

INDIA FOUNDATION JOURNAL



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With a team of dedicated professionals based at its office in New Delhi, the Foundation works with partners and associates both in India and overseas to further its stated objectives.

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The India Foundation Journal is led by an Editorial Board of eminent scholars and leaders from various spheres of Indian public life. The bi-monthly journal covers a wide range of issues pertinent to the national interest, mainly focusing on international relations, national security, legal and constitutional issues and other issues of social, religious and political significance. The journal seeks articles from scholars with the intent of creating a significant body of knowledge with a nationalist perspective and establish a recognised forum for debates involving academicians and policymakers.

India, Multipolarity, and the Shifting World Order

Dhruv C Katoch*

Is the world moving towards multipolarity, or at least towards a new world order? In the last century, close to the end of the Second World War, Henry Morgenthau Jr., at the opening of the Bretton Woods conference, observed: “*The transcendent fact of contemporary life is this: ... the world is a community.*” This thought had been enunciated thousands of years earlier in India, where the Maha Upanishad mentions the ancient Indian philosophical concept of “**Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**” (The world is a family). But were the institutions created after World War II to govern the world order focused on creating an equitable world or to perpetuate the stranglehold over power in the hands of a few?

When India gained independence, the philosophy behind the phrase “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” found utterance in the voices of its leaders, but India was not a power that could influence global decisions. During India’s G20 presidency, the summit held in New Delhi in September 2023 was themed on Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—One Earth, One Family, One Future. Prime Minister Modi has used this phrase while advocating for peace in the Russia-Ukraine War and the Israel-Hamas conflict and during his frequent interactions with world leaders for a more equitable world order.

Eight decades after the formation of global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, the questions regarding their relevance in

today’s world are becoming louder and more constant. When these institutions were established, the world order radically differed from the one we live in today. There was little concern then about issues such as climate change. Terrorism was confined to limited geographical pockets, and its spread was not difficult to contain. The world had yet to make those rapid technological advancements that define the present battle space, especially in communications and long-range precision weapon systems. The space race was in its infancy, and cyber warfare was not a threat. But all that has changed now. The world is literally “on fire,”¹ as the rather provocative article by the Stockholm Environment Institute states. This raises the question: Can the existing institutions of global governance adapt to change? Or are new instruments required to replace the ones formed about eight decades ago?

Recognising the need for change, UN Secretary-General António Guterres issued a policy brief in July 2023 titled “A New Agenda for Peace.” It outlines his vision for peace and security in a world in transition, aiming to address current conflicts, foster sustainable peace, and promote international cooperation. “What is at stake,” Guterres wrote, “is not the future of the United Nations, but of our nations and humanity. The possibility of global devastation, whether from nuclear weapons, climate change, diseases or war, or even technology run amok, is tangible and increasing. Member States will need to find new

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ways of working together despite the increasing mistrust that has permeated international relations.”²

The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) Summit, held in Kazan, Russia, from 22-24 October 2024, is a pointer to how a future world order could emerge. A plurilateral organisation, BRICS was founded pursuant to a meeting of the four leaders of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) in St Petersburg, Russia, on the margins of the G8 Outreach Summit in July 2006. Two months later, in September 2006, the group was formalised as BRIC during the first BRIC Foreign Ministers Meeting held on the sidelines of the General Debate of the UN Assembly in New York City. After that, the first BRIC summit was held in Yekaterinburg, Russia, on 16 June 2009.³ The Kazan Summit has added more members to BRICS—Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to form the BRICS+. Many countries have applied for membership, so the organisation is set to grow.

BRICS+ challenges the structural advantages that advanced market economies continue to enjoy,⁴ but it is not an anti-West grouping. It allows operating within and outside groupings like the G20 for India and other middle powers. This fact precludes the world from being divided into rigid blocs, a throwback to the Cold War years. The West, for now, is adopting a wait-and-watch attitude. Still, there is no reason for alarm or confrontation, especially if the West addresses emerging powers’ concerns, legitimate hopes and aspirations.

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) also seeks to reshape the geopolitical landscape by

funnelling development finance to extend its economic and political influence. Decarbonisation will rewrite the geopolitical script by changing the value of specific resources—diminishing the relevance of fossil fuels while increasing the importance of rare earths.

An American political scientist, G. John Ikenberry, has viewed the emerging change as dividing the world into three major groupings—The West led by the US; the East comprising Russia and China; and the developing world. According to Ikenberry, these ‘three worlds’, as he put it, are not blocs but loose evolving factions with situation-specific dynamics. According to Ikenberry, these three worlds are not blocs but loose evolving factions whose dynamics are situation-specific. He characterises plurilateral organisations such as the Quad, BRICS, the SCO and other regional organisations in this manner. An interesting facet of the view is that Ikenberry posits that Asia is at the forefront of the change that will come about and that India will be a critical driver of that change.⁵

India’s External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, alluded to these geopolitical shifts while addressing the Asia Society Policy Institute in New York on September 25, 2024. While emphasising the need to rebalance the global order, he noted that economic, political, and demographic transformations over the last eight decades have propelled several Asian countries into the top twenty world economies. Among these, India—ranked as the tenth-largest economy just a decade ago—has now risen to fifth place and is projected to become the third-largest by the decade’s end. He spoke of the inevitability of change and argued for a multipolar world with more independent

decision-making centres as international politics was redirecting toward finding convergences and overlapping interests among nations.⁶ The United States will contest this change and resist efforts to alter the status quo. China will continue its quest for global leadership, making a future conflict all the more plausible. The Global South, though not a pole in the conventional sense, will significantly influence the changes that occur in the world order. India's role, too, will be critical.

India's Neighbourhood

The volatility in India's neighbourhood reflects the transformation underway in the global order. Power struggles, shifting alliances, increased cooperation in some areas, and intensified competition in others are all becoming more frequent. Asia remains the focal point of these developments, driven by India's rise, Japan's developed economy, China's bid to challenge U.S. dominance, West Asia's energy reserves and the growth of ASEAN. How the India-China contestation plays out will be critical to any future outcome of the new world order.

The recent rapprochement between India and China in Eastern Ladakh does not signify a significant forward movement in the relationship between the two countries. Still, it indicates that the two countries can find mechanisms to ratchet down tensions and work around each other's core concerns. China, for now, advocates a multi-polar world but remains fixated on being the sole pole in Asia. The contestation for power will thus remain. China's President Xi Jinping has clearly articulated his vision for China as a world leader in comprehensive national strength and global influence by 2049.⁷ India, too, aims to be a

developed country by 2047. There will thus be cooperation, competition and contestation between the two countries. How this plays out will impact the new world order.

In the quest for dominance while supporting India's rise, the West would not like to see India grow to the extent that it would be a competitor to their economic and other interests. The overthrow of the democratically elected Sheikh Hasina government in August this year had US backing, as seen by Washington's support for Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, perceived as a U.S. protégé, to head the interim government in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, the US played for its long-term strategic interests, designed to keep pressure on India and influence Indian foreign policy to align with Western interests. Developments in India's Northeast and some other parts of India also point to the role of external agencies in keeping India embroiled in internal issues to slow down India's rise.

China, too, is wary of India's rise, and the tensions along the India-Tibet border are a concomitant result of Beijing's focus on a unipolar Asia. It also reflects in China's support for separatist movements in India's Northeastern states bordering Myanmar. For many decades now, China has also used Pakistan as a proxy to contain India. The China-Pakistan nexus extends to the strategic domain and manifests in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), designed to open China to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean via the Gwadar port. China's foray into the Indian Ocean also poses a challenge for India. The network of strategic ports from the Kyaukphyu Port in Myanmar to Gwadar in Pakistan, while designed to secure China's energy routes through

the Indian Ocean, also serve as tools to encircle India strategically.

In response, India has pursued its Act East Policy, with ASEAN at its core. The Quad—a partnership involving India, the U.S., Japan, and Australia—advances India’s vision of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific and extends its influence to Australia and beyond. While India aligns with the U.S. and other Western nations in the maritime domain, differences remain on continental issues, as seen in India’s neutral stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Some of India’s smaller neighbours—Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives—seek to maximise their advantage by balancing ties between India and China. However, India’s cultural and civilisational links with Nepal and Sri Lanka and its geographic proximity to the Maldives provide it with a strategic edge. Through its ‘Neighbourhood First Policy,’ India has prioritised deepening physical, digital, and people-to-people connectivity

with neighbouring countries and expanding trade and commerce. Over the past decade, India has taken a generous and non-reciprocal approach to regional engagement, a strategy it will likely maintain despite occasional setbacks.

As India’s global influence grows, it would be unrealistic to expect a frictionless environment. The challenges India faces—geopolitical, economic, or strategic—must be factored into its long-term growth strategy. Connectivity will remain pivotal to India’s ambitions. The proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), linking India with Europe and the Atlantic, and the Trilateral Highway through Myanmar, connecting India to the Pacific, illustrate India’s increasing centrality in global trade and geopolitics. This connectivity, stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific, will have far-reaching strategic and economic implications, underscoring India’s evolving role in shaping the future of the global order.

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Developments in the IOR and its Impact on Bharat

Shekhar Sinha*

In his famous book 'Monsoon,' Robert Kaplan aptly announced the importance of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). He wrote:

"The Indian Ocean Region is more than just a stimulating geography. It is an idea because it provides an insightful visual impression of Islam and combines the centrality of Islam with global energy politics and the importance of world navies in order to show us a multilayered, multipolar world above and beyond the headlines; it is also an idea because it allows us to see the world whole, within a very new and yet very old framework, complete with its own traditions and characteristics, without having to drift into bland nostrums about globalisation."

What Kaplan stated is a fact of geography and will always remain so. The geopolitical centrum of the world has shifted to the Indo-Pacific; it is evident when one observes the two big powers, the US and China, jostling for geopolitical supremacy since it would give them oversight to the main sea lanes of communication through which world energy and trade traverses. This competition has the potential to turn into contestation and, worse, conflict and ultimately may redefine international order. The existing free world led by the West seriously threatens to be replaced by a more autocratic and possibly non-democratic

structure for prosperity. In this vast area, Bharat is the most consequential resident power. It is the fifth largest economy in the world and is inching towards becoming the third largest,¹ behind China and the US. India's strategy, therefore, must factor in the dynamism of IOR, which is now witnessing intensified jostling for supremacy. It is in Bharat's interest to assist the IOR neighbours if it has to attain its \$5 trillion GDP goal in a desirable timeframe. These neighbours also expect Bharat to actively ensure an environment of peace and stability in the region for their trade, commerce, and prosperity to flourish.

The IOR littorals falling into either of the two camps, the US or China, will not augur well for their prosperity. These two big powers' efforts are to influence the smaller IOR littorals and develop such infrastructure in those countries with dual purposes for possible military usage in times of crisis. Bharat is too large a country and powerful to be part of any alliance and act as a second fiddle. Best for Bharat is what it is practising: the strategy of strategic autonomy. For Bharat, PM Modi's government's policy of 'neighbourhood first'² and 'SAGAR³ (Security And Growth for All in the Region)' is ideally suited for the prosperity of the countries in the region. Bharat has bailed out every neighbour whenever they were deep into an economic or security crisis. Yet, these countries

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continue to hedge their bets between Bharat and China to seek financial advantage. Bharat is experiencing these flip-flops from its neighbours at regular intervals. How this is to be addressed will remain a challenge for Bharat.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh is experiencing a period of uncertainty. The student agitation forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to leave her country and take refuge in Bharat. Her ouster was followed by mayhem. Law and order broke down completely,⁴ but it is showing gradual signs of recovery. In the latest development, the Bangladesh interim government has requested the extradition of Sheikh Hasina, a diplomatic challenge for Bharat.

The country's constitution enshrines secularism as one of the four fundamental principles, even though Islam is the state religion. The Bangladesh Constitution grants equal status and rights to all faiths—Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and others. It bans discrimination on the grounds of religion. Bangladesh is also one of the few Muslim-majority nations where proselytising is generally accepted and legalised by law subject to public order and morality. This is important to remember since, in the recent political turbulence, a large number of Hindus were killed by the radical Muslims who were steering the agitation.

Under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh flourished economically for over 15 years. Its GDP and PPP increased significantly, and poverty declined. Its PPP per capita was higher than that of Bharat. Even the HDI of Bangladesh has been higher.⁵ It has a long coastline along the

Bay of Bengal. Significantly for India, it is separated from Bhutan and Nepal by the Siliguri corridor to the north and from China by the mountainous Indian state of Sikkim. It is the second-largest economy, the third-largest South Asian military, and the largest contributor to UN peacekeeping operations.

Bangladesh is a reasonably affluent South Asian nation. Its poverty rate declined from 80% in 1971 to 44.2% in 1991 and 12.9% in 2021. The literacy rate in 2022 increased to 74.66%. But all that has retarded since 5 August 2024 with Sheikh Hasina's forced ouster amidst the countrywide agitation by students against the reservation policy of the government. This was followed by mass violence and destruction of property, with radical elements damaging Hindu temples and killing Hindu citizens. The military installed an interim cabinet with the indulgence of another country. Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, who has lived in the US for a long time, has been positioned as the head of the interim government.

Bharat and Bangladesh share historical and civilisational similarities. Then, there is linguistic commonality with the state of West Bengal. There is a very close intertwining of trade, commerce, connectivity, security-related activities, people-to-people relationships, etc. Given Bangladesh's land and maritime proximity to Bharat and contiguity with the Bay of Bengal, bigger powers in the geopolitical arena have always had their eyes set on Bangladesh. The US and the PRC thus continue to make overtures to secure closer ties with Bangladesh. China has vast trade and close cooperation in infrastructure and defence sectors. Most weapon platforms in the Bangladesh Armed

Forces are of Chinese origin, including two submarines sold under the pretext of training. This justifies access to the PLA Navy to Pekua port (Chittagong), where these submarines are based. The base, BNS Sheikh Hasina, built with significant Chinese support, can accommodate up to six submarines and eight warships. This China orientation of Bangladesh has irked the USA on several occasions. Ex-PM Sheikh Hasina is on record stating that the US was seeking access to St Martin Island (a small island near Myanmar), and her refusal could have led to her ouster. China helped Bangladesh in upgrading the Chittagong port to international standards. Bangladesh was desirous of leasing the operations of Mongla Port, and both Bharat and China bid for the same.

The contract was awarded to Bharat, much to China's annoyance, as this would have given PLAN a more significant toehold in the Bay of Bengal. Thus far, this part of the Indo-Pacific has been free from geopolitical jostling for strategic superiority between the US and China. None of their warships are present on a regular basis, which permits Bharat much freedom of operations of the Eastern Naval Command and also DRDO for conducting trials of long-range missiles.

