

Why the Dragon and the Elephant are more Interested Dancing over South Asian Countries?

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Abstract

This paper aimed at examining the growing influence of China and India in South Asian nations. Both China and India have been doing their utmost to consolidate their influence in this sub-continent through economic, political and military deployment. Although Beijing and New Delhi both want to conquer the heart of neighbor state governments; but Beijing's regional policy primarily focuses on to ensure peace and stability in this region for Chinas' internal stability, sustainable economic development and for slacking the powers of the West particularly the US. India, on the other hand, believes that China wants to contain it with the name of help to its neighboring countries which in fact has stolen the peace of New Delhi. The mistrust between the two countries has been reached in a high peak after the border conflicts and global pandemic (COVID-19) followed by vaccine diplomacy.

Key Words: China, India, COVID-19 Vaccine, QUAD, South Asia

Introduction

In an China and India are not only the two most populous countries in the world, but also these two emerging giants will transform the global economy in numerous ways over the coming decades. As per the World Bank's latest GDP rankings of 2019, China and India are 2nd and 5th largest economies of the world. In addition, among Asian countries, China and India together contribute more than half of Asia's GDP. Therefore, China and India play vital role in South Asia and global politics. In 2006, China and India had pledged to strengthen their relationships by celebrating the China-India Friendship Year of 2006. China and India have made deepen their ties within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2016. But, they never truly regard themselves as friends rather friendly enemy. The big clash occurred among the Chinese and Indian border forces at Galwan Valley in June 2020 had turned their relationship into too bitter. According to Indian media, this causality had caused death to twenty Indian soldiers whereas Chinese media acknowledged the death of four soldiers from Chinese side. Despite this, both of them cherish for dominating the Asia particularly the South Asian region to encircle each other. The recent regional focus of India in Southeast Asia and beyond also exposes its emerging role within a competitive regional economic and security space shared with China (Pardesi, 2015). India adopts its extending policy not only in South Asia but also in the East. India's approach towards "Look East Policy" (Jaffrelot, 2003) and "extended neighborhood" policy (Scott, 2009) have made China cautious to its South Asian foreign policy. To counter India's dominance in this region, China has taken many lucrative and ambitious initiatives and has tighten bilateral relationships among the neighboring countries of India. During the global pandemic (COVID-19) crisis, both China and India have

fledged their hands providing with medical supplies and vaccination around the world particularly in south Asian countries to maintain their dominance.

Economic Affairs between China and India

The two regional superpowers of South Asia, China and India, are culturally and historically different. But, both China and India fought against the British imperial powers in the mid-19th century. After establishing own states both the countries have been trying to reform their economy. In the year of 2000, China's economy was a tenth the size of the United States; but twenty years later, the economy is two-thirds as big. Wilson and Purushothaman referred in their famous BRIC study for Goldman Sachs even estimated that China to be the world's largest economy by 2039, followed by the United States and India (Wilson and Purushothaman, 2003). India will have replaced Japan and Germany to get its rank No. 3 in the global economy race. Although India hopes for achieving \$5 trillion economy by 2024 in terms of GDP; but the economic slowdown is likely to spoil India's hopes of becoming so. Amid the US-China trade dispute, China maintained its growth rate nearly 6 per cent while India's economic growth slowed to 4.5 per cent in September 2019. However, during the pandemic (COVID-19) India saw its worst GDP growth in 2020 while China is moving forward its economy.

Foreign Diplomacy towards South Asia

For the past decades, China and India and have been contemplating to create influences in the South Asian sub-continent as powerful rivals. To maintain balanced and sustained political and economic relationships with neighboring states of South Asia region and the Indian Ocean littoral; Chinese policymakers have reformulated their regional policy. To enhance the development cooperation with neighboring countries as well as establishing new lines of communication in southwestern periphery; in 2014, China nicely followed and executed foreign policy of President Xi Jinping. China's ambitious the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) envisages linking China with the rest of the world through numerous commercial-financial relationships and industrial projects. China aims for extending its geo-economic footprint in South Asian region through its BRI Project. China is not only changing Asia's geopolitical landscape through its economic and infrastructural activities but also maintaining global balance of power to defend its rivals. Even few decades ago, China had expressed its less interest in the South Asia's security and economy; but after four decades of reform and opening up policy, China emerged as wealthy and militarily strong to pursue its ambitious role in South Asia.

