

QUADRUPLE OF NUCLEAR GIANTS: PERILS OF SMALLER STATES OF SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

South Asia occupies a very important strategic location in the world. Its geostrategic location, presence of two de facto nuclear powers, and historical role in global politics further add to its importance. As global power dynamics are changing, apart from the US, the two emerging powers of China and Russia are taking a considerable amount of interest in South Asia. All these powers strive to extract maximum benefit from the region, therefore, making alliances with the important states of the region. In the context of great powers' interests in South Asia, the paper raises and answers two questions: first, why are the deepening of the Indo-US and Pak-China relations likely to have significant consequences for the balance of power in the region? Second, how the Indo-US and Pak-China power blocks are bringing in bilateral opportunities, whereas threatening the interests of other states of South Asia? The paper asserts that the growing Indo-US partnership is a threat to regional peace and stability because it causes a security dilemma in Pakistan and the US is taking advantage of the Indian position in the region to implement its pivot to Asia policy and, therefore, posing a direct challenge to Chinese interests in the region. Moreover, the US is supporting the growing Indian role in Afghanistan that is a direct security challenge for Pakistan. The emerging bloc politics in the region will serve the national interests of the larger states like Pakistan and India and draw economic aid and FDI from China and the US. Reciprocally, the US and China would continue to promote their national interests at the expense of their allies. However,

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this emerging security matrix increases the security risk of smaller states of South Asia.

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The emergence of Bloc Politics in South Asia

It sounds fanciful for a small state to be noticed by a mighty one. Even more so if the rulers of growing powers see some benefit in that state. But in the real world, as the bubble of fantasies pops with a single tap, the people of the small states are enslaved and their resources snatched from them, their lands plundered and their abilities kept forcefully limited to keep them subservient. Such is the past of South Asia, a past that most of the states share. The shared past led to similar problems and the tragedies left such marks that the recovery is too slow for each state. The states have small economies, poverty, and inflation with growing needs and huge populations. They have, over the years, done what they could to please the superpowers and accumulate their power and wealth gradually.

South Asia has retained its geographical, political, and economic importance. With China and its growing influence in the whole world, this region holds the potential to become equally, if not more, powerful than the West. The world of today is undergoing huge changes, the events are historic and appear to be opening the curtains and giving a peek into the future of the world. The United States remains powerful but not the priority for many states. As the world witnesses the patterns of US foreign policy, its recurrent involvements in initiating wars against people who are much weaker and pose no fatal threat to the US and its subjective foreign policies are affecting its 'greatness' in the eyes of people. With such power dynamics on a global level as new powers seem to be emerging, South Asian democracies also frame their foreign policies accordingly. For the two larger states of South Asia, Pakistan and India, the foreign policies are also influenced greatly by their traditional rivalry. As for China, it has an

undeniable relationship of cooperation with Pakistan but it also maintains substantive trade relations with India. For China, it is about opportunities as they appear, but for the US it is to maintain its status and credibility as the superpower. It needs a strong partner in the region as well as a strong presence, which is apparent from its continued war in Afghanistan and a very clear strategic and economic leaning towards India.

As the Afghan war has been raging for two decades almost with no result or even hope for normalcy or peace, the US still has no resolute plan or wish to come out of the Afghan soil. Pak-India rivalry is also a player in determining bloc politics. Surely, a state cannot trust the friend of an enemy in politics, neither can both have the same bigger friend. This is also why one power cannot be the hegemon in the region rather there will always be a fight for a balance. As China has grown more powerful in the region, the US through India and Afghanistan will surely counter its influence. This is gradually leading to tension in the airs of South Asia with states trying to withstand their internal crises while finding a peaceful and least threatening place in regional politics.

