



CENJOWS

LEVERAGING MILITARY GEOGRAPHY: POLITICAL OPPORTUNISM ON INDIAN PERIPHERY

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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 politico-economic 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 politico-economic 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.**

On other hand, 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.

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 theatre of interests. Whereas, **this region is the life line of China as 90% of their trade and 70% of energy flows through Indian Ocean.**

Accordingly, **China suffers from an acute insecurity and a cultural hubris syndrome** which has shaped their political conduct wherein use of military force is an inclusive mechanism to achieve their national interests. Their stance in South China sea when hyphenated with other aggressive military overtures elsewhere points towards their desperation to shake off her land locked mental syndrome. China also seem to be in a hurry to attain her national ambitions to graduate to a stature of a world power, hence her overbearing demonstrative political conduct.

China, as part of her “string of pearls in the Indian Ocean” scheme, has embarked upon securing their sea lanes by establishing military out posts in the Indian Ocean in littoral countries alongside politico – military encirclement of India perceived to be a rival and a potential trouble maker in their designs. The Chinese mechanism to charm these impoverished small countries is through irresistible financial and development packages, alongside military benefits. The Indian neighbours on her periphery seem to be shifting into Chinese folds not realizing the negatives of Chinese strategic game plan.

Besides above ,the BRI concept to link their perspective markets ,develop industrial and power corridors are all part of Chinese grand game for their global politico- economic expansion. The CPEC is one such project through Pakistan which is central to Chinese scheme to bypass the insecure Indian Ocean. They have similar design for Nepal, Bhutan, Bangla Desh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and other countries of interests in Eurasia and Africa.

Having realized their new found strategic value, all Indian neighbours seem to be playing China card to enhance their political leverages, thereby indulging in visible politico- economic opportunism in their conduct. Their dilemma is that they cannot do without India as their sole stabilizing factor and at the same time they cannot ignore China 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 since they have chosen path of self seeking exclusivity as against cooperative policies in their economic pursuits.**

Pakistan, in particular, is the most vocal proponent of the Chinese camp to the extent that she has permitted China to step into their politico-economic space with an eye to enhance their military deterrence against arch rival India. There seem to be a deliberate scheme to include Other Indian neighbours in the Chinese band wagon by showcasing Sino-Pak model of economic and military cooperation a way forward to attain higher political buoyancy. All our neighbours appear to have fallen for the Chinese bait and in turn facilitating Chinese designs . In that, **the Doklam stand off in Aug 2017 and recent transformational political activities in Maldives have distinct foot prints of Chinese involvement with far reaching strategic imperatives.**

Maldives , an island nation has been a beneficiary of Indian patronage all along including launching a military operation to save guard their sovereignty. However, the bilateral ties with India have nose dived after India criticized the current Abdulla Yameen government for imposing emergency in the island country. Their refusal to participate in Indian exercise MILAN and defence expo alongside withdrawal of Dhruv ALH are signs of change in Maldivian political outlook towards India. The recent visit by Pakistani Army chief during ongoing political crisis is indicative of military diplomacy with inimical designs by China Pakistan combine.

It is apparent that Maldives is showing signs of defiance with obvious prompting by China who has invested heavily in Maldives with an aim to establish a military base and replacing India as their anchor. Maldives, very cleverly, seem to be leveraging this new found strategic equation to extract higher political mileage both from China as well as India. The extra regional forces lead by the US are also feeling the heat of Chinese influence into Maldivian political space. It is another opportunity for Maldives to exploit in times to come.

What emerges from ongoing political maneuvering is establishment of China as a stake holder in Maldives which was not the case earlier. Moreover, Pakistan with her Islamic appeal is being propped up by China as a co security provider to the island nation. Therefore, there is a reckonable strategic shift in favour of China and Pakistan combine, a new strategic friction for India in the central Indian Ocean. India seems to be clearly on back foot for not wresting the political initiative in the initial stages of the crisis in the island nation in her back yard.

The attempted Doklam ingress when hyphenated with military geography would suggest a sinister grand game to cut off entire North Eastern India from the Indian main land. In that , narrow Siliguri corridor happens to be located at the tri junction of Nepal , Bangla Desh and Bhutan which can be easily accessed through approaches from any of these countries. **Besides this China has shortest over land route(600 plus miles) to India along second world war fame Ledo/ Stillwell road which connects Yunan province of China to Arunachal Pradesh and then on to Assam.**

It has potential to turn the flank of Indian military deployment in the state of Arunachal Pradesh which is claimed by China as their territory. Though , such an outreach seems impractical, but there is a threat in being under certain circumstances. One should not forget that China has substantial economic presence in the Myanmar plus they are involved in construction of a port at Kyauk Pyu on western coast to link main land China with Bay of Bengal . The China has been insisting on upto 85% of ownership stake in the \$ 7.3 billoin deep sea port which provides strategic advantages of not to cross strait of Malacca for transshipment of her energy supplies.

Nepal shares a border of over 1850 kms in the east, south and west with five Indian States – Sikkim, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. The India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 forms the bedrock of the special relations that exist between India and Nepal. Under the provisions of this Treaty, the Nepali citizens have enjoyed certain advantages in India, availing facilities and opportunities at par with Indian citizens. Nearly 6 million Nepali citizens live and work in India . whereas , there are signs of political discomfort with India amongst some of the Nepalese polity under influence of China.

