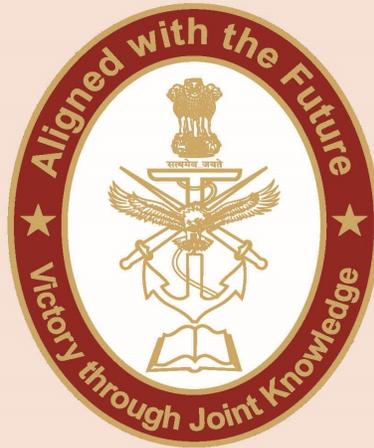


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EMERGING POLITICAL DIVIDE ON INDIAN PERIPHERY: PARADIGMS OF CHINESE AFFLICTIONS

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Nations have option to chose their friends but not the neighbours. In an existential sense the geography is destiny and as per Kautilya your neighbours may not always be friendly with you. Apropos, within Indian sub continent, India is perceived as a big brother with domineering attitude overshadowing the political growth of her smaller neighbours, not withstanding their own structural fault lines. **The notion of equal status syndrome and concomitant national ego often plays up prominently in their political conduct.**

Whereas, all these small countries are actually sub nationalities of ancient Indian entity with common history, geography and cultural milieu. The roots of occasional hiccups in their political stability and economic sustainability lie in their unnatural creation due to manipulative and insensitive British policies of divide and rule. **Therefore, the inherent politico-economic inadequacies prompt them to seek alternate sources of political strength so as sustain their nationhood through exercising political flexibility beyond Indian influence.**

It is the military geography of these nations which has brought them into focus of bigger geo-political grand games being played in the Indo-Pacific region as on date. The strategic interests of US and China in the Indian Ocean region has changed the political complexion of traditionally Indian area of influence for centuries. The US has transcontinental influence as the sole super power and Indo- Pacific happens to be one of their theatres of interests. Whereas, **this region is the life line of China as 90% of their trade and 70 % of energy flows through Indian Ocean.**

Hence, all the countries on Indian periphery are important for Chinese geo political matrix as a response mechanism for the security of her economic interests. Chinese conduct when hyphenated with their "String of Pearls in the Indian Ocean", and their defiant politico-military stance in the South China Sea speaks of their seriousness and sensitivities of their South Asian embrace. Apropos, over period of time the China, has deliberately chosen to secure a substantial political space in these countries. **Lucrative economic incentives coupled with security dividends to include arms supply as well as physical military foot prints has been their concept to woo these smaller nations in their folds.**

It, obviously, is a win -win situation for countries looking for economic buoyancy and a politically strong anchor to stand by their side in the time of crisis. **India, obviously, has not been pro active enough to sense the aspirations of her neighbours and propensity of China to exploit the political deficit, so perceived, on the strength of her deep pockets and liberal military outreach.** In that, the Chinese BRI concept envisages development of communication net work, industrial and power corridors as part of Chinese grand game for their global economic expansion. The CPEC is one such project through Pakistan which is central to Chinese scheme to bypass the insecure Indian Ocean from their perspective. They have similar design for Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives in South Asian landscape for securing higher political leverages.

However, there are also apprehensions of negative fallouts of new found political bonhomie with an outsider with prospects of disturbing existing stable regional political equilibrium fully aligned with socio- cultural emotional bind of Indian legacy. **Accordingly, there is an emerging pattern of an internal political divide amongst all our smaller neighbours lead by parties and individuals believing in encashing the fast track pragmatic opportunism**

as against continuation of stability through India centric regional cohesiveness.

While Pakistan is fully under Chinese folds, the political class in Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives is clearly divided on the lines of pro India and pro China lobbies. **The debates on politico –economic issues in these countries have shifted from internal consolidation options to quick fix solutions through external support, though with inherent fault lines and shades of dubious political opportunism.** Such externally induced political short cuts may not be able to sustain their national interests in the longer run due to absence of essential fundamentals of economics. The Chinese debt diplomacy as being witnessed is a warning signal to all her client countries to reset their choices. **The major side effect of the Chinese afflictions, as it is turning out to be, is the fears of loss of political autonomy which was certainly not under any threat under Indian patronage.** Nevertheless, the signs of internal political divide are on the horizon and likely to stay.

Nepal saw rise of communist philosophy as a mechanism to fill up the political space in the aftermath of fall of monarchy. Nepal with high presence of communists in their political system is witnessing increase of Chinese foot prints by the day. Prachanda, during his premiership gave Budhi Gandaki hydro project to China without any tender which was cancelled by the next pro Indian Deuba government . However, the new K P Oli lead communist government is reportedly to be inclined to give it back to China. It is expected that similar see - saw political environment is likely to continue in Nepal in times to come.

