

INDIA AND CHINA BATTLE FOR DOMINATION IN SOUTH ASIA

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Introduction

Post the declaration of emergency in Maldives, China has continuously threatened India about interfering militarily in the island nation. Initially the Chinese stand was that it was an internal matter and hence outside interference was unwarranted. It even prevented the UN from discussing the topic, with support from Saudi Arabia and Russia. It has now changed tack and even offered to mediate between various political parties. The ex-President Nasheed, now in exile in Sri Lanka and the one who invited China to establish its mission in the country, has been regularly calling for Indian military intervention.

Simultaneously, India moving at a fast pace, has secured a naval base in Seychelles for 20 years and signed an agreement for Indian naval ships to use the port of Duqm in Oman. Chabahar port, now partially operational, though presently only for commercial use, could with time become a refuelling destination for Indian naval vessels. India's efforts at setting up 10 coastal surveillance radar systems in Maldives appears to be slowing down, with the ongoing crises. India had set up three, the last in 2015, but they are, 'not transmitting'.

Competition Rising in South Asia

Indo-Chinese competition for dominating South Asia is on the rise. Post the first-ever dialogue between the foreign ministers of China, Pakistan and Afghanistan, the Chinese state controlled daily, Global Times, issued a scathing article on India's approach to South Asia. It stated, 'India should stop treating those small countries around it as its mistresses and

showing no tolerance when they interact with other major powers.’ It went on to add, ‘They (India) believe that South Asia and the peripheral area of India should be New Delhi’s turf. Every nation in the region should respect only India and reject developing relations with other countries.’ This was possibly because of close interaction which India maintains with its neighbours seeking to ween them away from Chinese influence.

Expanding Chinese Footprints

China has over the years been expanding its footprints in South Asia, adding to India’s woes. While Modi did follow the policy of ‘neighbours first’, China, with its financial might has bulldozed its way into India’s neighbourhood, challenging India’s policy of ‘neighbours first’. An analysis of Chinese projections into the region would indicate new threats that India faces.

In Nepal, the new government under Oli, though yet to take office, is likely to be pro-China as per his stance in his earlier stint. He had accused India of supporting the Madhesi movement, which led to a blockade of the country. Though India still controls the tap to Nepal, as its oil, gas and other imports transit through India, a China shift could be worrisome. The recent meeting between Sushma Swaraj and Oli did indicate signs of a rapprochement, but with greater Chinese influence, a thaw is unlikely.

The Doklam crises was also Chinese attempts to pull Bhutan out of the Indian camp. It has been stalled for now, but Chinese presence remains in the region. China has been making overtures to Bhutan to agree to a swap on pending border disputes. A high-level India delegation comprising the NSA, foreign secretary and the army chief were there recently to

discuss the post-Doklam assessment. China would continue planning forays challenging India-Bhutan relationship and pulling Bhutan away from India.

In Myanmar, China brought forth a collection of rebel leaders, whom they had tacitly supported over the years for peace talks with the present government, thus proving to be invaluable for the future of Myanmar. While peace is still years away, Suu Kyi knows Myanmar cannot move forward with peace, without Chinese support.

After the Chinese financed Myitsone dam, in the Kachin state of Myanmar, was suspended, the government was compelled to enhance Chinese share in the port project at Kyaukpyu, as it owed China USD 800 Million. This project in Rakhine will give China prized access to the Indian Ocean. It was initially meant to be on a 50:50 basis, but after the failure of Myitsone dam, it is likely to be changed to 85:15 in favour of China.

The Sri Lankan government has handed over the Hambantota port to China on a ninety-nine years lease, to offset a loan of US \$ 8 Billion it had taken from China. However, to allay Indian fears, Sri Lanka stated that Chinese naval ships would not be permitted there. Maldives has signed a free trade agreement with China, clearly choosing China ahead of India. It has also endorsed China's maritime silk road project, a part of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). After increased pressure from India, their foreign minister visited India and aimed to assuage Indian fears, but with the present crises everything seems to have stalled.

China is fast becoming the single largest individual investor in Bangladesh. The countries have signed a 13.6 Billion USD agreement of trade and

investment. China has also promised to provide loans of upto 20 Billion USD. Bangladesh recently procured two submarines from China at a cost of USD 203 Million.

Pakistan is almost a Chinese province, while it seeks to actively be involved in Afghanistan also. China is supposed to be developing a naval base close to the Pak-Iran border, adjacent to Gwadar. While China and Pak have refuted this claim for the present, reports of China assisting Pak in improving defences along the Indo-Pak border in Rajasthan are flowing in. Pakistan's latest borrowing of \$ 500 Million from China makes it more indebted to it. China seeks to expand the OBOR project into Afghanistan, where it may not succeed as Indian influence is high, hence its frustration.

Impact of Chinese Expansion

In every case, where China advances loans, it is at a much higher rate of interest. In return it seeks facilities and resources. Nations around India are slowly moving into the Chinese lap, necessitating a shift in policy from India. With a naval facility already established in Djibouti, another in the making near Gwadar, Hambantota and possibly Kyaukpyu, the Chinese string of pearls would be almost complete. While Chinese naval threats may not be prominent at present, they would increase as Chinese naval power develops faster than India. Hence, India cannot ignore developing its military might.

Presently India can defend itself from threats from China, however the future would need to be catered for. It has also demonstrated that it would stand by its friends. However, economically it cannot compete with China. Hence, while it seeks to support its neighbours and has proved it in the Doklam crises

that it would not back down, it has been unable to support the financial demands of the neighbourhood. Further, India grants loans on a project to project basis, which take immense time to fructify. There have been occasions when Indian backed projects never even take off.

Local Politics

Nations on India's periphery on multiple occasions resort to India bashing, thus moving closer to China, for petty temporary political gains. It is currently on in Maldives, where newspaper editorials even termed PM Modi as anti-Muslim. Similarly, the previous Sri Lankan President Rajapaksa moved into the Chinese lap adding to India's security concerns. The Bangladesh opposition leader, Khaleda Zia, when in power strongly projects an anti-India stance.

Increasing Security Concerns

The army's concern on China flexing its muscle was evident when Indian army chief, Bipin Rawat, in his press interaction on pre-army day stated that Chinese transgressions along the LAC had increased manifold and that China was trying to put pressure on India. In the Raisina dialogue he mentioned that though relations are back to pre-Doklam days, however India remains wary. He also stated that we are looking at diplomatic and military partnering with countries of the region as we cannot allow our neighbourhood to drift away from us.

Military diplomacy is a solution

A factor which the Indian government has overlooked is that all countries in the neighbourhood have their army playing a significant role in domestic politics. Hence, military diplomacy should be employed to project long-term impacts of accepting

high interest loans from China for short term political gains and compelling the nation to hand over critical defence facilities in return. Political leaders may change in these countries, but the military would remain close to the throne. With rising military to military contacts, the government must exploit this approach.

Options for India

Chinese forays into the region which India considers under its direct influence is a warning to the government to reconsider its neighbourhood policies, failing which, the region could come under Chinese influence, adding to Delhi's woes. If India is to reduce Chinese influence, it could either increase own financial support or using its economic and diplomatic clout compel international financial institutions to grant loans to countries falling into Chinese debt traps.

Military diplomacy should be exploited to the hilt for projecting Indian concerns with neighbouring army chief's advising their governments against seeking short term political benefits by taking high interest loans. Finally, Indian military power of the future needs to be invested in today, failing which we would be open to Chinese threats in the years ahead.

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