

Introduction

China and South Asia represent a unique example of the world's two ancient civilisations that have evolved at close proximity to each other over thousands of years. Nine countries¹ in South Asia (including Myanmar) have consistently tried to deconstruct their own history including one about their ties with China. Rivers and mountains link China and South Asia in physical terms but the cultural and traditional links are also interwoven in wider context. Their interface became somewhat negative during the colonial subjugation. Given China's sensitivity on Tibet, which is regarded as her underbelly, China's South Asia policy had always been guided by strategic and security considerations particularly by the risks of interference by some external powers that wanted to undo the country's Communist revolution. These trends were clearly visible in China's military invasion and fortification of Tibet, and later, cultivating close strategic ties with the military regimes in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma, as well as the monarchy in Nepal. China's relations with these South Asian countries became part of her indirect approach in dealing with India, which Beijing continues to see as a major challenge, particularly after evolving strategic ties between Washington and New Delhi in later part of 2005.

For India, majority of the countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri-Lanka and Bhutan were, one way or the other, under the British Colonial Empire; and after India's Independence in 1947, should have come under Indian Domain. Had it been in China's case, the country would have called them the renegade provinces and would have claimed them. But India preferred or could not assert its position. From India's perspective, the growing bonds between China-Pakistan and China-Nepal perhaps present the most critical element of South Asian security environment. It is a unique example of interstate relations, which has no comparison whatsoever. Given the proximity and historical interdependence of these smaller South Asian countries with India, Chinese indulgence has not resulted in any formal military alliance with any of India's neighbours. At the same time, however, this indulgence did have a major impact on South Asian threat perceptions, which has been mainly responsible for vitiating the India's vision about China. This has also provided an opportunity for other world powers to seek influence in the region. The USA's active participation in Nepal's post conflict phase, after 2005² through various forms of aid, is an example of expanding US strategic interest in the region, where it has been critically involved in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US and her allies seek more role in Sri Lanka and Nepal in the form of bilateral cooperation, inclusive of assistance for peace building through greater cooperation in the Information Technology, infrastructure development and education. According to the US government's official statistics, Sri Lanka has emerged as the USA's 79th good trade partner in recent years.³ On the other hand the US's biggest ally, the UK has become Sri Lanka's second largest trading partner (exports and imports combined).⁴

In an effort to build stronger linkages with South Asian countries, China has emerged as a major supplier of military hardware and technology to smaller South Asian countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma. This indulgence has been understood in terms of Beijing's strategic vision of emerging as an Asian leader which has a direct bearing on the South Asian security and strategic environment. After almost 50 years of lull along the border, India and China have again started serious argument over border issue in Arunachal Pradesh.⁵ In recent years, particularly since the beginning of the year 2010, the military build-up along the border areas from both the countries and the exchange of words at academic and semi-official levels do not indicate any pleasant development in the region.

If India is suspicious about China's intentions in South Asia, China seems concerned about India's enlarging activities in Southeast Asia. China's concerns are not only related to its unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea, with some ASEAN countries, but also about the implications of India's activities in East Asia, particularly in the context of Japan and Taiwan. India's assertiveness in inducting Japan as an observer to South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to counter balance Nepal's proposal to introduce China also as an observer during the organisation's Summit meeting in Bangladesh in 2005 could very well be understood as India's move to counter balance China.

".. the move for inclusion of China in SAARC as an observer came as a rude shock to India. On the eve of the Summit, India was all set to grant membership to Afghanistan as SAARC's eighth member. However, Nepal's attempt to link Afghanistan's membership to China's quest for observer status was a corollary to India's move. Though India has been aware of China's intentions to intrude into its backyard, the linkage of Afghanistan's membership to China's entry to SAARC demonstrates China's rising diplomatic and economic clout in the region. India has long believed South Asia to be its sphere of influence and considered SAARC as a South Asian organisation with common problems of poverty, unemployment and slow economic development. The region was seen as bound by common culture and common aspirations. China has no role to play in the region.." ⁶

Despite various challenges, China and South Asia can serve the common interest of South Asian countries by promoting trade and economic relations. A common goal in South Asia has to be, the improvement in living conditions of one-third of the world population in the region. While each nation can design means and strategies to achieve this end, a new partner in the exercise can be China, which can provide an impetus to economic advancement. The countries in South Asia then will have a common objective of bringing real prosperity to the region. Traditionally, China's role has been dominantly towards East Asia and the Pacific in the past decades. Slowly but steadily, it has started taking keen interest in South-Asia as well. The growing differences with India over the past decades keep haunting the Chinese leadership but the temptation to gain something from South Asia has never stopped China from looking at new avenues. Both China and India are world's fastest growing economies, which will ultimately change the existing global market order. Importantly enough, China's relations with rest of the South Asian countries are very cordial. At the same time, growing focus of the US in poor countries in South Asia has alarmed both India and China in a peculiar way. Both feel strategic threat from the US.

