



DEFENCE AND DIPLOMACY

IN PURSUIT OF NATIONAL SECURITY

VOL. 9 NO. 4

ISSN 2347 - 3703

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2020

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Book Review

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➤ EDITOR'S NOTE

The quarter just gone by has been dominated by the events on India's northern border with China. While China has been adamant about the de-escalation/disengagement process and accepting the status quo ante positions, proactive action has been taken by the Indian Army to dominate the high grounds from where it can keep an eye on Chinese positions, both on the North as well as the South banks of the Pangong Tso. This 'tactical victory' for India—but a humiliating reversal suffered by the Chinese—is becoming difficult for the PLA to swallow, and has led to a hardening of stand on the de-escalation and disengagement process. The Chinese side is now insisting that disengagement of troops, tanks/guns (that have been brought in by the PLA to intimidate the Indians), is contingent on withdrawal of the Indian Army from the high grounds it has occupied since August 29 when the PLA fired warning shots to threaten the Indian troops. This was the first time that shots have been fired along the LAC in the last 45 years. The heights occupied by the Indian Army are, however, well within the Indian side of the LAC; there is thus absolutely no question of withdrawing from such heights that give our soldiers the strategic advantage in the region. Left to the Chinese, any 'grab' of unoccupied territory by the PLA is passé, but any perceived 'grab' of unoccupied territory, when carried out by the Indian Army, raises hackles among the Chinese senior leadership (of despair and frustration). The Chinese propaganda machine and Daily, the *Global Times*, called the Indian Army action to gain strategic heights on the South Bank of the Pangong Tso as 'provocative' as they (Indian troops) were reported to have been 'the first to unilaterally change the status quo in the border area'. It is acceptable for the Chinese national newspaper—the mouthpiece of the CPC—to suffer from short-term memory loss, a

condition normally reserved for those who see horrific action on the battlefield; it is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Daily seems to have forgotten the action at Galwan Valley on June 15 that had been precipitated by the blatant pitching of tents across the LAC by the PLA; that, along with the actions by the PLA near the Finger Four area of the Pangong Tso, were the first actions by the PLA to change the status quo along the LAC as early as April-May 2020. However, in its response to the Indian Army action on the intervening night of August 29-30, the Daily does not mention that fact at all but goes to great lengths to whip up national sentiment with catch phrases like “... *but regarding sovereignty, China will never compromise and India’s miscalculations will endanger its frontline troops*” and that “*no matter what kind of pressure China is facing to the east, India will surely pay a heavy price*”. Here it is quite surprising that the Daily admits to the “pressure China is facing to the East” (in a reference to the pressure it is facing from the US as a result of China’s aggressive activities in the Taiwan Straits and the South China Sea)—something that would have been downplayed in earlier times. It is possible that this is meant to provide an ‘escape route’ to the PLA and assuage national sentiment should things turn sour on either front.

The movement forward of military hardware and troops by both sides to the Eastern Ladakh sector, along with the PLA’s determination to stick it out through the bitter winter that lies ahead, does not bode well for ‘peace and tranquillity’ along the border areas—a phrase abused by the Chinese who are known for their proclivity to speak with a forked tongue. China, on its part, has amassed 150 fighter aircraft, tanks, guns and in excess of 50,000 troops in the areas across the LAC in the Northern sector, yet speaks of bilateral ties to continue. In other words, despite this massive build-up of military force near the LAC, China expects India to return to ‘business as usual’.

If we hark back to the days prior to the 1962 War, to the exchange of letters between PM Nehru and PM Chou En-lai regarding repeated Chinese transgressions into Indian territory since the late 1950s, we will get a sense of the Chinese mindset, which does not appear to have changed over the years. In the reply given by Chou En-lai to Nehru’s letter in which Nehru had pointed out about the Chinese building the road through Aksai Chin—an integral part of India—

and why the Chinese had not settled the border with India despite India's repeated reminders since 1954, Chou En-lai wrote: "*This was because conditions were not yet ripe for settlement and the Chinese side, on its part, had had no time to study the question.*" They were only waiting for an asymmetry in military power to build up and also an opportune moment to assert their claim forcefully over India and "teach India a lesson" for eyeing Tibet. Also, the intention of the Chinese leadership at that time was to "assert China's claim to regional hegemony" by defeating India—the only other regional power—convincingly. The internal faultlines within China suggested that war with India was the only opportunity for Mao to return to centre stage from his political 'retirement'.

It appears that Mao was not as concerned about the McMahon Line as he was about India's desire to take over Tibet by driving the Chinese out. This was one of Mao's biggest fears, exacerbated by Nehru's 'Forward Policy'. The border with India had stood and had been accepted between Tibet and India for centuries. Given the victory achieved by China over India in 1962, the Chinese leadership felt that India was an easy pushover state against which the border issue could be kept alive so that it could be resolved at a time of China's choosing. In this context, even as recently as the last decade of the twentieth century, the view from the Chinese leadership was that the boundary question could be left for future generations to resolve. Clearly, China was biding its time once again till it became militarily strong and could assert its will on India.

Given the situation as it obtains presently in the East Ladakh region, that moment seems to be slipping between the Chinese fingers as we speak.

The induction of the Rafale into the IAF 'could not have happened at a more opportune time' is what the CAS said at the induction ceremony held at Ambala on September 10. Buoyed by the tremendous firepower that the aircraft can deliver—both in the air dominance role as well as against surface targets—the Raksha Mantri sent a strong and unambiguous message to China by stating that the induction of the Rafale is a big and stern message "especially to those eyeing our sovereignty". Since the arrival of five Rafales at Ambala on July 29, the pilots have familiarised themselves with the likely

area of operations and carried out integrated training with other squadrons of the IAF, some of which have aircraft similar to those available with the PLAAF. They have also carried out live firing of all types of weapons—both air-to-air as well as air-to-ground—and are “good to go and deliver” as per the CAS.

Despite the developments on its western borders, China has been busy elsewhere too in its quest to grab as much territory as possible under the garb of ‘Historical claims’. The South China Sea (SCS) is another region where the Chinese Maritime Militia continues its actions to harass those carrying out legitimate hydrocarbon development or offshore fishing, but belonging to neighbouring states in the South East Asian region—the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei. The large number of Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia boats patrolling the SCS on a 24x7 basis make regular use of the newly built facilities on the islands in the SCS as staging posts. China has ‘reclaimed’ several disputed islands by carrying out dredging in recent years and built military facilities, including airfields for fighter aircraft, hangars, radar stations, SAM sites, repair and refuelling facilities, and also positioned anti-ship cruise missiles at these outposts.

All this, however, did not deter the Indian Navy that boldly sent a warship into the South China Sea immediately after the clash at Galwan Valley to send a strong message to China that India would not be deterred by their actions in the Ladakh sector where it is attempting to upset the status quo. The Indian Navy warship carried out Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) in the SCS, while keeping in touch with the US Navy that was also in the region at the time, despite stern warnings from the Chinese that they would not hesitate to carry out planned collisions with the Indian Navy warship if it entered China’s territorial waters (meaning the seas around the disputed islands in the SCS that China has only recently laid claim to—a claim that was turned down by the Permanent Court of Arbitration as being devoid of any merit). Besides this, the IN began patrolling the Malacca Straits to keep an eye on PLAN ships or submarines attempting to enter the Indian Ocean region for possible activities inimical to India’s national security.

China has historically seized a moment when the Superpower(s) has/have been diverted from interfering with whatever agenda the PRC wanted to further in its national interests. In 1962, it was the Cuban Missile crisis that gave the Chinese the opportunity they were waiting for to wage war with India “to teach India a lesson”. In 1974, it was the ‘weakened US’ that had to withdraw ignominiously from Vietnam that gave China the opportunity to seize Paracel Islands from Vietnam. From 2014 onwards, when the US was embroiled in West Asia in the fight against terrorism, China saw a golden opportunity to start the expansion in the SCS and began to build islands from what were once mere outcrops in the Spratlys and Paracel group of islands in the SCS. And, of course, never mind the international outcry ... it will subside. Possession *is* nine-tenths of the law.

Now that the world is reeling under the impact of the Wuhan virus, the US elections not very far off, the Indian economy not exactly shining, Xi Jinping feeling the impact of domestic faultlines in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and the slowdown of its economy, will China seize this moment to try and carry out another “defensive counterattack” against the ‘invading’ Indian security forces?

India needs to take a leaf out of history and read the signs.

STAY SAFE STAY HEALTHY STAY CHEERFUL

Happy reading!



CHINA'S UNCOMPROMISING STANCE ON THE BORDER: LESSONS FROM THE PAST FOR INDIA

SANA HASHMI

INTRODUCTION

With the current stand-off in the Galwan valley, it will not be business as usual for India and China. In June 2020, 20 Indian soldiers were killed in the clashes with China, whereas the latter is yet to disclose casualties on its side. It was the first time in more than four decades that the clashes turned violent. These events demonstrate that despite both sides' emphasis on keeping the dispute at the back-burner, the dispute is at the forefront of India-China relations and delaying the border dispute resolution will only delay the prospects for better India-China relations. India's policy has been to engage in a dialogue with China, and for diffusing tensions there have been several confidence building measures that were introduced over the years. Till now, 22 rounds of special representative talks have taken place. Despite several dialogue mechanisms, the progress made at

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the border front is inconsequential, and the border dispute continues to remain a major irritant in the relations.

In this context this paper argues that for stable India-China relations, India needs to push for an early settlement of the boundary dispute, and it is important to get rid of the notion that the boundary dispute should drive the relationship. India may take cues from China's past border dispute resolutions, and formulate a strategy to tackle the China challenge.

LEARNING FROM CHINESE RESPONSE TO ITS PAST BORDER DISPUTES¹

China's territoriality and its facets, territory, boundaries and frontiers, make the founding pillars of the Westphalian state system, which has been a fundamental feature of the modern nation states. It has also been seen that the territorial expanse of a nation state is intertwined with its inviolability without consent. Alteration in the territorial scope of a country impacts upon its sovereignty, which is central to its identity. Needless to mention that in today's world, frontiers and boundaries are an important contributor in a nation's geographical scope and politico-administrative horizon, and on all these counts China confirms the rule rather than being an exception to that.

So far as the boundaries and their dispute resolution mechanisms are concerned, the process comprises three significant steps, namely: defining, delimitation and demarcation of the boundary.² The state authorities across the world have found it difficult to deal with the challenge of boundary demarcation and keep it sacrosanct. This is primarily due to the reason that, more often than not, states are not able to reach a mutually agreeable boundary with the neighbouring state. In the case of China, the situation has been even more complicated as it has traditionally been unable to reconcile with its own history.

Thus, the first step taken to resolve the boundary dispute by the disputant countries entangled in a boundary dispute is: *Defining the*

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1. This article draws from the author's published book, Sana Hashmi, *China's Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects* (Delhi: Knowledge World, 2016). Since history plays an important role in understanding China's approach towards territorial disputes, this is an abridged version of the conclusion of the book on China's territorial disputes published by Centre for Air Power Studies in 2016.
 2. A. Henry McMahon, "International Boundaries", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 84, no. 4330, 1935, pp. 2-16.

disputed boundary. In the case of the India-China boundary dispute, while the maps have been exchanged several times and negotiations have taken place since the 1960s, not much positive development has taken place. The fundamental problem is the lack of mutual agreement on the entire boundary question. Citing several reasons, China claims parts of both Aksai Chin area and Arunachal Pradesh, thereby posing major challenges to the negotiation process. The shifting stands of the basis of Chinese claims on the territories of its neighbours, including India, not only pose a substantive challenge to dispute resolution, but also complicate the negotiation process. In the India-China boundary issue, the challenge lies in defining the boundary in such a way that it is mutually acceptable. In essence, the fundamental problem with the Chinese approach is that on Arunachal Pradesh, it claims history as the basis of dispute settlement, while in the case of Aksai Chin it comfortably overlooks the history. What makes the so-called authenticity of the Chinese claims even more discomfiting is that it packs the two deals together and offers India a settlement that is not mutually acceptable. Logically, China should offer India one of the two approaches, i.e., either historical claims or the current situation—China cannot expect to have the best from both aspects and negotiate with India to accept its terms and conditions.

With respect to *delimitation of the boundary*, in the case of India-China boundary issue, delimitation in totality is yet to see the light of day. Dividing the boundary on mutually agreeable terms can be reached only when India and China come to terms with defining the boundary. In all likelihood, the process will take several years before it is completed. *Demarcation* is the final step in the boundary dispute resolution process. While India has expressed its willingness to demarcate the boundary, major hurdles lie in terms of finding a long-term solution. While both India and China realise that the boundary dispute has been the biggest irritant in their relationship, China has been rather slow in attempting to negotiate the border issue with India and, on the contrary, has been initiating several stand-offs. It may be argued that the first remarkable attempt to resolve the border between the countries was made, after more than two decades, during the Rajiv Gandhi era. Since then, 22 rounds of talks have happened, but have not been able to yield substantive positive results. The

two leaders—Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping—met in two informal summits in order to have a free flow discussion on issues of contention. In the aftermath of the Doklam stand-off, the first informal summit took place in Wuhan in April 2018 and the second summit in Mamallapuram in October 2019. The current stand-off has raised questions on the utility of the informal summits. However, it is still important that the boundary dispute resolution process is led by greater political will and flexibility in keeping the negotiations intact. So far as the modalities of the process are concerned, there is also a need to persuade China that historical claims and the so-called century of humiliation narrative would not lead to resolution of the dispute. Taking into account the complexity of the problem, aggravated by the hyphenation of the geopolitics of India and China's rise, other factors such as presence of the citizens in the disputed territories and natural boundaries should also be considered. This gives India an advantage on settling the Arunachal Pradesh issue at the earliest. India also needs to underscore the inconsistencies in the Chinese approach towards the border issue, as the latter cannot invoke historicity with one of the neighbours while conveniently using a different standpoint to justify its claims.

BOUNDARY DISPUTES AND THE CHINESE APPROACH³

China has been at the epicentre of most of the boundary and maritime disputes in Asia since the 1950s. It explains its sovereignty claims over territory by arguing that most of it was illegally taken away from China through unequal treaties by foreign powers during the so-called 'century of humiliation'. Evidently, Mao Zedong and his successors did all that they could to restore the Chinese territory, often based on their own assumptions. In the context of India-China boundary dispute, China claims that the past should be the key to determine the present and the future. However, in the case of the South China Sea dispute with the Philippines, China does not refer to the ancient historical facts. China's acts of land reclamation in the South China Sea demonstrate that China intends to tweak the international laws and history to suit its own interests. The 'nine-dash line' is not

3. The author has compared China's approach towards territorial disputes with different countries in her book, *China's Approach towards Territorial Disputes: Lessons and Prospects*.

grounded in history and refutes not only the historical facts but also the norms and rules of international laws. While China has been looking at the historical perspectives as a panacea to the boundary woes between India and China, such perception on the part of China have often invited surprise and anxiety from its neighbours, many of whom have had a troubled past, or have come into existence only in the twentieth century. In the case of China's maritime dispute with Japan, China keeps making mention of the historical past and claims that earlier in history the maritime areas, including the islands, were a part of China's territory, which was illegally snatched away. Calling such incidents illegal, China claims back the maritime area and the islands. China's attempts to take history, as the sole pillar, has been redundant and complicates the prospects of a peaceful and mutually agreeable dispute resolution formula.

In the late 1950s, China commenced the process of boundary dispute resolution with Mongolia. At that time, China was leaning towards the side of the USSR and with its approval—as Mongolia, at that point of time, was under the influence of the USSR—Mongolia went ahead to resolve the dispute with China. Clearly, in the 1950s if not in the 1960s, China's boundary dispute resolution was worked through due to the ideological bonhomie between China and the USSR, and the influence of the latter on Mongolia. However, the China-USSR equation began to change and worsened in the 1960s. Consequently, China began to delay the resolution with the USSR and preferred to resolve the differences with smaller countries first. The USSR case demonstrates that China's strategy had been "*Keeping the low Profile and Biding the Time*" (Yang Hui Tao Guang) till the other disputant country weakened to such an extent that it not only consented to negotiate but also agreed to at least a few conditions imposed on it. China only resolved the dispute with the post-Soviet states when the USSR collapsed and the three Central Asian Republics and Russia were relatively weaker. China's strategy in dealing with the Central Asian Republics and Russia was driven by the fact that it was easy for China to negotiate and realise a boundary settlement mechanism with weaker post-Soviet states. It may be noted that China's boundary negotiations with the USSR could not get resolved for decades as Russia was not only relatively more powerful than

China but also part of similar ideology. If the Central Asian Republics and the Russian cases are taken as an indicator, it is highly likely that China would like to see a weakened India before it goes ahead with negotiations. Clearly, the Central Asian and the Russian examples are not in conformity with the Indian case. On all parameters, the Indian position is only strengthening and it seems highly dubious that India's position will weaken in the coming years. Additionally, by the 1990s, unrest in Xinjiang began to grow as a major challenge to China's internal security and border security at the northwestern side. Border stability became a primary concern for China in the 1990s. However, with India, China has never faced such a problem. China's border with India is relatively secure compared to China's western and northwestern frontiers.

With respect to China's boundary dispute resolution with Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan, India's burgeoning status on the international platform played a greater role. China wanted to improve its relations with the South Asian countries as early as the 1960s. However, the 1962 India-China War turned out to be the beginning of the bitter phase in India-China relations, which were normalised only in the 1980s. India's asylum to the 14th Dalai Lama, permission to the Tibetans for establishing the government-in-exile and huge inflow of Tibetan refugees in India further complicated the India-China relationship. In fact, in most of the Cold War period, Chinese leadership partly perceived India's granting of asylum to the Dalai Lama as an effort to ignite the Tibetan uprising and separatism. The presence of Tibetans in India and also in Nepal made China's desire to establish its foothold in the South Asian region firm. In contemporary times, Pakistan and Nepal are considered China's close partners but India and China do share multiple stresses in the relationship. It is highly unlikely that China will offer concessions to India in the hope of gaining dividends from such a partnership. The cases of Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan and Myanmar are also divergent in terms of China's approach towards India. One of the reasons for that is that non-resolution of the India-China boundary problem can largely be attributed to their capabilities to counter each other. Clearly, India's rising military profile, its status as the 'first among equals' in South Asia (to the extent of being called 'big brother'

in the Indian subcontinent) and remarkable presence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean have been major factors in shaping the Chinese approach towards India.

With the end of the Cold War, China's need to have smooth economic relations with its neighbours grew. Since Southeast Asian economies were growing at an unprecedented rate, Southeast Asian countries were China's safest bet. China wanted to integrate with the ASEAN economies. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square incident, China desperately wanted the support of fellow socialist countries at a time when it was on the verge of being isolated. That is the reason why China, despite having a turbulent relationship with Vietnam, went ahead to settle its land border. However, with India, even in the 1990s, it was not in China's interest to resolve the protracted dispute as there was neither any tangible gain nor was it in need of India's support in any of the matters. In fact, by the 1990s, a new kind of rivalry was taking place between India and China. With India's Look East Policy, rechristened as Act East Policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi administration, and its efforts to reach out to the Southeast Asian countries, both countries' aspirations to establish economic dominance in the neighbourhood began to take centre stage. Hence, India did not fit as a resource source for China and as an object of extractive resource diplomacy, as in the cases of Myanmar and Lao PDR, nor did India fall into the league of China's satellite states such as North Korea that is dependent on China. That India cannot accept being defined as a resource supplier to China without accruing equitable benefits from China is evident from the fact that India has been raising the issue of trade deficit with China. India has also been pressing China to enter the services sector, have deeper access to the pharmaceutical sectors. Clearly, India strives to maintain parity with China in terms of gaining from trade partnership—a factor that distinguishes it from resource suppliers such as Myanmar and Lao PDR.

INDIA-CHINA BOUNDARY DISPUTE: OPTIONS FOR INDIA

While China has been considerate with respect to its other boundary disputes, it is unwilling to give any concessions in its dispute with India and two maritime disputes. Even the South China Sea dispute

provides one with a different perspective about China's approach on boundary. A clear point emerges out of this. China is reluctant to negotiate the matter at the multilateral level. China's approach has been to resolve the dispute bilaterally. This has been demonstrated on several occasions. While rhetorically, China has been supporting multilateral dialogue, it has never really favoured the multilateral approach to the dispute. For India, thus, the lesson is clear: handle all boundary issues bilaterally. This means resolving the western sector dispute separately with Pakistan as also resolving the dispute with China without Pakistan's intervention.

The India-China boundary dispute has been a much more complicated case than China's other boundary disputes. Geopolitics is attached to the dynamics of the boundary dispute. India is the only rising power that is involved in a dispute with China, whereas no other country has been a rising or emerging power while resolving the dispute. The only comparable example is that of China and Japan. In addition, the relationship between them is far more complicated and several other issues need to be settled before China and Japan get to the issue of maritime dispute resolution. Hence, the rise of India and China has not only attracted other major powers to perceive India as a potentially strong player in the balance of power politics in the region, but has seemingly also complicated the bilateral problems, primarily the issue of boundary dispute resolution.

It is important for India to notice that China has always been apprehensive of big power involvement in any dispute, which may also be considered a critically important reason for China to delay a constructive and fruitful negotiation with India. China has shown the trend of 'backing out' of a confrontational situation that involves a big power. In the case of India, China backed out of supporting Pakistan during the 1965 India-Pakistan War and the 1971 Bangladesh War overtly. So far as the South China Sea dispute is concerned, it is evident that China has been striving to avoid the involvement of the United States in the matter. Therefore, for China the challenge is on two fronts: One, to avoid the possibility of a united multilateral Southeast Asian front; second, to avoid the United States' involvement. Clearly, China's deployment of delaying strategy and desperate actions are aimed at singling out the countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines so

that other Southeast Asian countries do not come together. For India, the crucial requirement is to strengthen its relationships with the United States, Japan and Australia to such an extent that China feels the need to resolve the boundary dispute as a tool to stop India from establishing a partnership with the United States aimed at China. China is mindful of the implications of India-United States strategic partnership. From a theoretical point of view, it is natural for China to get apprehensive of the India-United States relationship, or the India-Japan relationship for that matter. To maintain its supremacy in the region, China perceives India as a 'revisionist power', especially in the context of rising India-United States bonhomie, and the recent revival and elevation of the quadrilateral security dialogue involving India, Japan, the United States and Australia.

Way Ahead

China under Xi Jinping has become ever-assertive and aggressive. Xi Jinping is getting away from Deng Xiaoping's policy of keeping a low profile. China's aggressive postures are demonstrative of Xi Jinping's aspirations to showcase China as a stronger country and a step towards replacing the United States from its position of the sole Superpower in the world. As far as India is concerned, it is amply clear that it is in China's interest to keep the dispute alive so that India is preoccupied with the dispute and its rise is contained. China, in all probability, will keep working towards delaying the boundary dispute resolution process.