Pivot to Asia vs CPEC

As we see a background of powers trying to hone in more influence we also reflect upon their methods and strategies. Obama administration brought a shift in the foreign policy of the US that was aimed to bind the Asia-Pacific region into economic and strategic deals with the US. The 'pivot to Asia'—which was later called the 'rebalance to Asia'—was a foreign policy based on the thought that the Asia-Pacific is the next centre for the world economy. This foreign policy shifted the focus from the Middle-East and Europe to the Asia-Pacific region. The new US foreign policy was "to lock in a substantially increased investment—diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise in the Asia-Pacific region." What the US implied by this foreign policy was a very literal meaning. On the other hand, the practical side of the

Pivot to Asia tilted towards military and strategic courses of action rather than focused on economic and diplomatic policies.¹ This was not to be well-received by China, which took it as an aggressive foreign policy to contain Chinese economic expansion and growing influence in the region.

China continued to build on and started trillion-dollar programmes under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's wish to connect to Eurasian markets has been astoundingly powerful and resolute in action. In this journey of economic expansion, China has never taken a step back rather only when it had to convince the collaborating states to join in. The BRI and projects like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, CPEC, etc. have been like the backbone of the Chinese growing economy assuring a bright future. While the US policy did sound like it would want China to continue its development, it reacted bitterly.² The US did not accept the invitation of China to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) even when many of its Western allies did. The US took the AIIB as a threat to the Bretton Woods system and the monetary system emanating out of it, which is policed by the US.³

The Pivot to Asia was slightly transformed by the Trump administration. The focus of the Trump foreign policy has been to engage more with India in the region, especially when Prime Minister Modi welcomed the US with open arms. Wishes to strike a trade deal with India, national visits and many diplomatic gestures have been carried out. However, under the current circumstances, India is losing its reputation and getting internationally criticised for its brutal crackdowns against Muslims, and this time not just in Kashmir. Along with this, the economy of India under the Modi Regime is actually in a decline, currently facing the worst GDP in the last five years.⁴ Even under these circumstances, the US has chosen to stand with India. However, the urgency of striking a trade deal has faded because India

did not show readiness or flexibility to strike the kind of deal that President Trump approves of.⁵

Along with a pro-India stance, the Trump administration showed its distrust in China by escalating the trade war. Washington argued that China had unfair trade policies toward the US. After which, in 2018, the US decided to put trade barriers by increasing tariffs on Chinese products. China retaliated with tariffs on US imports. As of January 2020, the US has imposed tariffs on more than \$360 billion worth of Chinese goods and China has retaliated with tariffs on more than \$110 billion worth of US products.⁶

On the other hand, China's \$23 trillion initiative, a dream project to engage 62 per cent of the world population and more than 70 countries, is aimed to change the course of history.⁷ An initiative that boasts the connectivity of most of the world from China to Central Asia, Europe, Africa, and South Asia to the Pacific region along with academic and cultural exchanges and hard and soft infrastructure to be developed in all the countries involved in this Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mega project. The initiative holds the potential to change the economic world order in favour of China and along with it a remarkable shift in the power structure of the world.

One of the projects under BRI is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). President Xi Jinping wants to expand Beijing's global role and CPEC is a successful example. Not only has CPEC tied Pakistan to China for infrastructure building, energy-based projects, and rail-based mass transit projects but Pakistan has also given China an entire port, the Gwadar port, on lease for 40 years. President Xi Jinping stated:

China will work with Pakistan to tackle non-traditional security threats to provide a reliable security guarantee for bilateral economic cooperation and common development. The Chinese nation loves peace. It will deepen win-win cooperation with its neighbours to deliver more benefits to

them through its own development. China will continue to pursue a win-win strategy for opening-up to build an open economy. This will create new development opportunities and space for both Asia and the world. We will strengthen cooperation with countries along with the land and maritime Silk Roads, to jointly build an open platform for cooperation and create new impetus to achieve sustainable development in the related regions.⁸

The statement makes it clear that China too wishes to seize all opportunities of strategic and economic cooperation in Asia and the world. It is clear that both the powers, the US and China, seek to gain strategic partnerships in Southeast Asia. The former trying to secure its credibility and influence in the region while containing the rapidly growing influence and power of the latter. They have increased tensions even militarily in the South China Sea, along with deployment of naval fleets of the US in the Pacific. The Pivot to Asia of President Obama has been criticised in the US and is even considered a failure. The pitching of an economic idea in Asia and executing it from the military headquarters did not pay the US much. Rather, it aggravated tensions between China and the US. The US has been successful in South Asia when it comes to appeasing India, even though their trade is not improving either. US-Pakistan relations have also improved as Pakistan observed the US-Taliban dialogues in early 2020. On the other hand, the seemingly never-ending Afghan War is further damaging the US economically and regionally because the regional population is starting to demand stability and development.