Although the US and India have been striving for strategic partnership and enjoy deepening trade and military cooperation, the issue of Tibet is definitely a major focus of such a partnership. Given China's repeated protests over alleged anti-China activities of various Tibetan groups in Nepal, including those that flow in and out from India from time to time, by taking advantage of the open and unregulated border between Nepal and India, there is tremendous pressure on Nepal to strictly adhere to her declared policy of "One China"; meaning that Tibet Autonomous Region is an integrated and inalienable part of the People's Republic of China and that Nepal would not allow any anti-China activities on the Nepali soil. With growing economic and military clout, China will become increasingly assertive in Nepal on the question of Tibet. This is likely to clash with the Indian interests even as New Delhi also adheres to "One China" policy but is home to the Dalai Lama and his government-in-exile. At the same time, the US and European Union would like to make their presence stronger in the geo-strategically located Nepal. Thus, Nepal provides a convenient strategic venue for the US and EU to engage with both India and China in a comprehensive dialogue to settle lingering disputes in the region.

Rising China and Its Implications

There are indications that the world is taking notice of China's rise in Asia. The claim of China over land and sea areas in her neighborhood, China's claim for Spratley Islands in East Asian sea and border dispute in Arunachal Pradesh with India in particular, is likely to trigger some confrontation in the future. Such confrontation may result in full-scale war; where India as the largest country in South Asia may find herself dragged into it. As a result, some of the countries in South Asia may lose their identity as a nation forever. In such cases two countries are more vulnerable, Nepal and Bhutan.

As China's military is becoming more and more assertive on foreign policy matters in recent years, realising the Communist Party's dependency on them, any act of aggression from them would have a catastrophic impact in the continent. China's military adventures in the past (in the form of territorial pre-emption in Korea in 1959, Vietnam in 1979, India in 1962, or into the former Soviet Union in 1969) took place when China was not a very strong military and economic power. Today, when, the Communist Party is facing social problems, ranging from one child policy to the right of ethnic people against the assimilation into Han majority, to keep the country and her people united by preaching the 'threat theory', the military could trigger some sort of military adventurism.

Head on confrontation between China and India will definitely cause large scale destruction in the ancient civilisations. On the contrary, peaceful rise will bring prosperity in the region. One third of the population of the world will reap the benefits of such harmonious conditions in the region.

China in South Asia

China's policy towards South Asia has undergone changes at various stages. After the fall of Imperial China, the policy of the People's Republic revolved around Mao Ze-Dong's ideas basically drawn from the ancient Chinese history. The 'Class Struggle', and 'self-reliant development' prescribed by Mao, were undoubtedly the main domestic goals. To facilitate their attainment, during the period of Mao, China joined hands with the Socialists.

The second phase started with the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the rise of Deng Xiaoping. This phase saw a drastic change in China's priorities as Deng adopted the path of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' and 'opening up' to the outside world. The main objective of this phase was to bring China out of the past policy formulation and establish herself as a major power in the world. Deng's successors have been trying their best to continue with his legacy, to date.

When Jiang Zemin came to power in March 1993, he introduced his theory of three major historic tasks, modernisation, national reunification and safeguarding world peace and common development. He also adhered to the path of pursuing 'Independent foreign policy of peace'. This policy had only one goal, *'to make the Communist party a representative of the people'* which meant, to reinforcing Deng's visionary policy. Hu Jintao succeeded Jiang in March 2003. He laid emphasis on balanced development, a clear shift from China's GDP centric growth earlier. He tried to refine the policy taken by Jiang, by introducing the concept of creating a harmonious socialist society through sustainable development and gave the slogan of scientific outlook of development.

