

ROLE OF CHINA AGAINST THE NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS TO SOUTH ASIA IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

South Asia is a region of eight states if we include Afghanistan in the mixture. India and Pakistan are known as the major state of the region, the remaining states are Maldives, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. China is a neighbor of Pakistan, India, Bhutan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. As a neighboring country of Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Pakistan. Thereby China is an integral part of the region and regional power politics of South Asia. China already has a bilateral cooperative relationship with Pakistan. Whereas, India and China have a bilateral trade relationship. Both India and China also have border issues. The relationship of China with small states of South Asia is a vast field of research. This research addresses two main questions. First, how China is dealing with the smaller states of the region. Second, How China engages the Smaller South Asian states to counter the non-traditional security threat in the region after 9/11. For this purpose, explanatory and case study research was used for this research. These research methods are part of qualitative research. Secondary data such as; books, research articles, newspapers, and websites are the main source of this article.

Keywords: *South Asia, Traditional Security Threats, Communist China, China's Regional Alignment*

INTRODUCTION

A former British diplomat, Sir John Adam Thomson (2002), explains that “September 11 has severely shaken the South Asian kaleidoscope” (p.13). The transformation in the security situation reinforced the United States to

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adopt unilateral policies to curb the evil of terrorism in their way. These unilateral policies of America had a long-term impact on South Asia and particularly China. However, Beijing supported the United States in the war against terrorism yet it has serious concerns over its military presence in many parts of Asia.

Meanwhile, Sino-US relations were undergoing in the Bush administration and treated China as a strategic competitor. However, it denounced the Bush administration's aggressive policies and got broad support worldwide. China supported the principles of the United Nations on war against terrorism and opposed pre-emption, which negatively impacts South Asian regional security.

In the Post 9/11 scenario, China is attempting to stabilize its standing in South Asia. Sino-Indian relations are moving towards normalization through frequent visits by the leaders of both countries. However, China and India expand their economic relations to develop mutual benefits and trust.

Consequently, U.S. strategists are concerned about the growing Sino-Indian relations because these ties would be a possible threat to its interests in the region. These concerns push the United States to establish robust strategic cooperation with New Delhi. With a strong strategic partnership with the U.S., India signed a Civilian Nuclear deal in 2005 and ratified it in 2008. China and Pakistan both see this nuclear cooperation and strategic cooperation as a serious concern because the United States uses India as a counterweight to Beijing and promotes her as a hegemon in that region, which would also affect Pakistan's security fulcrum. Beijing started its influence in the region by establishing bilateral ties with the important powers of the South Asian region. Jakobson (2016) discusses that "in China's rise under the Xi Jinping era, in 21st century USA is facing same experience with China which it faced with USSR at the end of last century (p.221).

In the post-9/11 scenario, Pak-China relations became necessary due to the changing situation in the South Asian security environment. The Indo-US Defense Pact and Civilian Nuclear Deal create a deep sense of insecurity among the smaller South Asian states. Pakistan again reinforced its strategic importance in China's South Asian policy. Mirza Aslam Beg responded to the Indo-US defense pact that, "China is the most trusted and reliable friend and is not expected to be bound by any deal. This friendship thrives on a reciprocal and symbiotic relationship. Pakistan's regional order position will be defined by its relations with China" (Dawn, 2005). The growing Indian hegemonic design compelled other nations for alternative options for

security arrangements. Therefore, Pakistan and other small states look towards China for a balancer role in the region against Indian supremacy. Smith (2011) explained that “Islamabad’s strategic tilt towards Beijing after the U.S. Navy Seal raid in Abbottabad in 2011; its subsequent turn towards China has highlighted one of the most remarkable legacies of the Cold War” (Smith, 2011).

Furthermore, China’s policy in South Asia in the post-Osama Bin Laden phase took a strategic shift predominantly aimed at its global peaceful rise. At the same time, it is eager to increase its political, and economic impact in South Asia to ensure development in its western restive parts. It is also enhancing its strategic impact to reduce the threat of terrorism, and to condense the political instability in its restive western regions. It also curtails India’s hegemonic designs, reduces the ability of potentially hostile powers like the U.S. to its interests, and promotes economic integration (Kaura, 2018, p. 8). In 2013, President Xi Jinping launched the One Belt One Road project. He also announced a “pair of initiatives that aimed to restructure the economy and geopolitics of Eurasia. The Silk Road Economic Belt is a program to build the land transportation corridors that connect China to Europe and all other sub-regions like South and West Asia”. Moreover, in the same year, the Chinese President announced the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, a port development initiative to extend its trade channels targeting the maritime regions (Arase, 2015, p. 25).