Growing Role of the US and China in Afghanistan

The presence and role of the United States in Afghanistan is multifaceted and deep-rooted to such an extent that even if the US wished to withdraw from there, an immediate withdrawal would be impossible without damaging US credibility and influence around the

world. Not only does the Afghan economy float with the help of US aid but the territory itself has also been a home and a battleground for the US military for almost two decades. Indeed, the Trump administration's efforts to negotiate with the enemy of 18 years for the sake of peace and better engagements than war have been criticised and appreciated simultaneously. On the 29 February 2020, the US envoy signed a peace deal with the Taliban in which the two parties for the first time made a mutual agreement that is to be followed by a comprehensive process of peace and troops withdrawal. The peace deal signed consisted of four core agreements.⁹ One of the agreements was to free 5,000 prisoners of the Taliban, which was not accepted by the Afghan Government. This peace-deal was to be followed by intra-Afghan peace negotiations. But before the plans could be materialised, the world fell into a bigger crisis of a pandemic that it was not ready to face. However, the efforts of the US seem sincere in the withdrawal. The internal Afghan political issues such as competition between the two top leaders Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani have also been monitored by the US. The US pressurised the two leaders to solve their dispute or the aid to the country would be cut-down. For this, the US Secretary of the State Mike Pompeo flew to Afghanistan with a plan to broker a deal between the two leaders who both claimed to be Presidents of Afghanistan.¹⁰

The situation remained unclear with regard to the peace deal with the Taliban and as time passed it was subjected to speculations and analyses. The Taliban attacks on the Afghan national defence and security forces have increased, contrary to what the Taliban promised in the deal. On the other hand, the US government's stance on this increase in attacks has been flexible. Secretary Pompeo commented on this in March 2020 that the Taliban had "committed to reducing violence; they have largely done that." But the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reports admit that violence has increased and that the Taliban would not agree to a complete

ceasefire.¹¹ This role of the US in Afghanistan is becoming controversial as the US government keeps the intricate mechanisms and extents of the peace deal secret. The deal does not give information on the thresholds of peace as decided with the Taliban. Along with this, the hidden mechanisms of the peace-deal are demanded by some representatives of the people to be made public.¹² What is evident from these circumstances is the ability of the US to pull strings in Afghanistan and the dependency of the Afghan government on the US. But it is not just Afghan dependency on the US but also the need for the US to keep a strong force, ally, and a stronghold for intelligence in the region. Along with this, the nature of withdrawal from Afghanistan is vague but following the theory of realism, it would be absurd to believe that the US would carry out a complete and comprehensive withdrawal from Afghanistan. Rather, more economic and strategic cooperation along with a considerable presence of US intelligence forces could be expected.

Stability in the region is the foremost requisite for Chinese economic expansion and for the Belt and Road Initiative to go according to the plan. China, therefore, has started to become vocal about its wishes to help in better relationship between Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹³ As the US seems almost desperate under the Trump administration to withdraw, China finds it a good time to step in and fill the gaps as soon as they are created. China, with Pakistan's support, has sought to extend CPEC into Afghanistan, starting with smaller projects followed by larger ones.¹⁴