Myanmar

An important maritime and land neighbour of Bharat, Myanmar has been witnessing internal turmoil for years. The governance has swung between military rule and democracy. For the past few years, the military has been in power. Various armed ethnic groups have come together and are combating the Tatmadaw. The northeastern states of Bharat have land borders with Myanmar and

share ethnic linkages. Historically, ethnicity has been one of the factors for insurgency in the states of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The recent turbulence in Manipur has resulted from ethnic clashes and possibly external influence,⁶ highlighting the geopolitical sensitivity of Bharat's northeastern states.

Instability in Myanmar has created multiple challenges for Bharat. One of these is the illegal influx of Rohingya Muslims. Some of these Rohingya have been recruited by known terrorist groups based in Pakistan with linkages in Bangladesh. On the economic front, if Bharat has to achieve its goal of becoming a \$5 trillion economy, stability in Myanmar is an essential prerequisite. At present, bilateral trade is approximately \$2 billion;⁷ however, there is potential for access to mineral resources necessary for the high-tech industry. Bharat has actively partnered with Myanmar through BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and Mekong Ganga Cooperation, which adds significance to its 'Act East' policy.

There is also a China-Pakistan aspect to Myanmar. Pakistan sold ten fighters (of Chinese origin) to Myanmar in 2018 and is likely to supply ten more with the tacit approval of China. China is Myanmar's largest trading partner. It has invested in high-speed railway lines, dams, a \$2.5 billion gas-fired power plant and the construction and control of Kyauk Phyu port.

This is part of China's Maritime Silk Road. An oil pipeline approx. 1060 km long, runs from this port to the Kunming oil refinery in Yunnan province of China. The port serves as an essential transit for West Asian oil for China and mitigates its Malacca dilemma to some extent. The port

receives and transports 400,000 barrels of crude per day.

Additionally, a major natural gas terminal and pipeline were built by Daewoo ROK for Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise in Shwe (close to Kyaukphyu). It can pump 12 bn cubic meters of natural gas annually, mainly to China via Maday Island.⁸ The Chinese have also constructed a railway line between Kunming and Kyaukphyu, which has been operational since 2021. This project will also connect with the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport project via a 311 km link from Kyaukphyu in the north to Ann in the south and then southeast to Minbu.

It is helpful to dive deep into Indo-Pacific issues here. Having realised its minimal dominance in the Bay of Bengal and been left out of BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and Quad, China has put much effort into Myanmar's development and other investments. Kyaukpyu port could also be used by the PLAN, thereby allowing possible entry and sustenance in the Bay of Bengal and making the 'String of Pearls' strategy around Bharat more realistic. It already has a presence through the Bangladesh port in Chittagong, which has a submarine base that operates Chinese-built submarines.

According to Rachel Cecilia of APU, Beppu, Japan, these developments have been causing concerns in Washington, whose larger apprehension is the Chinese attempt to reshape the world order. Consequently, the US has gradually been increasing its influence in the Bay of Bengal littorals with the possible future presence of the US Navy to mitigate increasing Chinese influence. The recent upstaging of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

of Bangladesh and installing a pro-US Advisor and a military-backed interim government appear to have resulted from these apprehensions. The US has also budgeted \$75 million for funding an insurgent group in Myanmar, which is fighting against the Junta along with other groups. These events in the Bay of Bengal littorals reflect the beginning of geopolitical jostling between the US and China for supremacy. Bharat cannot sit idle since peace and stability in the region are germane to its trade and prosperity.

Sri Lanka

Bharat and Sri Lanka share centuries-old civilisational ties dating back to the Ramayana. Sri Lanka's strategic location makes it lucrative for maritime powers to maintain good relations with Sri Lanka. The Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCS) in the Indian Ocean, from or to the Cape, the Strait of Hormuz, and Malacca pass near Sri Lanka. Dondra Head also serves as an important navigational feature to all seafarers. A traffic separation scheme is enforced closer to Dondra Head. It limits the speed and lateral separation between vessels in reciprocal traffic. As the closest neighbour, Bharat holds great significance to the Sri Lankan population. Education, trade, commerce, infrastructure, security, healthcare, etc., are closely knit.

Since China's rise as an economic powerhouse, it has been fanning out in the IOR littorals for a few reasons. Firstly, it imports nearly 80% of hydrocarbons through the Indian Ocean and therefore, energy security depends on secure Sea Lanes of Communication. Secondly, it has increased its trade interests in Africa and South America, necessitating its merchantmen to traverse these

waters. Thirdly, this economic rise has also enhanced China's ambitions to become a global power by possibly displacing the US from the leadership of the existing international order. On its way to achieving those objectives, China has Bharat to tackle, with whom it has ongoing land boundary disputes. China has attempted for years to encircle Bharat with what has come to be known as the 'String of Pearls'. For that necklace to be complete, its toehold in Sri Lanka is essential. Historically, there are mentions of Chinese travellers visiting Sri Lanka for trade. Recently, China has assisted Sri Lanka in building its infrastructure, mainly roads and ports. But it hasn't been through financially transparent loans. They are attached with higher interest rates and very stiff penalty clauses, should they be unable to pay back on scheduled time. This has been China's strategy of economic coercion the world over.⁹ Sri Lanka's default in repayment of loans to China resulted in them giving complete control of two critical ports, Hambantota and Colombo South, to China, which has added to Bharat's security concerns given our tense relations with China on land borders.

Apart from merchantmen, PLAN ships and submarines have become more frequent visitors of IOR. Additionally, the Ocean Research Vessels berthed in these ports upon completing their excursion in the entire IOR. Not only are they capable of recording hydrological data and mapping seabed resources, including minerals, but they also have antennas that can record electromagnetic emissions, particularly during long-range trials/practice of missile launches by Bharat in the IOR. This data can be used during actual conflict wherein

hydrological data helps plan the deployment of submarines and programming of torpedo launch parameters. The electromagnetic emission records can compromise the launch of long-range missiles and provide the adversary with adequate time for countermeasures. The scenario gets complicated when the Pakistan nexus is factored in, as this brings Bharat's two adversaries and mitigates surprise during Bharat's offensive actions. Therefore, solutions for Bharat's Armed Forces become more complex.

Bharat and Sri Lanka have several security cooperation agreements and mechanisms that create guardrails against such possibilities. However, how the powers in Sri Lanka will turn under pressure from China remains to be seen. Bharat has recently bailed out Sri Lanka from an acute financial crisis and has joint maritime patrol agreements that address common traditional and non-traditional security threats; only time will deliver the outcomes. After a significant political debacle in Sri Lanka, the island nation has had a free and fair election and has chosen a president from a left-leaning political party. However, the incoming president has assured Bharat of its security concerns.¹⁰

Maldives

Maldives is yet another small but strategically significant maritime neighbour Bharat has historically supported in peacetime and in times of turbulence, both in the economic and security dimensions. President Gayoom, who ruled for over thirty years as almost an authoritarian leader, won six consecutive elections and established good neighbourly relations with Bharat.

Being a chain of 26 atolls southwest of Bharat, which stretches across the equator (1 degree South of the Equator to 8 degrees North), it is considered a toll gate to the Indian Ocean. Two vital sea lanes pass very close to the islands. Through the northern group of islands is the Gulf of Aden- Straits of Hormuz- Straits of Malacca SLOC maritime trade route, which is critical to world trade, both energy and bulk commerce. It is crucial for Bharat since 50% of trade and 80% of hydrocarbon imports traverse these SLOCs in the Arabian Sea. Maldives is at the forefront of Bharat's 'Neighborhood First' policy and SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region). Another important aspect is the proximity of Maldives to the Lakshadweep & Minicoy islands of Bharat. It, therefore, acts as India's forward defence in the South West Indian Ocean. The northernmost island of Maldives is only 70 nautical miles (approx. 140 km) from Minicoy Island. Any Chinese presence in Maldives would be detrimental to Bharat's security. Any Chinese surveillance system in these islands can expose aerial activities in Bharat's southern peninsula. Also, it can leave Bharat's trade routes vulnerable to Chinese interdiction.

Bharat has done much for the development of the Maldives. 70% of MNDF is trained in Bharat, and Bharat has created the capacities and capability for their maritime security. Bharat provides many infrastructure projects, including roads, ports, airports, hospitals, medical evacuation assets, higher education in Bharat, high-impact community development projects, day-to-day usage items supply, etc. Bharat also used its military on their request to quell a mercenary-led coup, provide humanitarian assistance in acute shortages of fresh

water, evacuate a tsunami, etc. Bharat has also extended financial support to the Maldives, including a USD 400 million credit line and USD 100 million in aid, to aid the country's economic recovery.¹¹

However, since the Maldives adopted a democratic form of governance through the direct election of an executive president and vice president, the leadership has alternated between pro-Bharat and pro-China approaches. While President Nasheed was Bharat-friendly, Yameen was heavily China-leaning. President Solih was more inclined to protect Bharat's security concerns. However, the present President, Mr Moizzu, who won an 'India Out' campaign, has demonstrated a heavy China-leaning approach by reactivating Chinese projects and falling for PLA's offers. However, the public uproar against his policies made him realise the importance of maintaining close and friendly relations with Bharat for the daily survival of Maldives citizens and her economy. During his recent official visit to Bharat, several agreements were signed, including Economic agreements to bail out the Maldives from a debt trap.¹² Much will depend upon President Moizzu's continuing with these agreements and not succumbing to economic and military coercion by China. Bharat has always pursued a friendly foreign policy with its neighbours. All projects for the public good are progressing on time.

Pakistan

Pakistan has yet to cease its support to terror groups based in their country. Immediately after a democratically elected government took office in J&K, there were two terror attacks in the valley, killing innocent civilians.

The country is in a deep financial and political crisis, yet it has the quiet support of both China and the US. China supplies the entire range of weapon platforms and systems,¹³ whereas the US hangs on to Pakistan to retain its global leadership position and monitor Afghanistan. The US presence in Pakistan also helps monitor any Russian attempt to utilise warm-water ports in the Arabian Sea, which could enhance Russia's ability to challenge the US Navy.

Pakistan continues with a cease-fire on LOC with Bharat, though terrorist infiltration supported by the Pakistan Army/ISI continues unabated. Bharat has declined to engage in talks with Pakistan till the terror activities cease. In the recent visit of Bharat's External Affairs Minister to Islamabad for the SCO meeting, it was made amply clear that no bilateral talks were on the agenda.¹⁴

The Pakistan challenge will remain for Bharat. The supply of Chinese-built submarines and warships to Pakistan has commenced. It is expected that the navies of China and Pakistan could jointly shrink the manoeuvring space for the Indian Navy and put their activities under surveillance. The Arabian Sea has become a hotbed for future maritime conflict, with China now virtually owning Gwadar at the mouth of the Gulf of Oman (outside the Strait of Hormuz). China also has a presence in Djibouti at the mouth of the Red Sea. China's presence in the Strait of Malacca, through its involvement in reclaiming smaller islands and constructing Malacca Port for Malaysia, will see Chinese presence in all three choke points in the Indian Ocean through which traverses world trade and warships of many countries. This provides China with a substantial strategic

advantage, which not only Bharat but the US should be highly wary of. Any desire to restrict Chinese ship movement through these choke points in the US could become a pipe dream. The US has already lost its supremacy in the South China Sea, where the Chinese are very aggressive and flouting all international conventions and laws of the Sea. The China-Pakistan combination in the Arabian Sea will bring its own set of challenges and make the Indian Navy's deployments more complex.

Nepal and Bhutan

These two landlocked countries have trade and commerce access to the Bay of Bengal through Bharat and Bangladesh. Therefore, geopolitical dynamism has a direct impact on their prosperity, too. These two countries are also members of BIMSTEC, a multilateral forum, and the BBIN transit arrangement.

Nepal and Bhutan also have land borders with Tibet. They act as buffers between Bharat and China, as China has now occupied Tibet. Both have cultural and civilisational linkages with Bharat and depend on Bharat for trade, travel, communication and economic development. The Chinese have been coercing them for years to bind them in an economic bond and then extract access through their country towards Bharat's land borders, particularly near the Siliguri corridor, should they fail to repay. As of now, Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with China.

Nepal has been a democracy since the collapse of the monarchy and the surfacing of Maoists out of underground operations. Today, the Maoists in Nepal are a reasonably strong political party. Whenever they are the more significant

partners in a coalition government, Nepal tends to lean towards China. The Chinese have penetrated critical infrastructure, including communication in Nepal, which gives them surveillance ability throughout the Nepal-Bharat border. The Nepali Congress and Madhesi are more sympathetic to India's concerns. This has been the trend.¹⁵

Since the Bhutanese King abdicated in favour of parliamentary democracy, the trend of one of the two parties has been more sympathetic to Chinese demands. Right now, discussions are afoot for ownership of some parts of northern Bhutan which the Chinese lay claim to by quoting some fictitious history, mainly self-written.¹⁶ Bharat is the source of Bhutan's economy and the everyday living of their citizens. As far as Nepal is concerned, there is road connectivity at many crossing points and an oil pipeline which supplies petroleum products permanently, which fuels their economy. Despite that, Nepal continues to hedge its bets between Bharat and China.

Overall Geopolitical Imperatives

India's geopolitical environment is challenging. While the maritime domain needs 24/7 awareness to ensure safe and secure Sea Lanes Of Communication for Bharat's economy to attain the \$5 trillion mark soon, continental Bharat requires deft diplomacy by assisting these two neighbours and Bangladesh by providing public goods and access to all forms of connectivity that are citizen-centric irrespective of the party in power and their leanings. It also calls for a constant dialogue with the opposition parties in the neighbourhood to address their apprehensions.

China remains a significant source of concern

regarding unresolved land borders and its coercive strategy in the string of pearls. While negotiations and talks must continue, the preparedness of the Armed Forces should deter the adversary from any offensive, both at sea and on land borders.

Bharat's strategic autonomy and concept of 'Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam' should hold us in good stead. Cooperative mechanisms, e.g. QUAD, Malabar exercises, IMEC, I2U2, BIMSTEC, Colombo Security Conclave, BBIN, connectivity projects like Kaladan Multimodal Project, BRICS, SCO, bilateral agreements with all neighbouring countries which have economic and security benefits to neighbours, IPMDA, IPEF, ASEAN mechanism, Arctic Council, G- 20, Chahbahar connectivity project with Iran and Afghanistan (subsequently Central Asia), INSTC connectivity to Eurasia and many more. These should be pursued vigorously since they have long-term benefits for all participants.

During Bharat's climb to become a major economy and military power, developed countries, such as the US and Canada, will create obstructions on account of their self-proclaimed protectors of democratic norms while flouting them themselves. These must be handled with firmness and intelligent diplomacy. The indulgence of big powers in the neighbourhood, such as Bangladesh and Myanmar, should be analysed, and guardrails should be placed to prevent collateral impact on Bharat.