In recent times, Beijing and Islamabad have paid an unusual consideration to their strategic interests in security, political and economic development. Pakistan considers its partnership with Communist China to be the cornerstone of its foreign policy. Islamabad extends full support to China on the issues of Taiwan, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea. On China’s part, it is the only major strategic power that backs Pakistan’s efforts to safeguard its territorial integrity. However, Communist China fully backed its membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group ((NSG). More importantly, in recent times, China recognizes Kashmir as a dispute between Pakistan and India and calls for a peaceful resolution according to the UN resolutions, particularly after India’s unilateral action of repealing the special status of Indian Occupied Kashmir in August 2019. While, U.N. Secretary-General Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric clarified that the position of the UN on Kashmir is well established and has not changed (Siddiqui, 2021).

In the contemporary era, both states focused on developing economic relations to counter these security threats. Pakistan was the first to join the Chinese One Belt and One Road (OBOE) initiative. The China-Pakistan

Economic Corridor (CPEC) helped her accomplish its strategic objectives in that context. McCartney (2021) argued that “Pakistan’s long-term Plan for the CPEC describes the spatial geography of the CPEC as One Belt with three axes and several passages with a core zone and adjoining radiation zones” (McCartney, 2021).

Furthermore, Chinese economic corridors have become victims of great powers rivalry in the South Asian region. In a report, the White House stated that “Beijing would attempt to convert the OBOR projects into undue political influence and military access” (House, 2020). However, the containment of Communist China was the declared objective of U.S. foreign policy. While, in this scenario, Indo-US relations took a strategic shift to counter the Chinese influence in the region. Kaura (2018) argued that “in a significant exodus from India’s traditional policy of not entering into a military pact with any major power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had made India’s strategic preference in favor of the United States of America” (Kaura, 2018). However, this regional alignment between U.S. and India has far-reaching ramifications for the regional balance of power. So, china is moving forward to the bilateral relationship with the rest of the South Asian states such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an excess of literature to assess the Sino-Pak ties, but much of the work is inadequate to the precise relations between China and small states of South Asia. Moreover, the existing literature comprehends a tiny fraction of the topic theoretically. This study attempts to add a little more about recent development in their relations to counter the traditional security threats after 9/11 in South Asian power politics. Furthermore, this research has identified the theoretical perspective of Realism, Balance of threat, Deterrence, and its practical manifestations in China’s strategic ties. Therefore, it is a need for new alternatives to describe the issue of its ties with the international community, specifically with China regarding its regional alignment against the aforementioned threats in South Asia.

The existing literature also lacks knowledge about other emerging players’ interests in South Asia after 9/11. Therefore, this research also tries to find out how China engaged the smaller South Asian states to counter the Traditional security threats to maintain regional stability. Furthermore, the current literature also lacks knowledge about the common security threats that China faces from the regional and offshore players. However, this study

tries to find out how Beijing employs its strategic alignment based on traditional security to counter the non-conventional threats in South Asia. Besides, China is using international organizations to make a new security architecture to overcome these security challenges.

This research highlights the unexplored areas of mutual consensus between China under the circumstance of non-traditional security threats faced by the country in the form of Infectious Diseases, Terrorism, Energy Security, and environmental issues. Therefore, there is a dire need for an academic inquiry to determine how this particular security alliance between smaller states of South Asia and China creates a stable environment in the region. Furthermore, how does this alignment counter the growing traditional security alliance in the contemporary era? Moreover, this research also highlights bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and China at international and regional organizational levels to use political and economic interdependence to counter these non-traditional security threats.

The existing literature review also highlights the significance of Communist China in south Asia and the gap in the literature about traditional security threats that both states face in the current circumstances in the presence of traditional & non-traditional security threats at the regional level.