The US under current circumstances could also use China's help in settling political disputes in Afghanistan and in the establishment of an Afghan government that is stable enough to walk on a path towards self-sufficiency. Such cooperation, however, would require China to press Pakistan to be on the same side as the US. It is in the best interests of the US to establish a government in Afghanistan that serves its interests without being a hole in the US pocket. China is

also looking for similar stability in Afghanistan because the least threatening Afghanistan would mean the most secure BRI and especially CPEC. Cooperation between these two states on the issue is not seen even when they share the aim to have a similar end in Afghanistan.¹⁵ A lack of such a possibility reinforces the idea of bloc politics in Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, the Trump administration's tilt towards India, recognising its 'constructive contribution' and an invitation to play a more active role in peacebuilding is bound to put Pakistan in an unfavourable position.¹⁶ While US policies echo their need for Indian support, the US cannot afford to leave Pakistan out of the peace process either. Mainly because Pakistan not only supplies the US forces in Afghanistan but is also a nuclear power that the US would not want to be on the opposing side of. Peace is crucial now because the US can no longer afford war any longer. The US is currently having a \$3.7 trillion federal budget deficit in the fiscal year 2020.¹⁷ Along with this the Corona Virus pandemic has dealt the US a hard blow that will not only change the US priorities and expenditures but is also shaping a global public opinion that the US is neither invincible nor the prime power anymore. Even Pakistan, with its all-weather friend China at its back, has been taking US pressure with less seriousness. The US cannot afford to leave more gaps in the region because China seems to be always ready to step up.

The role of China in Afghanistan is bound to increase if the US takes back its hard power from the Afghan soil. This is because a regional and closer economic power has more capacity to efficiently exploit the resources in Afghanistan than a power thousands of miles away. History is in the making as the US is locked into an economic recession due to a pandemic and China has successfully fought the same deadly disease. The credibility of China and its capacity to deliver shall surely benefit from this. As for the role of any power in

Afghanistan, domestic peace and stability is the foundation that is necessary and vital to any development yet the hardest to achieve.

India-US Partnership: A Deep Dive

India-US relations can be traced back to 1947, but the contemporary strategic alliance started in 2016. The changing trends streamlined US interest with India. Moreover, the US pursued a single theme recently after the rise of China that though China had fallen prey to communism India must not. China's emergence is increasing the dangers of Thucydides trap for US hegemony,¹⁸ thereof, the US needs India as a strategic partner to curtail the rise of China.

In 2018, the US renamed its strategically significant Pacific Command (PACOM) as the US Indo-Pacific Command. At the top level, the US perceives China as a revisionist power that pursues to continue a substitute to the Western liberal order. However, in the more direct context, the fear has increased since China has extended its armed and commercial hold in the region much to the trepidations of smaller neighbouring states.¹⁹ Likewise, Chinese investments in BRI have instigated core monetary upheavals in numerous beneficiary states. So, China is posing a threat to the US authority in the region. In short, the US standing in the Indo-Pacific region has significantly suffered due to Chinese initiatives. Longstanding US partner Pakistan has also drifted away from it due to closer cooperation with China and US policies towards India in recent years that Pakistan regards as objectionable and discriminatory. Therefore, the US is in dire need to maintain a strategic partnership with India to have an active presence in South Asia.

The US is using all means to align India with its policies to avoid being a regional handicapper. It can be viewed by the US policies towards India as recently India became only the third Asian state after Japan and South Korea to acquire the Strategic Trade Authorization-1 (STA-1) from the US.²⁰ The US has traditionally preferred to place only those states in the STA-1 who are participants

of the four export regulatory regimes: the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), Wassenaar Arrangement, Australia Group, and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) regime. However, India was granted this without being a part of the NSG.

Pakistan-China Partnership

Having China as an ally, Pakistan gets a huge regional advantage. Having an undeniably significant geostrategic position, Pakistan has benefited from Chinese CPEC. This, along with a border with Afghanistan, makes it easier for Pak-China cooperation to extend into Afghanistan. India's huge investment in Afghanistan may not entirely be in vain but it is still not viable for India to use Afghanistan for economic projects. Transport would be possible only through Pakistan and Indian dream of a trade route to Central Asia via Chabahar port, Iran, and then Afghanistan is a long and expensive project and does not seem viable. Along with that, the recent recognition of the Taliban by the US may also be a source of concern for India.