Strategical Gainings in South Asia

China's rapid military modernization, capitalizing on its economic growth, has already surpassed India's military advancement (Burilkov and Geise, 2013). China's growing military and diplomatic power had become a security threat to India's regional aspirations. Thus, India's China policy choices were profoundly consequential for the Indian government. After declaring itself as a nuclear power state in the late twentieth century; India established its new strategic military partnership with the United States, what Ganguly and Scobell called a "healthy relationship" (Ganguly and Scobell, 2005). To counter China's dominance over Asia Pacific region and South Asia; India and the United States took some of the converging strategic interests. The formation of Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as QUAD, by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007 recently has drawn attention to the world community. The

diplomatic and military arrangement among the QUAD country members Australia, India, Japan and United States is viewed as to counter Chinese resurgence especially in economic, military and maritime power. China has already shown its deep concerned over this so called QUAD group and warns other south Asian countries not to join or involve in it in any means. Tensions between Quad members and China have led to fears of what was dubbed by some commentators as "a new Cold War" in the region (Power, 2021).

To Uphold Political Affairs

China and India have been shared a long range of border where some parts of territories are claimed by both of countries. Indian side claims that, the de facto border between China and India is 3,488 kilometers long, while China opposes this claim and says it is considerably shorter. In regarding border disputes, the two countries fought a war against each other. The two-week military standoff in Ladakh in 2014 further aggravated the two countries' relations. In 2017, the Indian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army of China faced off over Chinese construction of a road in Doklam near a tri-junction border area. This standoff rose tensions between the countries. To react on this border dispute issue, an India's foreign secretary told in February 2018, 'We cannot see the relationship with China the way we perhaps saw it thirty years ago, or even 15 years ago ... both countries share the belief that this relationship is slated to become one of the defining relationships of this century, certainly in our region...' (Ministry of External Affairs India 2018). After the June clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020; another recent skirmish happened between the dragon and elephant at India's Sikkim state on 20 January of 2021. Amid the political tensions between the two countries, India too has contemplated ways to reconnect with its South Asian neighbors and inculcated a spirit of integration and interdependence in the subcontinent through its cooperation and influences since 1990s (Singh, 2019). It is believed that there is similarity between Indian culture and neighboring countries; therefore, it paves the way to India easily influence over these countries. According to India's foreign policy, it always tries to maintain friendly relations with its neighbors. Unfortunately, in recent times, India loses most of its friendly neighbors because of its unwanted interference in internal affairs of those countries. China usually maintains neutral balance with whatever regime is in power and avoids intervening in domestic political affairs. Therefore, most of India's neighbors now are inclined to China, as China usually keeps silent on other's internal issues. It is mentionable that Pakistan is always become India's big enemy where China's one of the friendly allies. In recent years, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives even Myanmar are also closely embraced with China.

Vaccine Diplomacy in South Asia

The outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus locked the entire world and south Asian countries have also plunged into this crisis. Though China has successfully enabled to curb COVID-19 crisis and provided nationwide vaccination for further prevention. India, on the other hand, has been severely affected by coronavirus in its second wave. As of 20 June 2021, 29,881,965 coronavirus cases have been reported in India on which 386,740 have been died (Worldometers, 2021). During the second wave coronavirus crisis, hospitals in India are desperate for oxygen and other medical