RESEARCH METHODS

This part of the work deals with adopting the qualitative research approach to identify the most useful methodology. A qualitative study has enjoyed exceptional growth and modification in the contemporary era and has become a recognized framework across various disciplines, particularly in social sciences. Denzin and Lincoln outline this method's generic definition as "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible. They turned the world into a series of representations, including interviews, conversations, recordings and it involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world" (2005a, p.3 as cited in Flick, 2007, p. 2). The qualitative research approach primarily focuses on understanding a phenomenon, which applies to this research study. The main objective of this study is to comprehend the possible answers to overcome the aforementioned threats faced by both Pakistan and China in the South Asian security environment, more importantly, after 9/11. However, qualitative research produces meaningful results from the analysis of words, and it is also flexible and amendable for research goals.

The qualitative method is more suitable for different reasons in this research work, like commonly answering how, why, and when. This particular methodology can adopt one or more ways to investigate social phenomena. This research study was mainly based on secondary research to examine the impact of conventional and non-conventional security threats confronted by Beijing, particularly after September 21st century.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

China's Regional Alignment with the South Asian States

China's Relationship with Bangladesh

Beijing develops close relationships with small states of South Asia for a peaceful regional security environment. China and Bangladesh developed their relationship in 1975 and exchanged diplomatic missions in Feb 1976. However, in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, China supported Pakistan against India. At the same time, it used her first veto against Bangladesh in United Nations. Afterward, Sino-Bangladesh relations were strengthened to enhance economic and military cooperation. Over time, increased military cooperation between these two states was significant in the regional security environment. Dhaka's defense requirements and developmental needs are heavily dependent on her. "Beijing sees its foothold in Bangladesh as a part of its quest to establish its regional power profile; and as a means to challenge India in its own South Asian backyard" (Rao, 2010). Consequently, it also planned to build Chittagong port and construct a port at Sonadia Island in Bangladesh, giving it direct access to the Bay of Bengal. This will reduce China's dependence on the Malacca Straits (Suryanarayanan, 2011).

New Delhi showed serious concerns over these developments in the Bay of Bengal and the growing military cooperation between China and Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh also had a water-sharing dispute with India, she pays no heed to Bangladesh's claims on water issues, which compelled her to make alternative security arrangements with China. Bangladesh views China as a dependable partner and counterbalances Indian influence.

China's Relationship with Sri Lanka

China and Sri Lanka developed their relations in the early 1950s. Both China and Sri Lanka signed a barter trade agreement in 1952. This agreement was necessary because China was under a ban by some countries on strategic materials then. In the 1980s, China had shown some reservations about Sri Lankan requests for help against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) in Sri Lanka. Consequently, China refused the Sri Lankan request for help because China tried to win India's confidence to normalize its relations. But after the changing situation in the region, China gave military and economic aid to Sri Lanka to strengthen their bilateral relationship. For its energy security corridors, China also develops a seaport at Hambantota. Indian Defence analyst Anand Kumar (2011) discusses that "the construction of the deep seaport at Hambantota and the latest one in Colombo fulfilled this latter objective. A strong foothold for the Chinese in Hambantota would allow them to control a vast area of the Indian Ocean extending up to Antarctica". Consequently, Sino-Indian strategic competition in Sri Lanka can be described as "China and Pakistan finding Sri Lanka attractive for attaining one of their strategic goals of limiting India's power and influence in the region" (Nathan, 2011).

China's Relationship with Nepal

Nepal is a land-locked nation in South Asia, heavily dependent on Bharat for its transit facilities. In the initial stages, Sino-Nepalese relations were not up to the mark. Nepal was considered a satellite state of India. India forced Nepal to sign a memorandum, which allowed India to establish check posts near the Sino-Nepalese border. However, Nepal reacted to the Indian aggressive designs and showed dissatisfaction. The Sino-India war of 1962 allowed Nepal to mend its relations with China. From then onwards, Sino-Nepalese relations were cordial, and China became the primary source of economic and strategic assistance to Nepal.