While there is a divided house in Nepal, the entire political dispensation acknowledges continued importance of India for them for their politico-economic existence. A land locked country with economic dependence and socio cultural commonality has little choice, but to look up to India as a patron. This equation is unlikely to change due to geographical synergies despite Chinese intrusion in their politico-economic space. The Indian concern is that China is here to stay and knowing Chinese penchant to use military for their political purposes, there is an increase in negative strategic ante.

In Sri Lanka, the Mahindra Rajapaksha is known to be favoured by China who during his previous premiership was given loans worth \$ 6 billion for various infrastructural projects including Hambantota port. Later the debt trap diplomacy of China got highlighted in their demand of ownership of the port plus

15000 hectares of land adjacent to it. It, surely, has exposed the dubious ways of China which has prompted number of recipients of Chinese benevolence to revisit their commitments with them as regards to BRI scheme.

The opponent Ranil Wickremasinghe is known to be a proponent of the Indian lobby who had cancelled housing project of more than 50,000 houses in North and Eastern Tamil areas given earlier to China in favour of Indian companies. Rajapaksha is back as the prime minister through a political coup and is expected to push Chinese interests in the island country. The likely Chinese naval presence at Hambantota port barely few hundred miles from Indian shores is a security concern for India.

The Maldives is also a house divided with Yameen heading a pro Chinese lobby and Gayum faction is seen to be a pro Indian dispensation. Yameen chose to cancel contract of the bridge linking Halule airport to the capital Male from an Indian company to a Chinese company and that too at three times the cost of original Indian estimates. Besides this, he initiated actions to withdraw Indian helicopters as they could carry out surveillance over islands acquired by China wherein China is likely to develop a naval base to monitor one and half channel in Indian Ocean. The new Maldivian government in waiting is expected to be pro India but they can do little to undo the Chinese influence in the island nation. Maldives with Chinese foot prints is a matter of security concern for India and we need to be more forth coming in nurturing the pro India political base.

Bangladesh also has significant Chinese presence in their economy and military domain. They also have pro Indian lobby headed by the present prime minister Sheikh Hasina and quasi Chinese leanings of her opponent Begam Khalida Zia. Bangladesh is signatory of Chinese BRI project wherein, China is going to develop infrastructure and industrial corridors in the country. Bangladesh armed forces have substantial military hardware of Chinese origin. The military geography facilitates China to cut off the entire North Eastern India through an intrusion via Nepal, Sikkim or Bhutan and cut off the narrow Siliguri corridor. The significance of recent Chinese intrusion in Doklam needs to be viewed from this perspective. Therefore, Chinese inroads into Bangladeshi political space is a priority concern of Indian polity.

Similarly, the Myanmar has significant influence of China in their politico-economic space. China is developing a China –Myanmar economic corridor terminating in Bay of Bengal. The economic corridor starts from Yunan province

of China, links Mandalay, Yagon and Rakhine where China would be developing a port and a SEZ in Kyaukphyu. India is also developing a road and rail network linking the Thailand via Myanmar so as to increase her presence in the SE Asia. So there are competing interests of both India and China in Myanmar.

The factual position, as on date, is that the China has substantial presence on Indian periphery and this reality is well understood as all sovereign countries have freedom to make their political choices. India, on her part, has to work out her strategic outreach in the back drop of Chinese factor in the region with appropriate responses to the likely inimical contingencies. However, **the fact that China is located thousands of kms away from the Indian sub continent with vulnerable line of communications, India would always have higher politico-military synergies in the region.**

These strengths need to be exploited to enhance the Indian influence in the region through pro active participation in their economic development and enhancing the political strengths as regional partners .Taking cue from the dubious Chinese conduct as being unfolded after initial euphoria , there are signs amongst few countries taking a relook at their Chinese sponsored projects. It is time for India to strike and take initiative to reset the geo political balance by recovering the lost turf to maximum extent possible.

Over all, the India has proven to be a dependable regional anchor with her resources and capabilities of all hues to bail out these nations in the time of crisis situations. Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, Bangla Desh, Bhutan and Myanmar have all been the beneficiaries of Indian patronage in their time of crisis. India, is and will continue to be the centre of gravity of all regional synergies encapsulating land mass of Indian sub continent and the IOR. They all do understand this factual position, but seem to be showing visible opportunist strains under influence of inducements by the external forces, especially China with her deep pockets.

Having realized their new found strategic value, all Indian neighbours seem to be playing China card to enhance their political leverages in their conduct. Their dilemma is that they cannot do without India as their regional stabilizing factor, and at the same time they cannot ignore China either, an emerging world power with basket of goodies for them. Such a situation is here to stay, albeit it is China which has higher compulsions to appease these countries. The Chinese opaque dealings are getting exposed as seen in Sri Lanka, Maldives, Malaysia and even in Pakistan. **India as a big**

player in the region needs to look for strategic spaces to neutralize the Chinese negative influences in all its manifestations and keep the regional flock together.

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