

India's Response to Chinese BRI: Analysing Geopolitical Implications and Regional Cooperation

Background

India and China had warm relations in the 1950s. India was one of the few non-communist countries that recognised China after their Civil War and was always treated as a good neighbour. Both nations signed the Panchsheel Agreement or the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. India-China relations were popularly known by the slogan 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai,' but China betrayed India by waging war on the shared border in 1962, border clashes in 1967, and the Galwan clash in 2020. China has been eyeing the strategic location of Doklam in Bhutan to keep an eye on India. It has been raising concerns about the development of infrastructure on the Indian side, but India did not raise any concerns when the Chinese were constructing roads on the border. Additionally, China supported Pakistan in the 1965 and 1971 wars. And after the Sino-Indian War, the two nations did not have a diplomatic relationship. Later, in the late 1980s, then Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Chinese Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping normalised relations and set up a body to resolve the border dispute through talks.

However, in the past three decades, the border dispute could not be resolved even though, both the country signed 1993^[1] and 1996^[2] peace and border tranquillity agreements. Deng Xiaoping's, approach at the time, was that the next generation would resolve the border dispute, since then, China has been focusing on exporting goods and maintaining a low profile in international politics, based on Xiaoping's famous dictum of 'Bide your time and build your strength'. When the world was facing a global financial crisis in 2008 China showcased its power to the world through the Beijing Olympics (2008) and Shanghai Expo (2010). China even denied the formation of the Great Power Space or 'Group of Two' in international politics in 2009 offered by the USA in the backdrop of the Global financial crisis.^[3]

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Chinese President Xi Jinping announced its ambitious project Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) a decade ago. The BRI aims to develop infrastructure that connects the China with rest of the World. It would enable China to boost its export-based economy as it is the world's largest manufacturing hub. The BRI is one of the components of the 'Chinese Dream' and the global aspiration of China is a reflection of Chinese economic growth over the period. BRI has six corridors which connect a) China with Mongolia and Russia; b) China with Eurasian countries; c) China with Central and West Asia (Middle East); d) the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC); e) China-Myanmar Economic corridors and f) Indian subcontinent that covers China, Nepal and Bangladesh.^[4]

Beijing aims to develop BRI to its potential. From the Indian perspective, BRI is undermining India's sovereignty and integrity as CPEC passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK). Despite India's continuous protest, China summarily disregarded and did not change its route of CPEC. Therefore, India refused to join the Chinese BRI. In addition, Beijing has also undermined the sovereignty of other neighbours like the Philippines in the South China Sea (SCS). Manila not only protested against China but also took it to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA). However, China was not ready to accept the judgment given by PCA and kept asserting the

sovereign borders of the Philippines. Apart from it, other South-East Asian countries like Indonesia, and Vietnam are also fighting from China to protect their sovereignty.

Moreover, before BRI China signed an agreement regarding the naval bases in Bangladesh, Maldives, Pakistan, Somalia and Sri Lanka to develop a military network which is known as the 'String of Pearls'. Through this strategy, China's thinks to encircle India in the maritime domain and increase its influence in the Indian subcontinent. In addition, Beijing has been enlarging its territory by employing the 'salami slice' tactic.^[5] This refers to the planned execution of small activities that over time, without eliciting a response from others, lead to the accomplishment of significant ground realities. The Communist Party of China (CCP) has used this technique of acquisition to submerge India's neighbours in debt and maintain its hegemonic control over their lands. In this power manoeuvre to isolate India countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan have all played a significant role as pawns. These nations have received significant investments from China as well as numerous loans when they have needed them. Their assistance to India might lead to China's reprisal brought on by the leverage of debt. All the instances articulate China's intention, either through the String of Pearls or through the BRI, that China wants to develop and rejuvenate its notion of the Middle Kingdom. Therefore, the Chinese President uses the 'Chinese Dream'.

India's Response to BRI

However, India has strategies for some of the policies to balance the geopolitical threat from China. To balance out Beijing, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India has established the 'Necklace of Diamonds', which includes Changi Naval Base in Singapore, Chabahar Port in Iran, the Assumption Islands in Seychelles, and Duqm Port in Oman. In addition, New Delhi is creating strong ties with Vietnam and Mongolia to counter the Chinese "String of Pearls" strategy. Even before BRI, India had already begun to work International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which links Russia to India via Iran. Later on, thirteen different countries joined this project which shows acceptance of India's ambitions.^[6] However, there are many challenges including the financial and involvement of Russia in the Ukraine crisis.

Moreover, the main challenge that India is facing is the economic crisis. Chinese GDP is six times of India's. Therefore, India should not respond to the Chinese directly but with an alliance, it is possible to check China's assertiveness, especially BRI. India has joined the QUAD, which comprises the USA, Japan, Australia, and India, to have freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. All four are principle-based democratic countries that want to maintain the rule of law that passes through the UNCLOS. Meanwhile, China is a part of the UNCLOS but is prevented from applying to the South China Sea.

In addition to economic growth and QUAD, India should focus on protecting its subcontinent by creating awareness against China's debt trap diplomacy. Chinese have knowingly offered loans to Sri Lanka and Pakistan and got access to their port on a lease, which is a new threat to India. To counter the debt trap, India should bring economically stable countries like Japan and ask them to invest in the Indian subcontinent. As the Japanese have the economic and technological power to develop infrastructure to counter BRI. However, another factor to counter Chinese intelligence is the 'Five Eyes Compromise strategy'.^[7] India should take assistance from the 'Five Eyes' comprising of New Zealand, Australia, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, welcomed India's

decision on the banning of mobile apps to counter the surveillance strategy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Conclusion

Geopolitically, China wants to expand its power and check the rise of India. China is over-ambitious as President Xi Jinping uses the 'China Dream' or China-centric world order. The Geopolitical implication of BRI is threatening India's policymakers as China might use BRI as a military base in the future. BRI is one of the components of Chinese centrism to check which India must play an active role in the QUAD and should work with like-minded countries to protect the Indian Ocean Region from the influence of the Chinese.

Endnotes

[1] Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquility along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas

https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_930907_Agreement%20on%20India-China%20Border%20Areas.pdf

[2] Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field Along the Line of Actual Control in the India-China Border Areas

https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/CN%20IN_961129_Agreement%20between%20China%20and%20India.pdf

[3] An Gang Rejecting the G2 Beijing Review, September 30, 2013
http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/2013-09/30/content_30174118.htm

[4] China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape, OECD 2018 <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>

[5] What is salami-slicing tactic? Times of India / Sep 1, 2020,
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/what-is-salami-slicing-tactic/articleshow/77868465.cms>

[6] Johny, Stanly North-South Transport Corridor Connecting continents May 21, 2023
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/north-south-transport-corridor-connecting-continents/article66875206.ece>

[7] Hanna, Jason What is the Five Eyes intelligence pact? May 26, 2017
<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/25/world/uk-us-five-eyes-intelligence-explainer/index.html>

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