Under the contemporary circumstances, Pakistan and China come forward as a stronger alliance in the region, economically and militarily. While other smaller South Asian states are not strong enough or in a position to take sides at the cost of their economy, India may feel off-balance in the region. The US is strongly supporting India, but for how long and how practically useful for India can be questioned. For now, the deals made in early visits of 2020 seem to be fading, with the US in its very own crisis and an upcoming election, which will inevitably keep it preoccupied.

This does not mean that the court is empty for China and Pakistan to play, but they do have the opportunity to bring the region some prosperity. The human rights crisis in India is also not helping the Indian reputation in the world. The region is in uncertain times, and an off-balance for any state can be dangerous. No country should

be left with unchecked powers, as chances of its corruption and misuse are always present and often prevail.

Security Concerns of South Asian States

Apart from the growing tensions and competition among the bigger states, the increasing bloc politics in the region is more concerning for the states that are not only geographically small but also lack any military or economic prowess. The smaller states of Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have always been underdeveloped and disadvantaged. Especially the politics of Nepal and Bhutan is deeply influenced by the powers to their north and south.

International relations among the smaller and bigger states are often studied in the light of the structural scarcity theory. It states that due to a lack of economic and military capabilities the smaller states start depending upon the bigger states.²¹ Another theory to study such relations is the dependency theory.²² According to this theory, the larger states influence the economy and politics of smaller states by entering their market and polity. This theory sees the larger states as dominating over the smaller dominated state which can hardly run itself independent of the influence of the dominating state.

For the most part, the weaker states in South Asia can also be studied in light of these theories. The geostrategic location, military, and economic power of these states are sufficient to determine their security concerns. To effectively study these states a SWOT analysis of each of these states can help in understanding the situation.

Bhutan

The Kingdom of Bhutan, a constitutional monarchy, is landlocked between two giant countries: China to the North and India to the South. Bhutan lies at the eastern edge of the Himalayas and has evolved from a theocracy, so Buddhism plays an important role in its culture.

Moving ahead, Bhutan's administration is facing mounting internal criticism over its monetary progress under India's aegis.²³ The existing Bhutanese authority faces major problems with reference to escalating unemployment and inflating foreign debt to India. Beijing, on the other hand, is pursuing improvement in its relationship with Bhutan through soft power and the guarantee of a safer future. India's strategic fascination about evading military vulnerability to China in the Doklam Plateau has hindered Thimphu from frontier negotiations and has even deteriorated relations between India and China. The 72-day stalemate in the Doklam over assembly by the Chinese armed troops in 2017, echoed that diplomacy had collapsed and armed confrontation was a possibility. Bhutan was marching on eggshells throughout the 2017 crunch and was seen weighing between the two forces but felt deeply traumatised and even suffocated by the prevailing stance of India in their relationship. A discernible rivalry has intensified Thimphu's apprehensions about getting swept into a Sino-Indian struggle. Bhutanese leaders, and progressively more the people, deem that they must settle down their borderline with China and not attach their resolution to India's thornier and more intractable dispute.²⁴ Beijing has proposed Thimphu a tactical swap in which China would acknowledge Bhutan's contested territory in the north in barter for Doklam. New Delhi, nevertheless, steadfastly dissuades surrendering Doklam to China as it will put its chicken neck vulnerable to PLA,²⁵ and it will greatly foster the guerrillas operating under separatist movements in adjoining Indian states. So, Bhutan is facing an unprecedented dilemma in its security strategy as it cannot create a void for its stability by going against the will of two regional giants.

SWOT Analysis

Bhutan has an advantage of the Himalayas to its north, which have always made it harder for China to penetrate because of its thousands of feet high peaks. Bhutan is significant due to the geostrategic position that borders it with the states of Arunachal

Pradesh, Assam, and West Bengal. This position makes it a state of importance for China to access the Indian states while India uses it as a buffer to counter China.