A fine balance of strengthened military capabilities and infrastructure along the border, along with diplomatic finesse, is the need of the hour for India. While India needs to work towards ensuring that a regular dialogue with China is continued on the border issues, including the border meetings that have been going on, military and civilian infrastructure along the borders needs to be ensured.

India's defence preparedness, surveillance capabilities and swiftness in dealing with potential military challenges from across the border need to be given utmost priority and urgent attention. In this regard, more defence procurement, upgrading and strengthening smart military forces, for deterrence purposes mainly, is the need of

the hour. Considering the high-altitude, difficult terrain and hostile weather conditions such as those in Aksai Chin, a greater role is expected of the Indian Air Force. The topographical complexities in dealing with the northern neighbour require that the Indian Air Force must be given a greater share in policy planning and preparedness. In essence, the tilt towards the Indian Army in dealing with the border problems needs to be balanced with more responsibilities and share of the Indian Air Force.

Given that India-China boundary dispute is different from those in the other 13 countries, the approach and solution also need to be different. Leaving the territorial dispute resolution to the next generation leadership is intrinsic in the Chinese approach. In the current situation, where there is a deadlock, what India may do is to push for an accelerated resolution while exploring options such as cooperation with like-minded countries in the Indo-Pacific region to address the China challenge.

CHINA'S FORAYS INTO REGIONAL SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

SHANTANU ROY-CHAUDHURY

A realist perspective of international politics advocates the view that nation-states are rational actors that engage in an anarchical world. The only way to ensure survival is through increasing one's security and by alleviating potential threats. Additionally, John Mearsheimer states that powerful states attempt to establish hegemony in their region of the world while making sure that no other state dominates their neighbourhood.¹ For the People's Republic of China (PRC), this is an important aspect of achieving its two centenary goals under Xi Jinping: becoming a "moderately well-off society" by 2021 to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and becoming a fully developed nation and a leading power by 2049 to mark the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC).² China's foreign policy manoeuvres have been echoing the above narrative which aligns with the Chinese

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1. John Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise", *Current History* 105, no. 690 (2006): 160-162.
2. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, "Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream", *The New York Times*, June 4, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/05/opinion/global/xi-jinpings-chinese-dream.html>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

dream of becoming a leading power. An important aspect of this strategy is to not only ensure that potential challengers are subdued, but also to gain power at the expense of others to become and remain as the only leading power in the world.³

This paper will elucidate upon one such strategy used by China under the aegis of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, one of Xi Jinping's primary foreign policy tools, has been instrumental in not only increasing connectivity between the world and China, but also increasing Beijing's influence across the globe. By expanding China's sphere of influence in areas where other regional powers have historically been paramount, the strategy plays into Beijing's hands of pursuing relative power and achieving the status of a leading power by not only "adding and multiplying its power, but also subtracting and dividing the power of potential adversaries".⁴ The BRI, therefore, is also being used as a means to act as a wedge and prevent rivals from accumulating power. Timothy W. Crawford has defined this 'wedge strategy' as a "state's attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance at an acceptable cost".⁵ China's advances under the BRI not only seek to undermine alliances against it but also to create a wedge among regional powers and their smaller neighbours. This keeps regional powers occupied within their traditional spheres of influence to manage an increasing Chinese footprint rather than being able to establish themselves as a larger power that could present itself as a potential national security threat to China.⁶

The paper attempts to examine three instances where China, through the BRI, has been increasing its presence in regions traditionally seen under the sphere of influence of nations that are or have the potential to become a threat to China's rise. The first three sections of this paper will study China's economic, political, and security presence in Central Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Latin

3. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

4. Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics", *International Security* 35, no. 4, (Spring 2011): 155-89.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Shantanu Roy-Chaudhury, "China's 'Wedge Strategy'", Centre for Air Power Studies, August 8, 2020, <http://capsindia.org/files/documents/e9cfdaed-55ba-465c-b4e1-c7cffff042f8.pdf>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

America. The fourth and final section will examine the various concerns it presents for the traditional regional powers of Russia, Australia, and the United States (US) respectively, and what it means for regional stability and their bilateral relationships with China. It will also analyse how this strategy plays into China's wider ambitions of becoming a leading power.

CENTRAL ASIA

The Central Asian Republics (CARs), comprising the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and traditionally under Russia's sphere of influence, are essential for China's regional ambitions and the overall success of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Beijing has a threefold interest in the region:

Firstly, Central Asia is rich in natural resources and raw materials, access to which is vital for China's continuous economic development and increasing energy requirements. China's inaugural direct oil pipeline from Central Asia pumps 130,000 barrels per day into western China from Kazakhstan. The region wholly accounts for 15 percent of China's natural gas needs.⁷

Secondly, the region acts as a buffer zone between Afghanistan and the western province of Xinjiang which is known for its Muslim Uighur community with secessionist tendencies. For Beijing, the buffer zone is imperative to prevent Islamic radicalism and terrorism from entering its borders and influencing those in Xinjiang, along with becoming a threat to Chinese citizens. Beijing also believes the region could become a support base for what it calls the "Three Evils"—terrorism, separatism, and extremism.⁸ Increased engagement with the region would prevent these "evil" elements from entering China. On a multilateral level, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has also been formed with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan,

7. James Grant, "China Looks to Central Asia as an Economic Alternative", *The Diplomat*, December 18, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/china-looks-to-central-asia-as-an-economic-alternative/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

8. Sergey Sukhankin, "The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part One: Chinese and Regional Perspectives on Security in Central Asia", The Jamestown Foundation, July 15, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-one-chinese-and-regional-perspectives-on-security-in-central-asia/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

and Tajikistan to “address their common interests in combating terrorism, separatism, and extremism”.⁹

Thirdly, from a geographic perspective, located at the centre of Asia, the CARs are crucial for China’s BRI routes to Europe as they have the potential to become an “overland transit hub for the entire continent.”¹⁰ Tajikistan is also viewed as an essential part of providing China access to the Indian Ocean through the “Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism” consisting of China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.¹¹ China, therefore, has emerged as an influential player in the region through its vast investments under the BRI that have paved the way for Beijing’s economic, political, and security influence to grow.

After Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan in 2013, all five CARs have signed strategic agreements with China, resulting in China becoming the largest investor in the region. China has thus become a key partner, increasing its investments in the region from \$8.9 billion in 2013 to \$14.7 billion in 2018.¹² China presently has 261 BRI and bilateral projects in Central Asia with 102 in Kazakhstan, 46 in Kyrgyzstan, 44 in Tajikistan, 43 in Uzbekistan, and 26 in Turkmenistan.¹³ Out of these, a majority are trade and industrial development projects, followed by rail and road connectivity projects, energy connectivity projects, and finally people-to-people projects. Of these, 135 projects have been identified as commercial projects where the primary aim is to pursue commercial goals, while 126 are strategic in terms of strengthening connectivity

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9. Ian J. Lynch, “What Are the Implications of China’s Growing Security Role in Central Asia?” *The Diplomat*, June 3, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/what-are-the-implications-of-chinas-growing-security-role-in-central-asia/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 10. Temur Umarov, “China Looms Large in Central Asia”, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 30, 2020, [https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81402#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,percent%20lower%20\(%248.9%20billion](https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81402#:~:text=According%20to%20data%20from%20the,percent%20lower%20(%248.9%20billion). Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 11. Sergey Sukhankin, “The Security Component of the BRI in Central Asia, Part Two: China’s (Para)Military Efforts to Promote Security in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan”, The Jamestown Foundation, August 12, 2020, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-security-component-of-the-bri-in-central-asia-part-two-chinas-paramilitary-efforts-to-promote-security-in-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. Farkhod Aminjonov, Alina Abylkasymova, Anna Aimee, Bahtiyor Eshchanov, Daniyar Moldokanov, Indra Overland and Roman Vakulchuk, “BRI in Central Asia: Overview of Chinese Projects”, *Central Asia Data Review 20*, (2019): 1-5.

in the region.¹⁴ Politically, China recently held a meeting with the foreign ministers of the CARs under a 5+1 format. The meeting focused on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and cooperating to revive the economies of the CARs.¹⁵ While not the first to initiate a 5+1 format with Central Asia, this narrow approach from Beijing “marks an expansion of China’s role in the region and a signal of its readiness to compete for influence”.¹⁶

CHINA’S MILITARY ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

On the security front, between 2015 and 2020, China has stepped up its military engagements with the Central Asian countries in a threefold manner. Firstly, Beijing has held numerous bilateral military exercises with the armed forces of the CARs.¹⁷ Secondly, Beijing is becoming an increasingly important exporter of military equipment and technology to the region. China has accounted for 18 percent of the region’s total arms imports over the past five years compared to 1.5 percent over the first half of the decade.¹⁸ Thirdly, China has been considering greater inclusion of private security companies to protect BRI investments and has already established a military base in the Murghab district of Tajikistan.¹⁹

PACIFIC ISLANDS

The Pacific Island Countries (PICs), a region traditionally viewed under Australia’s sphere of influence, has also seen an increasing Chinese presence, receiving a boost with the announcement of the BRI. The PICs cover fourteen nations that span over 15 percent of the world’s surface and are extremely vulnerable due to developmental

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16. Umida Hashimova, “China Launches 5+1 Format Meetings With Central Asia”, *The Diplomat*, July 20, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/china-launches-51-format-meetings-with-central-asia/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

17. Temur Umarov, n. 10.

18. Ian J. Lynch, “What Are the Implications of China’s Growing Security Role in Central Asia?”

19. Gerry Shih, “In Central Asia’s forbidding highlands, a quiet newcomer: Chinese troops”, *The Washington Post*, February 19, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-central-asias-forbidding-highlands-a-quiet-newcomer-chinese-troops/2019/02/18/78d4a8d0-1e62-11e9-a759-2b8541bbbe20_story.html. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

challenges and exposure to natural disasters and climate change.²⁰ Often overlooked on the geopolitical stage since World War II, the region has come into the limelight with China's growing footprint in the region. The PICs, strategically located in the Pacific, can play an important role in maintaining logistical supply lines and for military force projection, as they did during World War II.²¹

For China, the Southern Pacific is important for four reasons: Firstly, the PICs, due to their extensive exclusive economic zones, have access to vast natural resources and fishing rights which are attractive to China. Secondly, a Chinese naval presence in the region through agreements or bases could increase China's power projection, improve intelligence gathering, and weaken the American presence in the Indo-Pacific. Furthermore, the island nations can also play an important role in China's offshore defence strategy. Thirdly, the PICs are along the energy sea lines of communication between China and the Americas, which Chinese scholars have advocated need to be protected.²² Fourthly, six of the PICs have diplomatic ties with Taiwan. Beijing has, therefore, been pressuring them to switch alliance and adhere to the 'One China' policy by leveraging aid and benefits under the BRI, thereby aiming at reducing Taiwan's allies in the region.²³ China has been successful in this endeavour with both the Solomon Islands and Kiribati having voted to cut ties with Taiwan in 2019. President Xi Jinping's visit to Fiji in November 2014, the first by a Chinese President, highlighted the growing importance of the region to China.

Out of all the PICs, the Cook Islands, Fiji, Micronesia, New Zealand, Niue, Samoa, Vanuatu, and Tonga have already signed on to the BRI, that has opened a path for increasing investments

20. Jonathan Pryke, "The risks of China's ambitions in the South Pacific", *The Brookings Institution*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-risks-of-chinas-ambitions-in-the-south-pacific/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Denghua Zhang, "China's military engagement with Pacific Island countries", *Asia and the Pacific Policy Society*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.policyforum.net/chinas-military-engagement-with-pacific-island-countries/#:~:text=In%20reality%2C%20the%20PLA%20has,which%20involved%20PLA%20naval%20ships>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

23. Lee Jeong-ho, "Pacific islands new diplomatic battleground for China and the West", *South China Morning Post*, September 10, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2163077/pacific-islands-new-diplomatic-battleground-china-and-west>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

and engagements with China.²⁴ Becoming the second-largest donor after Australia, between 2011 and 2018, Beijing pledged \$6 billion in loans and foreign aid to the region, with the majority going to Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, and Micronesia.²⁵ Overall, there are presently 218 projects across the PICs in different sectors which, along with infrastructure and real estate, include “agriculture, communications, education, energy, health, infrastructure, sanitation, and humanitarian assistance”.²⁶ The largest of these investment projects include a \$136 million road project in Fiji, an \$85 million road project in Papua New Guinea, and an \$81 million redevelopment of the Luganville wharf in Vanuatu.²⁷ Chinese technology companies have also made inroads into the region winning contracts to build broadband networks in Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.²⁸

China has also extended its soft power to the region in the form of educational, cultural, and humanitarian assistance. On a multilateral level, Beijing has been supporting and is involved with Pacific Island regional organisations and often funds and lends support to them regardless of being a participant.²⁹ China has also been increasing its military engagement with the region, although to a limited end due to only the PICs of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Tonga having militaries. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has held bilateral meetings with their counterparts, and also visited the Pacific Islands

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24. Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “China’s Belt & Road Initiative in the Pacific Islands”, *Silk Road Briefing*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2019/05/23/chinas-belt-road-initiative-pacific-islands/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 25. Lucy Hornby and Jamie Smyth, “China-Australia rivalry heats up over Pacific islands”, *Financial Times*, November 15, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/6a2e1e2c-e7f5-11e8-8a85-04b8afea6ea3>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 26. Grant Wyeth, “What to make of China in the South Pacific”, *The Diplomat*, September 29, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/what-to-make-of-china-in-the-south-pacific/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 27. Amy Searight, Brian Harding and Kim Mai Tran, “China’s Growing Role in the Pacific Island Region”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 15, 2019, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/190515_SoutheastAsia_U.S.PacificIslands_WEB.pdf. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 28. Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker and Han May Chan, “China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States”, U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 14, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China-Pacific%20Islands%20Staff%20Report.pdf>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.
 29. Ibid.

24 times between 2006 and 2019, with more than 60 percent of the visits involving naval ships.³⁰ Furthermore, PLA Major General Qian Lihua pledged military aid to Fiji in the form of vehicles, uniforms, and training opportunities in 2013, and provided 46 military vehicles to the country in April 2020.³¹ China gave 62 military vehicles to Papua New Guinea in 2017 which followed a similar donation of 44 vehicles the previous year.³²

LATIN AMERICA

Engagement with Latin America began when China became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and has since deepened through the BRI. Latin America and the Caribbean was formalised as a “natural extension of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in 2017.³³ Since then, 19 of the 33 nations have signed on to the BRI. Although interactions with the region are limited when compared to engagement with Central Asia and the Pacific Islands, the region is growing in importance for Beijing.

China’s engagement with the region revolves around the economic and diplomatic spheres. Furthermore, unlike Beijing’s forays into the CARs and PICs, it is possible to infer China’s interests in Latin America, even if only symbolically, are in part driven as a retaliation to the American presence in China’s neighbourhood.³⁴

On the *economic front*, Latin America is important for China for procuring raw materials which include oil, ores, minerals, and agricultural goods. Beijing, through the BRI, is also looking at the region becoming a growing market for Chinese goods and increasing investments. China is only behind the US as a trading partner to the region, having overtaken the European Union (EU). Bilateral trade

30. Denghua Zhang, n. 22.

31. Ibid.

32. Ethan Meick, Michelle Ker and Han May Chan, “China’s Engagement in the Pacific Islands: Implications for the United States”.

33. Wang Yi, “The Belt and Road Initiative Becomes New Opportunity for China-Latin America Cooperation”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, September 18, 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1494844.shtml. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

34. Ted Piccone, “China and Latin America: A Pragmatic Embrace”, *Global China*, July 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FP_20200720_china_latina_america_piccone_v2.pdf. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

increased from \$17 billion in 2002 to almost \$315 billion in 2019.³⁵ China is the most important trading partner for Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay.³⁶ Over the past two decades, China has also invested \$130 billion in energy and transportation projects, with Brazil and Peru being the largest recipients.³⁷ As of 2018, China has expressed interest in more than 150 infrastructure projects, with around half having materialised.³⁸ Out of these, most have been in connectivity projects and port deals which “vary considerably in type and scale, from dredging and expansion deals to construction and/or operation of entire ports”.³⁹ China is also constructing dams and hydroelectric power plants in the Amazon and Patagonia, laying rail tracks across Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela, and is negotiating the construction of an \$8 billion nuclear facility in Argentina.⁴⁰ Chinese technology companies have also been successful in conducting business in the region as surveillance technology is being exported to numerous countries.⁴¹

On the *diplomatic front*, Beijing has signed strategic partnerships with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. China has also had success in reducing support for Taiwan as Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador established diplomatic relations with Beijing in 2017 after previously recognising Taiwan. Apart from bilateral relations, China

35. Rhys Jenkins, “China and Latin America: How significant are their economic relations?” *The Asia Dialogue*, October 29, 2018, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2018/10/29/china-and-latin-america-how-significant-are-their-economic-relations/>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Margaret Myers, “China’s Regional Engagement Goals in Latin America”, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, May 7, 2020, <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2020/05/07/china-s-regional-engagement-goals-in-latin-america-pub-81723>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

39. Ricardo Barrios, Ruiyang Huang, Izabella Zox and Bob Zeng, “China’s Transport Infrastructure Investment in LAC: Five Things to Know”, *The Dialogue*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.thedialogue.org/blogs/2018/11/chinas-transport-infrastructure-investment-in-lac-five-things-to-know/>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

40. Raquel Carvalho, “China in Latin America: partner or predator?” *South China Morning Post*, May 25, 2019, <https://multimedia.scmp.com/week-asia/article/3011618/beijing-conquest-latin-america/index.html>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

41. Raquel Carvalho, “In Latin America, Big Brother China is watching you”, *South China Morning Post*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2178558/latin-america-big-brother-china-watching-you>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

is increasing its involvement with regional organisations like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). In 2015, Xi Jinping founded and participated at the inaugural China-CLAC forum, and at the second forum in 2018, both sides agreed to extend a cooperation plan through to 2021.⁴² The forum has become an avenue for Beijing to communicate its objectives in the region, including those of the BRI.⁴³ Additionally, China is increasingly being seen as an alternative to the US and Europe by the region for support in international organisations. China has also been increasing its security cooperation and arms transfers to the region. Frequent military visits and port calls have taken place between the countries of Latin America and China. Having sold \$676 million worth of arms since 2008, Chinese weapons make up for a meagre 3 percent of the region's arms imports.⁴⁴ Of the sales, 86 percent have gone to Venezuela, with other recipients being Bolivia, Trinidad and Tobago, Peru, and Ecuador. Sales include a variety of offshore patrol vehicles, helicopters, radars, light tanks, combat aircraft, and anti-tank missiles.⁴⁵

REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND BEIJING'S STRATEGY

As seen above, China has been simultaneously increasing its involvement and engagement with Central Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Latin America. The BRI allows Beijing to get access to natural resources, raw materials, at the same time giving opportunities for Chinese companies to undertake investment and developmental projects in numerous countries. China's increasing consumption habits have made it a necessity to scour the globe for opportunities while Chinese companies operating abroad allow a greater Chinese global presence. This increasing footprint in the afore-mentioned regions and China's presence as an extra-regional power has serious

42. Mark P. Sullivan and Thomas Lum, "China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean", Congressional Research Service, June 1, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10982.pdf>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

43. Margaret Myers, n. 38.

44. China Power Team, "How dominant is China in the global arms trade?" *China Power*, March 13, 2020, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-global-arms-trade/>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

45. Rhys Jenkins, "China and Latin America: How significant are their economic relations?"

implications for the traditional regional powers of Russia, Australia, and the United States. For each of the three countries, concerns about China's forays involve smaller countries falling into debt traps and Beijing using its economic might as leverage, garnering political support, and potential military cooperation that could threaten Moscow, Canberra, and Washington's national security. From Beijing's perspective, increasing engagement with the three regions also plays a role of keeping Russia, Australia, and the US preoccupied to some extent in their backyard in an attempt to manage China's growing influence, and acts as a wedge between them and their neighbours.

China's scale of lending across the three regions which comes with interest, and combined with lack of a robust institutional mechanism, has raised questions in terms of debt sustainability for the recipient nations. There is the potential of a 'debt trap' taking place in Central Asia with both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan owing around 20 percent of their GDP to China and struggling to pay back their debts.⁴⁶ Similarly, a number of the Pacific Island states are already some of the most indebted nations to China.⁴⁷ With Latin America also receiving increasing amounts of loans from China, there are apprehensions that those countries could go down a similar path, increasing their dependence on China. This is of serious concern to the traditional regional powers as the inability to pay the debt could result in a situation similar to what happened in Sri Lanka—the Sri Lankan government gave up operating rights and leased the port of Hambantota to China for 99 years to alleviate \$1 billion in debt after not being able to pay it back. A similar situation could bring the Chinese right up to the doorstep of these traditional powers and affect their national security.

With the Digital Silk Road being an important aspect of the BRI, China's technology companies have also been successful in helping nations establish networks and lay down cables. The concern in this lies with China being able to have remote access to these networks and potentially use them for surveillance. Additionally, access to data

46. Temur Umarov, n. 10.

47. Roland Rajah, Alexandre Dayant and Jonathan Pryke, "Ocean of Debt? Belt and Road and Debt Diplomacy in the Pacific", Lowy Institute, October 21, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2NZkkRv>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

will also enable China to gather market information which could be used to promote Chinese enterprises against local entrepreneurship.

On the diplomatic front, as seen above, China is using its economic might for diplomatic gains and has already applied it to reduce support for Taiwan. This could also extend to garnering support in international organisations like the United Nations where each country has one vote, irrespective of size. The BRI, therefore, also acts as a means to bolster China's international standing and clout in international organisations. China's forays also have military and national security concerns for the traditional regional powers as it increases China's presence closer to their borders. Apart from expanding Beijing's surveillance capabilities, greater military cooperation with the three regions will also enable China to better understand the territory. This is especially true for the Southern Pacific where China's presence can reduce the US and Australian Navies operational abilities. Although improbable, a permanent military presence in any of the smaller countries would be of great alarm and Russia, Australia, and the US are actively preventing such a scenario from becoming a reality. From their perspective, therefore, China's forays have exacerbated tensions between them and added another layer of competition in international politics.

From Beijing's perspective, expanding its global presence through the BRI plays well into a strategy of keeping potential challengers occupied (albeit to varying extents) in their neighbourhood. While this may not have as large an effect on the US as compared to Russia and Australia, it nonetheless undermines their traditional influence and helps China disrupt the existing status quo balance of power. Furthermore, it allows the smaller nations in each region to use China as an extra-regional balancer, and use this leverage for their benefit. By increasing its presence in these regions, Beijing could potentially also preserve its security and prevent a coalition of adversaries. China's increasing forays into Russia, Australia, and the United States' regional sphere of influence under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative, therefore, plays a dual role for Beijing. On the one hand, it increases China's economic reach and global presence, thereby diversifying its sources of imports and expanding the market for Chinese goods. On the other hand, it plays a more subtle role of

acting as a wedge between the traditional regional powers and their neighbours who see China as an extra-regional balancer and a power they can leverage for their gains. While this enhances China's relative power and at the same time reduces those of Russia, Australia, and the United States, there is no doubt that the three countries have tangible concerns for these forays, which will only continue in the future.