China will attempt to tie down Bharat in domestic and near neighbourhood issues to retard her progress since it helps hasten her progress toward challenging the USA.

However, India's strength lies in its robust leadership under Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

his capable team of ministers, and an efficient governance apparatus. A strong and apolitical Armed Forces serve as a vital instrument for diplomacy and must be leveraged to enhance India's international standing.

At this critical juncture, India's citizens and political parties must rise above petty politics and work collectively to build a robust and prosperous nation. While the challenges are manifold, India is well on its way to claiming its rightful place in the global order.

As Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India from 1899 to 1905, once remarked regarding India's relations with its neighbours: *"India must maintain close relations with its maritime neighbours. It must*

aim to intertwine their economies and security within its own architecture so that the region's growth and prosperity are seen as one. India's security threats from larger powers like China in the northern areas can be neutralised by maintaining a strong maritime presence. If India loses its close connectivity with its maritime neighbours, and thus its ability to apply pressure on Chinese trade in the Indian Ocean, China will increasingly threaten India's northern borders, which could lead to territorial losses."

India must remember these lessons as it navigates its path forward in the complex geopolitical landscape of the 21st century.

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From Shared Past to Uncertain Future: India's Strategic Calculus in a Coup-Stricken Myanmar

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Abstract

Since the take-over of the Tatmadaw on 1 February 2021, Myanmar has seen growing internal instability. What was meant to be a move by the military to restore the integrity of the military-drafted Constitution to uphold the rule of law, three years since the coup has come full circle. The Tatmadaw, which has viewed itself as the protector of national unity, is dealing with the potential splitting of the country today. With Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) launching attacks on military assets and democratic forces battling to dislodge the junta, the growing complexity of issues in Myanmar is impacting India. With over 1643 km of porous land borders with the northeast region of India and transnational ethnic relations, the repercussions of the civil war-like situation in Myanmar extend far beyond a refugee crisis for India with grave consequences for states like Manipur in the northeastern region.

Introduction

Myanmar, India's immediate eastern neighbour, always found an essential place in the strategic thinking of post-colonial India. Geographically, Myanmar and India share a 1643-km-long boundary along the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. It has

been accepted that India and Myanmar are close physically, culturally, and historically (Chetty 2005, 171). The Buddhist period saw deep cultural and intellectual interaction between the two countries. During the British colonial era, Myanmar formed one of the provinces of the British Indian Empire till 1935. Due to this political connection, a large Indian community of traders and other professionals was present in Myanmar until the end of World War II. It may be reminded that leaders of the freedom movement of Myanmar and India carried on their respective struggles in parallel and were in close contact with each other, which was reflected in the close personal relationships between Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Colonel Aug San and Thakin-Nu (Dixit 1996, 165). Strategically speaking, there is an inextricable linkage between India's security and peace, progress and stability in Myanmar. The following statement of Sardar K.M. Panikkar, one of India's pioneer strategists, best encapsulates such a linkage: *"The defence of Burma is, in fact, the defence of India, and it is India's primary concern no less than Burma's to see that its frontiers remain inviolate. No responsibility can be considered too heavy for India when it comes to defending Burma."* (Panikkar 1945, 13)

V.K. Krishna Menon, then Defence Minister of India, also emphasised the strategic unity

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between India and Myanmar. Speaking at the UN General Assembly on 17 April 1953, he said: ‘What hurt Burma would hurt India because of links of friendship, geography and history between the two countries’ (Official Records of the UN General Assembly, 7th Session, April 1953). The above statements only revealed the intimate strategic connection between the two countries. Despite the age-old ties, the past political and cultural linkages, strategic location and geographical proximity, the history of India-Myanmar relations has been marked by many hiccups due to several external and internal geo-political factors. However, since the early 1990s, there have been persistent efforts on the part of New Delhi to improve relations with its strategically vital neighbour – Myanmar- mainly when Myanmar came under the influence of Beijing to the detriment of India’s interests. Ever-growing Chinese influence in Myanmar; India’s internal security problems arising out of insurgency movements in its troubled North Eastern Region (NER) and the concern for developing its landlocked North Eastern Region; New Delhi’s determination to expand its relations with ASEAN in the changed geo-political milieu of post-Cold War period and India’s desire to find a foothold in the resource-rich Myanmar’s economy are the critical factors which have prompted New Delhi to change its approach towards military regime in Myanmar. As a result of the consistent efforts of New Delhi, India, and Myanmar, they have come a long way in reconciling their past differences and establishing a good neighbourly relationship.

The improving relationship between the two neighbours is best reflected in the pattern of their

engagements. Today, India is engaging Myanmar at the bilateral level, at the sub-regional grouping like BIMSTEC and at the ASEAN level. The relationship, however, has been disturbed by the current civil war in Myanmar following the military coup in February 2021. Three years after the military coup in Myanmar, Operation 1027 was launched against the military junta by the Three Brotherhood Alliance members comprising the Arakan Army (AA) based in the Rakhine State, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) from the Kokang Region of Shan State and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army also from the Shan state. On 27th October 2023, the Alliance simultaneously attacked military outposts and police stations and took control over key cities and highways in the northern part of Shan State. The rebellion quickly spread to the Saigang region. By the 6th of November, the second biggest city in the country, Kawlin, fell in the hands of the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), becoming the first district-level town to be taken by the insurgents. By the 7th of November, with the launch of ‘Operation 1107’ in support of Operation 1027, many other insurgent groups across the country joined hands. This was perhaps one of the rare occasions in the troubled history of Myanmar where insurgent groups from a variety of ethnic groups had come together to carry out meticulously coordinated attacks against the junta.

The Peoples Defence Forces (PDF), a militia group that has branched out of the shadow of the National Unity Government (NUG), also joined the fray. The NUG has the unstinted support of the United States (US) and has its office in

Washington, DC, a short distance from the White House. The NUG welcomed the US Congress passed HR 5497 Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act, 2021, which authorises appropriations to provide humanitarian assistance and ‘other’ support to Myanmar, in addition to taking upon itself to promote democracy and human rights¹. Using Burma and not Myanmar as the name of the country by the US in the Act passed by the US Congress is seen as a provocation as the name ‘Burma’ was rejected by the Junta for ‘Myanmar’.

Myanmar-China Relations: Possible Consequences for India

The Western policies have almost over the years coerced Myanmar to look towards China and Russia for support. The Washington government had even accused Myanmar’s defence ministry of importing nearly USD 1 billion worth of materials and raw materials to manufacture arms² and China remaining Myanmar’s primary source of foreign investment, with 40% of its foreign debt owed to China. Further, there is a danger of sanctions naturally exacerbating China’s debt trap policy. Considering China’s projects in Myanmar that have advanced under the junta, creating an ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India has every reason to worry about China’s interest in a ‘back door’ access to the Indian Ocean.

Further, Myanmar’s rich oil and natural gas reserves and its fragile geographical location have made it a priority in China’s future plans. China has constructed a natural gas and oil pipeline, which

starts from Kyaukphyu city of Myanmar’s Rakhine State, traversing through the Chin state to China’s Yunnan region, which is China’s springboard to the ASEAN, just the way the northeast region is springboard to the ASEAN for India. Gwadar port, part of CPEC and Kyaukphyu port, gives China an advantage in strategically containing India and blocking our access to the West and the East. Even though India-US relations have strengthened, especially after Prime Minister Modi’s visit to the US, the US concerns in the region may impact India’s Act East policy. For instance, in May 2023, Adani Group’s ports arm APSEZ had to sell its Myanmar port project for an enormous loss due to the sanctions imposed by the US on Burmese military-owned Myanmar Economic Corporation Limited. The project could have established India’s port footprint in Southeast Asia.

Myanmar is also paying the price for the world’s conflicts over rare minerals and greenhouse gases, particularly in the wake of the West’s transition to green energy. With the politics of critical and rare earth minerals, an investigation by the Associated Press, Myanmar is being called the ‘Sacrifice Zone’³. Amongst other findings, the investigation revealed that even though the US Congress required companies to disclose conflict minerals with an assurance that it does not benefit armed groups, the law did not cover rare earth minerals. Rare earth elements were also found to be omitted from the European Union’s 2021 regulation on conflict minerals. Today, Myanmar is one of the top four countries in the world that produces rare earth elements. The unregulated mining combined with political instability has

China's projects in Myanmar Post-Coup: (BRI)

Name of the project	Total Investment	Location	Status	Development under the regime
Mee Lin Gyaing LNG	US \$2.5 billion	Ayeyarwady region	On Going	Approved by Myanmar Investment Commission
Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (KPSEZ)	US \$1.5 billion	Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State	On Going	Reorganised the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone management committee with further planning to construct.
New Yangon City project	US \$1.5-billion	Yangon	Planning	The land acquisition process is being finalised
Chinshwehaw CBECZ	-	Northern Shan State	Planning	Officials to expedite work on new land border crossing
Kanpiketl CBECZ	US \$22.4 million	Northern Kachin State's Special Region 1	On Going	Approved by Myanmar Investment Commission
Kyaukphyu Power Plant	US \$180 million	Kyaukphyu Township, Rakhine State	On Going	Completed Phase I
Kyaukphyu deep sea port	US \$1.3 billion	Kyaukpyu Township	On Going	Joint venture between the Chinese consortium CITIC Myanmar Port Investment Limited and the KPSEZ management committee.

Source: Sreeparna Banerjee and Tarushi Rajaura, 2021. "Growing Chinese Investments in Myanmar post-coup". Observer Research Foundation (ORF).

created an atmosphere of underhand deals and profits being shared by militias and insurgent groups. Chin and Rakhine states, as well as the Saigang region, apart from Kachin State, are also rich in resources such as aluminium, nickel, iron, chromite, oil and gas, but most importantly, rich in heavy rare earth elements, such as dysprosium and terbium, classified as the single-most critical element among rare earth.

With growing world economies and geostrategic competition based on critical minerals that will fuel these economies, areas across India's Northeast frontier will suffer consequences. The conflict in Manipur is but a precursor to what India may have in store for the future. Conflicts like

those in Manipur will demand a broader perspective and geostrategic and geopolitical understanding. Stepping away from short-sighted analysis, especially by vested Western interests who have misunderstood complex sensibilities historically, might be the first step towards unravelling the changing dynamics of a complex conflict with wider ramifications. This region's successive US, EU and UK policy failures have already created a complex situation. For instance, while the EU was imposing its seventh round of sanctions last year, its imports from Myanmar surged, increasing substantially from the pre-coup years⁴. Arguably, it is a better policy than sanctions that impact the ordinary citizen on the ground without facilitating

a regime change. However, the alienation of the Junta has not only exacerbated the insurgency in Myanmar but also given China a stronger foothold. China not only tries to maintain a cordial relationship with Tatmadaw, but it also tries to improve its relations with conflict groups such as the Ethnic Armed Organisation (EAO) and non-state combatants by offering arms. Thus, China exploits every possible tactic to build trust with Tatmadaw and, simultaneously, with opposing groups⁵.

This, however, does not mean there are no underlying suspicions between China and the Tatmadaw. Interestingly, China has refrained from recognising Myanmar's Junta leader, Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing, indicating continuing mistrust between the two countries. Previously, when President Thein Sein decided to open up Myanmar to the world, China was wary of its plans towards the West and vice versa. Beijing saw it as Naypyidaw side-lining China for the West or, at the very least, trying to play both sides. However, with Aung San Suu Kyi, relationships improved for a while. It was right before the elections in 2015 that brought her to power. China invited her on an official visit, where she met President Xi Jinping.

Furthermore, her policy towards the Rohingyas saw a massive backlash from the West, bringing China back to the centre stage in Myanmar, with President Xi Jinping visiting Myanmar in 2020, the first Chinese premier to do so in over 20 years. However, this blossoming friendship was short-lived with Aung San Suu Kyi's growing proximity to the military junta during the Rohingya crisis, as

well as public sentiment in Myanmar turning against China because of the visible Chinese migration. There have also been significant concerns in Myanmar over China's illegal mining for critical rare earth minerals, leaving areas the size of Singapore in northern Myanmar uncultivable and rivers poisonous, resulting in mass protests against China.

Additionally, China's concern with the Tatmadaw is more than just the cybercrime and gambling rackets operating from Myanmar. The problem for China is that the Tatmadaw has not been able to stabilise Myanmar nor consolidate its power effectively, which has jeopardised China's infrastructure investments. Whether it is the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), its oil and gas pipelines or the Kyaukphyu deep seaport, without political stability and control on EAOs, China's alternative to its "Achilles heel", the Strait of Malacca, will remain compromised. Though China has made its way to restarting some of the projects with its influence on EAOs, Myanmar's balancing act has once again made them anxious.

Consequences for the Northeast region- Epicentre Manipur

Across the border in Myanmar, after the regime change in Naypyidaw, the military crackdown has caused many to be displaced. In the Sagaing region across Manipur, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk has said, "Since the beginning of the coup, the military has scorched at least 70,000 homes across the country, 70 per cent of which were in Sagaing region. Over 1.5 million people have been forcibly

displaced with minimal access to humanitarian aid”⁶. The porous border of Manipur has absorbed this influx, with Mizoram next door recording over 40,000 Myanmarese refugees. In addition, active anti-Junta insurgent groups, such as the Chin National Army (CNA) or the Arakan Army, are only a few outfits operating across the border of India, with many, like the CNA and Kachin Independence Army, having transnational ethnic ties with communities in the Northeast.

Manipur having borne the brunt of the influx of illegal immigrants from Myanmar, weapons to fuel the recent Manipur conflict between the Kukis and Meiteis and the increase of drug trade from Myanmar was only the precursor of what could potentially have far-reaching consequences for India’s national security. As long as instability continues to grip Myanmar, it gives incentive to insurgent groups with transnational ethnic ties to create grander designs that remain unfulfilled after the containment of the Manipur conflict. Although faultlines within communities in Manipur and Mizoram may have been made, the territorial integrity of these states remains indomitably intact. However, it would be foolhardy not to recognise the vulnerability of the over 1643 km porous borders between India and Myanmar with the Free Movement Regime - 16 km on both sides, which is still abrogated.

Strategically, after the Manipur conflict, in a not-so-remarkable concurrence of events, the Chin National Army on November 7th 2023, supported by PDFs that operate from the Chin State and Sagaing Division of Myanmar, captured key military outposts and towns on the border of India.

Khampat town on the Kale- Tamu road, an important trade route and Khampat police station in the Sagaing region were the first to fall⁷. The Indian border town of Rikhawdar in Falam township was also seized, it is the first town in Chin state that is entirely in control of the Chin National Force (CNF). It was widely reported that CNA spokesperson Salai Htit Ni described Rikhawdar as a hub for trade with India and noted that it was close to outposts of the local CNA groups⁸.

