

## The geopolitical great game is still going on

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With India's growing position of influence in the world, China wants to escalate its power and tighten its grip in South and Central Asia and beyond. The two prominent neighbours are engaged in a new 'Great Game'. Geopolitically, China intends to pursue its expansionist ambition and control the region against the rising influence of India. Whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or its carefully planned debt traps to destabilise governments, or intermittently flexing muscles at borders – are all means to those ends.

This new great game was addressed by Bertil Lintner in his book, 'Great Game East: India, China and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier'. The book details the conflict between the Western powers and Russia and China over Central Asia's land and natural resources.

And the historic aspect is well chronicled by Peter Hopkirk in 'The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia'. It documents the games, or the complex political machinations, of Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century, leading into later periods.

As per recorded documents, the term 'Great Game' is said to have been used by a British intelligence officer, Captain Arthur Conolly, in the nineteenth century during the Anglo-Russian clash for the control of Central Asia.<sup>[1]</sup>

Lintner and Hopkirk too have mentioned Conolly in their respective books. The former's rendition, in later chapters, has detailed China's economic and strategic interests in South Asia and Southeast Asia. Incidentally, according to a report,<sup>[2]</sup> China may be planning to build a string of overseas naval bases in order to "Protect shipping routes and strengthen its ability to resist sanctions from the US and its allies, analysis has found".

The Guardian report on 27 July named Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Bata in Equatorial Guinea, and Gwadar in Pakistan as the three most likely locations for its naval bases. The report quoted an analysis of US based research institute AidData that said that the bases are to be established in the next two to five years.

China's People's Liberation Army Navy currently only has one overseas military base in Djibouti, on the coast of the Horn of Africa, the report added.

Earlier reports have suggested that China, with an aim to expand its influence in the Indian subcontinent, has already signed agreements regarding naval bases in Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sri Lanka. This network, circling India, is called the 'String of Pearls'.

In this context, the outcome of recent election results in Maldives hold significant diplomatic implications<sup>[3]</sup>. Mohamed Muizzu, widely seen as pro-China, won a runoff election against incumbent Ibrahim Mohamed Solih in the Maldives' presidential election. According to the Washington Post report, the vote "Highlighted a bitter divide between pro-India and pro-China camps in Asia's smallest country. India and China hold sway in the island nation in the Indian Ocean, which has about 500,000 inhabitants spread across the archipelago and sits in a strategically important location for both trade and security".

It comes at a time when the US is also trying to improve relations with the Maldives in recent years. It sent a career diplomat to become the first resident ambassador there. Earlier, it maintained diplomatic relations through the US embassy in Sri Lanka, the report added.

However, on the economic front, China is currently facing a slowing down. Persistent domestic difficulties in China, according to the World Bank's economic update early this month<sup>[4]</sup>, will weigh on its growth, slowing it to 4.4 per cent in 2024. This figure is down from the 4.8 per cent figure the institution forecast in April.<sup>[5]</sup> Asia's largest economy struggles with a brewing property crisis that threatens to harm prospects for its economy, dragging down regional countries along the way.

This economic downturn is affecting the pace of its BRI. "The importance of BRI for China has been such that it was included in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) constitution in 2017 and in China's 14th Five-Year Plan issued in 2021. Before the world was struck by the COVID-19 pandemic, the BRI appeared to be moving at a rapid pace, although numerous problems associated with it had already become evident," wrote Vice Admiral Girish Luthra.<sup>[6]</sup>

At the same time, the BRI is facing criticism for its real intent that aims at gaining strategic influence, introducing debt diplomacy along the way while ignoring local interests and disregarding sovereignty. Among the victims of this debt diplomacy are countries like Laos, Mongolia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Zambia, among others. While in some cases, China provided additional lending, while in others, it offered currency swap lines for debt restructuring. Notwithstanding, negative perceptions about the BRI expanded slowly, with some partner countries becoming less enthusiastic about these projects, resulting in a changed stance, mentioned Admiral Luthra.

No wonder thus, China offered a guarded reaction to the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). It may consider India's entry into Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) and the IMEC as a threat. An MOU on the IMEC was signed by India, the USA, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the European Union, Italy, France, and Germany on 9 September 2023 on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi.<sup>[7]</sup>

The White House said in a statement that the nations intend to develop transformative economic corridors and scaling high-quality investments through the PGII.

"At an event co-hosted by President Biden and Prime Minister Modi, President Biden and partners announced a landmark India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor that will usher a new era of connectivity from Europe to Asia, facilitating global trade, as well as cooperation on energy and digital connectivity, it added.<sup>[8]</sup>

It is envisaged not only as a trade route but also a corridor of rail link, digital as well as infrastructure network for electricity and clean energy. The IMEC will connect India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Greece, and then the major economies of Europe. The corridor will make India-Europe trade time 40 per cent faster.

China said that it welcomes the IMEC so long as it doesn't become a 'geopolitical tool'. Incidentally, it simultaneously downplayed Italy's plan to pull out of the BRI.

Apart from this, Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment of the G7, the Global Gateway of the EU, Japan's Quality Infrastructure Investment Programme (Japan), and other such initiatives now offer alternatives to the BRI, according to Admiral Luthra.

India's active participation in several world forums is being closely monitored by its northern neighbour. The formation of a China-Russia-Iran-Pakistan grouping was being considered a palpable challenge to the Quad of Australia, India, Japan, and the US. But it has till now failed to

deliver. Some experts argued that the China 'Quad' is based more on certain regional interests and lacks the basic tenets of diplomacy, cooperation, and principles.

However, China will not cease to expand its BRI or other expansionist intentions. It intends to inject a feeling of need to counterbalance India's influence among the peripheral nations of the subcontinent.<sup>[9]</sup>

The modern-day war is not as much about weapons as is communication. And thus goes the 'new great game'.

## End notes

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