asia and Indian Ocean Region. Besides, India re-alignment with Europe, the USA and Middle East and good balancing with Russia has really raised concerns for China. Therefore, in last one decade China has not been missing a single opportunity to belittle and downsize Indian stature in the region.

CHINESE GAME PLAN IN THE REGION

Chinese intervention into the internal and political matter of smaller nations is quite prominent. Recent example being of Maldives, where recently elected government of Mr Mohammed Muizzu is openly asking India to leave the island nation by 10 May 2024. Till now India has been bailing out Maldives from number of distress situations but it has found a new ally China. Chinese presence in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka is well known on some or other pretext. It also needs to be brought out that except India and Bhutan every country in South Asian region has accepted to be part of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is a vast economic plan for investment and infrastructure development.

WAY AHEAD FOR INDIA

Therefore, it is imperative for Bharat to implement its plan of actions to counter Chinese influence in South Asian region. Since year 2014, Bharat has been aggressively attempting to improve goodwill in the region to subtly counter Chinese influence. Bharat has realised that China by the means of its border confrontations strategy and debt trap, plans to roll out a web of alliances to encircle it from land and sea both. Chinese secured access to Gwadar, Chittagong and Hambantota is well known, which finally aims to encircle Bharat. Apart from the same Chinese- friendly governments in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka further accentuates the dilemma and predicament of Bharat. But India traditionally has good economic and socio-cultural relationship with these countries which got thawed in the past in absence of steady foreign policy. But same has been realised by present dispensation in New Delhi and it is following the principle of "Neighbours First" approach.

- **Afghanistan.** India's foreign policy and meaningful engagement with Taliban in Afghanistan has surprised many think tanks. In war torn country India has been able to match China which is trying hard to get foothold in the country post military withdrawal of the USA. Primary aim of China in Afghanistan is realisation of segment of BRI through Afghanistan. Besides, it is also looking for Lithium and Copper mines in the country. Last but not the least is the security of strategic depth of Pakistan. China is also concerned with threats from Islamic terror outfits emanating from Afghanistan which can give impetus to ongoing extremism in its Xinjiang province. India on the other hand systematically engaging with Taliban wherein it has sent its technical team into the embassy to maintain its operations in the country. Recently Bharat sent humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan in terms of food, medicines and development assistances without any business interest, same was welcomed by the regime and Country has promised India to reciprocate. In December 2023, Taliban had asked Bharat to expedite completion of 20 odd, stalled projects, which eventually would counter Chinese BRI in that region. India also confirmed allotment of budget for these projects which has been again welcomed by Taliban. All these steps are important for India to thwart Chinese attempt to have a foothold in the country. But Bharat also understands that Taliban will always look towards China being a larger economy vis-a vis India. The ongoing trust deficit between Taliban and Pakistan is advantageous to India and India is leaving no chance to leverage the same in its favour. Apart from the foregoing, because of Chinese closeness to Pakistan, Afghanistan sees India as an alternate partner.
- **Bangladesh.** Another fierce battle of influence between India and China is Bangladesh, which is very crucial for New Delhi. China has been making inroads into the country through BRI agreements of approximately 25 billion USD which will eventually become Chinese playground in Indian neighbourhood like Sri Lanka. China has already finished the construction of Padma multipurpose bridge between Dhaka and Chittagong and work at Mongla and Payra ports are on the cards. Chinese companies are also developing power grid, road and rail infrastructure in Bangladesh as part of BRI circuit. Though, India too has been investing good amount of funds in development projects in Bangladesh but it is nowhere close to Chinese investment. Bangladesh refuses to compare India's relationship and its closeness with Beijing and claims that both countries are imports to them. India closeness with Awami League which is in power for last 15 years has benefitted New Delhi in many ways in Bangladesh. Chinese BRI has not been progressing with the speed which Beijing had expected. Huge bilateral trade deficit in Chinese favour is also troubling Bangladeshi economists. Besides, Chinese failure to push Myanmar's military junta for repatriation of Rohingya refugees has created a sort of distrust in the minds of Bangladesh.
- **Bhutan.** Bhutan which is an all-weather friend of India since centuries has also been pushed by China by its salami slicing policy. China is developing villages on its borders with Bhutan and asking own people to settle there in order to gradually nibble Bhutanese land. Year 2017 has already seen the Doklam standoff between India and China at tri-junction point. It was an act of China to lay claim on Bhutanese land and gauge the patience and response of India so that it can work out future course of action in similar staged situation. Therefore, India must enhance its engagement with Bhutan in all spheres to counter China from middle sector. Once China has openly played its card India must strengthen the area around tri-junction by massive and coordinated infrastructure development projects and force postering to foreclose Chinese option towards Siliguri corridor.
- **Nepal.** Nepal being a pro communist government has a natural alignment towards China. Its geographic location makes it important for both, India and China. It also gives depth to India from Himalayan border. India's socio-cultural and religious ties with Nepal offset the advantage of China. After the economic blockade of year 2015 by India, there have been perceptible tilt of Nepal towards China. Since then, China has been able to leverage investment in large number of infrastructure and power projects. Nepal's agreement to the BRI through its landscape is the testimony of the same. In last eight years China has held three military exercises with Nepal Army. India has been losing ground in Nepal because of certain issues like border dispute in its Western borders in Kalapani area. It happened when India after abrogation of Article 370 issued map of Indian Northern border, Nepal had certain issues with the same. Though, one of the theory advocates this to be the handiwork of China to get India embroiled in border conflict with Nepal but India has been able to resolve the same for the time being. Second issue is with recruitment of Nepalese Gorkhas in Indian Army under "Agniveer" scheme, which is the new recruitment process for Indian Army soldiers for four years of service without pension benefits. Currently, around 32,000 Gorkha soldiers from Nepalese origin are serving in various battalions of Indian Army. Till now it was one of the most preferred employment options for Nepalese youth, but Agniveer scheme is dissuading them to join the Indian Armed forces. If China takes the advantage of this void and starts recruiting Nepalese youth for its Tibetan borders then it will be a catch twenty situation for India. Therefore, India must plan an alternative to avoid this situation. Of late India has been massively investing in power generations projects in Nepal. Apart from the same India has agreed to buy 10,000 megawatts of electricity from Nepal for next 10 years which is going to boost Nepalese export manifold. Mutual agreement on Indo-Nepal-Bangladesh power generation project is also going to help Nepal's export in a big way. India must refrain from interfering into internal politics of Nepal which will a bad example of mature diplomacy. Any country big or small does not like external interference into their business and India has definitely faltered on this account in past.