Rikhawdar is located a short distance from Zokhawthar town in Mizoram and critically has one of the two land border crossings between India and Myanmar. The Chin National Army flag flew high over the border crossing in an ominous declaration of rebel victory. The CNA and PDFs were aided by their Thantlang Drone team, which allegedly has access to drones made from commercially available parts similar to the MR-10 cargo drones used by the Indian Army. To add to their string of strategically captured towns and military installations, it took a group of 80 insurgents to take control of the Khawmawi military camps in the Chin state. Many of these groups are active along the Mizoram border. The offensive in Chin state resulted in 75 soldiers of the Junta having to take refuge in Mizoram. However, not just the Junta needs to take cover; the civilians also need to be covered. The capture of these areas prompted over 2000 civilians to pour into India within a week. With an estimated 50,000 refugees in Mizoram and countless unregistered ones in Manipur, the issue continues to be unsettling⁹.

Further, PDF Zoland, a smaller group but with an ambitious name, took over the junta hilltop base

on Kennedy Peak in the Tedim township. Zo or Zou is the northern Kuki-Chin-Mizo language spoken amongst tribes in Myanmar and India. During the Manipur conflict, this transnational ethnic identity was propelled by the idea of *Zalen'-gam* (land of freedom for all Kuki people). In India, *Zalen'-gam* constitutes parts of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Karbi Anglong District in Assam; in Myanmar, it includes the Kabaw Valley, the Chin State and parts of Sagaing Division; and in Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill tracts. The situation is reminiscent of the now partially exhausted Naga insurgency that dreamt once upon a time of 'Greater Nagalim for Christ'. The Naga umbrella identity was founded upon bringing together over 16 main tribal groups with their distinct names and languages, with a sense of unity forged with the advent of the British administration and Christianity. The idea of Nagalim, similar to *Zalen'-gam*, pursued the idea of bringing tribes under an umbrella identity across the northeast region and in Myanmar.

Besides countering the dream of a 'Land of Freedom', which sounds innocuous but hides a subtle secessionist agenda, India should hope for a unified and stable Myanmar. The US involvement in the internal affairs of India's neighbours, whether Myanmar or Bangladesh, will have a spillover effect. India is not new to the geopolitical games played by the US from time to time. The US- CIA involvement in the Naga insurgency is well-recorded. A paper published by the Indian Council of Social Sciences Research claimed that a former secret service agent revealed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had supported and

financed the Naga underground movement till the 1950s. The USA continued to be the patron and supplier of arms and ammunition to the insurgent groups of Northeast India from Bangkok in the 1970s. (Naga 2011, 95-105).

Myanmar, too, has borne the brunt of foreign interference, whether it was during the 1950s when the CIA supported the Kuomintang (KMT)¹⁰ or pro-democracy forces in the 1980s, giving them funds and training in Thailand. Today, the NUG and the allied EAOs have reportedly asked the US Congress for \$525 million in aid and \$200 million in nonlethal humanitarian aid¹¹. Finally, the reality of the situation brewing in Myanmar is that it is too close for comfort for India. The conflict in Manipur has left the region and the country anxious. The fall of crucial towns, military installations and infrastructure just across the border of India will not only give impetus to anti-national elements and insurgents but also to the illegal trade of contrabands, including drugs, gold and areca nuts that are already common in these areas. The US support for EAOs will give insurgents hope for independence. Former Acting President Myint Swe, in an admission of the challenge faced by the Junta, stated that the conflict in Myanmar risked breaking the country apart. This would plummet the region into utter chaos. It is in India's interest to hope that Myanmar will regain its stability and remain whole, not just for India's future ambitions in Southeast Asia but also for India's immediate concerns about stabilising the northeast region, especially Manipur.

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The Dragon's Shadow: A Look at China's Expansionist Strategy and Its Impact on India

Priyadarsi Mukherji*

A remarkable achievement of engineering and construction, the Great Wall of China, with a series of military fortifications, stands as a reminder of the concept of national defence that typified the mindset of the early Chinese. This man-made mega-project served as a psychological barrier between the self-perceived “civilisational-superior” Han Chinese and the so-called “barbarians” belonging to the northern tribes, say, the people of Turkic ethnicity, the Tartars and the Huns. The concept of exclusion was ingrained in the psyché of the Han Chinese for the last 2500-3000 years. Yet the Mongols later on breached the wall to conquer China.

Following an unwritten edict, the Communist Party of China (CPC or CCP) pursued the strategy of defeating all the non-Han ethnicities that had once ruled over parts of China even for a short duration in history. The Tibetans, the Mongols, the Manchus, the Tanguts, the Kiangs (Qiang, the genetic ancestors of the Tibetans), the Khitans and the lesser-known peripheral tribes of Yunnan are some examples. The infamous incident of burning classics and burying scholars alive was attributed to the first emperor of China, Qin Shihuang (259-210 BCE). Despite being considered one of the most ruthless tyrants as reflected in Chinese history and folklore, today, the CPC considers him a hero who annexed the small kingdoms and ushered in a political system

of authoritarianism. China today takes pride in Qin Shihuang and his ruthlessness in burning books of non-Chinese origin and burying alive dissentient scholars, thus justifying the CPC's strong-arm tactics in the name of implementing “unity”.

A Sinocentric Strategy of Exclusion

Integration, as per the Chinese concept, is the forcible assimilation of non-Chinese ethnicities by obliterating their cultures through Sinicization. Even before the founding of the “People's Republic”, the CPC had made an elaborate plan to capture the water resources of entire Asia by occupying Tibet. In the process of forcible occupation of Tibet, the original Tibetan names of rivers and toponyms were systematically obliterated by the Chinese rulers. The three regions of undivided Tibet — Ü-Tsang, Amdo and Kham became history when China annexed and incorporated large parts of these regions into the adjacent provinces like Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan and renamed Amdo as Qinghai. Today, it is seldom known that the Yellow River (Hwang-ho) was *Ma-Chu*, the Yangtze River was *Dri-Chu*, the Mekong was *Dza-Chu*, the Salween was *Gyalmo-Ngulchu*, and so on.

Similarly, the picturesque town of Jiuzhaigou, which means “Valley of Nine Fortified Villages”, was a Tibetan town named *Siza-Degu*, meaning

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“The Nine Villages with Precious Roots”. The Giant Panda, which became China's mascot in the global arena, is an animal belonging to Tibet, solely surviving in the Tibetan habitats. Hence, no artwork or painting depicting pandas emerged from any Chinese painters until Tibet remained an independent entity. Pandas could be protected from the omnivorous Chinese solely due to adherence to the non-violence of the Buddhist doctrine by the Tibetans¹. Panda, known in Tibet as *Dhom-tra* (lit. spotted or coloured bear), a docile creature exclusive to Tibet, was misappropriated by China and made into a Chinese mascot after bestowing it with a belligerent demeanour.

As discussed in my previous article², the CPC aggressively seeks to negate history and deliberately pursues to extend its “Imperial Legacy” over its adjoining countries and regions that have been flagrantly fabricated and are untenable through historical facts. Resorting to big-power bullying tactics, China continues depriving the Southeast Asian nations around the Indo-Pacific (South China Sea) region of getting economic benefits. The legitimate rights that the smaller countries of the region have over their territorial waters are being denied by China in the name of its exclusive rights over the “Ancestral Ocean”. While calling the entire South China Sea or the Indo-Pacific region as China's exclusive territory or sphere of influence, China blatantly declares that the Indian Ocean is not India's ocean.

China's tactics of intimidation through maritime expansionism had long taken root in denying trading rights to other countries in the western Pacific region while usurping maritime and trading rights in the Indian Ocean region.

Maintaining exclusive control over maritime resources by forcibly denying rights to trade and livelihood to the neighbouring countries in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia has increasingly revealed the overtly despotic nature of China. Renaming places, sea shoals and oceanic beds with Chinese names far beyond the territorial limits of China — is another reflection of the tyrannical propensities of the Sino-Supremacists. Cases in Arunachal and the oceanic sea beds around India indicate such propensities.

Hayreddin Pasha, the famous admiral of the Ottoman Navy during the mid-16th century, had said, “Who controls the sea rules the world.” Later, a US naval historian, Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1914), cited the same view. Such quotations appeal to China, which finds justification in advocating the “sea-power theory” but with a typically superstitious Sinocentric rhetoric — “The dragon is a totem of the Chinese nation...the Chinese proudly consider themselves the descendants of the dragon. A dragon dives into the sea. Only when the descendants of the dragon are closely bound to the sea can they have a more prosperous future.”³ Such redundant rationalisation is a ploy to seize the worldwide maritime resources under the tag of “national rejuvenation.”

The so-called “Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century”, a brainchild of Xi Jinping since October 2013, has been termed as a concrete embodiment of the “soft power” expansion and “smart power” engagement of China in diplomatic relations. The concerned chapter discusses “The Sea Dream Shines upon the Chinese Dream”. Thus, China aspires for the rise and renaissance as a maritime power. It propounds that China's sustainable economic development and national defence

strategy are closely tied to the sea. It further expounds that China's sea power development lies in its claims of sovereignty and the need for defence...to maintain its marine rights and interests. The expansion of the Chinese navy has also been dealt with but without factually stating its actual role—challenging US maritime supremacy and usurping other countries' marine rights and interests. China proclaims that the South China Sea is the “Mother Sea” of the Chinese people. And that “if the sea dream is the epitome of the Chinese dream, the maturity of the national maritime consciousness is the prerequisite for achieving the sea dream.”⁴

At the end of 2012, Xi Jinping launched his pet phrase 中国梦 (The Chinese Dream) based on the concept of the “American Dream”. The “Chinese Dream” has a profound connotation that follows the Olympic dream, the Space dream, the Aircraft Carrier dream, and the Nobel dream. Realising the space and aircraft carrier dreams manifests that China is gradually fulfilling its dream of catching up with the world's advanced levels in the hi-tech arena. Nevertheless, China suffers from the ill consequences of a lack of faith and morality. Moral and ethical dislocation have been observed in China today. However, the preamble of the chapter questions — whether it is patriotism or nationalism.⁵ The era of Xi Jinping witnessed a “neo-normal” sought to be imposed by China the world over to establish a counter-narrative to “redress humiliation of the past”, which is essentially a dress rehearsal seeking global hegemony.

In the history of Chinese diplomacy, it is a proven fact that China, with a long legacy of alluding to history, pursues the policy of 远交近

攻 (*yuanjiao jingong*) — which means “to befriend distant states while attacking those nearby”, especially the ones China perceives as a threat in achieving the status of a big-power hegemon. This ancient diplomatic strategy has been adopted by successive monarchs and was inherited down the historical path, beginning from the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE) that annexed all other kingdoms by deceit and intimidation. The current rulers, the CPC, follow a stratagem that actively seeks to jeopardise the dynamics of growth in India and to weaken the Indian machinery of governance through subversion internally and by imposing over-dependence on China for all essential components needed for high-quality production of goods.

At the same time, China makes the covert supply of arms to all secessionist groups in and around India, intending to create constant disruption in the path of India's rise in the global arena. While befriending countries in the other hemisphere, China extracted all it could from India but paid back with ingratitude at every step India sought towards better resolution in the course of development.

China visualises India as a multiethnic hotchpotch with a Western-styled democratic tag that has not been able to enhance India's position as a real competitor of China, given India's potential in terms of human resources as the world's most populous country. However, at another level, China views India as an entity with the potential to be a civilisational challenger both at the regional and global levels. China's stratagem of exclusion includes India as the origin of Buddhism, India's Spice Route was much older than China's Silk Route, and India figured

prominently in that Silk Route. China's civilisational narrative seeks to nullify India's role or denigrate India's image as a civilisation that had a paramount impact on China.

China's narrative of civilisational superiority is based on its economic and military muscle acquired through enforcing a widespread global dependence on its manufactured products and vital appliances. The same narrative underscores how China has been able to catch up with the advanced nations and even surpass them in certain aspects, beginning from its impoverished status within forty years. The rhetoric in the anthropocentric narrative of China also entails its concept of race and its perceptions of racial supremacy based on its pride over being a Yellow Race that endured humiliation at the hands of White Westerners for centuries. China's newly-established prestige by virtue of its economic wealth and its indispensability as a global manufacturer has bolstered its theory of repositioning China as the alternative to the USA, which is conceived as a global hegemon whose power is fast depleting. Thus, China's rise underscores the discourse around Sino-Supremacy versus White-supremacy or Anglo-American supremacy.

India does not figure at all in China's global equations. China visualises “inevitable competitions between emerging powers and established powers... the US enjoys its established advantages in “soft power”, while China retains initiative in “hard power”... The new model of Sino-US major-country relationship reflects a new type of games aiming at building a new international order.”⁶ Inversely, China acknowledged that — “ancient China's worldview

and political ethics were centred on China and lacked the concept of international political equality.”⁷ While proclaiming the “Chinese Dream” as one of rejuvenation, peaceful development, cooperation, and win-win results, China harbours a dream of aggression and expansion, especially with India.

At the socio-political level, China's oversensitivity to claiming civilisational superiority or its claims over Tibet, East Turkestan, Southern Mongolia, Manchuria and other occupied regions is rooted in its lack of legitimising factors or rather non-justifiability of its domination over all those non-Chinese regions. Over-emphasis on China's civilisational superiority is also deeply embedded in the CPC's considerable shortage of confidence in its political system that actively seeks to suppress individuality in terms of human expression and freedom of thought. Thus, despotic propensities arise, wherein a despot governs by one's will or caprice. This form of despotism was common in the first stages of statehood and civilisation. Qin Shihuang, accredited as the “unifier” of China, was a terrible despot. The saga of despotism in China is indeed ancient and still prevalent today.

Induced Indispensability and Protectionism of China

The geo-strategic posturing and tactical repositioning by countries in the post-Covid era marked a paradigm shift in international relations. However, much earlier than this critical juncture, the world reconciled to China being the only country that follows protectionism, especially regarding trade practices and transnational communication networks. China's undisclosed

agenda has been to “take every possible advantage, every possible secret from others, but give nothing meaningful in return.” The global perception of China has been that it is a conservative country, always anxious about sustaining its one-party rule with an iron fist. A sense of uncanny discomfiture of the CPC emanates from mass membership of civic or cultural bodies, which tend to exceed that of the CPC. In such situations, the CPC cracks its whip and comes down heavily to suppress people who might be members of organisations other than the CPC. One such example is the Falungong. Such a phenomenon accentuates the inherent disbelief regarding the CPC's legitimacy in terms of popular perception of governance. An intense mistrust kept overwhelming the collective psyche of the Chinese, especially under the communist regime.