supplies including coronavirus vaccine. China thereupon extended its hands to India by providing assistance with oxygen concentrators, ventilators, monitors, medications and other medical supplies in battling COVID-19 pandemic. Both Beijing and New Delhi are continuing its cooperation around the world to combat the outbreak. However, India has minimized its cooperation for global community since India itself has been devastated with the coronavirus. Beijing has taken this opportunity to get closer with south Asian countries. Therefore, it establishes a Covid-19 "emergency supplies reserve" for South Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and, has sent medical supplies along with vaccine to help them to battle against growing coronavirus pandemic. Concerning over the China's vaccine diplomacy, according to a report of the South China Morning Post, India would send its neighbors 10 to 20 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines for free (Bhaumik, 2021). However, China is running fast in this vaccine diplomacy race than India. China has sent 700,000 doses of a Covid-19 vaccine to Afghanistan where COVID-19 crisis is getting worsened. India also contributed to Afghanistan by supplying 968,000 doses of Made-in-India vaccines. Bangladesh made an agreement with India for India-made Astrazeneca corona vaccine last year. But, India has stopped supplying vaccine to Bangladesh after second wave coronavirus surged in India. To fill the vaccine shortage, Bangladesh approached to China and received 5,00,000 doses of China's Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine in the first phase. Additionally, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) had approved a \$250 million loan to Bangladesh to help the country cope with the coronavirus pandemic. Bhutan received COVID-19 vaccines from Indian Government while it also received 550,000 doses from China. Both the Chinese and Indian government has handed over 500,000 and 1.5 million doses coronavirus vaccines respectively to Myanmar. Maldives received 200,000 doses vaccines against COVID-19 and anti-epidemic materials from China and 100,000 doses from India. Nepal received a consignment of 800,000 doses of Covid-19 vaccines from China in March 2021 and 1 million doses will be receiving soon. Nepal government has decided to procure 4 million Covid-19 vaccines from China under a non-disclosure agreement. However, Nepal has also procured 1 million doses vaccine from India. Pakistan received 1.2 million COVID-19 vaccines from China as both are the long-term ally. Chinese government and Chinese military have also donated vaccines to Pakistan. Beside, purchasing several consignments of COVID-19 vaccines from China; Pakistan launched its home-made COVID vaccine 'PakVac' with the assistance of all-weather ally China. China has granted Sri Lanka a concessionary loan of \$500 million to deal with the coronavirus crisis along with sending 1.1 million doses of vaccines. To maintain balance in vaccine diplomacy, India has sent 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Sri Lanka.

India is donating millions of AstraZeneca shots to countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka. But, neighboring countries that relied on India for vaccine, have increasingly turned to China due to India's own vaccine crisis. Many believe that Beijing's humanitarian plan against COVID-19 pandemic globally has gained a geopolitical advantage, and Beijing has managed to transform the pandemic into a strategic opportunity to assert its leadership role and expand its geopolitical influence. Many nations reacted positively in Beijing's decisive, swift and effective response to Covid-19 and embraced with Chinese health policy. Moreover, China's Ali Baba Group has also been cooperating Chinese government in building its global image by sending medical supplies to many

countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka etc. As a new rising power, India, on the contrary, is seen somewhat slowed to get closer with these south Asian countries in terms of vaccine diplomacy.

Geostrategic Interests in South Asia

China and India both the neighbors have expressed some common interests to manage non-traditional threats, promote secular and stable regimes, secure maritime trade routes, and geo-economically link South Asia with East Asia. Huang Yasheng argues that China and India's relations are fraught with more competing issues than their mutually common interests (Huang, 2011). On the other hand, in terms of regional approaches China and India have some basic different agenda. China's vision is to connect South Asia with China; while India's approach is to bring South Asia closer and connect with Eurasia and South East Asia. India's unwillingness to join in China's the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other projects like the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) have much concern. India believes that the BRI and BCIM will cement the relationships among India's neighbors and reorient the foreign policies of South Asian states which eventually harms its interests and lessen influences in this subcontinent. In fact, the main interest of China is to engage the neighbors in its goals and provides them economical, infrastructural and technological supports which enables China to pursue its engagement with South Asia and other countries. China's soft corner and political, economic and diplomatic supports to Pakistan and Myanmar for its geostrategic interests, have made worried of its rivals India and the US.

Conclusion and Discussion

Although China and India are today seen as regional competitors but none of them have fully succeeded to make closing with neighboring South Asian countries. India has not fully win the heart of neighbors due to its lack of intra-regional trading, poor infrastructural networks, poor economy and intervene in others' domestic politics. China, on the contrary, has been partly succeeded to deepen the relationships with South Asian nations through its economic strength and willingness. From the above discussion, we can conclude that there is a 'security vacuum' in the Indo-Pacific zone. Each South Asian neighboring country of China and India is now feeling insecure. India is often alleged to interfering other countries' internal affairs that actually annoys the people of the other countries and has created a negative impressions about India. However, India has tried to engage its neighbors by providing Coronavirus vaccines. China, on the other hand, had lent its hand to the world community including its South Asian neighbors by providing necessary medical equipments and medical supplies to combat global pandemic (COVID-19) together. China is also getting more closer with India's neighbors with development activities. Many say that, such development activities of China is an effort to surround India in land sea and air. India, however, has no other good options to defend China's huge economic and military power but to make a counter-strategy. Although Beijing's foreign policy doesn't enter other countries' bedroom but, investing huge amount of money in India's neighboring countries, New Delhi sees it to gain political influence over the governments.

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