However, Nepal supported China's national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and she assured her that it would not allow any country to use its territory against her. Consequently, Nepal also backed Beijing to counterpoise the Indian influence in South Asia. "China has attempted to erode the traditional Indian influence in Nepal through infrastructure development projects, bringing economic dividends to the Nepalese living in the heartland. This has helped China accrue immense strategic and financial advantages and provided opportunities to bring Nepal into its fold" (Sakhuja, 2011). Bhutan and China have strained relations in the past and did not maintain diplomatic relations. There was a border dispute between Bhutan and China, and they started negotiations for improving their relations.

China's Relationship with Bhutan and Maldives

Bhutan tries to adopt a balanced foreign policy approach towards India and China's traditional friends. According to Kumar (2010), "The dynamics of the Sino-Indian relationship and Indian and Chinese strategic interests and activities in the Himalayas will be crucial in shaping Bhutan's policies towards China". China developed its relations with the Maldives in October 1972. Both states are stressed about enhancing economic and military cooperation. The rivalry between China, India, and the U.S., the Maldives will continue to rely on China's investment, trade, and goodwill, even though India has also sought to enhance its investment, trade, and economic assistance to the island nation (Ranasinghe, 2011). Furthermore, China also signed a deal with the Maldives to develop a naval base in Marao in the Maldives.

In a nutshell, China's perception and policies about South Asia are likely to remain significant. In the Cold war era, she adopted a limited strategy to protect the western part of the territory and avoid confrontation in the region. It was satisfied with the existing regional structure because, at that time, China lacked strength and miscalculated the strategic value of South Asia. It adopted a one-dimensional policy in South Asia in the Cold war; supported Pakistan in two wars to neutralize the role of its rival India. However, the departure of revolutionary leader Mao Zedong from China in the 1970s provides an opportunity to mend her relations with India. Afterward, Beijing has taken many initiatives to normalize its ties with New Delhi. But India adopted an aggressive approach to deal with neighboring states. India's hegemonic designs and Chinese opposition to hegemony compelled other South Asian states to maintain a good relationship.

In the post-soviet era, the aim of Beijing's foreign policy approach was the containment of hegemony and promotion of multipolar and democratic international institutions. Therefore, she introduced a new security concept, this security arrangement is based on mutual trust, benefit, and equality. The conflicting approach between India and China perturbed the South Asian security environment. The threat perception of China pushed both India and the United States to 'China-centric' strategic solid cooperation. These developments move the actors into a new power struggle in the region. While its policy in South Asia regarding the regional security environment adopts a policy to engage India's neighbors to shift the balance of power in its favor.

China-South Asia Relations under One Belt One Road Initiative

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed argues that, in the Era of China's One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), Beijing attaches great significance to the smaller South Asian states. Each country's situation is unique, and its partnership with China varies (Sayed, 2022). Though, Beijing's economic ties in developing new infrastructure and investments under Belt Road Initiative (BRI) with smaller states increased over the past decade. Though Chinese annual foreign direct investment across the smaller South Asian States is almost 3.9 billion U.S. Dollars, making it one of the largest bilateral investors in some of them (Randall G. Schriver, 2020, p. 39). Today, China's investment stands at almost \$15 billion, mainly after 2013; the Hambantota deal was revised in 2017 under the Belt and Road Initiative (Mohan, 2021, p. 76).

While other strategic projects that include port facilities, roads, rail, and airports are currently under construction in Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives, and Sri Lanka. In comparison, China's increasing regional alignment with these smaller states poses a counterweight to India's hegemonic position in the region. Though, she also has concerns about the issue of Tibet with the adjoining countries like Bhutan and Nepal. However, China's strategic alignment with these smaller states of the South Asian region plays a role of a balancer to undermine the Indian hegemonic designs. Nepal had seen a significant shift in its relations with China when it took steps to expand its ties with her in the wake of the border closure by India in 2015. In October 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Nepal and signed 20 agreements and most of the agreements, including Nepal's support of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), railway and roads connectivity between China and Nepal, and Nepal's reiteration of One China Policy (Jha, 2019). So, China's active role in Nepal replaced India's traditional role as a power broker.