Consequently, the US companies that had provided China with advanced technological know-how during its open-door reform period were denied access to their products in China, especially in vital areas of social media, artificial intelligence, and software products. The Chinese paranoia led them to innovate many alternatives that could satisfy domestic consumers and, at the same time, prevent them from being “polluted” by Western values. China grew into a gigantic electronic manufacturing hub and erected a Chinese Firewall to prevent all outside apps from being used inside China. The Chinese developed alternatives to popular apps and websites. Some of the main alternatives from a long list of apps are as follows:

- Google — Baidu. [Baidu Images, and Baidu Videos].

- Google Map — Baidu Map or GaoDe Map [map and navigation app].
- WhatsApp — WeChat [instant messaging platform].
- Facebook — QQ [micro-blogging platform owned by Tencent].
- Facebook Marketplace — XianYu [trading or secondhand marketing platform].
- Twitter — Weibo or Sina Weibo [micro-blogging platform].
- Instagram — Xiaohongshu [lit. The Little Red Book; image-based blogging platform].
- Tinder — Tantan [dating app].
- Amazon — AliExpress; Taobao; Pinduoduo [shopping app].
- Uber — DiDi [taxi-service app].
- Uber Eats; Uber Food — MeiTuan WaiMai; Ele.me [food-delivery apps like Zomato].
- Paypal — Alipay [payment app; similar to the later Indian *avatar* Paytm].
- Google Chrome Browser — UC Browser.
- YouTube — Bilibili; Youku; Tudou (Tudouwang).
- TikTok — Douyin; Kuaishou [short video app].
- Google Meet; Zoom — VooV [video conferencing service].
- Abode Scanner — Cam Scanner.
- Quora — Zhihu [question-and-answer social media site].
- Yelp — DaZhong DianPing [restaurant, food delivery, business recommendation app].
- Instacart Grab Supermarket — HeMa [retail platform for fresh meals].

While enforcing protectionism internally, China has conveniently taken excessive advantage of liberal societies and professed itself

as a potential possessor of nothing less. This advocacy came at a cost with theft, violating intellectual property rights, plagiarism, and, lately, cybercrime. The Western duplicity in violating rights and exploiting resources over the centuries has found a new inheritor: China in the current era. Misappropriation of cultural legacies and ultimate assimilation into its Sinosphere has increasingly endangered all other ethnicities in terms of socio-cultural uniqueness. Genghis Khan (1162-1227) of Mongolia; Giant Panda, and the original names of rivers in Tibet; the Turfan grapes of East Turkistan (now Xinjiang); all Buddhist relics along the Silk Route that were essentially within the Tibetosphere or the erstwhile Indosphere; the Potala Palace in Lhasa — have all been systematically Sinicized. Even the cultural heritage sites belonging to non-Chinese ethnicities have been replicated into miniature structures in entertainment parks in China. The objective has been dual. Firstly, it attracts global attention and wins appreciation with a Chinese tag; secondly, it capitalises through commercial exploitation.

The Chinese penchant for giant constructions and massively large-scale projects is historical. For example, the Great Wall, the Grand Canal (between Beijing and Hangzhou), and the Three Gorges Dam. However, the contemporary efforts of China have been primarily aimed at surpassing the height of the 830-meter-high Burj Khalifa, the skyscraper in Dubai. The Jinmao Tower in Shanghai and financial centres in almost all cities in China — whether in Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Shenzhen or any SEZ- are examples of such wild ambitions. The Chinese have not desisted from making replicas of the Seven Wonders of the

World inside large amusement parks. Not only possessing what others have but surpassing others in what others do not — has an ancient mooring in the neo-Confucianist thoughts of Mencius (372-289 BCE). His philosophy focuses on a dictum — “poverty should not bother oneself, but inequality should.” This aphorism has effectively driven the Chinese throughout centuries. It has even propelled them to outstrip others in the contemporary era of cut-throat competition.

In its effort to exert pressure through monetary and military clout, the Chinese state has incorporated its notoriously *Perfidious Land-grab Army* (PLA) under the CPC, which consists of five service branches: (1) Ground Force, (2) Navy, (3) Air Force, (4) Rocket Force (Nuclear Missile forces), and (5) Strategic Support Force (SSF). The SSF wages war in the space, cyber, political and electronic realms. Psychological warfare, subverting public opinion or media warfare, and legal warfare— constitute the principle of the “three warfares”⁸ concept of the SSF. The “three warfares”, stated to be inspired by the Zhou dynasty strategist Sun Tzû's book *The Art of War*, is placed at the core of China's military reforms. Sun Tzû's notion of winning without fighting aims at undermining international institutions, altering borders, and subverting global media. Information warfare theory is fundamental to the PLA's science of military strategy. Institutions like the PLA Academy of Military Sciences operated by the Central Military Commission (Beijing); the PLA National Defence University (Beijing); National University of Defence Technology (Changsha); the PLA Information Engineering University (Zhengzhou); and Army Engineering University of the PLA (Nanjing) are a

few out of many such institutions that specialise in modernising the warfare techniques, and above all, conduct research through specialists and also by applying high degree of deception and camouflaging.

The recommencement of Open Hostility

The downward slide in India-China relations has taken a dangerous dimension in terms of regional security, given the all-out aggressive posturing by China along the land borders and on the high seas. When the Chinese embassy in Delhi arranged for a chartered flight to ferry Chinese citizens out of India on 8 June 2020, exactly a week before the bloody incident at Galwan, the move itself entailed an ominous message that something dreadful was going to happen shortly. My hunch turned true, as mentioned in my previous article.⁹ The Galwan Valley incident that marked the sharp downturn in India-China relations also exposed the duplicity of the CPC when it resorted to misinformation through deception regarding the actual figures of casualty.

However, facts emerged in the official Weibo account of the CPC's Political and Legal Committee of the Central Committee, the "China Chang'an Net". A long list of 38 killed on the Chinese side was added to the officially released list of four. Apart from the officially acknowledged death toll of four, the 38 hidden fatalities on the side of the Chinese PLA came out into the open as a result of intense resentment against the Chinese political system due to official acts of concealment. The online post, dated 03 December 2022, laid bare that "out of the 42 fatalities, most of the PLA soldiers were killed on the spot in a hand-to-hand combat with the Indian

soldiers and some injured PLA soldiers died due to sub-zero temperature and some while fleeing in the Galwan River." One Chinese colonel posted a photo of the actual cemetery of the Chinese PLA soldiers who died in the Galwan clash. He was quoted saying in February 2021 that the Sino-Indian conflict caused 42 deaths. As this figure was more than double the Indian casualty, the Chinese government was in overdrive to cover up the facts to avert a clear-cut "loss of face" vis-à-vis India.

Nevertheless, an online article authored by Li Tianyun highlighted that the attitudes of the Chinese and Indian governments were vastly different when soldiers on both sides were killed in action. He said, "Indian soldiers die with dignity. Their photos and names are the headlines of all newspapers. They are praised and commemorated by the Indian people. They enjoy great honour and are called heroes admired by the people of the whole country." The article also underscored that a grand state funeral was held for the fallen Indian soldiers on 18 June 2020, where countless people mourned.

On the contrary, the names of the dead Chinese soldiers were kept concealed, and their urns were sent by the military to their families and buried silently. The author lamented, "This is not like dying for the country, but rather like doing something shameful." As if the soldier "died in a scandal that chilled his relatives!"¹⁰

The Chinese bloggers asked—"India can hold state funerals for soldiers who were killed. Why can't the CCP even publish the list of its soldiers killed and injured?" The resentful post also cited the Indian media report, quoting some of India's top, authentic sources. It brought out a greater

revelation that all the commanders and deputy commanders of the Chinese troops near the 14th patrol station of the CCP, who directly participated in the conflict between the two sides, were killed.¹¹ This exposé makes it clear that the barehanded Indian soldiers were far more capable of overpowering the Chinese soldiers who came with crude and antiquated weapons to kill the unsuspecting Indians. Far from announcing the number of Chinese casualties, the Chinese officials, on the contrary, asked the family members of the deceased to keep the news strictly confidential and bury the dead quietly. When the 4th-level sergeant chief of the PLA's Sirius Special Forces affiliated with the Western Theatre was killed in November 2020, but his body was cremated a year later, it was suspected that sporadic armed conflicts have been taking place at the border between India and China even after the June 2020 incident at Galwan.¹² A list of 38 hidden casualties and their respective provincial affiliations was disclosed.¹³ The Chinese deceit was exposed by the Russian News Agency TASS on 10 February 2021. The TASS report said that the “Chinese and Indian forces clashed in the region in May and June 2020, resulting in at least 20 Indian and 45 Chinese servicemen dead.”¹⁴

The anger over the utter insensitivity of the Chinese authority under the CPC was manifested in the analysis of the commentator Zheng Zhongyuan, saying that the CPC has an abnormal way of maintaining stability. “From the establishment of the CPC to maintaining the regime after the forming of the government, the accumulated experience and lessons of fear of collapse have made it nervous at the slightest sign of trouble. This should be why the CPC refuses to confirm the real casualty figures.”¹⁵

The Sinocentric Era of Manufactured Dispute and Hybrid Warfare

There is no disputed boundary with China. There is only Indian territory illegally occupied by China in the eastern and western sectors. China's hideously hypocritical posturing on the so-called “disputed territory” concept is a diabolic reflection of China itself being the largest entity in terms of illegal occupation of territories along the entire stretch of its neighbourhood. Be it Tibet, East Turkestan, Southern Mongolia, Manchuria, Yunnan, China-occupied Ladakh (CoL), or all that it has kept under its forcible occupation in the Indo-Pacific region.

Gaining commercial, technological, and military secrets of other countries to safeguard China's national security is believed to be the foundation of Chinese espionage. The Chinese intelligence agencies resort to espionage by engaging academics, students, scientists and others. Many of them eventually become deeply involved in clandestine groups of website hackers. The network technology developed by China helps in espionage against other nations. The Chinese spy agencies identify all the perceived adversaries as prospective targets through multilayered warfare. Hybrid warfare through manipulation of public opinion and waging psychological warfare on countries by combining cyber warfare and artificial intelligence are uniquely Chinese.

The PLA Unit 61398 (codenamed Comment Panda)¹⁶ is the military unit cover designator of an advanced persistent threat unit (APT unit) that is a source of Chinese computer-hacking attacks. The unit is stationed at Pudong, Shanghai. Its role consists of cyber-cum-electronic warfare.

Manifesting its brute force, China now boasts its abilities in digital spying and network attack capabilities.

The PLA Unit 61486 (codenamed Putter Panda)¹⁷ is China's army unit dedicated to cyberattacks on foreign corporations focusing on satellite and communications technology. China conducts its campaign to steal trade and military secrets from foreign entities through this unit. Not only India or the USA but even Russia — the current ally of China too has been a target for hacking and stealing technology in aerospace, satellite, missile and underwater detection of submarines. It extracts vital information from aircraft manufacturers. The unit's headquarters are in the Zhabei district, Pearl Tower, Shanghai.

The PLA Unit 78020 (codenamed Lotus Panda)¹⁸ is the PLA Chengdu military region's second technical reconnaissance bureau. It is a state-sponsored hacking team that collects intelligence from political and military sources. It focuses on stealing sensitive data and intellectual property from military, diplomatic, and enterprise targets in Asian countries, ASEAN, etc. The unit is a military unit cover designator, an information and cyber warfare branch of the PLA, based near Kunming General Hospital, Yunnan.

Chinese belligerence vis-à-vis Historical Facts

China's mega strategy has been to debilitate India in all possible ways. Currently, the Chinese navy is hyper-active in the regions of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal. In a war scenario, the warfront must be taken to China's backyard, where the enemies are deemed the weakest in defence. When China is engaged in the

Himalayas, the battle must be taken to the coastal areas of China where the greatest concentration of population and industries exist. Incapacitating China's economic infrastructure would destabilise the socio-political order in China. Joint tactical manoeuvres need to be conducted with friendly countries around China. Rigorous exercises focusing on retrieving lost territories from the clutches of China were a pressing need at the time as China's belligerence tended to threaten the Asian region or, in a larger sense, the whole world with an impending Yellow Peril.

A cartographic counter-offensive is another area where India must take proactive steps, such as naming all the landscapes — mountains, lakes, rivers, and places lying within the Chinese jurisdiction that had been territories of Indian monarchs in the past or even those that initially lay outside the Han territory — with toponyms of Indic root, and make maps and distribute those to the world bodies. My Silk Route survey in 2018 revealed vast areas inside East Turkestan (Xinjiang) were under the Kushan Empire (1st century BCE—3rd century CE). The prominent places named Turfan, Kucha and Kashgar were all within the Kushan territory, and the mural paintings in Dunhuang depicting Buddhist Jātaka tales in remote caves around these regions were made under the direct patronage of the Kushan kings. India must circulate the Indic names of places that fell within the royal control of Indic rulers in the historical past, be it Xinjiang or other regions that now fall under Chinese occupation. Newly drawn maps marking rivers and hills with the original Indic or Tibetan names are imperative on the part of India. As a long-time observer of China for more than four decades, here, my

perspectives on China are rooted in the onslaught of the Chinese government and its armed forces, seeking to destabilise India both regionally and globally.

The people-to-people relationship carries a much different story that is being washed away by the official Chinese toxicity propelled through hyper-nationalism and jingoism, bringing the

average Chinese to the point of pseudo-supremacist conceit and neo-colonialist arrogance. The restoration of all agreements between India and China and the honesty of adhering to a gentleman's policy squarely lie in the hands of China. China's proactively intruding into Indian territory while pretentiously talking of peace has further pushed India away from China.

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A Tale of Two Countries: Trajectories of Change in Pakistan and Afghanistan

Tara Kartha*

There is a certain strangeness about events in the West. For the first time in decades, Afghanistan is marginally more stable than Pakistan. Its economic indicators are also on the rise, unlike Pakistan's, which is precarious. These are relative figures; indeed, Pakistan has the bare bones of governance and functionality while Kabul is still building up. But the downward spiral of Pakistan in multiple areas, like economic strength, social and political stability and violence, is remarkable by any standards. In contrast, Afghanistan's upward graph of stability continues despite the worst predictions. This article reviews the trajectories of both countries in the most critical sectors of governance to formulate policy towards both.

Indicator 1: Violence tells its tale

A comparison of United Nations reports indicates a steady decline in armed clashes in Afghanistan, with a spike in recent months¹ due to the ban on poppy cultivation. That is a second aspect of stability. There is no doubt that Afghanistan has cracked down on poppy and ephedra cultivation, with the latter being the favoured ingredient for the production of methamphetamine, according to experts². While the end effect of this on the narcotics market is yet to be seen, the intentions of the Taliban are clear, and the unevenness of such clearance operations is an indicator of their governance capabilities.

Meanwhile, the Taliban clashes with the elusive Islamic State of Khorasan (ISK), with the United Nations report noting over 100 attacks against the group in 2022-2023. These attacks undermine attempts to ensure security and prevent foreign investments, particularly from China. Last year, a leaked memo from a Taliban commander noted that some 7000 ISK cadres³ were being trained close to the Durand Line, probably in Nangarhar. Just in September, eight Afghan soldiers were killed and several injured in cross-border firing from Pakistani forces in the Khurram area, just opposite Nangarhar. These incidents in the central sector have been climbing, leading to tensions.