The very strengths of Bhutan become its weaknesses because they act as an invitation for the two powers, China and India, to interfere in its economy and politics. Historically, Bhutan has never been colonised but it is under a huge Indian influence and the Royal Bhutanese Army is under influence of the Indian armed forces. Indian influence in Bhutan has been under the Friendship Treaty of 1949, but this treaty has limited Bhutan in establishing its relations with any state against Indian wishes.²⁶ As a landlocked country with a small population and army, the state is left to survive by virtue of its neighbour's support. Bhutan's chief export is hydroelectricity and India helps run the hydroelectric plants.²⁷ Bhutan on its own has neither economic nor military conditions to defend itself under extreme situations. It is the international law that protects its sovereignty.

Bhutan faces the threats of being economically crippled without Indian support. On the other hand, it requires more interaction with other states for growth and development. Bhutan has occasionally shown interest in expanding relations, including with China. Because China has the power to help modernise, educate, and develop infrastructure in Bhutan. Although it rejected the opportunity to be a part of BRI in the past, it may not take similar decisions in the future. This shift can be judged because of Bhutan's entanglement in Indian debt. It has to find a way to acquire more independence in its policies.

Bhutan is also seen as a buffer state by India to keep China away. As there are freedom movements in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Nagaland in the north-east, support and access to China in Bhutan could also fan these movements causing instability in India and preoccupying it with internal conflicts.

Bhutan is currently dominated by India; however, it has started to show a desire to establish diplomatic and economic relations with

other states, including China. This could result in tensions between Bhutan and India. In case of any force exertion by India, China can be expected to come forward. Bhutan is now dominated by India with limitations on its growth and increased debt. And in case of a tilt towards China, Bhutan may become a state where China and India face each other threatening its sovereignty as well as peace.

Nepal

Nepal is the only official Hindu state in the world, another landlocked Himalayan country boasting the tallest peak in the world, Mount Everest. The state is a small territory sandwiched between two contending powers China to its North and India to South. The US-China rivalry is putting south Asian states in a precarious spot. For Instance, Nepal and India share a long border of about 1,880 km. The two states have settled maps encompassing 98 per cent of the border, but the Lipulekh pass, Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura in western Nepal are amongst the areas that continue to be contested. Collectively, the three zones cover about 370 sq km. The strategic Lipulekh pass joins the Indian state of Uttarakhand with the Tibet region of China. Presently, Nepal and China have been enraged by India's current moves.²⁸ Delhi printed its new map of the boundary in November, following the division of Indian-administered Kashmir in 2019. The map integrated a few of the regions contested with Nepal within India's borders. This contemporary crisis entails the second round of CIA's Tibet operation,²⁹ a vivid attempt of insurgency in China's backyard that can help both the US and India to strengthen their control in the Indo-Pacific. The adversity of Nepal in this big-power show is that being a poor and impoverished landlocked state with a precarious and volatile political structure, major external forces like the US and China with concealed political and strategic pursuits can derail its way ahead. Thus, instead of performing a productive starring role, these external powers convoluted the progression of tranquillity and peace taking place in Nepal.

SWOT Analysis

Nepal has its geostrategic significance and sufficient natural resources to support its economy but they are untapped. Nepal has friendly relations with India but it is also added to Chinese BRI. Still, it does not enjoy the best of both worlds.

Nepal is a poor state with high taxes, inflation, corruption, civil unrest, and is limited due to its landlocked geography. It has an army but that is not nearly strong enough to defend its borders in case of an attack by a higher power. Nepal depends upon India for most of its trade and India also opens doors for opportunities and jobs for a lot of Nepali people.³⁰

Nepal has been under political turmoil for decades; it is only now that political stability is expected because of a revised Constitution. Nepali governments have proven to be so incompetent and corrupt that none of its industry is booming. It has the potential to generate most of its revenue by tourism, hydroelectricity, irrigation, and agriculture.³¹ China also supports Nepal in establishing local industries.³² Nepal has a border dispute with India.³³ Its relationship with India is more susceptible to damage if India does not provide better opportunities. On the other hand, BRI is a promising deal for a country like Nepal.

Nepal is not currently completely dominated by any power, but it has been influenced by both India and China. In case of increased tension in the region, Nepal may have to take sides. Its position as a buffer state between two powers is a dangerous one for its own peace. Neither does it have effective diplomacy nor any economic or military prowess to defend its sovereignty absolutely.