UNDERSTANDING THE LOGIC BEHIND CHINESE EXPANSIONISM: FROM THE SOUTH CHINA SEA TO THE HIMALAYAS

CYRIAC S. PAMPAKAL

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has always been a State with expansionist ambitions both in territorial and economic spheres since the founding of the Republic. The annexation of Tibet in 1950 can be taken as a crystal clear example of these expansionist ambitions as the PRC leadership wanted to create scarcely populated buffer zones to protect their Shanghai-based population core. The 'Chinese dream' of unified Chinese nation floated by Mao Zedong was delayed in the early decades of PRC's existence due to its poor economy and underdeveloped infrastructure but its expansionist notions procured sizeable territorial gain in its western front. Soon after the solidification of political power at the eastern front, the communist forces swiftly pulverised its weak neighbours in Tibet, Xinjiang, and parts of Inner Mongolia, but Mao's dream of a unified China remained astray. The economic boom, as a result of the country's introduction to the free

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world market, in the 1980s, enabled China to resolve a large share of its internal issues and pursue its regional and global interests. Since then, PRC's operations along its frontiers can be correlated to the unification dream and the activities in its early decades.

PRC's military exertions in the South China Sea region and in the Himalayas are evidently the military manifestation of its recently acquired economic power. In addition to the military endeavours, PRC is proactively engaged in several infrastructural and economic developmental projects across the globe as part of its efforts to inflate its sphere of influence. Both these military and economic expeditions are the modern methods of PRC's expansionist ambitions, as it completes the annexations that it made during the initial years of its existence.

USURPING OF TIBET, XINJIANG AND INNER MONGOLIA

Tibet, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia are the three regions which became victims of Chinese expansionism under the then newly created Communist regime led by Mao. As early as in 1947 the PRC's forces occupied Inner Mongolia and after the inception of PRC, Inner Mongolian boundaries were redefined as some more territories nearby were annexed to it. Later, as per Mao's direction, the communist forces advanced to the Western frontiers of China and occupied the sparsely populated non-Han ethnic regions of Xinjiang and Tibet in 1949 and 1950 respectively. These annexations were among the largest territorial annexations after the World War II. This step was crucial in the modern Chinese nation-building process because most of the imperial kingdoms in the mainland of China, throughout history, had control over these frontier regions.¹ Traditionally, control over these regions signified the relative strength of the Chinese state as these regions were the sources of threat in times of weakness and disunity of the Chinese state; due to their ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences to the Eastern regions that always controlled the power and wealth.² Throughout history, these frontier regions

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1. Elliot Sperling, *The Tibet-China Conflict: History and Polemics* (East-West Center, 2004) pp. 4-10.
 2. Alexander Woodside, "The Centre and the Borderlands in Chinese Political Theory", in Diana Lary (ed.), *The Chinese State at the Borders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), pp. 18-20.

were buffer zones that protected the power centres of Imperial China from any threats of Western origin. The importance of these regions was not just strategic but also had political and cultural aspects as they represented the transition between what some Chinese scholars refer to as 'Chinese civility' and 'Western barbarism'.³ These regions clearly demarcated the cultural differences that both the regions had throughout history. These were, therefore, the factors that drove Mao's and PRC's conquest of these frontier regions.

The relations between China's Eastern power centres and these frontier regions were always troublesome due to the political and ethnolinguistic differences, but it was always based on a linear-providential viewpoint—where the eastern power centres of the Chinese mainland remained as the providers of economic development.⁴ The perfect exemplification of the linear-providential foundations of the relations was the benefit that these regions made through the famous ancient Silk Road. The growth and development it once enjoyed faded with the decline of the Silk Road and the lucrative trade route. Yet the linear-providential view remained regardless of these regions' political sovereignty. This sense of linear-providential view has seen an improvement under PRC, as developmental programmes, floated under the Belt and Road Initiative of President Xi Jinping, have improved the economic and infrastructural situation of these regions.⁵ Once considered as vulnerable regions of PRC, they now play an important part in PRC's economy. The development stimulated by the PRC primarily focuses on the infrastructural and population aspects, where the development in infrastructure ensures that the region is well connected to the Chinese power centres, which is crucial to the integration that Mao had dreamed of. The PRC efforts to redistribute the Han-origin Chinese population is a long-term strategic step, as PRC encourages migration to these frontier

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3. Michael E. Clarke and Douglas Smith, "A Rising China and its Frontier Regions into the Twenty-First Century", in Michael E. Clarke and Douglas Smith (eds.), *China's Frontier Regions: Ethnicity, Economic Integration and Foreign Relations* (London: I. B.Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2016), pp. 1-21.
 4. Alexander Woodside, "The Centre and the Borderlands in Chinese Political Theory", in Diana Larry (ed.), *The Chinese State at the Borders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007), pp. 18-20.
 5. David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: the Need for New Analytic Frameworks", *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 4, pp. 57-85.

regions and provides special economic support to its citizens who are willing to relocate to the frontier regions of Tibet, Xinjiang, etc.⁶ This is part of PRC's efforts to dilute the demographic majority that the non-Han ethnic populations enjoy in these provinces so that any chances of future political movements based on the advantages of demographical patterns can be averted. The rising population of Han-origin communities in the frontier regions can be viewed as the non-violent and covert part of the Chinese integration plan.

However, this non-violent part does have a violent incarnation, as PRC employs torture and human rights violations to suppress the ethno-religious identities in these provinces. The religious persecution, the concentration/re-education camps in Xinjiang and Tibet are part of the violent efforts made by PRC to suppress ethnolinguistic, cultural and religious identities that hinder the unification of illusive communist Chinese national identity.

TURBULENT WATERS OF THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

People's Republic of China's expansionist ambitions are not limited to its frontier Land regions in the west but are furthered to the eastern frontiers in the South China Sea as well. PRC's relations with its eastern neighbours have turned sour as it actively engages in border disputes with almost all of them over the claims that China has made on islands/reefs in the South China Sea. Unlike its western frontiers, PRC lacks any historical claims to the territories in the South China Sea on which it has claimed and built military infrastructure unilaterally. PRC is currently engaged in more than half a dozen territorial disputes within the South China Sea with its maritime neighbours like Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei.⁷

At the beginning of World War II, the South China Sea was under the shadow of the Imperial Japanese Navy and most of the islands in the region were under Japanese occupation and were used for military purposes, facilitating the Japanese invasion into

6. "Inside Tibet", BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-16761606#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20government%20has%20been,double%2Ddigit%20growth%20in%202011>. Accessed on July 15, 2020.

7. Laura Southgate, *ASEAN Resistance to Sovereignty Violation: Interests, Balancing and the Role of the Vanguard State* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019), pp. 163-212.

the mainland of China.⁸ Following the Japanese defeat in World War II, their positions in the region were relinquished, making room for other claimants. Even though the newly founded Communist-led PRC was adamant on expanding its territory, it lacked the economic and military power to further its claims in the South China Sea. In 1951, PRC made several claims in the South China Sea by modifying the 'eleven-dash line' made by its predecessor, Republic of China, to the present claim which is now known as the 'nine-dash line'.⁹ Under the 'nine-dash line' claim, PRC asserts its control over the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, the Pratas Islands, the Macclesfield Bank and the Scarborough Shoal.¹⁰

Before the Sino-Soviet split, PRC did support the USSR in its early years but later it started to deviate from its communist ally to create its footprint in the region. This deviation was visible in PRC's foreign and border policies and eventually resulted in a Sino-Soviet conflict.¹¹ At the height of the US-USSR Cold War, PRC could not achieve its dream of being counted as the supreme communist entity in the region as it was inferior to Soviet military might. However, in 1974, the PRC did manage to seize Paracel islands from South Vietnam, nullifying the agreements made during the Geneva Accords in 1954, by exploiting the weakened United States' position in the region and formally effectuated their claim in the region. This move by PRC marked the ambitious nature of its expansionist intentions and opportunistic flexibility it possesses. Still, PRC seriously lacked the economic and military strength to further them on a global level because of the presence of the USSR and the US at the top of both the political poles respectively. However, its unprecedented economic growth in the twenty-first century allowed PRC to bolster its military power, especially in terms of naval vessels, enabling PLA Navy to

8. Marwyn Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2015), pp. 55-65.

9. Ulises Granados, "Chinese Ocean Policies towards the South China Sea in a Transitional Period, 1946-1952," *China Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2006, pp. 153-81.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Philip S. Kosnett, "MILITARY: Sino-Soviet Strategic Balance," *Harvard International Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1979, pp. 17-18.

tentatively attempt to lock horns with the United States Navy in the South China Sea.¹²

THE LINKAGE BETWEEN PRC'S ECONOMIC GROWTH, MILITARY AGGRESSIVENESS AND EXPANSIONISM

PRC's tryst with its destiny was when it decided to implement economic reforms in the late 1970s, which allowed it to avert the situation of bankruptcy that many communist nations eventually met with.¹³ After the demise of Mao, the reformists in the Communist Party of China, headed by Deng Xiaoping, rose to power in the party and the government. This made PRC drift away from the Soviet model of Communism and embrace the free market and capitalism.¹⁴ This transformative move triggered the economic growth as PRC became one of the world's largest production hubs and a leading exporter. The annual growth rate of PRC's economy leapt from a 2.9 per cent in the early 1970s to a 9.5 per cent in the early 2010s,¹⁵ making it the second-largest economy in the world after the United States. The enhanced economic status enabled PRC to extend its sphere of influence across the region.

The infamous 'debt trap policy' employed by PRC to induct smaller/weaker States into its sphere of influence gave PRC an evident advantage in the Indian Ocean which serves as future footholds for PLA Navy (PLAN).¹⁶ PRC provides a huge amount of loans to several countries as developmental assistance and thereby connects these countries to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through ports, roadways and railways. Several countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bangladesh, etc., are beneficiaries of these mammoth-sized economic schemes provided by PRC.¹⁷ Unlike the

12. Hu Bo, "China-US Military Confrontation in the South China Sea: Fact and Fiction", *The Diplomat*, June 20, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/china-us-military-confrontation-in-the-south-china-sea-fact-and-fiction/>. Accessed on July 25, 2020.

13. Shigeru Ishikawa, "China's Economic Growth since 1949—An Assessment," *The China Quarterly*, no. 94, 1983, pp. 242–81.

14. Steven N. S. Cheung, "The Experience of China's Economic Reforms: Privatization vs. Special Interests", *Harvard International Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1989, pp. 19–23.

15. Trading Economics, "China GDP Annual Growth Rate", <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/gdp-growth-annual>. Accessed on July 25, 2020.

16. Mark Green, "China's Debt Diplomacy", *Foreign Policy*, April 25, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/25/chinas-debt-diplomacy/>. Accessed on July 27, 2020.

17. *Ibid.*

economic assistance provided by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, PRC's economic aid, at first sight, appears to come without any strings attached, but the strangling economic debt that follows prevents many such countries from undertaking further infrastructural projects. For instance, Hambantota, a Sri Lankan port, is a developmental initiative that PRC funded, which later failed to fructify economically as planned. This put Sri Lanka under severe economic debt burden, leaving Sri Lanka with no other option but to lease the Hambantota Port to China on a 99-year lease to mitigate the burden of debt. This clever plan of the Chinese is now universally acknowledged as the 'Debt Trap'. Maldives is another example where the debt to the Chinese has grown beyond the Maldivian capability to repay as the debt is around \$1.3 billion, while the entire Maldivian economy is around \$5 billion.¹⁸ Despite the likelihood of a debt trap, the initial aura of Chinese financial aid lures several countries—especially small and poor countries around the Indian Ocean—to fall prey to the Chinese designs.

While the Chinese economic projects across the globe are proclaimed by China as peaceful ways of PRC's expansionist notions, PRC's economy is the biggest factor that fuels the aggressive steps made by PLA and PLAN. Since the surge in the PRC's economy, PLA and PLAN have been actively following an aggressive code of conduct in the frontier regions and PRC has been bolstering their military infrastructure to solidify the aggressiveness. For instance, the significant increase of the vessel strength of PLAN is manifested through the aggressive military policy that PRC maintains in the South China Sea. Since 2010, there is a paradigm shift in PRC's behaviour towards its neighbouring states on both land and maritime boundaries.¹⁹ This shift is evident from PLAN's occasional confrontations with the United States naval vessels and the United States naval aircraft for operating in international waters and air space, which is being asserted by PRC as disputed or contested. All the other regional navies—with the exception of the Japan

18. Suhasini Haidar, "Maldives negotiating China debt, says Foreign Minister", *The Hindu*, December 13, 2020, International section, New Delhi edition.

19. Shinji Yamaguchi, "Strategies of China's Maritime Actors in the South China Sea: A Coordinated Plan under the Leadership of Xi Jinping?" *China Perspectives*, no. 3 (107), 2016, pp. 23–31.

Maritime Self-Defence Force—are severely outmatched by the PLAN which is rapidly acquiring vessels. Most of these confrontations never culminate in a military skirmish as PLAN makes a nominal withdrawal from the contested region to avert a confrontation with superior naval forces in the region, especially the United States Navy.

Since Xi Jinping's accession to power, the stance taken by PRC in the South China Sea is getting more aggressive as PRC is proactively engaged in land reclamation projects in the region, particularly in the contested island groups, which is known as the Great Sand Wall project.²⁰ Through the land reclamation projects, PRC is on a continuous effort to expand its territory regardless of huge international condemnation. PRC is unwilling to settle the disputes through international arbitrations and it asserts that the issues are to be resolved through bilateral negotiations. For instance, in 2016, PRC rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration's verdict for arbitration under the UNCLOS regarding the maritime territorial dispute between the Philippines and PRC.²¹

Similarly, PLA is also actively engaging in border confrontations with many of its neighbours in the Himalayas, especially with Bhutan and India. PLA's frequently attempted border incursions across the LAC with India are a clear reflection of Beijing's intentions towards the region to assert itself as the more dominant power. Earlier, occasional border violations were a regular routine as they were followed by the quick withdrawal from the PLA side even before a strong Indian reply could be made. In 2017, this trend was bucked as Indian troops forcefully stopped the road construction work done by the PLA in the tri-junction border area between India, China and Bhutan at Doklam. The situation quickly escalated into a border stand-off with India and PRC that lasted 73 days, making it one of the sourest moments in India-China relations since 1962.²² A disengagement formula was

20. BBC, "China building 'great wall of sand' in South China Sea", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32126840#:~:text=China's%20land%20reclamation%20is%20creating,serious%20questions%22%20on%20its%20intentions.&text=%22China%20is%20building%20artificial%20land,paving%20over%20them%20with%20concrete>. Accessed on July 29, 2020.

21. Fu Ying, "Why China Says No to the Arbitration on the South China Sea", *Foreign Policy*, July 10, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/07/10/why-china-says-no-to-the-arbitration-on-the-south-china-sea/>. Accessed on July 30, 2020.

22. Maira Qaddos, "Sino-Indian Border Conflict and Implications for Bilateral Relations", *Policy Perspectives*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2018, pp. 57–69.

quickly synthesised through diplomatic negotiations and both the sides withdrew to their initial positions.

In May 2020, India-China border tensions started escalating as both the sides were engaged in a clash near Pangong Tso Lake bordered by both the countries.²³ This clash resulted in nearly 70 Indian soldiers getting injured and both the sides multiplied their troops and infrastructure in the region. Over the same period, similar border violations were reported at multiple locations along the India-China border. These involved border violations and minor confrontations between PLA and Indian troops at Muguthang in Sikkim, Depsang Plains, Hot Springs, and Patrol Points 14 and 15 in Eastern Ladakh.²⁴ While these engagements did not result in casualties, another major brawl happened in Galwan Valley as PLA attacked Indian troops during the night, resulting in the death of 20 Indian soldiers.²⁵ While India disclosed the situation in a transparent manner, PRC refused to follow the trend and kept the casualties from its side hidden; as it views transparency in terms of disclosing the number of casualties and injured would reveal its military's weaknesses and failures. This incident severely impacted further progress on the disengagement formulas that both the countries had been working on since the Doklam stand-off.

OSCILLATORY AGGRESSIVENESS AND THE CHINESE DREAM
PRC's aggressiveness along its frontiers is not just random belligerence shown by the border forces of PLA, but it is part of the larger plan that PRC is trying to float since its communist revolution. Mao's dream to unify the Chinese nation under Communism has yet to fructify as several regions that the Chinese claim as part of their nation are under contestation and control of several other powers. For instance, Taiwan is one such ambiguity as both PRC

23. Snehesh Alex Philip, "Chinese troops challenge India at multiple locations in eastern Ladakh, standoff continues", *The Print*, May 24, 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/chinese-troops-challenge-india-at-multiple-locations-in-eastern-ladakh-standoff-continues/428304/>. Accessed on August 1, 2020.

24. SNS Web, "Indian, Chinese troops disengage at multiple locations in Ladakh amid talks to resolve border standoff: Report", *The Statesman*, June 9, 2020, India section, New Delhi edition.

25. Dinakar Peri, "Indian Army says 20 soldiers killed in clash with Chinese troops in the Galwan area", *The Hindu*, June 16, 2020, National section, New Delhi edition.

and ROC claim the region, leading to a mutual contradiction. PRC's biggest hurdle to complete its national unification is its failure to subdue the Tibetan protests, as the political leadership headed by Dalai Lama is in exile in India and still raising the Tibetan cause against PRC. Even with its newly acquired economic and military might, PRC cannot offensively accomplish Mao's dream, although it is trying to clinically implement it through short-spanned small-scale offences.

Both in the South China Sea and in the Himalayas, PRC's code of conduct is in an oscillatory aggressive mode where PLA and PLAN engage in swift and short-spanned brawls with neighbouring states. In addition to the fulfilment of Mao's dream, Xi himself is engaging with a dream where he places PRC as an alternative for the United States, asserting PRC's regional dominance and expanding its global sphere of influence.²⁶ To achieve this, PRC must confront US interests in the Pacific. The PLAN occasionally attempts an offensive stance in the South China Sea, but without risking a war with the United States. Similarly, in the Western frontiers, India is the only regional power to militarily challenge PRC, although it is not as strong as the United States which China faces in its Eastern frontiers. Still, PRC hesitates to escalate matters too quickly as it is unsure of the political equation that could evolve from such a formal military confrontation. Therefore it always resorts to 'dialogue and disengagement' with India, although this may be only for a transient period during which PRC equips its economy and military to withstand a long-term conflict.

Nevertheless, the method of swift and short-spanned skirmishes and partial disengagement from their aggressive mode have reaped certain benefits for PRC in terms of territorial claims as it was able to expand both its formal territory as well as its claims, both in the eastern and western frontiers. PRC's aggressive stand along its border in the western sector is likely to continue till it completes assimilation of Tibet in its entirety,²⁷ and in the eastern sector until it makes the South China Sea a perfect backyard and places itself as an

26. John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US power in Asia", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, no. 3(4), 2010, pp. 381-96.

27. Abhijit Bhattacharyya, "China's Bhutan push to fulfil Mao's old dream", *Deccan Chronicle*, June, 27, 2017, "Opinion", New Delhi.

equal power counterweighing the strategic influence of the United States Navy and its allies.²⁸

THE DREAM OF GREATER CHINA AND INDIA'S OPTIONS

India-China relations have always been ambiguous as both countries foresaw a future filled with contradictions and hostility. The formal hostility between India and PRC began with the 1962 war. India's then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru believed in the rise of Asia and hoped India-China cooperation would be the foundation of the Asian era. India was one of the first countries to recognise the newly formed state of PRC and Nehru's foreign policy towards PRC was based on the idea of peaceful coexistence, which was later formulated into a bilateral agreement known as 'Panchsheel Treaty'.²⁹ India and PRC came close to conflict when PRC militarily occupied Tibet, forcing the socio-political leadership of Tibet into exile. At this juncture, Nehru's China policy started to deviate towards a structural crisis as Tibetan leader Dalai Lama and tens of thousands of his followers sought political asylum in India. The Indian government granted them sanctuary considering the excellent relations with erstwhile Tibetan government, but contradicting the prior interim agreement on Tibet as a domestic issue which antagonised the PRC leadership (the Chinese logic behind their expansionist policies!). This step consolidated all the irritants in India-China relations and led to the 1962 war, according to the Chinese version of the invasion of Aksai Chin.

Thereafter, the Tibetan issue kept the India-China relations muddled as PRC is dubious about India's political interests in the Tibetan region, even though India insisted that it had none.³⁰ In addition to the ambiguity created by Indian foreign policy, PRC has high ambitions in the Himalayan region which involves claims to Indian territories such as Ladakh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. These three Indian regions, along with Nepal and Bhutan, are claimed by PRC as the five fingers of its Tibetan Palm, and China

28. Donald K. Emmerson, "Why Does China Want to Control the South China Sea?", *The Diplomat*, May 24, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/05/why-does-china-want-to-control-the-south-china-sea/>. Accessed on August 26, 2020.

29. Mohan Malik, *China and India: Great Power Rivals* (New Delhi: Viva Books Pvt. Ltd., 2012), pp.125-64.

30. Ibid.

has been involved in territorial disputes in all these regions.³¹ Such an aggressive narration by the PRC detracts from good neighbourly behaviour and puts in jeopardy attempts at normalising relations between the two countries.

Despite this, India's stance towards PRC has been less hostile than PRC's stance towards India, both militarily and diplomatically. There were several instances where Indian nationals from the state of Arunachal Pradesh were issued stapled visas to PRC instead of a regular one, asserting the PRC's unwillingness to accept Arunachal Pradesh to be a part of India. In contrast, India still respects the interim agreement made by the Nehru government on Tibet, rather than reflecting the same diplomatic aggressiveness to PRC in the matter of Tibet.

Since India cannot roll back to the old 'Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai' days due to the Tibetan issue, Aksai Chin and after what happened in Galwan Valley, it would be right for the country to toughen its diplomatic attitude towards PRC which is, as it is, having a rough time—of its own making—in the diplomatic realm. PRC's expansive policies on the economic and military front have triggered widespread discontent towards it among the international community, especially among countries like the United States, Japan and several other South China Sea littorals. On the other hand, India's relations with these countries are on a progressive trend as India is engaged in strategic partnerships with many of PRC's adversaries in the region. India-Vietnam relations are prominent among those relations where a decade-long Strategic Partnership was elevated to a level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2016 during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Vietnam.³² Another notable chapter is India-Philippines bilateral relations where multi-level cooperation is thriving, stretching over a large spectrum—from training of military and Foreign Service personnel to intelligence and military delegation

31. Suhasini Haidar, "History, the standoff, and policy worth rereading", *The Hindu*, June 18, 2020. "Opinion" section, New Delhi edition.