Although, Bhutan was also involved in the Doklam border area conflict between India and China in 2017. Nonetheless, Beijing reached an agreement with Bhutan on the boundary negotiations in October 2021. In an online ceremony, both countries signed "the memorandum of understanding on a three-step road map for accelerating the Bhutan-China boundary negotiations" (Wang, 2021). China has developed a strong bond relationship with Bangladesh, a strong ally of India in this region, in OBOR. President Xi Jinping visited Dhaka after a gap of thirty years; in October 2016 have signed 27 deals and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), totaling \$13.6 billion (Kabir, 2016).

While the Maldives is strategically located in the Indian Ocean, China-Maldives relations took a shift in the era of Maldivian President Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom. Both states signed the Free Trade Agreement in December 2017 to strengthen their economic ties. China's BRI brings tangible benefits to participant countries, including the Maldives. The China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, inaugurated in August 2018, links Malé to Hulhumale, and Hulhule, which is vital to long-term economic development (Cong, 2018). In January 2022, the Chinese Foreign Minister visited the Maldives and expressed his views about the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between China and the Maldives, which have withstood the test of international vicissitudes and become more mature, thus contributing to the regional peace and stability.

CONCLUSION

The basis of that particular research work was based on the research questions about China's relationship with the small countries (Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, and Bhutan) of South Asia against conventional security threats in the region after 9/11. The final thoughts of this research work focused on the study in different fragments with a perception to highlight the significant areas of cooperation based on security cooperation to counter these security threats in South Asia.

Beijing was examined from the realist school of thought and deterrence theory. Sino-strategic relations after 9/11 were analyzed by employing the dominant paradigms of international relations theories. However, different assumptions were mentioned as descriptions to establish the link between the jurisdiction of view and the existing domain of the foreign policy pursued by the state to counter these threats. Insecurity, cooperation between regions has become increasingly dependent over a long period. The convergence of interests was mirrored in linkages established between South Asia and China on multiple forums in the last decades. From this perspective, deterrence was relevant and best explained the Sino-strategic relationship to counter traditional and non-traditional security threats.

China embraced a balanced approach to dealing with the South Asian region because; it adopted economic liberalization policies for economic development. China normalized its relationship with India to create an environment of economic growth. But it assured Pakistan that her connections with New Delhi were not at the cost of its strategic partner. She continued her support for Pakistan by involving in different joint venture

projects. In the meantime, China also delivered Pakistan with missile technology to strengthen its military capabilities.

The incident of 9/11 changed the world's geopolitical settings and security situation. US-led combat against terrorism was thrust in Afghanistan to eliminate the terrorist sanctuaries of Al-Qaeda and toppled the Taliban's de facto government. Given that anti-crusade war, Pakistan was again playing the frontline state's role as earlier in the Afghanistan crisis in the 1980s. China supported the US-led war on terror campaign and appreciated Pakistan's role because it also faces non-conventional threats like terrorism in its Xinjiang area, where Muslim separatists perturbed the situation.

However, in the post-Osama Bin Laden era, Sino-Pak relations touch new heights of strategic cooperation, part of Beijing's One Belt One Road Initiative. In that context, Pakistan-China Economic Corridor (CPEC) would take the economic ties among the iron brotherly nation states to new high points. Whereas, apart from the regional connectivity from Xinjiang to Gwadar Port, the critical benefit that she gained from this economic corridor is the energy projects planned to construct and address its trade and infrastructure mechanism. Therefore, Islamabad and Beijing's inclusive partnership would possibly address its various glitches, which would expectedly give Pakistan leverage in asserting its position in regional power politics.

Moreover, Beijing's relations with Afghanistan commenced consolidating after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. China made some constructive negotiations with the current Afghan Taliban government to maintain cordial relations based on cooperation. Moreover, China has already invested in a war-torn country in the last two decades in infrastructural development. In that context, Beijing's desire to have a stable Afghanistan would lie its economic and strategic interests in OBOR. Peacetime in Afghanistan also serves its interests in Xinjiang province, bordering with war-torn countries. For China's regional alignment in South Asia, some essential areas would be suggested for inclusive study in the upcoming era. The imminent recommendations in the context of regional alignment between these two states are to counter the traditional and non-traditional security threats. This counter strategy should include using China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as regional connectivity between South & East Asia to Europe and other regions of the world. This approach will promote China's starring role as a stabilizer in South Asia.

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