According to research, Pakistan's violent incidents saw a record six-year high in 2023, with a 56 per cent increase in violence⁴. Data for 2024 shows that areas bordering Afghanistan, like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, totalled some 92 per cent of fatalities, significantly showing incidents not just of terrorism and violence due to security forces operations⁵. As for narcotics, in September last year, there was a significant drug clearance operation in the Qila Abdullah district of Balochistan, which claimed to have destroyed hundreds of labs and crop acreages.⁶

Reports on this are few, but what is apparent on the ground is that the thousands of tons of ephedrine and heroin seized in India originate from

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Pakistan. In this, the Haji Salim network based in Karachi has been identified, which operates across India, Sri Lanka and Maldives, among others⁷. No operation against any mafia network has been launched. Meanwhile, Pakistan is facing significant drug abuse among its youth, with reports noting around 6.7 million Pakistanis are addicted to ‘controlled drugs’, cannabis identified as the most used drug for some four million users, and an estimated 860,000 and 320,000 regular heroin and opium users, respectively. The fact that most of these drug cultivation areas are in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa makes for a toxic combination in terms of rising violence in the country.

Indicator 2: Unity and Integrity

A second aspect of Afghanistan is the Taliban’s attempt to integrate its poorly governed outlying areas. UNAMA reports regularly note that the Taliban are engaged in a program of outreach to distant provinces and redrawing district boundaries in a bid to elicit support from local communities. There have also been efforts to develop madrassa education professionally to recruit for civil administration from these institutions. While there is no doubt that overall freedoms are highly restricted especially for women, and there are still strong inter-tribal frictions, there are precise but tenuous efforts at normalcy, even while the opposite trend is apparent in Pakistan.

Instead of an outreach, Islamabad is worsening matters by proscribing the entirely peaceful Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) led by Manzoor Pashteen. The original Mehsud Tahafuz Movement (MTM) has been demanding since 2013⁸ the demining of the Mehsud territory,

impartial investigations and trials of those involved in the enforced disappearances of the tribe’s men, the ending of humiliating practices against locals at security checkpoints, extortions, and targeted killings (whether by the Taliban or during military operations), and the provision of fair compensation for properties damaged as a result of the conflict. With at least seven military operations taking place in these areas since 2001, the Pashtuns have had much to bear, including the backlash of three iterations of Pakistani interference, including mujahideen, the Taliban, and now a Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) that has turned against it. In September 2024, there was the spectacle of Lakki Marwat police staging a protest⁹, blocking the Peshawar Karachi Indus Highway for 72 hours, after repeated targeting of policemen. Their demand was simple. The army should withdraw from the area and give powers back to the police. In short, they knew how to deal with the militants, and the army was more of a hindrance. At least 75 policemen have been killed in ambushes and target killings in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2024, according to police data¹⁰.

Then, there is the Baloch question. Pakistan’s policy of ‘forced disappearances’ has become part of the policy, with no precise figures available, except for almost daily reports of one or another young person abducted. The strength of Baloch resistance was apparent in the spate of attacks in August when the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) launched “Operation Herof.” The BLA attacked some 22 buses, claimed to have captured a military camp for some 20 hours or longer, dominated critical parts of the coastal highway as well as major roads, and blew up the main railway line to Quetta and

the rail link to Iran. The group claimed that some 800 fighters and Fedayeen squads had participated in the operations. This was a virtual war against years of oppression, given the breadth and ferocity of the attack. But the establishment promptly made things worse. It barred the charismatic and entirely peaceful activist Mehrang Baloch from attending an event organised by *Time* magazine,¹¹ further alienating the people. She addressed it virtually anyway, which meant that Islamabad gained nothing.

The end result is two. The first is the Pashtun jirga, which demanded the removal of the army (and the TTP) and sought free movement of vehicles across the Durand line, reduced electricity costs and the ending of extortion, all to be done within 60 days¹². If these demands were not met, another jirga would be held. The second issue is that the two hugely divergent movements, Pashtun and Baloch, seem to have come together against the Pakistani state. That is dangerous for Pakistan and is the one trend to watch.

Indicator 3: State of the Economy

Pakistan's economy has little excuse for its repeated dependencies on foreign assistance. Afghanistan in the 1970s was still poorly developed, though with islands of prosperity like the 'bread basket' that was Herat, Kunduz, a hub of the cotton industry, and a famous exporter of dried fruits and carpets, with the country as a whole at peace with itself and the world, and self-sufficient in food. Since then, it has been at war, and despite that, it has managed to improve its economy in 2002, and then again as some fragile peace returns. The World Bank reports an increased supply of goods and services in the market, and the Afghani

averaged 79.0 to the US dollar in July 2024, when the Pakistani rupee was about 250 in the same period. Afghan revenue collection increased by 11 %, exceeding the target by 3%. All this is despite the steep decline in humanitarian aid, falling from USD 3.8 billion in 2022 to USD 1.9 billion in 2023. Further declines are likely as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stated that it has received just USD 649 million—21 per cent of the USD 3 billion required to meet the enormous humanitarian need¹³.

Pakistan has been facing a 'drip' aid arrangement since the 1950s when it began borrowing from the International Monetary Fund. Deputy Finance Minister Ali Pervaiz Malik disclosed that Pakistan will have to repay a startling USD 100 billion external debt in four years, which would primarily be funded by securing rollovers from bilateral lenders. The federal government's USD 100 billion external debt repayments are 10 times more than the current USD 9.4 billion gross official foreign exchange reserves. According to the Finance Minister, as told to the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance, the IMF has identified a USD 5 billion financing gap for the 2024 to 2026 period.¹⁴ Notably, major benefactors like China have begun to pull back on financial commitments, with the Chinese Ambassador pointing out that despite investing USD 5.5 billion in the power sector¹⁵ and improving power output significantly, Pakistan had delayed payment of USD 1 billion. China, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have agreed to roll over a USD 12 billion debt for one year to facilitate IMF bail-out packages. Again, it seems that while Afghanistan is grappling with near starvation in some parts of

the country, it is on an upward graph and retains its sovereignty. At the same time, Pakistan's economic troubles have landed it in a trap where it is torn between major donors.

Indicator 4: Relationship with Neighbours and the World

Afghanistan has been making definite strides towards greater acceptability. Its representatives have been travelling to Qatar, Iran and China, among other states, to participate in regional conferences. In addition, several other countries, including India, Britain and Norway, have closed embassies staffed by the previous incumbents. Around a dozen countries operate embassies in Kabul, some like India, at a limited strength. The Chinese and the Russian embassies are among the embassies operating at full strength. The former is far more active, as apparent from its embassy's activities. In recent days, China has pursued a far more independent line on Afghanistan, with its Ambassador's disapproval of Pakistan's pushing back thousands of refugees from Pakistan. Beijing's engagement with the Taliban is far more than it has had with the Karzai government and indeed predates its government formation, with engagements since 2015. It was also the first country to accept a Taliban Ambassador and appoint its own.

A report notes that bilateral trade more than doubled between 2022 and 2023 from USD 595 million to USD 1.33 billion. Still, few new noteworthy investments have been reported besides the Amu Dariya oil basin deal. Tangible engagement under China's Belt and Road Initiative has yet to materialise¹⁶. Russia is also standing

firmly by Afghanistan, with both cooperating to deal with the Islamic State. Recently, it has proposed to remove the Taliban from the list of sanctioned entities¹⁷. That is vitally important to Kabul. More critically, the Taliban have no real quarrels with their other neighbours (barring Pakistan) and are attempting to cooperate with them in reining in terrorism.

The contrast with Pakistan in this regard couldn't be sharper. As of July 2024, Pakistan's passport is ranked 102nd in the world by the Henley Passport Index¹⁸. True, Afghanistan is even lower at 104, but consider their relative histories. Also, Pakistan has troubles with all its neighbours. Iran fired missiles on Pakistan in January 2024 after years of asking Islamabad to rein in terror groups. Afghanistan now has a live border with Pakistan, and India has seen a rise in cross-border terrorism into Jammu in recent months. China, though not a neighbour, has been struggling with attacks against its citizens inside Pakistan.

Conclusion

For India, the sum of it is this. There is no indication that these two countries' trajectories will change in the foreseeable future. Afghanistan may falter as it goes along, but major neighbours like China and Russia are backing it in many ways that will make Kabul accountable to them. India has recently chosen to take a back seat in Afghanistan, which will mean losing out in a country that is on a rising trajectory. It should restart what it does best, namely, by giving small and effective aid packages. India announced Rs 200 crore in this year's budget, among the lowest allocations. Consulates need to reopen, and the embassy should

be made more functional, contingent on the security the Taliban is willing to provide. It certainly has the capability.

Pakistan, in its present trajectory of violence and insecurity, will continue to hit out in all directions. Still, there are some indicators that its major allies, like Saudi Arabia and China, do not want tensions between India and Pakistan to rise. The Saudis are impatient with the perennial instability in Pakistan, and China would prefer if it can get some returns from its massive investments in the country. For that, Pakistan must move spending towards infrastructure and development in places like Gwadar, where lack of finances is stalling multiple projects. Besides, Islamic extremism is not something China is comfortable with. However, the continuing spike in Pakistan-sponsored terror in J&K does not show that Islamabad wants to dial down tensions.

Yet, taken in entirety, quiet back-door talks with Pakistan could be considered. For India, the priority in national security is a stable western border, where troops can be reorientated towards a far more dangerous east, even should tensions with

China be reduced. The quid pro quo for Pakistan is trade, exploiting its geo-strategic location. Trade with Russia and Central Asia is also a priority for Delhi, though not a top one. Recently, Pakistan accepted President Putin's invitation to join the International North-South Trade Corridor (INSTC), the shortest route to get that trade going. This, in turn, has to be melded with the IMEC (India, Middle East Europe Corridor), which will be an attractive option for Indian consignments. Getting to that stage will take a while.

Meanwhile, given the profound implications for all concerned, it would be ideal for all three countries to engage in strong counter-narcotics cooperation. That in itself can be a test of Pakistan's sincerity. Cooperation on climate change and water management would benefit both. In the long term, tying Pakistan to a web of trade and transit could create leverage that would motivate Pakistan to abjure terrorism as an instrument of its foreign policy. Quelling a dangerous neighbourhood is in the interests of India and Afghanistan. Pakistan must choose its future trajectory for itself: terror or trade.

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Developments in Nepal and its Impact on India-Nepal Relations

Dnyanashri Kulkarni*

Introduction

On July 15, 2024, when Nepal's President, Shri Ram Chandra Paudel, appointed Shri K P Sharma Oli as the new Prime Minister of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML)-Nepali Congress (NC) coalition, it marked the appointment of Nepal's 14th Prime Minister in just 15 years. According to a power-sharing agreement reached on July 1, 2024, Oli and Deuba will alternate as prime ministers, each serving an 18-month term until the next general elections in 2027.

This political reshuffling raises two essential questions: *What does this new coalition mean for Nepal's political stability? And, can this government address Nepal's pressing economic and geopolitical challenges, particularly in its relations with India and China?*

Much like observing a Monet painting from the Impressionist movement—where stepping back allows the whole scene to emerge from short, fragmented brushstrokes—understanding a country's relationship, particularly with its neighbours, requires a similar approach. Political instability in Nepal is a product of its history and tryst with democracy, which is still a work in progress. A better understanding emerges when we view the events in Nepal in the larger

framework of the nation's recent history and geopolitical challenges.

The Political Precarity and Economic Instability

King Prithvi Narayan Shah's unification of various principalities in 1768 laid the foundation for a centralised monarchy in Nepal. Since then, Nepal has been ruled by different dynasties until 1951, when, with the end of the Rana regime, the first shoots of democracy emerged, with efforts towards framing a constitution based on parliamentary democracy.¹ Between 1951 and 1958, Nepal prepared for its first general election. During this period, rifts within and outside the political parties and frequent cabinet reshuffles led to chronic instability, with the country seeing five governments.² The Nepali Congress won the elections held on February 18, 1959, and BP Koirala was elected the Prime Minister.

Nepal's democracy dreams were, however, short-lived as King Mahendra banned political parties within a year in a coup and set up a Panchayat system. It took another 30 years to restore democracy. In 1990, a multiparty system was adopted with a constitutional monarchy and a new constitution was introduced. However, the 2001 royal massacre destabilised the monarchy,

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leading to further unrest. At the same time, Maoist insurgency was growing in the country. Finally, on 28 May 2008, the newly elected Constituent Assembly declared Nepal a Federal Democratic Republic, abolishing the 240-year-old monarchy³. In 2015, a new constitution was drafted by Nepal's Constituent Assembly.⁴ There was opposition from various groups, especially the Madhesis and some ethnic groups, who felt inadequately represented and feared their rights would be affected.

Nevertheless, the new constitution was adopted.⁵ Since 1948, Nepal has drafted seven constitutions—1948, 1951, 1959, 1962, 1990, 2007, and 2015—illustrating its ongoing efforts to shape a stable political framework. However, the shift to democracy has been marked by frequent changes in government, political infighting, and struggles to establish a stable system, leaving the country in a state of persistent political fragility.

The recent agreement between the Nepali Congress and CPN-UML, in which K.P. Sharma Oli and Sher Bahadur Deuba will alternate as Prime Minister⁶, is expected to work only in the short term. Previous coalitions have struggled to provide political stability. For example, the Maoist Centre, led by Shri Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda), has at various times allied with the Nepali Congress or with the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), but stability has remained elusive.⁷

The leftist alliance between the CPN-UML and Maoist Centre, formed in 2017, merged a year later to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), but that too later broke apart. Due to fragile coalitions and intra-party conflicts, Nepal has witnessed over a dozen changes in government

since the monarchy's dissolution in 2008, with shifting permutations of political alliances. Power-sharing arrangements have remained unstable, as personal rivalries and party competition often lead to internal divisions. Given the history of fractured coalitions and shifting allegiances, it is evident that Nepal's democracy requires more time to mature.

Much of Nepal's woes have to do with the state of their economy. In December 2023, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned that Nepal's financial system will face further strain if the country fails to address critical issues raised by the Asia Pacific Group of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). A field visit by a group from the FATF noted significant shortcomings in Nepal's adherence to anti-money laundering and terrorist financing standards. What was observed was a failure to criminalise private sector corruption, which exposed deficiencies in compliance mechanisms on issues related to money laundering and terrorist financing.⁸ Claims made by the former prime minister, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, in January 2024, of his government's achievements sounded hollow as the country continues to grapple with rising unemployment,

Earlier in January 2024, when then Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal repeated a list of his government initiatives as achievements, public resentment was deepening with market anomalies.⁹ These claims came when the country faced a trade deficit, unemployment, failing agricultural and industrial production, and declining restaurant and hotel business activities¹⁰.