32. Embassy of India, Hanoi, "Vietnam, India-Vietnam Relations", <https://www.indembassyhanoi.gov.in/page/india-vietnamrelations/#:~:text=Relations%20between%20the%20two%20countries,a%20%E2%80%9C%20Comprehensive%20Strategic%20Partnership%E2%80%9D>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

exchanges.³³ In addition to these efforts, India participates in military exercises that involve the littoral states of the South China Sea with whom PRC has border disputes, along with other countries such as the United States, Japan, Australia, etc. Thus, India is reciprocating the Chinese aggressiveness in the diplomatic front by proactively engaging with its immediate neighbourhood.

There is a possibility for India to solidify its position in the strategic feud with PRC if it develops regional groupings such as BIMSTEC to a security collective against the escalating aggressiveness of PRC. Furthermore, there are other security initiatives such as the QUAD—which has been proposed by the United States as part of the security efforts for the Indo-Pacific region to counter the PRC’s military-economic expansionism. Through these efforts India can counter PRC’s expansionism by employing an aggressive diplomatic stance rather than resorting to the same military aggressiveness. This is a necessity as the Chinese aggression across LAC is likely to continue as their expansionist ambitions are targeted on what they call the five fingers of the Tibetan Palm.

33. Jeff M. Smith, “India and the Philippines: A New Chapter in Defense Ties?” *The Diplomat*, January 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/01/india-and-the-philippines-a-new-chapter-in-defense-ties/>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

INDIA'S EVOLVING RESPONSE TO THE CHANGING POWER DYNAMICS OF INDO-PACIFIC

RUSHALI SAHA

The construct of Indo-Pacific has gained much steam in the last decade and has in turn become an important consideration in shaping the strategic thinking of countries in the region and beyond. Geopolitical tensions are high as relations between the US and China are turning towards confrontation while shrinking space for cooperation, the impact of which is being felt across the globe. Early signs indicate that Indo-Pacific, home to seven of the ten largest standing armies in the world, including both US Indo-Pacific Command and People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) will emerge as a potential hotspot. This was acknowledged by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison who described Indo-Pacific as the "epicentre" of rising "strategic competition".¹

India is a key actor in the Indo-Pacific and its diplomacy in the region has evolved from one of relative neglect to proactively building

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1. Elizabeth Roche, "Australia PM Says Indo-Pacific Region Epicenter of Rising Strategic Competition". *Livemint*, July 1, 2020, www.livemint.com/news/world/australia-pm-says-indo-pacific-region-epicenter-of-rising-strategic-competition-11593600533113.html. Accessed on August 5, 2020.

strategic partnerships with regional stakeholders. India's maritime vision witnessed a mammoth shift from being a "small coastal hugging passive brown-water fleet" to a "larger ocean going active blue water fleet"² since the 2007 Maritime Military Strategy envisaged a clearer "combat" role for the Indian Navy. Commensurate with the global recognition of Indo-Pacific as an important geostrategic theatre, Indian policymakers have been prioritising the region and have come out with a more coherent SAGAR (Security and Growth for All) vision which emphasises inclusivity, openness and ASEAN centrality. The Indo-Pacific is a construct of contested interpretation,³ and amidst the coexistence of multiple orders and ever-changing balance of power equations the region is always in a strategic flux. Therefore India has adopted a calibrated approach which can best be described in the words of Professor Rajesh Rajagopalan as "evasive balancing"⁴ a mix of balancing through developing partnerships while reassuring Chinese that the partnerships are not directed towards it.

CHINESE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

Beijing's initial reaction to the inception of 'Indo-Pacific' was one of outright dismissal, with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi comparing the "headline grabbing" concept to "sea foam" which would "soon dissipate".⁵ Despite continued hesitation in granting legitimacy to the concept, Beijing's posture has evolved into a more cautious, restrained one which, while acknowledging its relevance as a framework for regional cooperation, dismisses the "politicized and exclusionary"⁶ aspects. In other words, China's basic objection lies to the QUAD, an informal security dialogue between the USA, Japan,

2. David M. Malone, C. Raja Mohan, and Srinath Raghavan (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Indian foreign policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

3. Udayan Das, "What is the Indo-Pacific?" *The Diplomat*, July 13, 2019, thediplomat.com/2019/07/what-is-the-indo-pacific/. Accessed on August 5, 2020.

4. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Affairs*, 96.1 (2020): 75-93.

5. PTI, "'Quad' Move Will Dissipate like Sea Foam: China—Times of India". *The Times of India*, TOI, March 8, 2018, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/quad-move-will-dissipate-like-sea-foam-china/articleshow/63221055.cms. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

6. Yamazaki Amane, "The PRC's Cautious Stance on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy", *Jamestown*, February 28, 2020, jamestown.org/program/the-prcs-cautious-stance-on-the-u-s-indo-pacific-strategy/. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

Australia, and India, which it sees as an attempt to contain Chinese rise and oppose BRI. For these reasons, China continues to support the “Asia-Pacific” narrative which accords it a pre-eminent position while co-opting elements such as ASEAN centrality to emphasise China-ASEAN cooperation in the region. However, this should not suggest that Chinese interests in the maritime domain are limited to its immediate neighbourhood. China is not an Indian Ocean littoral state, yet since 2008 Chinese patrolling in the western Indian Ocean⁷ has been increasing and now there is a permanent Chinese naval presence in the region. Over the last two decades, PLAN has added more than eight times the ships and submarines as compared to India⁸ alongside strengthening maritime ties with countries across the Indian Ocean.

China’s expanding perceptions of the region paved the way for Beijing’s foray into the heart of the Indian Ocean. Apart from diluting India’s influence in the region, New Delhi’s strategic circle is alerted by China’s overt attempts at militarisation of Indian Ocean’s coast. These anxieties are not unique to India. Chinese domination threatens US traditional position and its “free and open” rules based order, and the smaller countries have quietly expressed fears of the catastrophic impact a US-China “hot war” in the region would have on them.⁹ Moreover Chinese military penetration into South Pacific and the possibility of military bases in the Pacific Islands¹⁰ directly threatens Australia’s national security as Canberra views stability in the islands as a critical aspect of its own security. China is making its maritime presence in the region felt assertively through its Maritime Silk Road initiative, a part of the Belt and Road project, by connecting the Asia-Pacific economies

7. David Shinn, “China’s Power Projection in the Western Indian Ocean”, *Jamestown*, April 20, 2017, jamestown.org/program/chinas-power-projection-western-indian-ocean/. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

8. “China’s Maritime Aggression and Options for India”, *The Financial Express*, May 1, 2020, www.financialexpress.com/defence/chinas-maritime-aggression-and-options-for-india/1945508/. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

9. Manoj Kumar Mishra, “Militarization of Indo-Pacific a Dangerous Trend”, *Asia Times*, February 18, 2020, asiatimes.com/2019/11/militarization-of-indo-pacific-a-dangerous-trend/. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

10. David Wroe, “China Eyes Vanuatu Military Base in Plan with Global Ramifications”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 9, 2018, www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/china-eyes-vanuatu-military-base-in-plan-with-global-ramifications-20180409-p4z8j9.html. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

in the East and the European economic core in the West with China by building a network of port cities along the Silk Route.¹¹ Although Beijing proclaims its intentions of “jointly” building the Maritime Silk Road emphasising “openness and inclusiveness ... mutual benefit”,¹² its actions seem to indicate otherwise. By establishing its naval presence through a string of bases along the Indian Ocean maritime chokepoints, Chinese investments in littorals are “less about development and more about Beijing’s desire to establish itself as a ‘resident power’”.¹³ China has acquired leasing rights to Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka for 99 years, sections of Djibouti for 10 years, 20 percent of Cambodia’s total coastline for 99 years and is financing a port in Chittagong and developing a multi-billion dollar deep seaport in Myanmar’s Kyaukpyu town. These are examples of Beijing successfully lending infrastructure loans more than a country can afford to repay in hopes for control over the ports and using them as naval installations geared towards patrolling Indian Ocean shipping lanes. The inauguration of the first Chinese overseas *military* base in Djibouti confirmed anxieties about Chinese intentions of militarisation of the Indo-Pacific. China refers to this facility as its first “overseas *strategic strong point*”¹⁴ to make it consistent with its defence position as reflected in its 1998 defence white paper which states that China “does not station any troops or set up any military bases in any foreign country”. Furthermore, Chinese bases are distinguished from ‘strategic strong points’ of US overseas bases on grounds of offering “benefits to host states” and providing them with “public security goods”.¹⁵ Rhetorics aside, the more gripping

11. Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy, “The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road”, *Observer Research Foundation*, February 10, 2017, www.orfonline.org/research/the-21st-century-maritime-silk-road/. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

12. *Full Text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*. June 20, 2017, english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

13. Mohan Malik, “China and India: Maritime Maneuvers and Geopolitical Shifts in the Indo-Pacific—Rising Powers in Global Governance”, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, October 9, 2018, risingpowersproject.com/quarterly/china-and-india-maritime-maneuvers-and-geopolitical-shifts-in-the-indo-pacific/. Accessed on August 7, 2020.

14. Conor Kennedy, “Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy”, *Jamestown*, March 22, 2019, jamestown.org/program/strategic-strong-points-and-chinese-naval-strategy/. Accessed on –August 7, 2020.

15. *Ibid.*

concern is that PLAN facility in Djibouti may be the first of its kind, but will not be the only one. Chinese have been vocal about their intentions to build overseas strategic strong points that “depend on the homeland, radiate into the surrounding areas, and move toward the two oceans”¹⁶ where the two oceans refer to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Chinese attempts to advance its geopolitical ambitions amidst a pandemic, during a time when global cooperation remains elusive, is seen as confirming Chinese ambitions to reorder the international environment in a manner more conducive to its own national interests. The Chinese government has undertaken numerous measures to change the COVID-19 narrative and dissociate itself from being the “originator” of the virus to speedily recovering from it and providing aid to affected countries, hence challenging the US’ international image of being the leading global health care provider. Chinese “mask diplomacy” paved the way for aggressive confrontation in the form of a border stand-off with India, confrontation with Vietnam in the South China Sea, imposing wide ranging national security law effectively diluting Hong Kong’s autonomous status, threatening Australia with boycott of wine, barley and beef. Overall this mix of soft and hard power sends out the message that while the world may have come to a standstill, China’s “regional ambitions” and “grudge settling” has not.¹⁷

However, a shift to Chinese hegemony in the Indo-Pacific is far from certain, in fact we are witnessing more credible multilateral cooperation among Asian countries and stronger American resolve to engage with the region. Beijing’s aggressive moves are aggravating the global distrust against China due to its initial mishandling of the virus and proving to be the catalyst to bringing other Indo-Pacific powers closer together. Japan, Australia, Malaysia, Myanmar, India have moved to reduce economic exposure to Beijing and are enhancing mutual cooperation to collectively confront China. In tune with the Trump administration’s more confrontational policy

16. Ibid.

17. Timothy McLaughlin, “The End of Hong Kong”, *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, May 22, 2020, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/05/china-hong-kong-pandemic-autonomy-law-aggression/611983/. Accessed on August 7, 2020.

towards China, Washington responded forcefully against Beijing's recent activities in the South China Sea, explicitly referring to them as "unlawful" and a "campaign of bullying".¹⁸

INDIA'S INDO-PACIFIC VISION

India's evolving Indo-Pacific approach has to be understood as a continuation of its traditional foreign policy disposition which places emphasis on strategic autonomy. Forming partnerships with external powers is a critical pillar of this strategy, but the focus remains on multilateralism which keeps open the possibility for accommodation with neighbouring China. Traditionally India has been staunchly opposed to the idea of China being the main driver of its Indo-Pacific approach even though its strengthening relationships with the US and Japan seem to suggest that.¹⁹ India has even, at multiple instances, gone out of its way to reassure China that India is not seeking to balance against it in the Indo-Pacific, and has been cautious not to antagonise China. Speaking at the joint press meet with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in June 2019, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reiterated India's stance that the Indo-Pacific is "not against somebody", and defined it as a landscape where a number of "independent players" work together for the "global good".²⁰ The message was clear—India did not want to portray China as the enemy and wanted to keep the space open to include China in its vision. Speaking at Shangri La, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi set out India's Indo-Pacific vision, inclusivity was placed before openness and ASEAN centrality in defining the "heart" of the new Indo-Pacific. While there are obvious convergences in US and India's vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific, it is clear that they have been independently arrived at keeping in mind each country's own strategic calculus.

18. "U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea—United States Department of State." US Department of State, July 15, 2020, www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/. Accessed on August 8, 2020.

19. Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Affairs* 96.1 (2020): 75-93.

20. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Jaishankar: India Treads a Fine Line in Indo-Pacific Region", *The Economic Times*, June 28, 2019, economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-treads-a-fine-line-in-indo-pacific-region/articleshow/69984218.cms?from=mdr. Accessed on August 8, 2020.

This also explains India's initial hesitation towards a regional security architecture for the region like QUAD. New Delhi has been engaging with QUAD but not as an explicit move against China, rather as a strategic move to protect its national interests.²¹

From the US' side, there is optimism that India may abandon its traditional 'non-aligned' posture and align more closely by overcoming historical baggage from the Cold War era. Yet such a simplistic assumption is not only a fundamental misreading of India's position but also goes against its strategic culture emphasising autonomy which shapes much of India's foreign and security policy. Professor Ian Hall explains how India's strategic culture helps clarify why it has "been so cautious in its reception of U.S. overtures since the early 2000s ... despite the progress that has been made in building a strategic partnership."²² To assume that India would abandon the fine line it has been treading on the Indo-Pacific and act against its strategic culture would be an overestimation, to say the least

STRENGTHENED QUAD?

Geopolitical developments since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic have drastically changed bilateral equations and the hotly debated question now is how the ASEAN centred security infrastructure of the Indo-Pacific will be affected. Chinese aggression along the LAC has led to calls for rethinking Sino-India ties which gained momentum following the series of informal summits between President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019, but it is clear now that the "Wuhan Spirit" has run out of steam. Beijing's moves fit the pattern of recent assertiveness and high-handedness where it seeks to dictate its terms on the rest of the world. According to a United States intelligence assessment, the border stand-off was an

21. Jagannath P. Panda, "India's Call on China in the Quad: A Strategic Arch between Liberal and Alternative Structures—Rising Powers in Global Governance", *Rising Powers Quarterly*, October 9, 2018, risingpowersproject.com/quarterly/indias-call-on-china-in-the-quad-a-strategic-arch-between-liberal-and-alternative-structures/. Accessed on August 8, 2020.

22. "The Legacy of Nehruvianism and the Implications for India's Strategic Culture", *The National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)*, August 12, 2018, www.nbr.org/publication/the-legacy-of-nehruvianism-and-the-implications-for-indias-strategic-culture/. Accessed on August 8, 2020.

attempt by Beijing to “teach India a lesson” and show that China was not vulnerable to burgeoning India-US ties.²³

With the strong possibility of full-scale deterioration of relations with China in the post COVID period, the US is turning to the Indo-Pacific realm. According to the proposed US National Defence Authorisation Act 2021, Washington is contemplating to open its air force training facilities in Guam for the fighter jet pilots of India, Japan, Australia as a show of increased military cooperation.²⁴ US supercarriers carried out joint exercises with the Indian Navy in the Indian Ocean and a second one with two other QUAD members—Australia and Japan—in the Philippine Sea. According to the official statement by US Defence Secretary, Mark Esper, the presence of the supercarriers in and around the South China Sea was to “back up the sovereignty of friends and partners” and to “reassure them that we will be there to defend ... in the face of China’s bad behaviour.”²⁵ Japan, which has recently called out China for trying to change the status quo in East and South China Sea unilaterally through its recent moves, conducted naval exercises with Indian naval warships in June this year.²⁶ Amidst the stand-off with China, India and Australia significantly strengthened mutual defence ties while elevating their partnership to a “comprehensive strategic partnership”. They also released a “joint declaration on a shared vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific” which reiterated support for a “rules based maritime order” while acknowledging “common concerns” in the maritime domain. The US Senate Armed Service Committee voted

23. Paul D. Shinkman, “U.S. Intel: China Ordered Attack on Indian Troops in Galwan River Valley”, *U.S. News & World Report*, June 22, 2020, www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2020-06-22/us-intel-source-china-ordered-attack-on-indian-troops-in-galwan-river-valley. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

24. Anirban Bhaumik, “US Plans to Train Fighter Pilots of India, Japan, Oz in Guam amid China’s Growing Belligerence in Indo-Pacific”, *Deccan Herald*, DH News Service, June 27, 2020, www.deccanherald.com/national/us-plans-to-train-fighter-pilots-of-india-japan-oz-in-guam-amid-china-s-growing-belligerence-in-indo-pacific-853865.html. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Anirban Bhaumik, “India, Japan Navy Ships Send a Message to China with Drill in Indian Ocean”, *Deccan Herald*, DH News Service, June 29, 2020, www.deccanherald.com/national/india-japan-navy-ships-send-a-message-to-china-with-drill-in-indian-ocean-854848.html. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

to pass the National Defence Authorization Act 2021 which intends to establish a Pacific Deterrent Initiative which focuses resources on key military capabilities to deter China. It seeks to provide a strong reassurance to allies and partners in the region that Washington is deeply committed to defending US interests in the Indo-Pacific.²⁷ These developments definitely suggest a stronger resolve among members to preserve a “free and open” Indo-Pacific in the face of aggressive actions by China, but whether it is strong enough for QUAD to take a hard-line approach against Beijing remains to be seen. To date, even the US, which directly labelled China as an “adversary” in its Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, has “resisted the urge to convert QUAD into an anti-China group”.²⁸ Even in the “QUAD-Plus” virtual meeting on March 20, which consisted of New Zealand, South Korea and Vietnam in addition to the four QUAD countries, there was no mention of China. Nevertheless the QUAD’s enlargement, especially the inclusion of ASEAN countries, seriously undermines Chinese claims that QUAD has no legitimacy among the regional countries.

The strategic convergence between India and the US is clearer now given the shared anxieties about Beijing’s aggressive intentions especially given the burgeoning defence ties. Yet, Indian experience of dealing with China since 1962 has shown that mistrust of China cannot serve as a firm foundation for an alliance partnership. It is true that the ideological differences between the two countries, which was a significant hindrance during the Cold War days, is no longer a threat; in fact it has been replaced by ideological proximity which strengthens the case for “like minded democracies” fighting an autocratic Chinese government. However, divergences remain, most significantly over the role of Russia in the emerging world order, and this has particularly important ramifications for how the geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific region will be shaped. India’s outreach

27. Jim Inhofe and Jack Reed, “The Pacific Deterrence Initiative: Peace through Strength in the Indo-Pacific”, *War on the Rocks*, May 28, 2020, warontherocks.com/2020/05/the-pacific-deterrence-initiative-peace-through-strength-in-the-indo-pacific/. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

28. Derek Grossman, “The Quad Is Poised to Become Openly Anti-China Soon”, *The Wire*, July 28, 2020, thewire.in/diplomacy/quad-india-australia-japan-usa-anti-china. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

to Russia to join the Indo-Pacific initiative²⁹ is a clear indication of India's assurance that while it supports a "rules based order" it is not a US-centric policy. Russia's traditional hesitation towards Indo-Pacific has been on grounds of the possibility of creating new divisions especially with respect to containment of China, which India has tried to ally even recently when Indian envoy to Russia, D. B. Venkatesh Varma emphasised commonalities over differences in the vision as India sees it as a "geographic continuum for cooperation and for certain principles ... to be free and fair for everyone."³⁰ India's decision to attend the virtual meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, India and China on June 23, where the Sino-Indian conflict was not discussed, keeps open the possibility of multilateral engagement with China. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal participation in the NAM summit on May 4, since he assumed office, is yet another indication of India's continued discomfort with alliance politics. In his virtual address he acknowledged the "limitations of the existing international system" and pitched a "new template of globalization, based on fairness, equality, and humanity". It is clear that India is cognisant of the changing international strategic reality but still wishes to retain its own space for manoeuvring, especially in the Indo-Pacific.

29. Nayanima Basu et al., "India Wants Russia to Join Indo-Pacific Initiative to Signal It's Not Just a US-Centric Plan", *ThePrint*, July 28, 2020, theprint.in/diplomacy/india-wants-russia-to-join-indo-pacific-initiative-to-signal-its-not-just-a-us-centric-plan/468853/. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

30. Dinakar Peri, "Pacific a Pivot for Ties with Moscow: Indian Envoy", *The Hindu*, July 15, 2020, www.thehindu.com/news/national/russia-should-be-more-involved-in-indo-pacific-indian-envoy/article32093190.ece. Accessed on August 9, 2020.

INDIA-NEPAL BORDER DISPUTE

RAGHVENDRA PRATAP SINGH

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Nepal has emerged as a key player in India and China to protect their regional and vital strategic interests. Although the Himalayan kingdom has been traditionally an Indian ally, the changing strategic and economic realities are indicative of the fact that national interest is permanent and the rest is dynamic in nature.¹ Keeping in view Indo-Nepal strategic interests, the recent border problems complicate the relationship. The Nepali government has blamed the Indian government for publishing a new political map in November 2019 unilaterally. It showed Kalapani region within Indian territory. This prompted Nepal's parliament to claim the three disputed areas Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura as its integral part. Furthermore, the construction and completion of an 80-km road at Dharchula by India in May 2020 drew a negative reaction from Nepal. On June 13, 2020 Nepal's parliament took a major decision by amending the constitution to update the country's new political map that laid claim to these three disputed border areas. Soon, the Indian Army chief Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane reacted that "Nepal was

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1. Narendra Kumar, "India-Nepal Relations: Evaluating Security Implications", in Shekhar Adhikari (ed.), *India's Security Interest in her Neighbourhood* (New Delhi: Pentagon. Press, 2015), p. 195.

acting at someone's behest"—a clear reference to China.² It is in this background that the author will examine: (1) Indo-Nepal disputed border areas; (ii) China's expansionist designs to encircle India; and (iii) implications for India.

GEOGRAPHICAL FACTOR

The geographical location of any country is of vital importance in analysing the security compulsion of another country. Nepal is no exception. Nepal is surrounded by India on three sides, namely, south, east and west, and on the west is the Tibetan region of China borders. India and Nepal borders are porous and share a 1,700-km long border. Both countries, for centuries, acted "as a barrier to the incoming influences and military adventures into India from the north".³

In the past British India was quick to realise the geographical importance of Nepal and made her a major partner in defending the northern frontiers. In fact, ever since modern Nepal was established in the late eighteenth century India's security perceptions in its northern frontiers have been linked to Nepal.⁴ Given the geographical location of Nepal and harmonious relations with China, China can easily gain access to the Indian mainland if Nepal allows it to do so.⁵ Today, China has taken full advantage of Nepal's weaknesses and is trying to encircle India from two sides.