Maldives

The Republic of Maldives is a small island nation in South Asia, located in the Arabian Sea of the Indian Ocean. It lies southwest of Sri Lanka and India, an archipelago of the Indian Ocean known for its tropical beauty. It is the smallest state in Asia.

The Maldives retain tactical significance for India underneath the Modi regime's 'neighbourhood first' strategy due to its position in the Indian Ocean. However, in the duration of the pro-Beijing government of their ex-President Abdulla Yamen, bonds between India and Maldives got tensed and strained. There arose a moment in 2018 when India even envisioned an armed intrusion but now the Maldives is reviewing its strategies. It is supporting the US-led approach that is expected to raise eyebrows in Beijing.³⁴ The Maldives can anticipate additional turmoil in its political system in the immediate future as a repercussion of power struggle within the region.

SWOT Analysis

The geostrategic position of Maldives makes it an area of interest for India and China. It is in an important location in the Indian Ocean that China can use to not only counter Indian influence but also to further its global military interests.

The islands of Maldives have tourism and fishing as their major source of income. The islands also has a defence force, which protects it from internal and external threats. China has for long been a friendly country trading with the Maldives and also a source of tourism.³⁵ But this tilt towards China and excess of trade has led the Maldives into debt. The Maldives expects under the current government to get support from India while India is also ready to extend support to Maldives for strategic purposes.³⁶

In the case of bloc politics in the region, India has a higher chance of having the support of Maldives as it is physically closer and can produce a viable relation. However, in any case, if the Maldives decides to stay neutral, it may take a toll on its economy.

Sri Lanka

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island country in South Asia, located in the Indian Ocean southwest of the Bay of Bengal and southeast of the Arabian Sea. Sri Lanka is a

developing country with good relations with India as well as China in the region.

Sri Lanka is another epicentre of great power games within South Asia. On one hand, it is encountering severe core political crises, while on the other hand, China, India, and the US are showcasing their agendas that are imperilling the future prosperity and autonomy of Sri Lanka. It is becoming an example of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy. The compression of powerful Chinese authorities concluded in an unfair deal that was ratified without the consent of the opposition. Although it gave China strategically valuable Habantouta port, it also exposed the dirty end of this power game by flaring up the interests of powerful nations within Asia in smaller and unstable nations in the immediate future. The internal and external volatility in Sri Lanka is adding to its vulnerability.³⁷

SWOT Analysis

Sri Lanka can give strategic access to China in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka has deep-rooted relations with China in economic terms. It has even built a billion-dollar port city in Sri Lanka.³⁸ This strong economic relation with China, however, does not ensure the military access too. However, Sri Lankan soldiers do get training opportunities in China. On the other hand, India is the closest state to Sri Lanka and another big market for Sri Lanka. India also wishes to strengthen its relationship with Sri Lanka to counter any threat and save Sri Lankan territory from being used against it.

Once again, Sri Lanka being considerably away from China may not face any direct threat to its security from it. But it is practically entangled completely with China in economic terms. On the other hand, good relations with India can maintain peace in the region. In case of growing tensions in South Asia, Sri Lanka may choose to stay neutral due to its location, economy, and lack of military role in the region. Only in an extreme situation could we expect China or India to pull strings in Sri Lanka through economic pressure.