The agriculture sector is central to Nepal's economy, as more than 70 per cent of the workforce is involved in agriculture. Yet, the sector generates

only around one-third of the country's GDP. The country that traditionally exported rice has been importing it for the past few years. Nepal imported around 1.4 million tons of rice from India in 2021-2022 (worth USD 473.43 million)¹¹.

Nepal's food inflation averaged 7.74 per cent, slightly above the annual targeted threshold of 7 per cent. More significant is the lack of employment opportunities outside the farm sector, which has led to a surge in Nepalis seeking employment abroad. In 2022-23, about 750,000 people left the country for foreign employment, turning many rural settlements into ghost villages or forests.¹²

Nepal and its Neighbours

As a landlocked country between two giant neighbours, geography has significantly shaped Nepal's relations with its neighbours and the world. Economic realities and deep-rooted historical ties with India are the other significant factors. Nestled in the Himalayas, Nepal shares a border with five Indian states to its South. Its northern border is with Tibet, which is now under Chinese occupation. Being hemmed between India and China, Nepal often balances its diplomatic and economic relationships with both.

Nepal's bilateral relations with China began in 1950 when China annexed Tibet. China's involvement with Nepal initially focused on preventing anti-China activities by Tibetans inside Nepal but has evolved over multiple sectors and now includes security cooperation, trade, and infrastructure connectivity. Since 2008, both countries have signed several intelligence-sharing agreements, primarily aimed at curbing pro-Tibet protests in Nepal led by exiled Tibetans. After the

2015 trade blockade by India, Nepal diversified its trade by deepening ties with China and, in 2017, joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for Nepal, China introduced a new platform called Silk Roadster. This initiative is anticipated to launch small projects to provide technical training, promote overseas study programs, enhance cooperation between enterprises, and organise cultural exhibitions and exchange visits. Nepalese political parties and social organisations are expected to participate in executing some of these activities. Initially, Nepal proposed 35 projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but this number has now been reduced to nine.

Similarly, from 2014 to 2018, China allocated USD 1.53 million each year to Nepal to support the livelihoods of northern Nepal, focusing on health, education, and road infrastructure¹³. China also played a role in Nepal's internal politics despite its claims of not meddling in the internal affairs of other countries. In 2018, China played a significant role in forming the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) through the merger of the CPN-UML with the Maoist Centre.¹⁴

Despite the Sino-Nepal rapprochement in the last few decades, the India-Nepal friendship is deep-rooted. Its historical, social, cultural, strategic, political, and economic ties cannot be ignored as they grow with their multifaceted bilateral engagement. As agriculture is central to Nepal's economy, with over 70% of the workforce engaged in this sector, the two countries have been working on agricultural research, technology transfer, and capacity building. India also plays a significant role in alleviating Nepal's lack of employment

opportunities. About eight million Nepalese citizens live and work in India, while only around six lakh Indians reside in Nepal. In addition, thousands of Nepalese students study in India on a Government of India scholarship. As of date, the Indian government offers 3,000 scholarships to Nepali students annually. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program also provides Nepalese officials and professionals capacity-building opportunities.

As India and Nepal extend visa-free entry, over the years, the movement from one country to another has not only increased tourism (Indians account for about 30% of foreign tourists in Nepal) but bilateral trade (India is Nepal's largest trade partner). India and Nepal have been working on enhancing trade and market access through infrastructure improvements and new agreements. The Nepal-India Trade and Transit Treaty, revised in 2023, allows Nepal access to India's inland waterways. Additionally, cross-border connectivity is optimised through integrated check posts at locations like Sunauli and Bhairahawa. Among the many completed and ongoing projects, the new Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline is an example of improved trade infrastructure for trade cooperation, saving significant costs for Nepal.

As it is evident, Nepal, being a landlocked country, is heavily dependent on its neighbours for connectivity and trade. During the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁵, 21 trade points were halted in 2020, of which 14 were recently reopened in May 2024. This prolonged closure severely impacted Nepali traders and workers, particularly in villages near the Nepal-China border that rely on essential commodities and the sale of medicinal herbs to

livestock¹⁶. In contrast, India ensured the supply lines between the two nations remained open during the pandemic. India is also Nepal's largest trade partner, with bilateral trade exceeding USD 11 billion in FY 2022-2023¹⁷.

Apart from this, Nepal is home to over 6,000 rivers, some of which significantly contribute to the Ganges River system. Against this backdrop, Nepal and India collaborate on water management, flood control, and irrigation projects, such as the Koshi Barrage and the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project. These efforts are crucial for agricultural productivity in the Indo-Gangetic Plains, which depend on water from Nepal's rivers.

Another key highlight of India-Nepal bilateral relations is humanitarian assistance, as Nepal is a highly vulnerable country to earthquakes. This is where India's aid comes into the picture. For instance, the horrors of the 2015 earthquake, which killed nearly 9,000 people and caused massive destruction, are a poignant reminder. India was one of the first respondents to the crisis. With Operation Maitri, India provided and continues to provide rescue, relief, and reconstruction aid.

However, bilateral relations between India and Nepal have not always been marked by consistent cooperation. With political regimes in Nepal frequently changing, their relations also shift, oscillating between periods of close collaboration and moments of tension and conflict. For instance, during his previous terms, PM Oli had a more aggressive stance towards India. In 2020, under Oli's leadership, Nepal released a new political map that included disputed territories such as Kalapani, Lipulekh, and Limpiyadhura, which escalated tensions with India.

The Indo-Nepal ‘open border’ has been looked at by experts through two lenses- a ‘springboard of opportunities’ with mutual interests or a ‘liberal paradox’¹⁸ as the 1880-kilometre border between the two countries has not been without disputes. The Kalapani area is strategically significant in South Asian diplomacy as it is a tri-junction between India, China and Nepal. As for Lipulekh, the Lipulekh Agreement, signed on 15 May 2015 between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping, has sparked controversy due to its implications for Nepal’s sovereignty. Specifically, Point 28 of the 41-point joint statement allows India to use the Lipulekh corridor without Nepal’s involvement, violating its sovereignty. This agreement is not the first instance that India and China have referenced Lipulekh in a bilateral context without consulting Nepal.

Apart from this, several reports indicate that terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), Indian Mujahideen, and various insurgent factions are exploiting the open border with Nepal to advance their agenda. Despite the border checkpoints, supplying trained operatives, circulation of fake Indian currency, and smuggling are some of the illegal activities noticed along the border. Additionally, the open border is misused for smuggling subsidised consumer goods¹⁹. For example, Nepal, which traditionally exported rice, has been importing it for the past few years. It imported around 1.4 million tons of rice from India in 2021-2022 (worth US \$473.43 million)²⁰. Following this, India banned exports of broken rice. It imposed a duty on exports of various grades of rice amid the threat of El Nio disruption, as well as to boost domestic supplies and calm local prices

after a below-average monsoon²¹. However, as Indian media reports, villagers illegally smuggled rice into Nepal along the India-Nepal border.

Conclusion

Though India-Nepal diplomatic relations were established in 1950 with the ‘Treaty of Peace and Friendship’, the cultural and civilisational connections go back to ancient times, to the period of the Ramayana. Today, this spiritual and historical connection between these two countries can be seen cherished with the contemporary sister city agreements signed (*Kathmandu-Varanasi, Lumbini-Bodhgaya, Janakpur-Ayodhya*) and the India-Nepal Ramayana Circuit. Today, these historic and civilisational relations are cherished and enhanced as India prioritises its relations with neighbouring countries through its ‘Neighbourhood First Policy.’

A stable political system survives crises without internal warfare.²² Though coalition governments are one of the essential features of a parliamentary democracy, in Nepal, coalitions are unable to sustain themselves, let alone implement long-term plans²³. Historically, they have been proven unstable, non-dependable and far less effective in addressing the challenges.

Political volatility in Nepal has significantly destabilised the country. The changing government often leads to inconsistent long-term domestic policy plans and foreign relations, particularly with neighbouring countries. The tilt towards China shown by the previous administration of K.P. Oli and the strong pro-India stance seen during Deuba’s previous tenure are examples of the above.

The newly formed coalition government will

likely provide short-term stability. Still, the ability of leaders to rise above personal interests and prioritise issues related to governance, especially issues related to employment, is open to question. India- Nepal relations have solid foundations, but Nepal will continue to hedge its bets with China.

The recent visit by Foreign Minister Arzu Deuba to India highlighted the potential for enhanced cooperation, but contentious issues like the boundary dispute will need to be settled soon. Nepal's democracy will, however, continue to be a work in being.

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Bangladesh: A Ticking Time Bomb

Robayet Ahmed*

Many might have seemed surprised by the fall of the Awami League government led by Sheikh Hasina on 5 August 2024. Still, those closely observing Bangladeshi politics recognised the signs well in advance. By 2021, it was evident that Sheikh Hasina was nearing the end of her tenure. Since 2020, two critical areas of control have begun slipping away: her political organisation and economic policy-making.

Control of her organisation shifted to her party's General Secretary, who was politically incompetent and focused more on consolidating his position than on strengthening the party. Consequently, many qualified political leaders were marginalised, causing numerous dedicated leaders and activists to become alienated from the organisation and ultimately rendering them inactive. Concurrently, in the economic policy-making sphere, Sheikh Hasina became reliant on a small group of businessmen who assumed control of key ministries, such as finance and commerce, through their influence and wealth. These individuals appointed an unqualified central bank governor at their discretion and initiated several redundant projects funded by exorbitant foreign loans solely for legal and illicit profit. Similarly, the trade of essential goods was monopolised by this cartel. As a result, the development trajectory and stability of consumer goods markets that Sheikh Hasina's government had maintained until 2018 shifted drastically, and economic activities became

largely stagnant during the year-long impact of COVID-19.

Since 2020, the escalating prices of essential commodities began generating resentment among the general populace, and this discontent was exacerbated by continuous social media reports of irregular loans taken by businessmen close to Sheikh Hasina. There were also widespread allegations on social media that these loans were being laundered abroad. In an attempt to quell this social media uproar, Sheikh Hasina made an ill-conceived decision to turn all but two newspapers, all digital media platforms, and private TV channels into government mouthpieces. Consequently, the public increasingly turned to those two newspapers and social media for news.

Opposition groups, particularly Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, effectively capitalised on this opportunity. They established a robust social media network using their expatriate members and extensive funding. Moreover, Jamaat-e-Islami's strategists, having anticipated the likely execution of their key leaders in 2012, adopted a decade-long plan. They focused on providing community services and religious instruction, targeting women and adolescents, with an approach designed to align them ideologically with Jamaat-e-Islami.

On the other hand, the youth vote that brought Sheikh Hasina to power in 2008 led to the formation of the Ganajagan Mancha, a movement aligned with the core politics of the Awami League. Although its impact is now a topic of history, neither

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Sheikh Hasina nor several senior leaders favoured this platform because of its young participants gaining popularity so quickly, fearing that these youths could soon become their rivals within the party. Sheikh Hasina, too, became wary of the Ganajagaran Mancha as a political threat to her legacy, believing that someone from this platform could emerge as a future leader, like her father, Sheikh Mujib—a simple young man who became a national leader—or as a competitor to her son or daughter.

To prevent political competition for her legacy, Sheikh Hasina began eliminating competent young leaders from party leadership and halted college and university student elections during her 16-year rule. Her main political rival, Khaleda Zia, also shared this stance, keeping these elections suspended during her tenure to secure her political legacy. Thus, she made no demands regarding this issue despite numerous demands from her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) during Hasina's rule. The mutual consensus between Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia created opportunities for the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Chhatra Shibir, which infiltrated both major political student organisations—the Chhatra League of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and the Chhatra Dal of Khaleda's BNP—to cultivate their leaders and activists within these groups.

In response to the emergence of the Ganajagaran Mancha in support of Hasina's politics in 2012, a group named Hefazat-e-Islam was formed with direct assistance from Khaleda Zia's party and the outside forces in Bangladesh. It was a coalition based on Qawmi madrasas that denounced the Ganajagaran Mancha as atheistic and launched violent street movements. Initially, Sheikh Hasina took a tough stance against Hefazat-

e-Islam but later established amicable relations in exchange for financial and other incentives, following the advice of her then-military secretary, who even publicly participated in Hefazat's gatherings. At their recommendation, the curriculum was increasingly Islamised, and numerous madrasas were established, allowing Hefazat to grow under government patronage.

Another major transformation occurred in Bangladeshi politics during this time. Ideologically, Hefazat-e-Islam opposed Jamaat-e-Islami's ideology. However, since Sheikh Hasina's then-military secretary was a follower of Jamaat-e-Islami, he succeeded in bridging the ideological divide between these two Islamist organisations to work against Sheikh Hasina in secret.

In line with their strategic plan, Jamaat-e-Islami launched a ten-year program in 2012 to promote "Dawati"—service and religious instruction. While this program was supposed to run until 2022, by 2020, just eight years into the plan, Jamaat-e-Islami's support base had expanded to become four times stronger than in 2012, surpassing any previous political strength. In 2022 and 2023, those closely monitoring Bangladesh's political landscape observed an unprecedented rise in support for Jamaat, particularly among a segment of the youth, women, and even academics and intellectuals.

Moreover, Jamaat exploited this opportunity since Sheikh Hasina accommodated Hefazat by aligning social and state policies with religious doctrines. Through Hefazat, they managed to instil their so-called religious discipline within society, especially in higher educational institutions and among families of Awami League members, creating a significant "soft" support base for

Jamaat beyond its dedicated followers over the last 12 to 13 years.

Thus, as extremists became more organised and economic management deteriorated, pushing commodity prices beyond people's reach, a major "time bomb" began ticking in Bangladesh. Adding to this was the lack of opportunity for citizens to vote in local government and general elections since 2014. While there was participation in local government, Awami League leaders consistently exerted undue influence to ensure their candidates' victories, weakening the grassroots organisation and making ordinary people part of this ticking time bomb.

Those observing Bangladesh's politics with impartiality anticipated since 2023 that the explosion of this "time bomb" was just a matter of time. Conversely, Sheikh Hasina believed she could neutralise it through administrative power. Those who know Bangladesh's history—and even Sheikh Hasina herself should have recognised from her past experiences—understand that in a small, ethnically homogeneous country like Bangladesh, attempting to defuse such a bomb through coercive measures is likely to backfire. Historically, during widespread discontent in Bangladesh, the most organised institution—the military—has always withdrawn its support for the ruling power. The situation was even more precarious this time, and it is a mystery why Sheikh Hasina and her local and international allies either failed to consider it or lacked accurate intelligence.