BORDER ISSUES

Though India has always regarded Nepal as natural partner, the border problem has persisted nevertheless. The border dispute between India and Nepal, particularly the southern position of Nepal, has become more problematic. Was India responsible for it? The answer is definitely 'no' as British India was not so active

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2. Akhilesh Upadhyay, "Decoding the India-Nepal dispute", *Hindustan Times*, May 29, 2020.
 3. Lok Raj Baral, "India-Nepal Relations: Continuity and Changes", *Asian Survey*, Berkeley, California, vol. 32, no. 9, September 1992, p. 815.
 4. Padmaja Murthy, "India and Nepal: Security and Economic Dimension", *Strategic Analysis*, New Delhi, vol. 23, no. 9, December 1991, p. 1531.
 5. Sita Kaushik, "Indo-Nepal Relations: Some Politics and Security Issues," in V.T. Patil and Nalini Kant Jha (eds.), *India in a turbulent world* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2003), p. 75.

in demarcating the frontier between India and Nepal at that time. Even the Sugauli treaty of 1816 failed to address both the countries' grievances. As a result, the border management crisis became more and more problematic.

Moreover, the region of Dasngaja became important because of population rise on the Indian side and deforestation of Nepal forest by India. There are certain areas where no border pillars have been erected. These areas are Susta, Arra, Nala and Tal Bagonda. Nepal alleged that India had encroached on the area of Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and Susta. Nepal also claims Tanakpur, Maheshpur, Thori, Sandakpur, Manebhanjyang, Pashupatinagar, Bhandabari and Mechpul area of Kankadvhitta. Nepal's apprehension is that India has constructed dams and embankments in Laxmanpur Rasiyawal, Rupandehi, Kapilvastu, Dang, Kanchanpur and Rautahat. With development of dams, Nepal has to face the fury of floods during monsoon season.

Should India be blamed for all these activities? One has to see it in the context of Nepal instability and also the role of Nepali political parties in resolving the issue. To resolve the border problem joint Technical Committee between India and Nepal was formed in 1981. The Committee succeeded in resolving 98 percent of India-Nepal 1,808 km border and 8,533 border pillars were erected. As at present two percent of the work could not be completed in Susta and Kalapani. Nepal's fear was that it would give India the upper hand over Nepal.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

On June 13, 2020, Nepal's Parliament passed "a constitutional amendment to give legal backing to a political map depicting disputed areas such as Lipulekh as Nepalese territory". This map was cleared by K. P. Sharma Oli government on May 20, 2020 and depicts Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura as part of Nepal.⁶ Soon the matter was placed before the Parliament.

In the House of Representatives the amendment was passed by two-thirds majority. But in the Lower House, the ruling Nepal Communist party lacked two-thirds majority. The shortfall was

6. Rezaul H Laskar, "Nepal okays map tweak, India calls it 'untenable'", *Hindustan Times*, June 14, 2020.

overcome by the support given by the opposition parties like Nepali Congress and Rastriya Prajatantra Party in favour of the bill.

The Indian Government reacted sharply by stating that such “artificial enlargement of claims” violates an understanding to resolve boundary issues through talks. India then recorded that “Nepal’s move has violated the bilateral treaty signed between the two countries”.⁷ The External Affairs Ministry spokesperson, Anurag Srivastava, said that “this artificial enlargement of claims is not based on historical fact or evidence and is not tenable. It is also violates our current understanding to hold talks on outstanding boundary issues.”⁸

The pertinent question is, why did Nepal have to issue the new political map? The Nepali government’s argument was based on India’s inauguration of an 80-km road to Lipulekh on the border with Tibet. The Indian government’s stand was that the development of the road would facilitate travel for the pilgrims going to Kailash Mansarovar. In 2019, Nepal felt uneasy about India’s decision to depict Kalapani as part of a new map of the Union Territory of Ladakh. Nepalese officials claim that they had made three proposals to India for talks since November 2019, and the most recent one was in May 2020, but there was no response from the Indian side. Nepal’s Prime Minister Oli has maintained that Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura are part of his country’s territory on the basis of the Treaty of Sugauli signed with the British in 1816. It says all areas east of the Kali River belong to Nepal. Oli has also accused India of creating an ‘artificial’ boundary in the region and of encroaching on Nepalese territory by deploying the army.⁹ It considers the treaty as the only authentic document on boundary delineation and all other documents as ‘subsidiaries’.¹⁰

IMPORTANCE OF LIPULEKH, KALAPANI AND LIMPIYADHURA: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the month of June 2020, Nepal incorporated three strategically important areas of Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura and made

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Dinesh Bhattarai, “India-Nepal ties must be dominated by opportunities of future not frustration of past”, *The Indian Express*, June 10, 2020.

10. n. 2.

them an integral part of Nepal. These areas have always been a bone of contention between India and Nepal. To get a proper glimpse of the situation, one has to relook into the past history of Indo-Nepal boundary dispute. The present situation is the reflection of the past history of Indo-Nepal relations.

The context of boundary dispute goes back to the Nepal war followed by the treaty of Sugauli signed on March 4, 1816. It is debatable as to whether the treaty was based on equality.¹¹ The treaty of 1816 limits the rights of Nepal claiming the territories. The 1816 Sugauli treaty between Nepal and British India placed "all the territories east of the Kali river, including Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura at the north-western front of Nepal on its side. But at that time, there was no political map".¹² These are evidences to show that from time to time Chand, Bam and Mala kings ruled over Kali. In 1560 Balo Kalyan Chand secured the Tibetan boundary. In 1670, Baz Bahadur Chand integrated the area of Taklakar, located in western Tibet. The integration was primarily for trade purposes.

Before annexing Kumaon region, and even afterwards during the East India Company rule, Indian and British people use to visit Tibet and Kailash Mansarovar every year for trade and pilgrimage. Here lies the importance of Lipulekh because it was seen as the easiest and most secure route. For a hundred years, one saw not only traders and pilgrim visitors but Baz Bahadur Chand, Bastiram, Henry and Richard Strachey and others also use to visit Tibet. The intrusion of foreign nationals in Bhagirathi and Alaknanda regions started in the seventeenth century. These foreign nationals came through different passes. For example, Jesuit Missionary in 1624 and Murcraft in 1812 came up to Chaprang and Rakastal-Mansarovar through Mana and Niti passes. But this kind of operation was not witnessed in the valley of Kali or Saryu. It was for the first time that Kali along with Kumaon region was shown in 1846 map. Similarly, it was in 1850 that Lipulekh for the first time appeared on the map but Limpiyadhura was still not mentioned. In 1879 certain changes were made in the map which showed Lipulekh as a part of Indian territories. In 1931 a new map appeared but it was in no way different from the 1879 map. There has

11. Adrija Roychowdhury, "Mapping the history of Kalapani dispute between India and Nepal", *The Indian Express*, June 13, 2020.

12. Ibid.

been no change in the map till the present Nepali government made a constitutional amendment and moved ahead with an updated map.

On June 22, 2020, it was reported that residents of Uttarakhand village bordering Nepal could catch the signals of a Nepali radio station playing anti-India songs that called for return of areas in Uttarakhand, like Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, that have been included in Kathmandu's new map. Songs like, "Hamarai hotyo Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura ... Utha jaaga veer Nepali" and "Lipulekh and Kalapani should be ours, it is our land that has been stolen" are being played many times and every hour.¹³

There are also reports that Nepal has planned to increase the number of its border outposts along the boundary with India by 100 from the existing 121 to 221 in 2021. The central intelligence agency has information that Nepal's Armed Police Force deployed at the border has already got an approval by Nepali Home Ministry for an additional 100 border posts. A proposal for taking this number to 500 is under consideration.¹⁴

Experts are divided on this issue. Some say that erection of more outposts should not be a cause of concern as both India and Nepal have a good working relationship. Further, they say that India has 533 border outposts of Sashastra Seema Bal at the 1,751-km long border with Nepal and argue that Nepal's Armed Police Force too has a right to erect as many posts as it wants. Manjeev Puri, who has served as ambassador in Nepal, believes that "Nepal's decision to add more border outposts on their side at this time should not have been done as it adds to an avoidable narrative of escalating tensions."¹⁵

The relations between India and Nepal worsened further when Nepal's government took the decision to amend the citizenship law where foreign girls marrying Nepali boys would get citizenship after seven years. The decision was aimed at India and was delayed till now because of the old tradition that existed between the two countries. This act of Nepal was not taken well in India but suits China's strategic interests.

13. Ishita Mishra and Prem Punetha, "Nepal radio station play anti-India song", *The Times of India*, June 22, 2020.

14. Neeraj Chauhan, "Nepal to add 100 borders outpost amid tensions", *Hindustan Times*, June 17, 2020.

15. Ibid.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE CONNECTION

Contrary to conventional wisdom among the strategic elite in India, China and Nepal maintained cordial relations even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Opposing British expansion in the Himalayan region, Nepal's rulers made continuous conciliatory efforts toward China to oppose British expansion in the Himalayan region. But this could not materialise because of the Opium Wars (1839-42) where Chinese government got a setback. Hence, Nepal had to roll back her plan and from time to time had shown soft gestures in dealing with the East India Company. When the 1857 mutiny shook the company, Nepal regained some of the territories it lost.¹⁶

Momentum was built up with Nepal's government to settle borders when India became independent. It is noteworthy to quote the ancient military thinker, Chanakya, when he says, "neighbouring states are most relevant in foreign policy." Nepal holds special importance to India because it is the second nation with Hindu majority and it is a buffer state between India and China. Keeping in view the importance of Nepal, India signed Peace Treaty of 1950 with her. Treaty of Peace and Friendship gave "the illusion of continuity in Nepal's protectorate relations with India. But this illusion soon chipped off amid the rise of mass politics in Nepal and its acquisition of an international personality."¹⁷

On the other hand, China lost no time in taking advantage of Nepal's growing indifferent attitude towards India. Consolidation of Chinese position in Tibet had led it to offer assurances to Nepal, thereby building more constructive cooperation with Nepal. Today, the Chinese connection is deep-rooted in Nepal's politics, which makes New Delhi suspicious about China's role in the current India-Nepal dispute.

The important question is, What does it indicate? Is this Nepal's independent move or has China incited Nepal to do so? It is important to assess China-Nepal relations and to spell out the Nepali government's compulsion to behave in such a manner that hurts the bilateral relationship and sentiments of the Indian people living in both the countries.

16. C. Raja Mohan, "Delhi must focus on India's relations with Nepal", *The Indian Express*, June 2, 2020.

17. Ibid.

It is rather difficult to read the Chinese mind. What happened in 1962 is an indication of China's subtle diplomacy when China engaged India according to their own norms and time. Nepal is no exception. Once China established its foot firmly in Tibet, it took an active interest in improving relations with Nepal, knowing that Nepal economically is an interdependent country. China succeeded when it signed a border agreement with Nepal. In the same year, both countries signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship which was seen by strategic experts as parallel to the historic Nepal-India Treaty of Peace and Friendship.

It is also noteworthy to mention the ongoing internal power rivalry in Nepal from the 1980s onwards. It gave the Nepali Communist Party opportunity to find ways to establish its rule in Nepal. It got success with the end of the rule of royal monarchy. Nepal, with Maoist ideology, had made things uneasy for India as it was difficult to work with Nepali Communist Party in such an emerging hostile environment. In 2017, Oli's Party, the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) rose to power on a strong nationalist wave. Soon, Oli announced a formal merger with Prachanda's Maoist party. It was seen that the present government had laid more importance on China. Taking full advantage of Nepali internal politics, China had increased its footprint in Nepal. China cleverly has chosen soft power (cultural and economic) to ensure that their interests in Nepal are protected.

The Chinese intention to create a rift between Nepal and India was clearly so that Nepal may drift away from India's influence. Today, India's insecurity has arisen due to China's active support given to Left-Wing Extremism (LWE). The threat to India from LWE stretches from Kathmandu to Tirupati. Then, there is a threat coming from Jehadi groups. The ongoing support of the ISI and its modules operating from Nepal have provided necessary material and ideological support to SIMI, IM and even HuJI of Bangladesh. Nepal is also closely linked to the predominant regions of UP and Bihar. Thus, these regions are vulnerable because China can create instability in the heartland of India through Nepal.

So far as infrastructure development in Nepal is concerned, China is constructing Lhasa-Kathmandu railway line at the cost of \$2.2

billion, which is likely to be ready by 2020. China has also assisted in the upgradation and expansion of the Kathmandu Ring Road, the Tatopani Dry Project and construction of the Upper Trishuli 3A Hydro Power Station.¹⁸ The focus of China is to reach every part of Nepal in order to eliminate India's influence in Nepal. Prithivi and Arniko Highway, the Pokhara-Baglung Road and the Narayanghat-Gorakha Highway are other Chinese projects.¹⁹ Furthermore, China has undertaken the development of Kathmandu Airport, hydropower projects and electronic communication. The Chinese purpose is twofold: (i) to deprive India from generating energy for its power deficient neighbouring states, and (ii) to capture the large communication market and possibly help China in monitoring Indian cyber and electromagnetic domain.²⁰

From time to time one also saw various Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Premier Zhao Ziyang visit Nepal in 1978 and 1981 respectively. In the late 1980s, pro-democratic protests started in Nepal by several political parties. These protests got ample support from Indian political parties. Drastic steps were taken by Indian political planners in the form of imposing economic blockade because of a major disagreement over trade between the two countries. But it did not affect Nepal much as Nepal accepted Chinese light arms and other military hardware in 1988. This was seen as "contravention to an earlier agreement signed in 1965 with India which had made it the exclusive supplier of defence equipment to Nepal. Today, the Nepali Communist Party are working to change the status quo of Indo-Nepal boundary."²¹

TIBET FACTOR

The Tibet factor contributes largely to China's interest in Nepal. At a minimum, "these objectives served the security interest of China in Tibet as that region was dependent on the neighbouring countries for border trade." Additionally, given the regular flow of thousands of Tibetan refugees into Nepal and India every year, "the objective

18. M. Chansorial, "China makes presence felt in Nepal", *The Sunday Guardian*, December 8, 2014.

19. n. 1, p. 201.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

21. R. Hariharan, "Why India needs to fine-tune its ties with Nepal", *rediff.com news* dated November 22, 2011.

was to nullify any negative fallout from Tibetan refugees in these countries to impact Nepal as a buffer zone.”²²

Crossing by Tibetan activists from either side was a cause of instability in Tibet Autonomous Region. Nepal is home to more than 20,000 Tibetan refugees and China’s main concern is to stifle their anti-Chinese activities. It has succeeded in curbing the Khampa activities, illegal crossings through porous border and anti-China political activities from Nepal.²³ Recently China has increased police posts along the Nepalese border with Tibet. It served the Chinese interest as one saw a reduction in the number of people crossing the border.

Strategic experts in India see mainly three China’s security objectives in Nepal: (i) assisting Nepal in the form of the development of created infrastructure,²⁴ (ii) curtailing Nepal’s overdependence on India,²⁵ and (iii) weakening India’s hold on Nepal and promoting Chinese aggressive design.

One can say that China has played a vital role in providing false security to Nepal. China believes in bargaining and if it has provided political and economic security to Nepal, certainly Nepal has to pay the price for it. In 2017, according to a survey done by Nepali Agriculture Ministry, Nepal surrendered close to 36 hectares of land in 10 places to China. *The Himalayan Times*, in June 2020, stated that with the construction of roads in Tibet, some rivers and their tributaries have changed their course and areas flowing toward Nepal. As such, vast lands of Nepal have become a part of China. Important areas in this where surrender of land took place are Humla, Rasuwa, Sindupalchok and Sankhuwasabha. Further, allegation has been made that Prime Minister Oli’s government has gifted the land to China where China can create outposts. This could potentially pose a security challenge to India. This move of Prime Minister Oli has been criticised by every political party of Nepal.

22. Dawa Norbu, “China’s Tibet Policy”, (Surrey, Britain: Curzone Press, 2001), pp. 281-86.

23. R. Ranjan and D. Malone, “A Yam Between Two Boulders”, in Sebastian von Einsiedel, D. Malone and S. Pradhan (ed.), *Nepal in Transition: From People’s War to Fragile Peace* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 307.

24. Satish Kumar, “China’s Expanding Footprint in Nepal, Threat to India”, IDSA, New Delhi, vol. 5, April 2011, p. 80.

25. A. Bhattacharya, “China and Maoist Nepal: May 23, 2008”, <http://www.idsa.in>. Accessed on October 4, 2014.

The sudden increase of China Study Centres (CSC) all along the Indo-Nepal border has become a cause of insecurity to Indian decision makers. Their number rose from 7 in 2005 to 19 till February 2008. These study centres were set up in 2000 as civil society groups. The objective was to promote cultural interaction. Today, these centres are meant to promote Chinese interests on vital issues concerning Nepal. These centres caution the Nepali government about India's aggressive designs.

CONCLUSION

Deteriorating Indo-Nepal relations have been seen by the Indian strategic community as Nepal's Prime Minister Oli's move where he is playing the nationalist card for his political survival. The Nepali Prime Minister's style of functioning and handling sensitive issues like border settlement had actually made him unpopular. As a result, resentment and protests have surfaced amongst the people including the three former Nepali Prime Ministers, Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda, Madhav Kumar Nepal and Jhala Nath Khanal. On the other hand, the Nepali Prime Minister has jeopardised the smooth relations with India. Oli sees the Madhesis, Nepali citizens of southern plains, more loyal to India than Nepal. The current citizenship bill in Nepal Parliament will create unnecessary problems for Indians who have married Nepali citizens for getting its citizenship. This will be a great blow to the close people-to-people contact between India and Nepal.

On the economic front, the present government has failed to meet the expectations of the people, for, today, Nepal is totally dependent on China and in a way China is micromanaging the Nepali economy. The fact remains that, what India can offer to Nepal in terms of open border, free movement of people and economic opportunities for Nepali citizens can never be matched by China. On June 15, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that "no power can break Indo-Nepal relations ... though Nepal has problems about Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura, the misunderstanding can be sorted out through dialogue and not by unilateral action. For centuries both countries have great social, geographical, cultural and spiritual

ties.”²⁶ The relationship between the two countries is of livelihood and marriage. The reality is that India has not demonstrated any form of bitterness towards Nepal. There is now some realisation on the part of Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli to take a soft approach on Indo-Nepal relations. This was seen when Oli telephoned Narendra Modi to greet him on India’s Independence Day. Furthermore, there was some sign of positivity from both sides when on August 17, 2020 senior diplomats met and discussed the progress made on various Indian development projects in Nepal. But they avoided the border issues. One can hope that the crisis is a temporary one. In coming years both the countries need to reset their foreign and domestic politics in proper perspectives.

26. “No power of the world can break India-Nepal relations: Rajnath Singh”, *The Economic Times*, June 15, 2020

EVOLVING CHINA FACTOR IN SOUTH ASIAN GEOPOLITICS: CASE STUDY OF NEPAL

SAYANTAN HALDAR

INTRODUCTION

With the onset of the twenty-first century, the shift in the global order has led to a substantive increase in the significance of Asia as a region. This has happened primarily because of the decreasing US influence and the crumbling down of the decisive role of Europe in global politics which has conceded a larger space for the emergence of Asian countries to rise to primacy. The enhanced strategic role of Asian countries like China, India and Japan has made this region the new epicentre of the global political discourse. China and India are the two major countries which have pushed the 'Asian Century' discourse by emerging as regional super powers and establishing themselves as Asian giants.¹ For President Xi Jinping, his pet globalisation project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has become an instrument for progressing China's foreign policy, and it is speculated that the BRI could prove to be the catalyst for China's emergence to primacy in world politics. South Asia has become the

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1. David Scott, "21st Century as Whose Century?" *Journal of World Systems Research*, 13(2) (2008), pp. 106-108.

theatre of contestation for Chinese implementation of the various policies and plans under BRI. Traditionally, South Asia has been a region of strategic influence for India. Scholars have argued that in order for India to have a formidable international profile, it must have a strong base in its neighbourhood.² Therefore, China's looming presence in the geostrategic landscape of South Asia has irked New Delhi to usher in a sense of geostrategic competition between New Delhi and Beijing. India has been one of the very few countries to have declined to be a part of China's BRI.³ India's refusal to join BRI is based on the issues of sovereignty, security concerns and Chinese acknowledgement of Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir (PoK) being part of Pakistan, eventually leading to escalation of tensions between the two regional giants.

In this context, Nepal has emerged as an important country in the midst of this regional geopolitical power play for primacy between China and India, thereby shaping the larger discourse of the international high politics of South Asia. Apart from China, India has mutual and long-standing interest in the neighbouring countries due to multiple reasons, including geographical proximity, trade partnerships and security interests. India's security interests and its Nepal policy have been shaped by the historical legacy, geographical imperatives, and regional and global political dynamics. China's ambition to assert itself in South Asia is solely premised on co-opting the smaller countries in the region into its grand vision of BRI. In this light, the unique geostrategic location of Nepal makes it imperative for extensive deliberation on the same to understand the evolving geopolitical discourse of South Asia as well as take stock of the 'China factor' which has been widely instrumental in shaping the political imperatives of the region.

Therefore, this paper will attempt to understand the geopolitical profile of South Asia and its renewed importance in the broader global political discourse. Consequently, it is imperative to make sense of the changing dynamics of South Asia due to the emergent

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2. C. Raja Mohan, "India's Neighborhood Policy: Four Dimensions", *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal*, 2(1), January 2007, pp. 16-17.
 3. Bansari Kamdar, "What to Make of India's Absence from the Second Belt and Road Forum", *The Diplomat*, May 9, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/what-to-make-of-indias-absence-from-the-second-belt-and-road-forum/>. Accessed on July 16, 2020.

geostrategic competition that characterises the regional profile. This will be followed by a substantial deliberation on China's BRI focus on Nepal. This paper will also look at how Nepal's foreign policy approach is shifting towards increased engagement with China. It is important to be cognisant of how these countries look at India in order to make sense of the Chinese impact on these countries which will ultimately pave the way for a broader understanding of the region of South Asia.

China's assertion of BRI has posed a potential threat by marking its presence in what India considers as its neighbourhood. Beijing's looming presence in India's region of influence has majorly prompted the academia and media to closely scrutinise the evolving geopolitical landscape of South Asia. India's mammoth presence in the region has been at the centre of the regional dynamics of South Asia. Therefore, there is bound to be an asymmetry in power relations amongst the countries. India's relations with Pakistan have been one of the central issues to have shaped regional geopolitics. China's entry into these regional dynamics seems to have prompted a shift in the attitude of the countries in the region. In terms of bilateral relations, Pakistan has been a long-standing ally of China. Part of BRI, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been termed as a 'flagship' project under the aegis of the BRI.⁴ China's growing engagements with the countries in South Asia have broadly bordered on infrastructure development, connectivity and trade. Countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives have prominently become part of China's BRI. In a similar vein, it is also important to take stock of the evolving political imperative of Nepal in order to understand how the 'China factor' manifests in the larger geopolitical landscape of South Asia.