Bangladesh

Formal Indo-Bangladesh relations extend over roughly half a century, starting with India among the first states to officially acknowledge Bangladesh. However, India's controversial new citizenship law has hurt relationships with adjoining Bangladesh,³⁹ which worries about a stream of refugees entering the state resulting in a replay of the Rohingya crisis. Several elements thwart and hinder constructive bilateral interactions, stretching from migration disputes, rebel movements, borderline and export disagreements, and the dispute over the very essential resource, the water of the Ganges.⁴⁰ There is a perception of distrust that embodies Indo-Bangladeshi relations over these issues, with Bangladesh seeing India as a hegemon. In the background of all these incidents, China-Bangladesh affairs have morphed into a tactical collaboration.⁴¹ Bangladesh's look east policy is diminishing its reliance on India and enhancing the leverage of China. Under the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement, China eliminated tariffs from 84 Bangladeshi manufactured goods that decreased the financial gap between the two countries. Bangladesh is now turning into a crucial player among South Asian nations for China's diplomatic-military realism. Strategic cooperation with Dhaka offers Beijing with enhanced leverage to keep track of Indian forces in the maritime realm. Until now, Bangladesh appeared to be harmonising its ties with both India and China in a larger regional paradigm but cumulative insecurity in Delhi over the influence of China after recent clashes indicates that Bangladesh will also be tested with a succession of compulsions offered by two regional architectures.

SWOT Analysis

Bangladesh is also a country offered huge projects by China under BRI. However, most of them did not come to fruition. The position of Bangladesh is not only important for China but also for other global and regional powers. Bangladesh has its own security

threats in terms of smuggling, drug-trafficking, arms-trafficking, etc. The state has received support from China in military terms as China is always willing to export arms and munitions to smaller states.⁴² On the other hand, Bangladesh has also signed defence agreements with India.

Bangladesh is vulnerable in security terms because India certainly holds the ability and prowess to carry out any propaganda in Bangladesh. In regional tensions, Bangladesh could not be judged to wish for any involvement. Neither is Bangladesh so small to be easily swayed. It has huge economic support from other countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Egypt, etc.

Kashmir Issue

Lastly, friction between Pakistan and India magnified after unilateral annexation of Kashmir as an Indian Union Territory and due to the illegal claims on Gilgit-Baltistan. This situation established the threat of an all-out nuclear conflict in South Asia. The sense of balance of power utterly wrecked in the region in 2019 and pressed Pakistan for tighter collaboration with China. The two-edged sword is slicing through the state of Pakistan fearing the debt-trap diplomacy of China and carrot and stick tactic of US. The core economic pandemonium and political insecurity are making it complicated for Pakistan to survive the regional political twists. The only silver-lining for Pakistan is rooted in CPEC so, it will be compelled to dive in Chinese centric regional architecture. This selection will entail countless can of worms for Pakistan in the international theatre.

Conclusion

Recently, Pakistan and India served as a new battleground for two competing security architectures widely known as the Asia Pacific led by China and Indo-Pacific led by the US for imposing their regional order in South-Asia. This complicated tussle is reshaping and rearranging regional dynamics as well as the global order. Since July

2018, China and the US were engaged in a tit-for-tat tariff war that severely affected the trade liberalisation and facilitation worldwide. States like Pakistan and India went through a series of economic problems, which the World Bank depicted as dark clouds harbouring skies. US-India partnership is fuelling a battle of conflicting ideas within South Asia that raised serious concerns in China, Pakistan, and other aligned smaller states. The unilateral decision of the annexation of Kashmir, claim on Kalapani and Lipolekh, Tibet movement, funding of protests in Hong Kong and Taiwan, attempts of sabotaging CPEC, and China's global standing created a deeper security dilemma that led to an assertive rise of China in South Asia. The recent Indo-China border spat created a new cycle of confrontation and expansionism and flared up historical disputes between Nepal, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and China. The interference of the US in this regional chaos is further exacerbating the already worsened situation. Realism is, therefore, indicating a growing menace of Thucydides' trap between the US and China creating a greater threat for regional stability of south Asia. These clashes, if prolonged, might fulfil the wild ambitions of US and Chinese authorities, but could push de facto nuclear states of Pakistan and India to a dead-end. Therefore, halt to confrontation is the need of the hour, but it does not seem plausible in contemporary situation. The road ahead will be dictated by the informational and algorithmic chess game of the US and China. South Asia might become the first hotspot for non-kinetic future warfare. The scales of war raised altogether from one-time conventional/predictable conflicts under nuclear overhang to an all-out belligerent trade war, armed posturing, and armaments contest that will further jeopardise the regional harmony and integration within South Asia.

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