These three stages are nothing but the continuation of the old legacy - to rule ruthlessly and expand influence in the world. Chinese leadership knows very well that its population is getting exposed to ideas from the outside world to a large extent and, sooner or later, will get influenced by them. Hence, they use 'modern' methods to hold their brains captive to their policies. Hu Jintao's idea of 'scientific outlook of development' is prime example of giving a doze of new ideas continuously, to retain people's loyalty to the regime.

The country's history, taught in the Chinese schools and universities, portrays that China was humiliated and squeezed by foreigners in the past. The period between 1840-1945 is portrayed as *"A century of humiliation"*, when foreigners were dictating China's fate. Mao Ze-Dong's popular slogan to *'Stand up'* against the foreigners still holds true in the Chinese mind, from the school children to the leadership. It has become the main foundation of Chinese Nationalism.

The way China is asserting itself in world affairs, makes the Chinese people to feel proud. They, therefore, do not see any need to go against the Communist party as yet. The problem lies with those people who want to see China 'more freer', and blame the Communists for not understanding how an average Chinese mind works. Basically they are pragmatic people with deep-rooted Confucian principles.

At the outset, the Chinese leaders seem very sober and philosophic in their remarks about their policies, but the world should read between the lines. For example, Hu Jintao put forward the idea of *'harmonious world for a lasting peace and common prosperity'*, after he assumed office for the second term. It sounds very good but the underlying principle of the Communist party is to start asserting their ideas on other countries in the name of peace. During his

visit to Pakistan in April 2005, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao clearly said, "What China needs for its development first and foremost is an international environment of long term stability and a stable surrounding environment".⁸

It means that China wants to establish itself as a world power and intends to have its say in international affairs and for that peaceful neighbours are needed. What he did not say was that 'China would actively involve itself in neighbouring countries affairs'. Two years after these remarks, the way China extended support to Sri-Lankan government (to address its separatist movement), reasserted its border dispute with India, intervened in Nepal's domestic politics, are some examples that reveal its assertive mindset.

China firmly believes, and has begun to convince her society that China has now come close to attaining a near super-power status. But the method is slightly different. China wants all Asian countries, including South Asian ones, to support China in her bid to make the Western countries and the US a target, for trying to contain the Asian rise. "*..The 19th century belonged to Europe, the 20th century to the United States. The 21st century, as we are coming to realise, can be the Asian century. But with that comes great responsibility-to lead, to guide, and to take ownership of the collaborative agenda...*"⁹, which means, the China has the capacity and leadership to influence the world.

Conclusion

If we compare South Asia and China from politico-cultural point of view, they are oceans apart. In China, right from the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, successive leadership has one thing in common - consolidation of the people to a single goal of national interest. There was some internal problem for a period during the cultural revolution but no outside power could play or make the leaders dance to their tunes. As a result it was easy for Deng Xiao Ping to initiate his idea of reform and opening-up. The cadres he chose for the line of succession are still towing his line under the principle of democratic centralism.

In India, after their Independence in 1947, the leadership, spent too much time, perhaps decades, to keep on denouncing the colonial rulers and their intention behind dividing the country. However, no attempts were made to either bring the neighbouring countries back or to develop stronger linkages. Even now the Indian leadership is divided on whether to cherish the foundation of democracy and industrialisation laid by the colonial power or to keep on denouncing them for occupying the country for so long. The political confusion in India after the Independence is still continuing in terms of recognising 'friends or foes'.

In order to make the 21st century as an Asian one; both China and India will have to come forward with a strong will, and talk meaningfully to resolve all outstanding problems and contentious issues rather than confronting each other with infructuous arguments.

Endnotes

1. The countries are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
2. The armed Maoist group (declared terrorist by both the USA and India) signed a 12 point agreement under the auspices of India in 2005 and that is believed to have pushed Nepal into a post conflict phase.
3. <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/south-central-asia/sri-lanka>.
4. http://www.island.lk/index.php?page_cat=article-details&page=article-details&code_title=20223
5. A large area in India's Arunachal Pradesh is claimed by China as Southern part of Tibet.
6. <http://www.india-defence.com/reports-917>.
7. People's Daily Online June 23, 2006.
8. Wen Jiabao's interview with Associated Press of Pakistan, carried by People's Daily, 4 April 2005.
9. Asia at the Helm: Beijing Review, Vol.53, No.44 November 4, 2010.

*Text of the talk delivered at USI on 21 Sep 2011.

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