SOUTH ASIA: GEOPOLITICAL THEATRE

The contours of South Asia have witnessed a monumental increase in its strategic role. One of the leading factors to have influenced this process has been China's assertive role in the region as well as India's emergent role in trying to become a regional power centre, which in turn has made South Asia a battleground for primacy among

4. Yaqoob Ul Hassan, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Questions on Pakistan's Economic Stability", *Strategic Analysis*, 44(2), April 2020, p.1.

the two Asian giants. A closer examination of the escalating India-China competition in the region is indispensable for understanding the strategic significance of this region. Historically speaking, China became a neighbour of South Asia after its military absorption of Tibet in 1951. Professor S. D. Muni identifies three main motives that have continued to strengthen China's drive to look into South Asia which border largely on aspects of domestic politics, economic, and strategic issues. According to him, China feels a sense of vulnerability with regard to its western periphery, comprising Tibet and Xinjiang, which is why it is focused on cultivating support from bordering nations in order to ensure stability in the region. Secondly, economic factors have vastly shaped its interests in South Asia. China is looking for opportunities to tap into the investment opportunities as well as natural resources in the region. South Asia being the populous sub-region in the world which houses almost a quarter of the total world population, is an ideal market for China to grow its economic might. Thirdly, South Asia's strategic significance has monumentally spiked due to China's enhanced focus on the Indian Ocean Region. Its strategic drive may have multiple objectives—including keeping India boxed within the regional ambit of South Asia—to having unhindered access to security transit points in the maritime space surrounding the region.⁵

Currently, South Asia sits at the heart of President Xi Jinping's ambitious BRI. Apart from being strategically placed geographically, South Asia is also seen as a potential market which perfectly fits into China's export-oriented trade philosophy. Therefore, there has been a steady growth in engagement with South Asian nations by major economic players around the world including China. With the onset of BRI, Chinese interests in the region have gained a renewed impetus in order to bolster ties with the regional players. In terms of regional identity, South Asia is one of the leading regions which does not have China's involvement in the institutional matrix. Despite China's exhibition of willingness to engage with South Asia through participation in South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), there has been a resolute opposition to this,

5. S. D. Muni, "China and South Asian Cooperation under SAARC", in Vishal Chandra (ed.), *India and South Asia: Exploring Regional Perceptions* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2015), pp. 180-181.

primarily led by India. However, that has not stopped China from extending its ties with individual nation-states within the region. In this context, Pakistan has emerged as the biggest Chinese ally as their ties have bolstered over the years. Undoubtedly, India has been one of the common factors pushing China and Pakistan together. CPEC has become an instrument for the recognition of their bilateral relationship as 'all-weather friendship'. Advocates of the CPEC have also termed it as a 'game changer' for the Pakistani economy. The Gwadar Port is one of the key infrastructure projects of CPEC. This port is of key strategic significance to China as it enables it to overcome one of its leading irritants in the maritime connectivity domain—the 'Malacca dilemma'.⁶ In tandem with its strategic commitment to China, Pakistan has in the past expressed its willingness in SAARC to engage with China.

However, despite Pakistan being the biggest priority for China in South Asia, its engagement with other countries in the region has also seen a steep growth over the years. The onset of BRI has prompted an enhanced focus on South Asia by China, which has increasingly engaged with countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, etc., to mark its presence in the region. In this light, Nepal has received increasing attention from China. At the very outset it is important to understand the growing significance of these two countries in China's strategic landscape. One of the primary factors to have driven Beijing's growing engagements with these countries is their geographical proximity with India. In order for China to counter India's geostrategic profile, it is important that it develops strong ties with its neighbouring countries which have key strategic value to India. Both these countries have also featured prominently as potential markets for Chinese exports. Apart from this, Nepal is seen as a relatively small country in terms of its economic profile, which has also paved the way for China to engage with it through financial assistance, especially in key sectors like infrastructure development and connectivity.

6. "The Malacca Dilemma: A hindrance to Chinese Ambitions in the 21st Century", *Berkley Political Review*, August 26, 2019, <https://bpr.berkeley.edu/2019/08/26/the-malacca-dilemma-a-hindrance-to-chinese-ambitions-in-the-21st-century/>. Accessed on August 15, 2020.

Therefore, China's interests in South Asia are guided not just by its quest for strategic leverage over India, but also by its own economic and strategic objectives. The twenty-first century Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Route have been designed by China to expand its political and strategic clout across Asia and Europe.⁷ This will require China to take smaller countries like Nepal and Bangladesh into confidence, not only because they fall within China's proposed ambit, but also because of their historical links with India, a country that is opposed to Chinese rise, particularly within its (India's) perceived area of influence.

NEPAL IN THE SOUTH ASIA CONUNDRUM

Nepal has emerged as an important player in the contemporary India-China competition for primacy in South Asia. Despite being a small country, Nepal occupies a crucial geographical location, sitting right in the middle of China and India over the Himalayas. Its strategic location is one of the primary reasons why it is hailed as an important country, especially in the context of the India-China competition. Hence, it becomes imperative to look at the changing nature of Nepal's foreign policy. Nepal's history of foreign relations, especially foreign policy, has not been marked by any sort of concrete ideology or inclination towards either one of the bigger powers. It has been largely flexible, especially towards India and China. It can be understood that Nepal's policymakers have been well aware of the structural limitations of the country, in as far as its policy orientation is concerned. Nepal's foreign policy has been primarily understood as a mechanism of 'balancing' between the two giants.⁸ Considering Nepal's geographical size, status of resources and command in the world order, it is imperative that they have to be largely dependent on either India or China. Nepal has also seen ample reciprocation from both its neighbours as they look at it as an opportunity to assert their control over Nepal's territory. Both the countries have a long-standing contestation over border issues which have the common interest of both Beijing as well as New Delhi. In terms of policy

7. Dong Ziangrong, "Historic Inheritance", in Cai Fang and Peter Nolan (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of the Belt and Road* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 81-83.

8. Monalisa Adhikari, "Between the Dragon and the Elephant: Nepal's Neutrality Conundrum", *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 25(1), January 2012, pp. 83-84.

preference, it has been seen that Nepal's foreign policy has majorly capitalised on China's rift with India. Nepal has in fact developed a reputation for playing the China card to India and playing the India card to China. Nepal has also seen a tremendous domestic conflict, especially with regard to the constitutional political turmoil. Nepal's domestic politics has shaped its foreign policy outlook deeply, since they have actors who are either pro or against either India or China.

However, one of the recurring features for Nepal has been the lack of a clear vision, or ideological stance.⁹ Nepal's ambiguity in conceptualising its foreign policy can be analysed by its dilemma of having to survive the might of both India and China. It is often said that this ambiguity in policy orientation is caused mainly by the vulnerabilities Nepal faces from the ambitions of the giant powers that circumvent it. It is important here to specifically look at Nepal's bilateral ties with China and India.

According to Manish Dabhade and Harsh V. Pant, Nepal has been successful in keeping both its neighbours in good humour and has resisted their attempts at dictating to it on its foreign policy priorities.¹⁰

CONTOURS OF CHINA-NEPAL RELATIONS

China's engagement with Nepal can be largely understood historically since 1955 which was marked primarily as the era of cooperation on lines of infrastructure and security. It was then premised on a more particular focus of drawing a counterweight to the overdependence on India.¹¹ It must be understood here that China and Nepal share a great deal of commonality through Tibet which has never been of much leverage to China. Nepal also holds significant strategic value to China because of the Tibet factor. It is in the best interests of China and Nepal to ensure stability in Tibet. Chinese President Xi Jinping has made strong assertions about China's unchallenged control over

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9. Maya Chadda, "Rebellion and state formation in Nepal: Implications for South Asian Security", in T. V. Paul (ed.), *South Asia's Weak States: Understanding the Regional Insecurity Predicament* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 280.
 10. Manish Dabhade and Harsh Pant, "Coping with Challenges to Sovereignty: Sino-Indian Rivalry and Nepal's Foreign Policy", *Contemporary South Asia*, 13(2), June 2004, p. 167.
 11. Monalisa Adhikari, "Between the Dragon and the Elephant: Nepal's Neutrality Conundrum", *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs*, 25(1), January 2012, pp. 95-96.

Tibet. This has strategic implications for Nepal owing to its proximity with the region. Nepal is a supporter of the 'One China Policy'. During President Xi's visit to Nepal in 2019, Prime Minister K. P. Oli posited that Nepal was 'committed' to strengthening bilateral ties with China. However, among the several documents of cooperation signed by the two leaders, there was no specific extradition treaty.¹² It is imperative to look at Nepal's recent engagement with China, which has escalated under China's proposed BRI framework.

Nepal's Placement in China's BRI Plans

Nepal joined President Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project officially in 2017.¹³ The then Nepalese Congress President Sushil Koirala-led government made a commitment to join it.¹⁴ However, the first major development between China and Nepal took place in 2017 before the first BRI Summit when Nepal and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) related to cooperation in the fields of economy, technology, environment and culture. China's outreach to Nepal is based on trade, infrastructure and people-to-people connectivity. In 2018, Nepal and China made significant development in the BRI framework by signing the 'Transit Transport Agreement'.¹⁵

Nepal's Perspective on China and BRI

Facilitating bolstering ties with China has been a long-standing objective of Nepal. It is not unusual that Nepal has turned

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12. Claude Arpi, "Situation worsens for Tibetans as China dictates terms to Nepal and Myanmar", *DailyO*, January 27, 2020, <https://www.dailyo.in/politics/china-tibet-conflict-tibet-crisis-xi-jinping-dalai-lama-nepal-myanmar-tibetans-in-india/story/1/32409.html>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.
 13. Sanjeev Giri, "Nepal, China sign deal on OBOR", *The Kathmandu Post*, May 12, 2017, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2017/05/12/nepal-china-sign-framework-deal-on-obor>. Accessed on August 17, 2020.
 14. Kamal Dev Bhattari, "Nepal's BRI Journey: Heavy on promises, light on substance", *The Annapurna Express*, June 2, 2019, <https://theannapurnaexpress.com/news/nepals-bri-journey-heavy-on-promises-light-on-substance-1600#:~:text=A%20year%20after%20Xi%20Jinping,was%20little%20progress%2C%20until%202017>. Accessed on July 20, 2020.
 15. "Nepali gov't endorses protocol of Nepal-China Transit Transport Agreement: official", *Xinhua*, March 15, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/15/c_137897799.htm. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

towards China in its foreign policy framework. As noted by C. Raja Mohan, China has always figured in Kathmandu's strategic calculus. Historically speaking, it is clear that 'Kathmandu kept up a continuous play' between India and China.¹⁶ Following China's reinvigorated push to have a looming presence in South Asia, Kathmandu has seen this as an opportunity to address its structural dilemma of being land-locked by India. Besides merely balancing India against China, Nepal's foreign policy towards China, under the BRI framework, further addresses the question of infrastructure deficit in Nepal. Not only is Nepal small in terms of area and population, but also in terms of its status of resources. These difficulties have been major hindrances for Nepal to develop itself. Therefore, Kathmandu sees a potential in having a close relationship with China. Beijing's BRI operates on the rhetoric of facilitating development in countries which have for long sought to address their development deficit. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is one such initiative which has been hailed as a 'game changer' in Pakistan.¹⁷ This has motivated many in Kathmandu to make use of China's connectivity bandwagon to escalate their infrastructure status. It is important to note that many in Nepal's strategic circles are sceptical of BRI and have stressed on the need for 'risk analysis' in engagement with the Chinese, owing to the Sri Lanka experience (of falling into a debt trap).¹⁸

Border Issues

China's infrastructure development initiatives in the Tibet Autonomous Region have come to impact Nepal as well. According to recent reports by Nepal's Department of Agriculture Ministry, China has 'encroached' on areas within Nepal's territory in order to

16. C. Raja Mohan, "Delhi must focus on India's relations with Nepal", *The Indian Express*, June 2, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-nepal-border-dispute-kalapani-lipulek-china-c-raj-mohan-6437884/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

17. Zahid Khan, et al., "CPEC: A Game Changer in the Balance of Power in South Asia", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 4(4), December 2018, pp. 2-4.

18. Kamal Dev Bhattari, "Nepal's Delicate Dance with China on BRI", *South Asian Voices*, May 3, 2019, <https://southasianvoices.org/nepals-delicate-dance-with-china-on-bri/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

expand its road network.¹⁹ This comes at a time when the world is increasingly taking note of China's 'expansive' tendencies. Similar instances of China's attempts to expand its territory have been visible with India, the Philippines and Indonesia.²⁰ Therefore, it is important for Nepal to flag these issues in a timely manner in order to escape a larger border dispute in the future. In addition to the security dimension common between Nepal and China in the Tibet region, border issues have increasingly come to the fore as well.

RECENT TRENDS IN INDIA-NEPAL RELATIONS

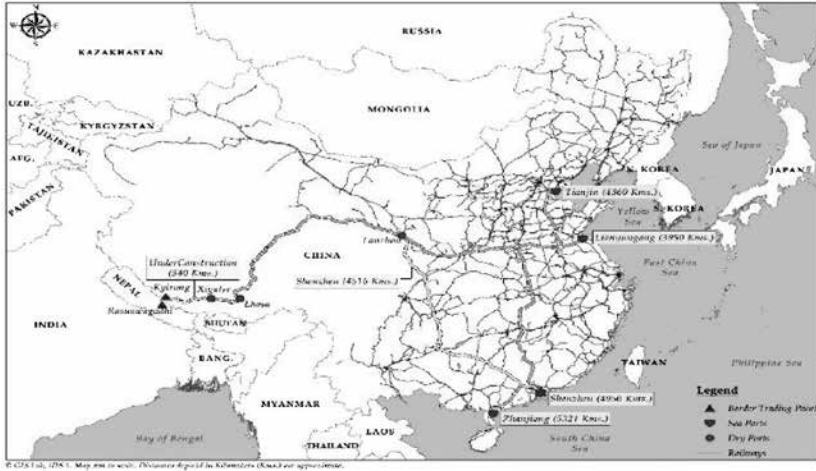
But, why is there a need for Nepal to reduce dependence on India? In 2018, Nepalese Prime Minister K. P. Oli was met with immense public pressure to look for alternatives to reduce its dependence on India. India's blockade of Nepal's border at a time when Nepal was already dealing with a severe earthquake has greatly contributed to the prevalence of this 'anti-India' sentiment. This also compelled the policymakers of Kathmandu to find alternatives so as to avoid any such situation in the future. Here it must be understood that Nepal is a country landlocked by India. Therefore, it is always vulnerable to the risk of reaching a deadlock in case political differences occur between the two countries. Simultaneously, as a small country, it is in the best interests of Nepal to navigate all possible avenues of establishing geostrategic networks to sustain itself. In this light, China's outreach to South Asia – and Nepal in particular – was embraced warmly by both strategic thinkers and policymakers alike in Kathmandu. Urgency in the public discourse was felt on this matter because of the 'blockades' it faced from India in 2015 due to strategic and political disagreements between the two countries, primarily pertaining to the 'Madhesi issue'. In order to reduce its dependence on

19. Binod Prasad Adhikari, "Nepal government report says China using road construction to encroach Nepali land, may set up border outposts", *ANI*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/nepal-government-report-says-china-using-road-construction-to-encroach-on-nepali-land-may-set-up-border-outposts20200623180855/>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

20. C. Raja Mohan, "China now has the military power to alter territorial status quo", *The Indian Express*, June 9, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/india-china-ladakh-lac-border-dispute-c-raja-mohan-6449294/>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

India, Nepal finalised the ‘Transit Transport Agreement’ with China which enabled it to gain access to seven transit points. As shown in Fig. 1, these include four seaports in Xinjiang, Shenzhen, Lianyungang and Zhanjiang along with three land ports in Lanzhou, Lhasa and Xigatse.²¹

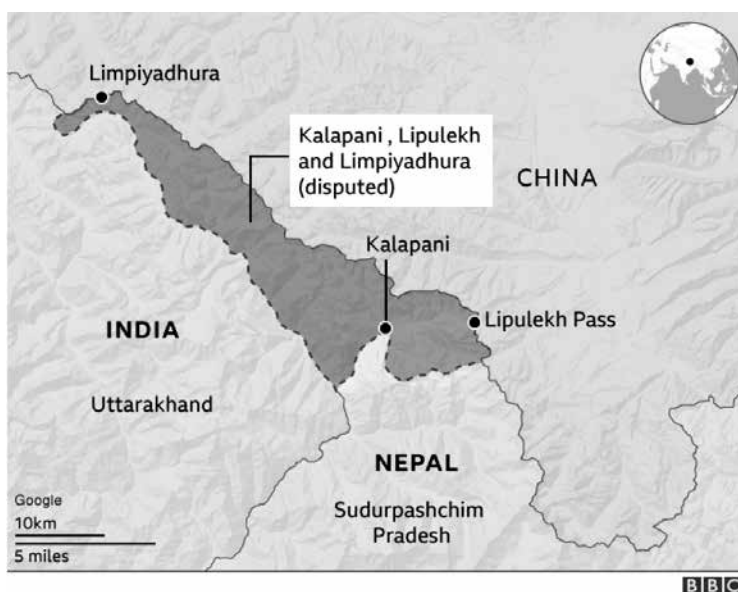
Fig. 1: Map of the Transit Transport Agreement



Source: Nihar R. Nayak, “Nepal-China Transit Agreement: An Evaluation”, IDSA Issue Briefs, September 21, 2018, <https://idsa.in/issuebrief/nepal-china-transit-agreement-nnayak-270918> Accessed on July 19, 2020.

In October 2019, China and Nepal concluded agreements for all-weather connectivity between Kathmandu and the Tibet Autonomous Region. Another interesting development in Nepal has been the shift towards an explicit ‘anti-India’ rhetoric at the top echelons of the Nepalese government. This rhetoric is greatly manifested in Nepal’s recent legislature passed in the lower house of its Parliament which approved a new map of the country.

21. Nihar R. Nayak, “Nepal-China Transit Agreement: An Evaluation”, IDSA Issue Briefs, September 21, 2018, <https://idsa.in/issuebrief/nepal-china-transit-agreement-nnayak-270918>. Accessed on July 19, 2020.

Fig. 2: Disputed Territories of India-Nepal Border

Source: Anbarasan Ethirajan, "India and China: How Nepal's new map is stirring old rivalries", BBC News, June 10, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52967452> Accessed on July 19, 2020.

The new map (Fig. 2) shows disputed territories of the Lipulekh, Kalapani and Limpiyadhura region in the Pithoragarh district of the Indian state of Uttarakhand. According to S. D. Muni, Nepal and India, two of the 'world's closest neighbours', are at cartographic, diplomatic and political stand-off.²² While disagreements regarding these borders have been recurrent between India and Nepal, the passing by the legislature is seen as a resolute response of the Nepalese state against India. According to Birat Anupam, India needs to set its border solution with Nepal on the 'fast-track' in order to secure its interests with its Himalayan neighbour. He sheds light on Nepal's successful border settlement with China, only seven years after establishing diplomatic relations with that country, to inspire a

22. S. D. Muni, "Lipu Lekh: The past, present and future of the Nepal-India stand-off", *Hindustan Times*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/lipu-lekh-the-past-present-and-future-of-the-nepal-india-stand-off-analysis/story-wy3OvSD0G0nkxtGQTOIp2I.html>. Accessed on July 19, 2020.

strong resolve to address the perpetual border tension with India.²³ The perception of Chinese influence has also gained steam because of Nepal's decision to introduce Mandarin in the school curriculum. Although there is no concrete evidence that directly links China with Nepal's aggressive anti-India posturing, there is a growing perception that Nepal is using China's interest and engagement in its country to leverage its strategic imperatives against India. Nepal has been at the centre of India's imagination of regional integration. Nepal is an important country in both SAARC and Bay of Bengal Initiative of Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), the latter having received enhanced attention from India since 2014. There has been a growing sense of dissatisfaction in Nepal vis-à-vis India because of what they have called India's 'big brother attitude' in dealing with Nepal. This has been one of the fundamental reasons why China has found room to spread its influence in the region. There has been a deep-seated conflict that has been instrumental in governing the bilateral relationship which reflects lack of trust and cooperation. There is a strong undercurrent of discontent on the part of Nepal that substantiates this argument. India's alleged involvement in the 'blockade' of Nepal in 2015 after Nepal was rocked by devastating earthquakes that caused the loss of nearly 9,000 people, can be seen as a tipping point in Nepal's perception of India.²⁴ The broader discourse reflected by the strategic community in Kathmandu views India as a major country in the region which is exploitative of the asymmetry in relations in the neighbourhood. India's view of Nepal, according to some in Kathmandu, is an element within India's security envelope in relation to China.²⁵ This angst was further enhanced after India expressed its discontent with regard to Nepal's constitution—which it adopted in 2015—on account of the Madhesi issue which is of key strategic relevance to New Delhi, apart

23. Birat Anupam, "India Needs to Fast-Track a Border Solution, Lest It Lose Nepal", *The Diplomat*, July 20, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/india-needs-to-fast-track-a-border-solution-lest-it-lose-nepal/>. Accessed on July 21, 2020.

24. Valerie Plesch, "Crisis on Nepal-India border as blockade continues", *Aljazeera*, December 24, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2015/12/crisis-nepal-india-border-blockade-continues-151223082533785.html>. Accessed on July 19, 2020.

25. Biswas Baral, "Did India really learn from Nepal blockade?" *The Annapurna Express*, May 22, 2020, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2017/05/12/nepal-china-sign-framework-deal-on-obor>. Accessed on August 17, 2020.

from India's alleged involvement in the fuel blockade in 2015. India has always maintained that Kathmandu should take cognisance of the demands of the Madhesis. It is in the best interests of India to ensure that the Madhesis are not discontent with the state of affairs in Kathmandu. Any violent reaction by the Madhesis is bound to have a negative impact for India's open border with Nepal. Therefore, securing the interests of the Madhesi community has been a strategic priority for India.²⁶ Nepal's discontent with India also pertains to India's 'demonetisation' policy in November 2016. As India banned its high-value currency notes, Nepal's economy suffered a critical setback owing to the entwined economic engagement between the two countries.²⁷

THE WAY FORWARD FOR INDIA

India has traditionally considered South Asia as its 'sphere of influence'. This would naturally imply that it considers countries in the region as key elements of its regional strategy. Nepal is important to India for two reasons: (1) it is a regional neighbour, and (2) it shares a key border area in the Himalayan foothills. India and Nepal have traditionally shared a unique relationship. The looming presence of China in South Asia has further prompted India's urgency to ensure stability in its bilateral relations with Nepal. However, to the contrary, there has been growing distance and mistrust regarding India in the strategic community in Kathmandu. It may be worthwhile to reflect on India-Nepal ties to have a more comprehensive idea of the geopolitics of the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi displayed his commitment to Nepal by inviting its leader to both his swearing-in ceremonies in 2014 and in 2019. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi, India has re-emphasised its strategic priority to its neighbourhood which has manifested through the Neighbourhood First policy and Act East Policy with emphasis on regional organisations such as BIMSTEC, BBIN, etc. It is also important to consider that the initiatives mechanised by India

26. Sanjal Shastri, "The Madhesi Conundrum: Making Sense of India's Stand", *ISSSP Reflections*, May 3, 2016, <http://issp.in/the-madhesi-conundrum-making-sense-of-indias-stand/>. Accessed on August 14, 2020.