China as on date has a well established a political constituency in Nepal due to presence of communist party in their ruling dispensation. The Nepal is

already connected with the Chinese road network in Tibet and there are plans to connect Kathmandu with a railway line also in near future. It would facilitate Chinese access to Indian Northern and Eastern Indian heart land of UP, HP, Bihar and West Bengal.

Nepal seem to have fallen into Chinese game plan head on as evident from their non participation in the joint military exercise as part of the BIMSTEC . Whereas, they would be participating in a Sino-Nepalese military exercise scheduled in near future in China. There are tell tale signs of enhanced Chinese presence in the Nepalese economic space wherein they have agreed to provide port facilities on Chinese Eastern coast . Nepal seems to keep this as an option to reduce her dependence on Indian ports, thereby creating political leverages to draw more concessions from India. There appears to be a perceptible change in the Nepalese outlook towards India which is a matter of concern as it has political implications besides national security paradigms.

Similarly Bangladesh is located adjacent to North Eastern flanks with its apex at Siliguri. Pakistan already has substantial complicity in infusing radical Islamic elements in Bangladesh which has afflicted the muslim population in adjoining Indian states of West Bengal and Assam. China also has an access to this narrow corridor from Doklam through Paro valley of Bhutan which can be easily connected with road network within Tibet. China has substantial politico-economic presence in the Bangladesh, besides Islamic afflictions from Pakistan which has an inimical dimension. Bangladesh fits into Chinese scheme in destabilizing India due to her military geography both over land borders in the North as well as her dominating location in the Bay of Bengal. China has been working on exploiting Bangladesh for her political purposes

The feasibility of X Chinese threats through Nepal and Bhutan would require violation of their neutrality which is unlikely to happen except in extreme desperate politico- military contingencies. Whereas , Bangladesh with Islamic radical elements may be exploited by China-Pakistan combine to suit their designs to destabilize Indian North Eastern sector even without crossing the border. Hence , these factors deserve to be taken into account in Indian security matrix , as **Doklam episode has amply exposed Chinese intentions to create a “threat in being” , thereby increase the ante.**

The China and Pakistan connection requires no elaboration in this narrative. The Pakistan army in their anti Indian obsession has permitted China to enter in their geographical space even at the cost of its impact on their sovereignty .

The CPEC alignment all along western periphery of India has well known military connotation .As a result ,the military deterrence of pakistan has gone up and they continue to indulge in anti Indian activities despite their poor state of economics and higher Indian combat superiority.

China openly supports Pakistan in their complicity of terrorist strains both in Afghanistan as well as Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. There is a congruence of their national interests to indulge in activities to destabilize India and keep her on the back foot . **What concerns most with the Chinese presence in Pakistani geographical space and its logistics linkages is the feasibility of collusive military threat on two fronts simultaneously which has strategically inimical dimensions .**

It, surely, is a grave situation from Indian national security perspective . However, India is not a push over given her strategic stature, economic buoyancy and proven military strength , besides reasonable counter veiling political support of comity of global heavy weights. **The Indian military leverages in Indian Ocean due to her dominating geographical location would always outweigh Chinese presence as their main land is more than 4000 nautical miles from the heart of Indian Ocean.** Moreover , they have to reach Indian Ocean through number of bottle necks dominated by countries with whom they do not have best of relations. Indian air and land forces alongside her nuclear calculus have credible deterrence to take care of Chinese threats at the time of reckoning..

Therefore, China with her more than 90% of trade flowing through Indian periphery cannot afford to mess up with India beyond a point. Hence , her designs of establishing military bases **is reflective of their defensive mind set to take care of her insecurities** ,albeit with ingredients of offensive defence doctrine at best. Therefore, **an all out military conflict seem to be unlikely as China also needs to survive in larger global politico-economic network wherein India is a major participant.**

China cannot afford to lose out on \$ 12 billion worth of trade with one of the largest markets of the world as it would impact on her economy . Moreover , with an ongoing trade war with US , it is in the Chinese interests not to raise the ante against India in the emerging politico-economic scenario. However, military induced Chinese psychological warfare is likely to continue on the sidelines simply to nudge India to be more malleable to Chinese interests.

The recent two plus two dialogue between US and India is all about strategic alliance to check the politico-economic expansion of China. It has overt military dimension of communication compatibility and logistics support to each other, besides modernization and empowering of the Indian armed forces through cutting edge technologies. The biggest import of emerging Indo-US equation is likely expansion of Indian influence from IOR to Indo-Pacific having greater outreach in times to come. India seem to have acted in the best of her national interests to take the Indo-US relationship to next level in the face of Chinese coercive ways and their attempts to create cognitive political dissent in the region inimical to Indian interests.

India needs to operate from position of strength and capable to take care of inimical forces in all their dimensions on its own in a decisive manner. **To do that, the Indian Armed Forces, in particular, need to be reoriented and synergized to operate beyond defensive doctrine with optimal offensive content for power projection as the threat happens to be emanating from standoff distances over land , air, sea and cyber space.** It is time to change the strategic priorities and its pace to expose Chinese bluff.

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