- **Sri Lanka.** Next South Asian country of major importance to India has been Sri Lanka which recently saw ousting of Sri Lanka's pro-china President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in the wake of country's economic crisis. New President Ranil Wickremesinghe recently visited New Delhi and signed economic and energy agreements with India. India is one of the first countries which has offered bail out package of \$ 4 billion to Sri Lanka against Chinese offer of \$2.9 billion that too through IMF route. China is also in an awkward position during the bail out as 20% of the Sri Lankan debt is from China itself. Still China enjoys freedom of operation in sea as it owes Hambantota for 99 years lease. Chinese ships in Sri Lankan water are a major concern for India as it can spy its military bases around coastal India and Andaman and Nicobar islands. India could counter Chinese influence in the region by exploiting QUAD as it would be difficult for India to match Beijing in stand-alone mode.
- **Maldives** Geographic location of Maldives makes it strategically and economically very important for China and India. Around 80% of China's oil imports passes through South China Sea via Indian Ocean Region. These trades are crude oil from Middle East, brought in tankers¹. Apart from that China has a military interest in the region to keep an eye on India and Navies from West. Chinese backed government in Maldives is going to make things harder for India. Long presence of China in Maldives is on the card like Hambantota through debt trap. Therefore, in this situation too India needs to keep investing in infrastructure development projects. All out efforts to be made to complete the ongoing projects. Regarding India, Maldives is wary of military presence and interference in internal politics of the country. Therefore, in this situation India should completely refrain from these two issues and focus on socio-economic investment in the country as decoupling is not the solution. Sooner or later Maldives would understand the overall game plan of China the way Sri Lanka has. To counter China militarily in the region India needs to project and posture strongly in IOR along with QUAD partners.
- **Pakistan.** China has been using Pakistan as pivot against India and for its economic interest in Afghanistan. Attitude of Pakistan towards India is not going to change in near future. It can be very conveniently assumed that till the time Pakistan Army is in the saddle of Country's decision-making apparatus, election, democracy and judiciary are meaningless. Pakistan Army and its terror infrastructure want to keep the pot boiling to justify its existence to the people of Pakistan. In spite of ongoing economic crisis and political turmoil, the country is floating well on grant from IMF and other international monetary organisations. China, which has heavily invested in CPEC a part of BRI, is not going to let go its money and it will do anything to have that. Therefore, India is considering Pakistan as a regional security threat, singularly or collusively with China. Apart from the same, in all probability China will be using Pakistan to get India occupied on Western borders and Kashmir.

CONCLUSION

India's External Affairs Minister Mr S Jaishankar in his book "Why Bharat Matters"² has very correctly brought out that neighbours who are historically and physically close to India turn naturally towards us especially during moments of difficulties like natural disaster, or man-made situations, political and economic. But the challenges arise, however, when expectations of India are selectively articulated as per convenience of each nation. From Indian point of view, it is not easy to keep a balance. Doing too much is considered interference; and showing ignorance is treated as indifferent attitude, if not the weakness. Development of connectivity, commerce and contacts are the core of India's Neighbourhood First policy. The way India moved forward to support Sri Lanka during its economic crisis has conveyed a positive signal to its neighbours in South Asia.

India is once again regaining its position in the comity of nations because of its generous and non-reciprocal polity. It has become the voice of Global South on issues of economy, mutual cooperation, terrorism, socio-cultural connect, health, energy and food security. Entire world is willing to engage with India with more enthusiasm and expectations and considering it a truce Global Leader or, "Vishwaguru" and this phenomena is being read by India watchers in China.

¹ <https://thedi diplomat.com/2023/02>

² Why Bharat Matters by S. Jaishankar, Rupa Publication, page 211.