27. Gopal Sharma and Manoj Kumar, "India's demonetization drive drags down Nepal's economy", *Reuters*, December 14, 2016, <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-modi-demonetisation-nepal-cashban-idINKBN14314P>. Accessed on August 14, 2020.

such as BBIN and BIMSTEC bear convergence of India and Nepalese geostrategic interests.

This trickles down to Nepal figuring in a more prominent position in India's strategic thinking. Ties of shared peace and prosperity among India and Nepal can be traced back to the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed between the two countries in 1950. According to S. D. Muni, geographical determinism in India's security interests in Nepal involved India guarding Nepal's northern border, modernising Nepal's defence capabilities and coordinating Nepal's foreign policy.²⁸ This has been the common framework which has acted as the premise guiding bilateral ties between the two countries. Trade and economic cooperation have been the pillars of this bilateral relationship between them. Their trade relations are guided by the Bilateral Trade Treaty signed in 1971 and revised multiple times thereafter in 1978, 1991, 1996 and finally in 2009.²⁹

Common Identity and Sub-Regional Solidarity

A common binding factor in South Asian countries has been the South Asian identity, the historical and cultural similarities. The regional identity puts India at an advantageous position vis-à-vis China in South Asia, and this must play a central role in determining India's approach to its regional diplomacy. Similarly, engaging with Nepal through promising multilateral technical initiatives will go a long way in solidifying its ties with Kathmandu. Despite the two countries sharing multiple regional and technical platforms and sub-regional initiatives, the bilateral ties between Nepal and India have suffered a steadily growing setback over the years. However, the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India Nepal Initiative (BBIN) and BIMSTEC are critical to reconciling India's engagement with Nepal. Both these initiatives need to be re-emphasised in order to ensure cooperation between the two countries. In terms of political mistrust and border dispute,

28. S. D. Muni, "India's Nepal Policy" in David Malone, C. Raja Mohan and Srinath Raghavan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of India's Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 266.

29. Indra Nath Mukherji, "Revision of Indo-Nepal Treaty of Trade and its Implications for Strengthening Bilateral Trade and Investment Linkages", *RIS Discussion Papers*, January, 2010, See: <https://www.ris.org.in/revision-india-nepal-treaty-trade-and-its-implications-strengthening-bilateral-trade-and-investment>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

it must be remembered that the territorial disagreements have been a part of the common history between Nepal and India, while they have maintained steady economic and strategic partnerships and cooperation. Therefore, India and Nepal should address their disputes and disagreements through bilateral diplomatic talks. However, things have not been smooth, in view of the border legislature in Kathmandu, with prevailing mistrust over arrangement of bilateral talks.

India's 'Big Brother' Attitude

By virtue of being the largest country in terms of geography and population, India enjoys centrality in the region. Additionally, India sits at the heart of South Asia and shares borders with every country in the region. In contrast, Nepal is landlocked by India and, therefore, has been dependent on New Delhi for various things, including access to ports. The informal blockade in 2015 has increasingly solidified the view in Nepal that when it comes to conflict of interest with India, there is a tendency in New Delhi to act as a 'big brother' in the region. One of the primary issues flagged by Nepal in levying the charge against India of being a 'big brother' is New Delhi's tendency to not take stock of the demands of its smaller neighbours and resort to actions which cost them dearly.³⁰ Nepal's suspicion about India was further strengthened in 2015 when the new constitution was adopted by the Constituent Assembly of Nepal.³¹ However, India's then Minister of External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj, contended that India did not have a 'big brotherly' attitude towards Nepal and that the government is adopting 'an elderly brother's approach', one of sharing and caring.³²

30. "Big brother' attitude of India unacceptable: Nepalese leader Pradeep Gyawali", *The Economic Times*, November 29, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/big-brother-attitude-of-india-unacceptable-nepalese-leader-pradeep-gyawali/articleshow/49968720.cms>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

31. Prem Shankar Jha, "India's Big Brother Approach Will Not Work with Nepal Anymore", *The Wire*, April 14, 2016, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/indias-big-brother-approach-will-not-work-with-nepal-anymore>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

32. "No big brotherly approach on Nepal, want early solution: India", *The Economic Times*, December 7, 2015, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/no-big-brotherly-approach-on-nepal-want-early-solution-india/articleshow/50080381.cms>. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

The Madhesi Issue

As elaborated earlier, India's hasty dealing with the fuel blockade to Nepal in 2015 might be seen as the first major action to have elicited the negative perception about New Delhi in Nepal. It was received in a particularly critical fashion in Nepal as the blockade played out in the midst of Nepal dealing with devastating earthquakes which ravaged major parts of the country. However, the blockade was lifted and goods were allowed to start flowing in through the blocked Raxaul-Birjung border in early February 2016.³³ Although India's assistance to Nepal in the aftermath of the earthquake was a positive step in the direction of confidence building and showcased firm solidarity across borders, the blockade seems to have caused irreversible damage. This can be observed more clearly in K. P. Oli's evident determination to reduce Nepal's dependence on India, which has prompted its turn to China. Kathmandu's keenness on the Transit Transport Agreement is seen by many as Nepal's attempt to reduce its dependence on India for third-country trade. It also opens new avenues for Nepal to continue its trade imports through ports without over-relying on India.³⁴

Adverse Effects of India's Demonetisation on Nepal's Economy

In November 2016, India 'demonetised' its high-value notes as a part of the government's attempt to crack down on corruption. However, the sudden policy of replacing the old notes with new ones also adversely affected Nepal. Indian currency is commonly accepted in Nepal and there are still old notes in Nepal. The central bank in Nepal announced that old notes worth INR7 crores were deposited in their bank.³⁵ This has further manifested as an irritant in India-Nepal

33. Baral Biswas, "India's 'Blockade' has Opened the Door for China in Nepal", *The Wire*, March 2, 2016, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/indias-blockade-has-opened-the-door-for-china-in-nepal>. Accessed on August 14, 2020.

34. "Nepal-China Transit Protocol to Come into Effect from Feb", *Outlook*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/nepalchina-transit-protocol-to-come-into-effect-from-feb/1698614>. Accessed on August 14, 2020.

35. "Demonetization: Nepal's Central Bank saddled with Rs.7 crore old currency notes, asks India to take them back", *Financial Express*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/demonetisation-nepals-central-bank-saddled-with-rs-7-crore-old-currency-notes-asks-india-to-accept-them-back/>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

relations. According to Kathmandu, the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, has not given any clear indication about how the notes will be replaced. Nepal has contended that India is not 'making adjustments' to address Nepal's prayer of redressal.³⁶ It is important for New Delhi to take stock of Kathmandu's demands on the currency issue. Lack of any facility to exchange old notes will continue to disrupt the banking system in Nepal. Issues of currency between the two countries do not pertain solely to demonetisation. Nepal has urged India to declare tenders over INR100 as legal in Nepal.³⁷ The use of Indian currency notes in Nepal is an apt indicator of how intertwined the two economies are. If India is to bolster its engagements with Nepal, it is imperative for New Delhi to consider resolving these issues pertaining to the economy at the earliest.

Nepal's renewed emphasis on looking for alternatives has also forced Kathmandu to look for new trading partners in order to reduce its dependence on India. China being a bigger and mightier economic power in comparison to India naturally has been Nepal's first choice. However, contrary to popular belief, China's share in Nepal's imports has grown from 11 percent in 2010 to 13 percent in 2017; India's share too has increased from 64 percent to 65 percent during the same time.³⁸ Therefore, India continues to remain Nepal's largest trading partner by a significant margin despite growing engagement between China and Nepal. However, in terms of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), China has made significant progress in closing its gap with India. According to reports, China had overtaken India in terms of FDI commitment to Nepal in two consecutive years, 2015-16 and 2016-17. According to a report by Xinhua, similar trends have prevailed in Nepal's economy for the last four years as China, with 90 per cent of total commitment, continues to top FDI pledges in Nepal

36. "Nepal wants India to take back demonetised notes worth Rs.7 crore from its Central Bank", *The New Indian Express*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/jan/24/nepal-wants-india-to-take-back-demonetised-notes-worth-rs-7-crore-from-its-central-bank-2094062.html>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

37. "Nepal writes to RBI to declared banned new Indian currency notes legal", *The Economic Times*, January 6, 2019, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/economy/policy/nepal-writes-to-rbi-to-declare-banned-new-indian-currency-notes-legal/articleshow/67406624.cms>. Accessed on August 24, 2020.

38. Nisha Taneja et al., "Indo-Nepal Trade and Investment: An Analysis", *India Quarterly*, 76(2), June 2020, pp. 11-12.

since 2015.³⁹ Therefore, there appears to be a lot for India to reconcile with Nepal in order to assert its primacy and secure its interests in its neighbourhood.

However, the current crisis in the relationship also provides an opportune moment for India to alter its approach towards Nepal. This can be rationally grounded from the perspectives of both India and Nepal. It must be understood that it is not just India that needs to take Nepal into confidence; even Nepal has enough reasons to advocate strong bilateral ties with India. China's pattern of extending assistance for infrastructure building, trade and security have had negative repercussions for most countries including Sri Lanka and the Maldives, which is a legitimate reason for Nepal to be wary of China's trading tactics. On the other hand, the element of shared culture can be the premise for a heightened proximity between India and Nepal.⁴⁰ There have been occurrences of abrupt discontinuities in trade on the part of India, which have been factors causing hindrance in solidifying India's bonhomie with Nepal. Although China has managed to project itself as a disinterested neighbour and a remarkably attractive alternative to 'big brother' India, its trading pattern has been detrimental to its partner countries. It is strategically imperative for India to forge a formidable geostrategic partnership with Nepal. Kathmandu's incentive towards this will be to escape the problematic pattern of Chinese trade. Consequently, India needs to pursue the strategic necessity of improving ties with Nepal that will ensure a more secure neighbourhood for New Delhi with less interference by Beijing. This will further be a concrete step towards India establishing itself as a regional leader which has the confidence of the constituent countries of the region.

India's promptness to initiate cooperation with the SAARC countries to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 can be said to be a positive development towards that end. Not only has India played a 'forward role' in initiating a dialogue within SAARC, it has also emerged as the single largest contributor to the proposed

39. "Over 90 percent of total FDI to Nepal comes from China", *Xinhua*, November 7, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-11/07/c_138535703.htm. Accessed on August 25, 2020.

40. Sneha Patel, "A New Journey in the New Context: Nepal-India Relations", *IOSR Journal for Humanities and Social Science*, 22(9), September 2017, p. 78.

SAARC fund with a share of US\$10 million.⁴¹ Other forms of assistance in terms of medical infrastructure assistance will be instrumental in asserting New Delhi's willingness to facilitate regional development in the neighbourhood.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion it may be argued that the arrival of China in the geopolitical space of South Asia has significantly impacted India's inherent political imperatives. Nepal, in particular, has been at the crossroads of Sino-Indo competition for geostrategic primacy in the region. Over the years China has moved beyond Pakistan in spreading its influence in the region and has made significant progress in Nepal. One of the prime factors to have shaped the growing proximity between Nepal and China has been the need for Nepal to look for alternatives to India, especially in its neighbourhood. Arguably, it was India's sustained 'big brother' attitude towards Nepal that prompted this shift. In light of Nepal's sustained geostrategic disadvantage of being 'land-locked' by India, Kathmandu's rhetoric of engaging with China is premised on being 'land-linked', thereby reducing dependence on India. BRI projects such as the Transport Transit corridor have cemented Nepal's turn towards China through its connectivity infrastructure engagements. A big determinant in Nepal's search for alternatives to India has been New Delhi's alleged blockade in 2015. Nepal seems to have addressed that demand by gaining access to sea and dry ports of China. However, it is important for Nepal and India to make sure that they maintain a healthy relationship which can be traced back to times before both India and Nepal became modern nation-states. It is crucial that India and Nepal have a concrete vision for shared cooperation and prosperity which also materializes in bilateral policies.

41. "Covid-19: PM Modi proposes emergency SAARC fund; India to contribute \$10m", *The Hindu Business Line*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/pm-modi-proposes-saarc-fund-to-tackle-coronavirus/article31075168.ece>. Accessed on August 14, 2020.

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S INCREASING FOCUS TOWARDS INDIA

SAURAV SARKAR

On May 10, 2019, the Islamic State's (IS) *Amaq* media announced the establishment of an IS province in India called *Wilayat al-Hind* (Islamic State Hind Province or ISHP) along with a statement claiming an IS attack in the town of Amshipora in Shopian district of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) which killed a policeman. This came after more than 250 people were killed in the Sri Lankan Easter serial blasts by IS-inspired terrorists in April 2019.¹

According to reports when IS was first declared in 2014, about 155 Indians had travelled to Syria and Afghanistan to join IS, while around the same number were arrested for having pro-IS links.² This is less than even the number of people who had left to join IS

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Disclaimer: Some parts of the article are to be published in the forthcoming CAPS publication, *Asian Defence Review 2020*.

1. Fayaz Bukhari and Alasdair Pal "Islamic State claims 'province' in India for first time after clash in Kashmir", *Reuters*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-islamic-state-idUSKCN1SH08J>. Accessed on June 1, 2019.
2. PTL, "155 ISIS operatives, sympathisers arrested so far in India: Home Ministry", NDTV, June 25, 2019, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/155-isis-operatives-sympathisers-arrested-so-far-in-india-home-ministry-2059073>. Accessed on December 1, 2019.

from a small country like the Maldives with a population of 400,000.³ There have also been relatively fewer pro-IS cases in India and with most pro-IS individuals choosing to go abroad rather than carry out domestic attacks. However, some significant IS-linked terror plots had been disrupted within India as well due to timely interventions of law enforcement and security agencies.

For instance, an IS module going by the name *Harkat ul Harb-e-Islam* was busted in New Delhi in December 2018 and was planning to carry out high-profile attacks in the city. Twelve handguns, assorted ammunition, one home-made rocket launcher, 98 mobile devices, 25 kg of explosive materials and hardware/electronic materials including 120 alarm clocks to make improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were recovered from the module.⁴ This is consistent with the operational methods of IS cells using home-made weapons and anything else they can get their hands upon to carry out their attacks. Three IS handlers overseas were said to be overseeing the module.

A few domestic terror groups such as the Indian Mujahideen (IM), Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), and several Pakistan-backed Kashmiri militant groups have posed threat to India's national security in the past (and some still do). Pakistan-based terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) have exploited vulnerabilities in India's security architecture to carry out major deadly attacks such as the Bombay blasts of 1993, Parliament attack of 2001, Mumbai terror attacks of 2008, among others. In contrast, pan-Islamic transnational terror groups like Al-Qaeda and IS have never been able to make any serious headway in India, let alone commit any major attacks. However, some of these Pakistani and domestic groups do indeed have on and off links with transnational

3. "The Maldives' Foreign Fighter Phenomenon—Theories and Perspectives", European Foundation for South Asian Studies, Amsterdam, April 2020.

4. National Investigation Agency (NIA), "NIA Files Chargesheet in Delhi-Amroha ISIS Module Case RC-38/2018/NIA-DLI", National Investigation Agency (NIA), June 21, 2019, https://nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/PressReleaseNew/705_1_Pr.pdf. Accessed on November 20, 2019.

groups such as Al-Qaeda⁵ and recently (to a smaller extent) with IS.⁶

The Indian Mujahideen (IM) was the main IS-linked group in India, a senior member, Shafi Armar, was reportedly a media chief of IS in Syria. Armar, allegedly killed in Syria in March 2019, was also head of *Ansar-ut Tawhid fi Bilad al-Hind*, an IS-affiliated group based in India, and previously recruited 17 individuals via social media for *Junood-ul-Khilafa-Fil-Hind* (JKFH), a pro-IS group. Interestingly, in a 2016 charge-sheet filed by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) against a JKFH module it was mentioned that 18 people were arrested in this regard and explosive materials for IEDs and Rs.2,50,000 in cash were seized from them. The charge-sheet also mentioned that the module had contacted Naxal militants to procure arms and to learn their terror tactics.⁷ This could have set a dangerous precedent with potentially lethal ramifications if such collaboration were to happen despite Naxalites and jihadists having fundamentally opposing ideologies.

Many observers believe that the secular and inclusive nature of Indian society and the more suspicious and rejectionist thoughts of Indian Muslims towards extremist ideas have kept terror groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda unable to exploit Islamist sentiments in India. These underlying causes are no doubt important to understand radicalisation and merit their own detailed study; however, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

Despite these positive points there remain isolated cases from time to time that attempt to dent this harmony, and given that in the age of the internet and social media a few voices are easily amplified (often falsely) as representing many,⁸ it is imperative to understand

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5. Randy Burkett, Review of *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* by Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, Central Intelligence Agency, July 16, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol-62-no-2/the-exile.html>. Accessed on July 1, 2019.
 6. Khaama Press News Agency, "Key ISIS leader having links with Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e Taiba arrested in Afghanistan", April 22, 2020, <https://www.khaama.com/key-isis-leader-having-links-with-haqqani-network-lashkar-e-taiba-arrested-in-afghanistan-04705/>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.
 7. NIA, "Supplementary Charge-sheet filed in ISIS Case RC-14/15/NIA/DLI", July 16, 2015, https://nia.gov.in/writereaddata/Portal/News/82_1_PressRelease19.07.2016_ISIS_CS.pdf. Accessed on December 1, 2020.
 8. Kabir Taneja, "From ShamiWitness to QMap: The Movement of 'One' in Online Radicalisation", Global Network on Extremism & Technology, November 2, 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/11/02/from-shamiwitness-to-qmap-the-movement-of-one-in-online-radicalisation/>. Accessed on November 3, 2020.

the threat that terrorist groups like IS pose in India and what may be our best course of action to manage the threat. This paper attempts to study the interests and threat posed by IS in India and the various factors behind its emergence and how it has tried to attract individuals and inspire terror plots.

ISLAMIC STATE PROPAGANDA IN INDIA AND LINKS WITH REGIONAL IS AFFILIATES

IS propaganda is extensive and distributed in different languages, even Malayalam and Tamil, two South Indian languages which had been previously ignored by Al-Qaeda that preferred Urdu. Other languages such as Tamil and Bengali have also been used to spread pro-IS propaganda. After the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, the claim released by the Islamic State's *Amaq* media was translated in both Malayalam and Tamil and widely circulated on social media.

In February 2020, a pro-IS magazine aimed at an Indian audience, *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of Hind), was released on IS social media channels. The magazine carried the headline: "So where are you going? A call to Muslims of India". Top Indian government leaders including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath were criticised. Controversial student leader Kanhaiya Kumar and a top Muslim politician Akbaruddin Owaisi were accused of manipulating and misguiding the Muslim youth.⁹ Prior to this, IS-weekly newsletter *Al-Naba* had an editorial mentioning the debate and unrest over the CAA in India and PM Modi was pictured greeting some Muslim community leaders.

Recent propaganda directed toward Indian Muslims suggest a reorientation of IS strategy in an attempt to garner support by capitalising on recent incidents of civil unrest in India. IS has always thrived on polarisation between religious groups and social chaos for its activities and recruitment, and India is no exception. Indian authorities have busted multiple IS modules and disrupted terror plots; however, radicalisation remains a long-term threat with the

9. SITE Intelligence Group, "Indian Subcontinent-Focused Pro IS Media Unit Publishes Inaugural Issue of Magazine", February 25, 2020, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/indiansubcontinent-focused-pro-is-media-unit-publishesinaugural-issue-of-magazine.html>. Accessed on April 28, 2020.

large number of Wahhabi and Salafi madrassas in India, the ease of access to IS propaganda online, and ongoing militancy in J&K.

In the first edition of *Sawt al-Hind* IS eulogised a former LeT terrorist known as Abu Huzaifa al-Bakistani who was killed in Afghanistan in 2019; he, along with his father-in-law Aijaz Ahangar, was instrumental in forming ISHP and in radicalisation and recruitment of Kashmiri youth. Aijaz Ahangar who hails from Srinagar was captured along with the leader of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) by Afghan forces in Afghanistan in April 2020. Ahangar was a veteran terrorist with 25 years of experience and escaped to Pakistan sometime in the mid-1990s.¹⁰ It seems common practice for IS to mention members with an Indian connection in *Sawt al-Hind*. In the second edition, a Kashmiri terrorist killed in J&K in an encounter in 2018 was mentioned.¹¹

In recent months this trend has become more apparent and increasingly noticeable in IS propaganda across its international affiliates, especially in terms of highlighting the roles and activities of Indian jihadists fighting for ISKP in Afghanistan. One reason behind this may be the signing of the US-Taliban agreement in February 2020 and the probable interests of some parties to take the focus away from Afghan and Pakistani militants in the region and shift the focus on India and internal developments in J&K and elsewhere.

On August 2, 2020 ISKP carried out an attack on the Jalalabad prison in eastern Afghanistan that lasted for almost 20 hours and killed 30 people—including 11 policemen, 14 civilians and five prisoners—and led to around 300 prisoners escaping, many of whom were linked to ISKP.¹² The Jalalabad prison raid also seems to have used similar tactics used by IS in Iraq and Syria including the use of *inghimasi* (suicide) tactics. An ISKP spokesman even compared the attack to the Abu Ghraib prison

10. Shishir Gupta, "Kashmiri terrorist got away 25 yrs ago, caught with ISKP chief in Afghanistan", *Hindustan Times*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/kashmiri-terrorist-got-away-25-yrs-ago-caught-with-iskp-chief-in-afghanistan/story-QyTGhX6cQ4phcqw14TVbyJ.html>. Accessed on June 1, 2020.

11. Aaron Zelin, "New Issue of the Magazine: 'Sawt al-Hind #2'", *Jihadology*, March 25, 2020, <https://jihadology.net/2020/03/25/new-issue-of-themagazine-%e1%b9%a3awt-al-hind-2/>. Accessed on April 25, 2020.

12. Fahim Abed, "Afghan War Casualty Report: August 2020", *New York Times Magazine*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/06/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report-august-2020.html>. Accessed on August 8, 2020.

break in Iraq in 2014¹³ which was a part of its larger jailbreak campaign during its formative years that was instrumental in giving IS a major recruitment and propaganda win prior to its formal establishment.

