

As New Delhi Become Power Focus In 2023, It Needs to Look Up the Threat Matrix

New Delhi is scheduled to host G-20 and QUAD and with this, it has become a power focus-coming under the spotlight of power and attention of global superpowers at the world stage. While, these significant international events offer New Delhi ample space to accelerate its strategic rise and further contribute in the process of becoming 'Vishwaguru'. But, the geopolitical terrain of South Asia especially subcontinent throws some challenges and obstacles at New Delhi's path of strategic rise this year.

The Political Noise In South Asia

As most of the neighbors in 2023 prepare to enter in elections mode, New Delhi has to be wary of these political developments. As these developments hold ample amount of potential to influence the Indian strategic and security calculus.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh will enter the General Election in later this year. Dhaka importance in India's security landscape is something which does not want exhaustive explanations- hostile regime have had their ground in Dhaka way back since early 2000s to 2010. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regime was and still backed by Islamic front, who has a soft corner for Pakistan. As a result, Islamabad did succeed in carrying out terror operations viz-a viz Bangladesh. Varanasi bomb blast and activities in West Bengal^[i] indicated that Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) did carry out some terror operations using Bangladesh. It's another front- Harkat-ul al Islami and Jammāt-ul- Mujahideen are some of the nefarious terror outfits still operating inside Dhaka.^[ii] Although, according to Boston Consultancy Group report, Dhaka is doing extremely well and prospering under present political dispensation led by Awami League's Sheikh Hasina.^[iii] However, there is anti-incumbency brewing against Hasina.^[iv] The Islamic and the opposition forces which are often backed by ISI are gradually gaining ground. Therefore, New Delhi cannot afford a regime change in Dhaka, and hence, Bangladesh will have a special place in India's security calculations this year.

Nepal

Nepal witnessed last minute political somersaults where a pro-China regime has taken over the political helm of Kathmandu by infiltrating a majority holder Sher Bahadu Deuba's party. Therefore, New Delhi has to wary of situation in Kathmandu as China-Pak nexus may become a severe security headache for India. The chances of other neighbors becoming a security headache under the garb of political noise cannot be ignored.

Sri Lanka

If we look downwards- Sri Lanka's dramatic political and economic meltdown has been colored by Chinese influence- continuously allowing Chinese to assert their maritime influence against India is one headache that New Delhi has to keep watch on.^[v] It is surprising that despite handsome financial assistance by New Delhi, Colombo is still getting lured by Chinese. To some extent, it seems like 'India First Policy' instituted by former President of Sri Lanka was a mere gimmick.^[vi] Colombo's leaning towards China can bring problems for India in increasing its maritime deterrence against China- recent postponement of our ballistic missile test is one such evidence of it.

As in 2023, New Delhi will also aim to increase its deterrence capabilities against China considering the present situation at LAC and long pending approvals of ballistic missile testing- recently one got sanctioned, Pralay.^[vii] However, If China's attempts of threatening India's traditional strategic space vis-a vis Sri Lanka continues then it will become an issue of strategic threat to New Delhi. Apart from this, a possible internal security threat is also brewing in Sri Lanka. If some news reports are to be believed then LTTE is possibly being revived by ISI.^[viii]

Maldives

Another case of Maldives which is going to witness presidential elections this year has also started to gain some currency in India's strategic and security calculus. The present President Ibrahim Solih who is said to have strong leaning towards New Delhi has to face the test this year. A "India out" campaign nurtured by China and backed by former Maldives President Gayoom to some extent is still resurfacing on occasional basis.^[ix] Considering an activated political landscape and China's attempt to influence Maldives by encouraging Chinese investments in the country becomes threat to India's influence in Indian ocean. Though, the opposition leader and pro-China presidential candidate Gaymoon has been sentenced to 11-year jail term in a corruption case^[x] but a recent incident of opposition leaders in Maldives calling for attack on Indian High Commission^[xi] is worrisome and indicative of existence of radical Islamic forces.^[xii] Anti-India forces may get complemented by Daesh presence in the Island. Therefore, any possible regime change in Maldives would be detrimental not only to India's traditional sphere of influence but also from national security point of view.

Pakistan and Af-Pak Region

Last but not the least, one of the most vulnerable regions after Europe and Russia-Ukraine is the Af-Pak region. Pakistan is scheduled to go in election mode next year but with Taliban threat present next door, chances of a peaceful conduction of elections is very slim. Not only elections but the whole internal strategic environment of Pakistan is under breakdown. Therefore, in such circumstances, ISI Chief Nadeem Anjum and Asim Munir, the hardliner duo are most likely to take some hard calls as situation is spiralling out day by day and room for peace and negotiation becoming bleak. If Islamabad decides to go tough against Taliban, then most likely US-Pak axis will get strengthened and Pakistan may get some rewards as they got after their alleged role with CIA in striking Al Qaeda Chief in August last year. Though, given New Delhi's growing strategic significance and G-20 this year, the Americans would be calculative in managing US-Pak affairs. However, any thaw between them most likely provides Islamabad with some strategic space that might not go in favour of India- capitalizing resources or any kind of military financial aid against India.

The Threat Assessment

The threat assessment or the matrix is based upon two threats- conventional and sub conventional threats. For New Delhi, China will stay a solid conventional threat and most likely there will be no drastic change on the conventional front apart the existing threat of China at the LAC. However, in 2023 as India prepares for G-20, the sub-conventional threats may see a slight rise which involves- heightened threat of terror strikes, proxy dealings, re-emergence of terror outfits, threats to India's strategic space, sphere of influence and assets. The possibilities of same have been exhaustively discussed above. The threat assessment speaks that this year sub-conventional threats are most likely to emerge under the political noise and New Delhi cannot afford to ignore these threats which are nurturing under the political noise of South

Asian states. Therefore, New Delhi has to run a scan of its neighbouring countries and up the tempo of all its combative and diplomatic efforts to foil sub- conventional challenges which may arise this year.

END NOTES

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