The attack involved 11 terrorists (four Tajikistanis, three Afghans, three Indians and one Pakistani).¹⁴ A few weeks prior to the attack, *Ansar-ul-Khilafah in Hind* (a South Asian IS-linked entity) in the July 2020 edition of its *Sawt al-Hind* magazine made references to imprisoned IS members and said getting them out of prison by force remained a top priority.¹⁵ Inghimasiuns are suicide attackers who carry small arms and explosive belts. Inghimasiuns fundamentally operate as 'shock troops', aiming to soften the defences of their targets for follow up attacks.¹⁶ Given that three of the attackers involved in the prison raid were Indian (including the suicide bomber) the references to prison breaks and inghimasi operations in *Sawt al-Hind* seem to be significant.

Following this, in the August 2020 edition of *Sawt al-Hind* released sometime after the attack, there was a full section dedicated to the Indian ISKP suicide bomber Abu Rawahah al-Hindi (real name Ijas Purayil, a doctor from Kerala) about his arrival in Afghanistan in 2016 with two others along with their families. The magazine detailed how he fought for ISKP in Nangarhar and ended up being the suicide bomber in the Jalalabad prison raid.¹⁷ This shows the importance and the publicity given to Indian ISKP members by IS to, presumably, inspire others to follow their example.

On March 25, 2020 ISKP carried out an attack on the Gurudwara Har Rai Sahib, in Kabul killing 25 people (mostly Sikh worshippers). Prior to the attack in a pre-recorded video the alleged attacker made references to Kashmir and accused pro-IS individuals in Indian prisons. One of the terrorists who carried out the attack had been identified as Mohammed Muhsin from Kerala. Muhsin is suspected

13. Official Speech from the Media Office of Khurasan Wilayah, Black Flags Media Center, Telegram, August 3, 2020.

14. Ibid.

15. *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 6 (Dhul-Hijjah 1441), Al-Qitaal media, Telegram, July 2020.

16. Cameron Colquhoun, "Inghimasi—The Secret ISIS Tactic Designed for the Digital Age", Bellingcat, December 1, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/12/01/in-ghimasi-secret-isis-tactic-designed-digital-age/>. Accessed on August 5, 2020.

17. *Sawt al-Hind*, Issue 9 (Rabi al-Awwal 1442), Telegram, August 2020, pp. 13-15.

to be part of the same group of men who had left for Afghanistan to join IS from Kasargod, Kerala. According to a NIA charge-sheet filed in 2017, the leader of the Kasargod module Abdul Rashid, used to conduct “pro-ISIS classes” at the home of Purayil in Kasargod.¹⁸

However, recently it was reported that DNA testing had shown the Kabul gurdwara attacker was not Muhsin but an Afghan.¹⁹ The same report quotes a source who said that most Indians recruited to IS/ISKP are in supporting roles such as doctors and engineers, not frontline fighters. Be that as it may, using the profile of an Indian national (and others) for the recent attacks serves three purposes for ISKP. First, it gives an Indian face to attacks in some of Afghanistan’s most secure areas. By doing so, ISKP aims to inspire other Indian Muslims sympathetic to the cause to support it and even carry out attacks in its name in India (if they cannot make it to Afghanistan). Second, it showed that ISKP has fighters in its ranks not just from Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also from democratic secular nations like India. Third, using an Indian Muslim from states like Kerala with strong links to the Gulf region are an attempt to radicalise more such people as they are notably well educated and skilled and may prove to be valuable assets for ISKP.

On August 22, 2020 Delhi Police arrested an IS operative after a brief encounter and recovered a significant amount of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). He was presumably planning a major lone wolf attack on Independence Day and was in touch with overseas handlers.²⁰ As per the police, the accused had plans to travel to Afghanistan along with his family. But this plan was shelved after the death of Abu Huzaifa al-Bakistani. This shows that ISKP has been able to inspire individuals to carry out attacks in India as well.

18. Vijaita Singh, “Kerala doctor may have been among Afghan jail attackers”, *The Hindu*, August 4, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala-doctormay-have-been-among-afghan-jailattackers/article32271298.ece>. Accessed on August 6, 2020.

19. Ananya Bhardwaj, “DNA test shows Kabul gurdwara bomber was Afghan, not Indian from Kerala’s Kasargod”, *The Print*, August 11, 2020, https://theprint.in/world/dna-test-shows-kabul-gurdwara-bomber-was-afghan-not-indian-from-keralas-kasargod/479516/?amp;__twitter_impression=true. Accessed on August 15, 2020.

20. PTI, “ISIS operative held in Delhi had planned terror strikes: police”, *The Hindu*, August 22, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/isis-operative-held-in-delhi-had-planned-terror-strikes-police/article32419493.ece>. Accessed on August 23, 2020.

PRO-IS KERALA MODULES

Jailed and missing IS members together make up about half of the 150 odd individuals—not counting children—believed by the Indian government to have joined IS in West Asia and Afghanistan. As per reports around 90 of them came from Kerala.²¹ According to Sri Lankan investigators of the Easter serial blasts, a Kerala native, 29-year-old Riyas Aboobacker, a native of Palakkad, Kerala who was plotting a suicide attack, reportedly identified Zahran Hashim's (mastermind of the Easter bombings in Sri Lanka) propaganda videos as one of the reasons behind his radicalisation.²²

Three IS modules have been identified in Kerala, they include: the Kasaragod module, the Kannur module, and the Omar al-Hindi module. Individuals from the Kasaragod module went to Afghanistan with their families. Members of the Kannur module left for (or attempted to) Syria to join IS. The Omar al-Hindi module, named after Manseed Muhamed of Chokli in Kannur wanted to create an IS *wilayat* in Kerala called *Ansar-ul-Khilafa KL*.²³

The Kasaragod module was uncovered in 2016 after 24 people went missing. Most of the men had all of a sudden turned devout after following certain Islamic teachings online. They followed Salafism and kept away from moderate Muslims. The core module converted three women and two men to Islam, organised their weddings, and then left for Afghanistan. Its leader Abdul Rashid secretly sought support for IS, and radicalised the other members by exposing them to IS propaganda material. Rashid and several others were previously banned from the Al-Quma Arabic College in Colombo, Sri Lanka for promoting violent jihad.²⁴

21. Praveen Swami, "Indians of the Islamic State, Held in Middle-East Prisons, Find Door to Homeland Firmly Closed", *News18*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.news18.com/news/india/exclusive-indians-of-the-islamic-state-held-in-middle-east-prisons-find-door-to-homeland-firmly-closed-3037352.html>. Accessed on November 4, 2020.

22. Rahul Tripathi, "A suspect arrested by NIA from Kerala has admitted to be following Sri Lankan bomber Zahran Hashim", *The Economic Times*, April 29, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/a-suspect-arrested-by-nia-from-kerala-has-admitted-to-be-following-sri-lankan-bomber-zahran-hashim/articleshow/69101997.cms>. Accessed on 1 July 2029.

23. Shaju Philip, "Explained: Kerala's Islamic State connection", *The Indian Express*, December 5, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/simply-put-keralas-isis-connection-islamic-state-afghanistan-6149447/>. Accessed on December 20, 2019.

24. *Ibid.*

In the Kannur module an estimated 40-50 people from Kannur district, mainly from the Valapattanam town, had joined IS in Syria. The men of this module were members of the right-wing Muslim outfit Popular Front of India (PFI), and several families travelled together to Syria. Militant elements within the PFI wanted to split after the PFI's political wing, the Social Democratic Party of India, was established in 2009.²⁵

The Omar al-Hindi module was formed and operated through social media. It was busted in October 2016 and it had allegedly plotted to attack foreigners, particularly Jews, near Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu, besides renowned politicians, judges, police officers, intellectuals, and Ahmadiya Muslims. Engineering graduate Shajeer Mangalassery was the so called 'emir' of the module. He went to Afghanistan (where he was later killed in a drone strike) in 2016.²⁶

Pro-IS cases in other Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal were targeted more towards attacking domestic targets, and not necessarily travelling abroad, which is usually the case in most Kerala cases. This is because Kerala has relatively stable inter-religious dynamics and more ease of travelling abroad, Kerala has four international airports (the most in India) and a large diaspora in the Gulf. Also, as of the time of writing several hundred ISKP fighters had surrendered in recent months to Afghan authorities, out of which there were reportedly 60 Indians.²⁷

IS Jammu and Kashmir

In February 2016, IS declared its intent to expand into J&K as part of ISKP (or ISJK).²⁸ The IS magazine *Dabiq* (issue #13) featured an interview of the now dead ISKP leader Hafeez Saeed Khan

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Praveen Swami and Neethu Raghukumar, "Fate of 10 Indian widows of Islamic State terrorists, imprisoned in Afghanistan, casts new light on movement that led dozens from Kashmir to Kerala into Nangarhar", *Firstpost*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/fate-of-10-indian-widows-of-islamic-state-terrorists-imprisoned-in-afghanistan-casts-new-light-on-movement-that-led-dozens-from-kashmir-to-kerala-into-nangarhar-7871811.html>. Accessed on January 15, 2020.

28. Praveen Swami, "Islamic State threatens to Expand to Kashmir," *The Indian Express*, February 3, 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/islamic-state-threatens-to-expand-to-kashmir/>. Accessed on December 5, 2020.

where he made this announcement. One of the concerning factors associated with the expansion of IS in J&K is the existing insecurity in the region due to the presence of a myriad of militant groups and heightened militarisation. So far, militant groups in J&K have mostly had either a separatist or a pro-Pakistan goal, and it is only more recently that transnational terrorist groups such as IS and Al-Qaeda have attempted to fuel the Kashmiri jihad with pan-Islamist ideas.

Hizbul Mujahideen (HM) leaders Burhan Wani and Zakir Musa were the first to propagate pan-Islamism ideas in J&K. Musa would go on to form Ansar-Ghazwat-ul Hind (AGH) in July 2017 which is an Al-Qaeda linked group in J&K following which ISJK's name started making the rounds in December 2017 by former Kashmiri militants linked to HM and Tehrik-ul-Mujahideen (TuM) who had pledged allegiance to IS.

In November 2017, IS claimed its first attack in J&K after a group of terrorists travelling in a car attacked a police patrol in Srinagar, killing one policeman and one attacker. A few hours later, the dead body of the attacker, Mughees Ahmed Mir, wrapped in IS flags arrived at his home in Srinagar. Mir was one of the first jihadists in J&K to give allegiance to IS. Before giving allegiance to IS in 2017 he was associated with the Salafist militant group TuM. He was the first terrorist associated with IS to be killed in J&K. In June 2018 in an intense shootout with security forces in south Kashmir four ISJK terrorists were killed including its so-called first emir. The second ISJK emir was killed by HM members in September 2018 possibly as retaliation for his defection from HM. Then in May 2019 in an encounter in Shopian the possible third emir of ISJK, a former Harkat-ul-Mujahideen terrorist, was killed by security forces along with one policeman also being killed in the shootout. Following this encounter ISHP was declared by Amaq.

As of February 2020 a total of 23 IS-linked terrorists have been killed in J&K, all except one from the state of Telangana, were Kashmiri. Eight of them were killed in Anantnag district, five in Shopian, eight in Srinagar and one each in Budgam and Marhama. Therefore, their activity seems more concentrated around south-

central Kashmir. The largest number of IS terrorists killed in Kashmir was in 2018 with 10 jihadists killed.²⁹

IS linked online messaging/media suggests that its goal is not to win over Kashmir's veteran militants as they are already embedded in their respective groups and high-profile defections would attract attention of security forces and rival militants alike. Rather, its pan-Islamist message and extensive online propaganda suggests that IS seeks to inspire tech-savvy Kashmiri youth who may be frustrated with the status quo but have yet to undertake terror activities. According to reports J&K has one of the highest traffic for IS propaganda in India.³⁰

Since late 2017, IS has engaged in an online campaign in J&K, directing messages tempered to motivate a Kashmiri audience. The more detailed writings circulated by IS titled "Realities of Jihad in Kashmir and Role of Pakistani Agencies" and "Apostasy of Syed Ali Shah Geelani and others" argues that the Kashmiri jihad had been hijacked by Pakistani interests and not Islam.³¹

In February 2020, *Amaq* released unverified photos of arson attacks on police stations and a 'church' in J&K. Though the photos were dated January 2020, the supposed attacks were not claimed by IS at the time, which is strange. In February, IS also claimed an encounter between two ISHP terrorists and Indian security forces near Srinagar, which led to the death of an Indian paramilitary trooper and the two terrorists.³² During the funerals of the two terrorists AGH members also attended and paid tributes.

Presently, it remains to be seen if ISHP transforms into something more than an idea or whether it simply remains limited to propaganda.

29. Kashmir Intel, "Islamic State jihadists killed in Kashmir since its inception", <https://kashmirosint.wordpress.com/2020/05/02/islamic-state-jihadists-killed-in-kashmir-since-its-inception/>, Accessed on February 10, 2020. (Open Source Intelligence)

30. "ISIS has generated a lot of interest in Assam: Police", *Firstpost*, September 29, 2015, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/islamic-state-has-generated-a-lot-of-interest-in-assam-police-2449578.html>. Accessed on July 31, 2019.

31. Amira Jadoon, "An Idea or a Threat? Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir", Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, February 9, 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/idea-threat-islamic-state-jammu-kashmir/>. Accessed on December 1, 2019.

32. SITE Intelligence Group, "In 1st Attack Claim in 8 Months, IS' 'Hind Province' Claims Killing Indian Policeman in Kashmir", February 5, 2020, <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/in-1st-attack-claim-in-8-months-is-hind-province-claims-killing-indian-policeman-in-kashmir.html>. Accessed on April 1, 2020.

The chances of ISHP inspiring a sufficiently large number of Kashmiri youth to start a new jihadist wave in J&K seem remote. ISHP had also faced significant hostility from existing terror groups in J&K such as the Pakistan backed LeT and Hizbul Mujahideen and from Al-Qaeda affiliated AGH.³³ However, at times HM and AGH have called for all militants in Kashmir—including those from IS—to unite but certain differences have persisted, making it difficult. AGH and ISHP goals seem to coincide but ideological and personal differences between Al-Qaeda and IS leadership³⁴ have obstructed their rapprochement.

ISHP has found it difficult to operate in J&K as well as to attract followers due to the dominance of Pakistan-backed groups and also because terrorists in J&K are reliant on Pakistan for their weapons, training and logistics. ISHP does not seem to have a formal structure in J&K and its members are limited in the amount of damage they can cause as they lack training and access to weapons from Pakistan, unlike other hardened terrorists in J&K. Therefore, ISHP seems to be reliant on poaching veteran terrorists from the established Pakistan-backed groups as part of its recruitment strategy. Still, IS has found some sympathisers within the Kashmiri populace as seen in the display of IS flags during protests and funerals of militants.

CONCLUSION

The potential for the growth of IS in South Asia, in theory, is present as the necessary conditions for promoting extremist sentiments exist; however, in practice they have largely been rejected. In India, where secularism has been for the most part held together, the probability of a large-scale violent Islamist extremist movement is low as followers of all religions have coexisted peacefully for the larger part of its recent history. However, there is a very real possibility of an undetected terror plot every now and then.

IS remains focused more on instigating attacks in India by capitalising on any perceived polarisation and its presence mostly

33. Faran Jeffrey, "Exclusive: The Mysterious Death of Islamic State Wilayah Hind's Militant in Kashmir", *Aurora Intel*, June 27, 2019, <https://auroraintel.net/asiaaustralia/exclusive-the-mysterious-death-of-islamic-state-wilayah-hind-militant-in-kashmir>. Accessed on April 25, 2020.

34. Aymenn al-Tamimi, "ISIS and al Qaeda: Partnership is Not in the Cards", Centre for Global Policy, June 2, 2020, <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-and-al-qaeda-partnership-is-not-in-the-cards/>. Accessed on June 5, 2020.

relies on its “brand-value” and propaganda dissemination. In J&K, the existing militant groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed, The Resistance Front, Hizbul Mujahideen, etc., have their own pro-Pakistan agendas which clashes with the Islamic State’s objectives of establishing a Sharia-based province part of a global Islamic caliphate, thus a group like IS has probably less space for growth in the long-term.

The continued interest in India by IS, as shown by its propaganda and publicity of Indian IS members, despite its inability to recruit or inspire a large number of Indians, gives the impression that the Islamic State’s recruitment strategy for India is likely to be long-term and not dependent on immediate results. ISHP along with other regional IS networks in Bangladesh and the Maldives are presently in a way operating as feeder branches for ISKP which is the primary IS affiliate in South Asia. Ever since the fall of the IS caliphate in West Asia, Afghanistan has become the preferred destination for South Asian jihadists due to geographical proximity. The influx of jihadists from India to Afghanistan and elsewhere is still minimal and will likely be so for the foreseeable future. In this regard, Indian law enforcement and security agencies deserve much credit for being able to not only pre-emptively discourage any terrorist attacks but also in keeping a close watch on those seeking to go abroad to wage jihad. Nevertheless, constant and increased vigil is required going ahead as there remain constant threats and repeated attempts by extremists to cause trouble in India and its neighbourhood.

BOOK REVIEW

India's Strategic and Security Concerns: A Compilation of Articles

Published in the CPS Bulletin from 1998 to 2018
Cmde C. Uday Bhaskar
(Visakhapatnam: Centre for Policy Studies, 2020)
Rs.795/.



MANPREET SETHI

India lives in a difficult neighbourhood and faces a complex set of security concerns. These range from regional challenges such as those of cross-border terrorism, migration, water sharing, smuggling, etc., to the more global concerns of nuclear and missile proliferation, space security, freedom of navigation, climate change, trade regulations, etc. Steering the country through such a challenging landscape demands policymaking that understands the depth of issues, their ramifications across regions and sectoral domains, and yet is nimble-footed and agile. Expectedly, this is not easy, and certainly not for a country of India's size that has a large regional and global footprint.

In many Western democracies, governments have developed a tradition of drawing upon national security think tanks and analysts to help in this process. With policymakers caught up in

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their day to day fire-fighting, think tanks are outsourced the task of undertaking a more comprehensive and considered view of specific security issues. Their inputs, provided in the form of policy papers, briefs, reports and books, are used to help the process of decision making.

India, too, has recently begun to inculcate this habit. But, it is a recent phenomenon. Till about two decades ago, the country had only one such think tank, the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), recently rechristened as Manohar Parrikar—IDSA. Stationed in New Delhi, it was the hub of strategic thinking and offered policy inputs through research and analyses conducted outside the government. Fortunately, it was populated by powerful and credible voices who made a place for the Institute. This experience also opened vistas for other such organisations to follow. Consequently, over the last 20 years, there has been a proliferation of national security think tanks that are today able to furnish well-researched policy inputs to the government. In fact, each has carved out its own niche area of expertise and is able to contribute towards the larger jigsaw puzzle of national security.

Many stalwarts have been responsible for nurturing this ecosystem over the years. One of them is Cmde C. Uday Bhaskar. He himself cut his teeth at the IDSA, which he joined on deputation from the Indian Navy in the late 1980s. First as a researcher, then as deputy director and later as officiating director of the Institute, and then as director of the National Maritime Foundation, he helped stabilise the think tank culture in India and was critical in mentoring the gene pool of analysts who today populate these organisations.

Amongst his many achievements is his mentorship of the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) at Visakhapatnam (Vizag). This is noteworthy since many have often lamented the lack of national security consciousness in other parts of a large country like India. Cmde Bhaskar helped CPS to sustain itself through his contributions in the form of writings, lectures and providing access to his vast network of national and international colleagues. His contribution has been acknowledged by the President of CPS, Mr. A. Prasanna Kumar, by bringing out the book under review as a “token of grateful appreciation”.

Comde Uday Bhaskar has been in the field of international affairs analysis for over three decades now. Having kept a close watch on issues of strategic concern, he has a plethora of writings scattered across many publications that provide India with well-thought-out recommendations on possible courses of action. The Centre for Policy Studies has brought out a compilation of his such writings on strategic and security affairs over two decades from 1998 to 2018. Most of these are his contributions to CPS Bulletins over the years, though there are a couple of articles published elsewhere as well. It is of great benefit to be able to find a part of the author's writings in one volume even in these times where articles are relatively easily retrievable on digital platforms. But, for those who prefer the crispness of paper in hand, such a publication comes in handy.

The book is roughly divided into four sections. Amongst the articles that are included in the Introduction, there is one that provides a personal recollection of the naval officer of his initiation into the so-called strategic elite of New Delhi. While tracing his individual steps into a new world, he also provides an insight into India's journey into international engagements after the end of the Cold War, initiation of economic reforms, and interactions to explore new relationships. Another particularly interesting article in this section is on India's strategic culture and the many perceptions that exist on the subject amongst the Western and Indian scholars.

The second section of the book focuses on his writings on National Security and this includes issues as wide-ranging as defence budget, India's external and internal challenges, civil-military relations, maritime diplomacy, nuclear concerns, etc. The third large section traverses foreign relations and global affairs and includes articles on India's relations with China, Pakistan, and other countries in the neighbourhood. A final fourth segment carries tributes to four of India's leaders from the political, military and diplomatic communities who contributed to the country through their dedication, foresight and professionalism. These include India's former Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, Marshal of Indian Air Force Arjan Singh, Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw, and a well-known diplomat, S. R. Nathan who is remembered as the architect of India's relations with ASEAN.

Given the range of issues addressed in these articles, the author's intellectual expanse is evident. However, the subjects in the book could have been better organised amongst the sections, including through creation of sub-sections, for ease of the reader. As they currently stand, the subjects within the four sections keep shifting from one to another. Neither do the pieces follow a chronology. This flaw could have been easily resolved through better categorisation and sequencing of the articles. However, this does not take away from the scholarly treatment of individual subjects that the author brings to every piece. Also evident is his sharp sense of foresight on emerging issues and the ability to connect dots to paint the big picture for the reader and the policymaker.

A book of this nature would prove to be beneficial to young scholars and civil services aspirants who are ready to start their journey into the world of national security. Short articles on such a variegated range of issues make for easy reading and adequately open the mind of the reader to explore further. Crisp comments on topical issues over a two-decade period can also serve the purpose of helping doctoral scholars on the lookout for research ideas from the strategic landscape for further investigation. The merit of such a publication, therefore, lies in being an "intellectual appetizer," an apt description used by Adm Arun Prakash, former Chief of Naval Staff, in the foreword to the book.

Published in an attractive paperback format, the compilation of a small selection of Uday Bhaskar's vast gamut of writings is, of course, a worthy tribute to the author and his scholarship. But, even more importantly, the anthology provides a window to the critical fields of national security that demand serious and thoughtful treatment. This can only be possible when India's intellectual capacity also rises. A mosaic of think tanks spread across the length and breadth of the country would be critical for this purpose and the CPS needs to be acknowledged for the contribution that it makes through its research and publications.

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