By the end of July, it was apparent that Sheikh Hasina's government was on borrowed time, and by August 3rd, it was clear that power was no longer in her hands. However, what transpired on the morning of August 5th remains ambiguous to political observers. Nevertheless, since this

outcome seemed inevitable, there has been little need to focus on the specifics.

Ultimately, the "time bomb" Sheikh Hasina was sitting on exploded when military support was withdrawn. Unlike previous times in Bangladesh, when political transitions occurred, the streets were controlled by political parties. This time, however, they were under the control of extremist forces in various disguises, making the events following Sheikh Hasina's fall far more severe and uncertain than ever before.

Many knew Sheikh Hasina was about to leave the country on August 5th. However, most people officially learned of her departure from the army chief's address to the nation, where he stated that Sheikh Hasina had resigned from her position as Prime Minister. It was later revealed that she had left without formally resigning, making her technically still the Prime Minister according to the constitution. The current government in Bangladesh, which emerged under the "doctrine of necessity" (resembling a ruling by the Pakistani court in 1958), lacks constitutional legitimacy despite wielding power through a muscle-flexing Supreme Court ruling.

This government has no constitutional or legal legitimacy. Even if the dissolved parliament was flawed due to election irregularities, the president's dissolving it and forcing the Speaker's resignation were *ultra vires* to the constitution.

While the army chief reassured the people in his address, he did not declare martial law or assume power by having the president declare emergency law. Instead, in the three days of governmental vacuum, attacks on homes of Hindu communities and other ethnic minorities took place, resulting in numerous deaths. Official reports

indicate that only nine Hindus were killed in these attacks, but over 10,000 houses belonging to the Hindu community were burned. In the current state of Bangladesh, there is no opportunity to gather accurate information because any attempt to do so could be fatal.

Immediately after Sheikh Hasina left the country, over 440 police stations were attacked by Jamaat, Hefazat, and other extremist groups. Officially, it was stated that 44 police officers were killed in these attacks, but a former Secretary, speaking on condition of anonymity, claimed that around 4,500 police officers had been killed. Experts believe that the perpetrators of these killings were trained as they employed methods like amputation, beheading, and hanging corpses, reminiscent of Taliban techniques in Afghanistan.

In the second week of October, all individuals involved in the killings from August 5th to 15th were granted indemnity through an executive order from the Ministry of Home Affairs. This means there will be no justice, not only for the murdered police officers but also for the killings of minorities and the looting of their property. Those responsible have been exempted from any legal action.

Additionally, 12 other High Court judges were forcibly made to resign beyond just the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, who was also forced to resign, now faces multiple murder charges, and his bank accounts have been frozen. A series of murder cases have also been filed against journalists, writers, and historians.

Moreover, the deaths that occurred during the movement to overthrow Sheikh Hasina's government have been labelled as genocide, and the perpetrators are being tried in court for war

crimes. The chief public prosecutor of this court was a joint secretary of a Jamaat offshoot (AB Party) and had served as a lawyer for war criminals tried under Sheikh Hasina's rule. The chief judge appointed to this court was a collaborator opposed to Bangladesh's independence.

Furthermore, the family of the current head of the government, Dr Yunus, had collaborated with the Pakistani army during the Liberation War of 1971. Dr. Yunus's younger brother was arrested in 1972 under the Collaborators Act as a Pakistani collaborator and remained imprisoned until Sheikh Mujib's general amnesty. The fathers of two other advisors were also direct collaborators. Hefazat's leader is an advisor to the government, while the primary driving force behind the government is Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh.

It is natural to question what relations neighbouring countries will maintain with such a government, which is constitutionally illegitimate and heavily influenced by pro-Pakistan fundamentalists. Moreover, even before taking charge, the head of this government made undiplomatic remarks about India's Seven Sister states, remarks that no previous legitimate or illegitimate government in Bangladesh had made.

Such a government must perpetuate extremism among its core supporters to stay in power. The more unrest they can incite in India's Seven Sister region, the more frenzied their base will become. India may assume that providing essential goods to Bangladesh, which is currently in a crisis, could make the country dependent on them and divert attention from the Seven Sisters. However, the reality is that the government's principal capital is anti-India sentiment, centred

around the Seven Sisters. Additionally, the players who supplied arms to insurgents in the Seven Sister region and attacked India's internal security have been released by the government without regard for the law. None of them are likely to remain inactive.

Matarbari Port in the Bay of Bengal was planned as a game-changer for the development activities surrounding India's Seven Sister region, with benefits anticipated for Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Japan, the US, Australia, and several Southeast Asian countries. However, instead, an illegitimate government is now in power in Bangladesh, which has dismantled the police, civil, and judicial administrations. They attempt to resolve every problem through mob violence rather than the law. Minorities, political dissidents, businesspeople, and even ordinary citizens are barely surviving under an unofficial jizya tax. The government claims there is no minority persecution at present, but in reality, minorities are surviving by paying this unofficial jizya to fundamentalist supporters of the government. In a country where all institutions have collapsed, and law and order have reached rock bottom, there is no logical basis to hope Matarbari Port could become an economic game-changer.

Recently, when the UN's local representative met with Mr. Yunus, he suggested creating a safe zone in Arakan for the Rohingya, akin to Hamas in Gaza. Yunus, who is considered the mastermind behind Sheikh Hasina's ousting, was recently seen in New York meeting with the terrorist wing of Hamas, the Young Muslims of New York, during his UN visit. Pictures of this meeting have surfaced

on social media, and their authenticity has been verified through fact-checking.

The current illegitimate government of Bangladesh wants to create another permanent conflict zone near the Chattogram border, Arakan's Sittwe Port and India's Seven Sister states. There are also reports of increased arms flow to the Pakistan-backed Rohingya terrorist organisation ARSA. Moreover, during the anti-Hasina movement, it was noted that many protesters were shot in the back. Initially, Brigadier Sakhawat, who headed the Ministry of Home Affairs, questioned how these weapons had reached the public. After speaking the truth, he was removed from the Ministry.

Overall, Bangladesh is now in a state of profound uncertainty. A significant segment of the country's youth is radicalised and extremist. If they are not contained strictly, they pose a threat not only to neighbouring countries but also to any nation's internal security, as evidenced by attacks on Delhi's Parliament and the US's 9/11. The dilemma is that if elections are held soon, these radicals could come to power, potentially even more dangerous than in 2001-2006. On the other hand, if the current illegitimate government continues, its fundamentalist core may soon turn to Jihad after stabilising minor crises like commodity shortages. Given these circumstances, global powers concerned with human rights and anti-terrorism, as well as democratic neighbours, must take initiatives to establish a strict governance structure in Bangladesh that can sustain itself long enough to weaken these radical elements. Only then should issues like elections be considered.



An Interview with Amb. Harsh Vardhan Shringla* on 'Developments in India's Neighbourhood'

Rami Desai*

Rami Desai:

Thank you for joining us in discussing developments in India's neighbourhood. Let me begin with Myanmar, where you witnessed the unfolding situation during your visit with the Army Chief Gen Naravane and, later, when you visited Myanmar after the coup. How do you see the situation in Myanmar, especially concerning India's Northeast region, Act East policy, and Neighbourhood First policy?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

I'm very happy to be here at the India Foundation. Thank you very much for this opportunity. Coming to Myanmar, I think calling the situation in Myanmar difficult will be an understatement. Any assessment of Myanmar right now must be pessimistic or worse. The country is fragmented with the Tatmadaw, the army controlling, you know, parts of the country that have the Burman centre. However, the outlying areas have seen a lot of insurgency activity. Some of these insurgents have made significant gains in recent months. Some are at the level of insurgency, but I think in all the ethnic areas, there is some level of insurgency against the military.

There has been no political solution in sight,

even though there has been talk from time to time by the military leadership of elections and restoration to democracy. But that seems to be a sort of a distant dream. As far as we are concerned, Myanmar is integral to our Act East and Neighbourhood First policies. We have attached much importance to Myanmar, with whom we share a 1700 km land border. We also have a maritime border with Myanmar. And, of course, there are a lot of people-to-people ties and a strong cultural connection. There have been good trade relations, and we've always had good relations with various dispensations in the country.

For us, the security imperative is critical because the security of the northeast of our country is also linked to security in Myanmar and cooperation from the authorities in Myanmar. So, we also look at the relationship from the security paradigm. Ethnic groups like the Mizos, Nagas, and others are common in both countries. That is why there is a Free Movement Regime (FMR), a policy where residents of certain borderland communities within 16 km of the border can cross the border without visa for up to 72 hours. So, from that perspective, any disturbance in Myanmar, political uncertainty, or any sort of breakup of Myanmar into different regions would be of

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concern. As a country, we are more comfortable dealing with democratic governments. Still, in any case, it is much easier for us to deal with one authority than to deal with multiple authorities, and some of the insurgent groups that have come up now have links with organised crimes, arms and drug smuggling. Such a situation will not be easy regarding our borders and interests. So, India needs a policy approach to Myanmar that facilitates an outcome that can lead to a ceasefire, elections, and a political settlement. We have been talking to the ASEAN. We have been talking to the Thais and other like-minded countries. We should look at this opportunity now to take specific initiatives.

Rami Desai:

Quite right, Sir. This raises many questions, but I will start with China and its influence on the ongoing events in Myanmar. We know that China has close connections with some ethnic armed organisations and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance (MNDA). We saw the Three Brotherhood Alliance being launched. Later, around this year, we saw China also telling them to hold back. So, there's been this sort of relationship that China has had with the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). How do you see China's influence in Myanmar? Is it a walkover like many analysts are considering it to be, or will it still be difficult because there is some natural resistance to China's over-influence in Myanmar as well from the Myanmar people?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

The relationship between Myanmar and China is complex. Even the Tatmadaw have had hesitations in dealing with China beyond a certain level of practicality. There is also a public sentiment

which leans toward suspicion and resentment, especially given the substantial investments China has made in various projects in Myanmar. Some of the mining projects, especially for gemstones and other areas, which are seen to corner natural resources at significantly low rates by Chinese private merchants have not gone down well in Myanmar. And of course, important groups like the Kokang and the Arakan Army have strong links with China. I think the Chinese will push for some sort of election to take place that would bring in some form of a quasi-civilian government that they could live with and try to, you know, project as a political solution. At the same time, they will have influence over the EAOs they control, and there will be some sort of uneasy alliance with the Tatmadaw. But that's not the ideal solution. As I said, we need to work on a political framework that would begin with a ceasefire, leading to talks and a political outcome that all concerned can agree upon. So, I think countries like India, Thailand, and the ASEAN are well placed to work on providing a framework that would be comprehensive, democratic, and in keeping with the requirements of the people of Myanmar.

Rami Desai:

How does this work in the larger geostrategic game? The junta said they will go into elections once the census is conducted. A census was underway this month, but the NUG (National Unity Government) objected and did not partake in that. We also know that the NUG has a certain amount of Western support. But there doesn't seem to be a meeting point on a democratic process. There appears to be a trust deficit between both groups. It also comes to mind that it is unclear who would

be the leader of the NLD. We know that the former vice chairman also passed away this week. There seem to be factions. So how would even if there was disarmament, even if the Tatmadaw has asked for disarmament before they can conduct elections? Even if that were to happen, how would they select a leader acceptable to all parties?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

The EAOs and PDFs on the ground and the NUG are not homogeneous factors. I mean, they have their differences. There are differences in approach and ideology, and some of them are fighting on the ground. In the Sagaing Division, Chin state, you have many EAOs fighting each other. And so, you have a situation where you know you don't see a united opposition per se. But that's, I think, a secondary process that can affect the ceasefire, and if you invite these parties to the table, you might have more coherence coming forth. This means you must work with all concerned and move forward with their minimum common agenda. I do not expect that all of these parties would have the same objectives in mind and would work towards a constructive solution because they all have different interests, and they're not necessarily looking at it from a national perspective. However, Myanmar's sovereignty and territorial integrity are very important to India. So preserving that is important. Anything less than that would impact us adversely in terms of our security and on certain domestic issues involving some of our states neighbouring Myanmar.

Rami Desai:

But you know it is a fact that there have been certain terrorists who had been arrested during Sheikh Hasina's time associated with the ABT

(Ansarullah Bangla Team) that have been released, I think 28 of them. We also know that ISI used Bangladesh as a base, especially against Tripura and other states in the Northeast region. Do you see a resurgence of that? Do you see this as an indicator of trouble brewing, and how do we finally, even if that is the case, safeguard a region that has such large porous borders?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Well, over some time, the previous government did deal with many of the terrorists and radical organisations, from the Ansarullah Bangla Team to the Hizb ut-Tahrir, to the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh, to a range of other actors. They also banned Jamaat right at the end of their term. I think all these actors are now active in a certain sense. Many of their leaders, as you said, have been released. Many of them are now in the political mainstream. But their ideology remains the same. The idea of creating an Islamic caliphate through whichever means at their disposal, I think, has not gone. So, we need to be vigilant. We need to engage all concerned to prevent this from happening. I don't think we can afford to go back to the days in which there was active insurgency in the Northeast. We have to pre-empt this by nipping it in the bud. And the best way to do it is to engage as many of the interlocutors in Bangladesh that can control that situation as possible.

Rami Desai:

If we look at our neighbourhood, there's been another dispensation change in Sri Lanka. Now, the present president, who's come into power, many have said, has Marxist leanings. How should we view it? We've built some very good relations during their economic crisis, and there have been

stronger people-to-people connections since then. But how should we engage to counter Chinese influence in Sri Lanka?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Well, I think the fact that you've had a new dispensation through democratic elections in Sri Lanka is a good thing. Aruna Dissanayake might belong, and he has roots in the JVP, but I think they have come a long way since they were involved in various activities that went under the scanner, as well as law and order concerns. Today, of course, it's a very different scenario. India was the only country that stood by Sri Lanka during its economic crisis. The support of four billion dollars that India gave provided confidence to Sri Lanka and, to some extent, resuscitated their economy. This has not been lost on the new dispensation. They understand that to fulfil people's expectations, they must work with India. In that context, President Dissanayake had already come to India before the elections. He met our national security advisor and the external affairs minister in Sri Lanka, so there were active contacts before and after the elections. I would expect a very different dispensation from what you would think of the JVP and those days. And I believe it is vital for India to work with any dispensation in power in our neighbourhood. Our neighbourhood is very critical. That's why we call it Neighbourhood First, and it is incumbent on us to work with all concerned.

I think the days are gone when we worked with certain political parties and dispensations that were considered favourable to us. We should not look in terms of black and white. I think we should have a policy that allows us to engage all concerned, whether they are ostensibly for you or against you.

You need to engage them, and if they are against you, you need to bring them to the right side of thinking by demonstrating your approach, which is a positive approach to a neighbour. When we talk about Prime Minister Modi's vision of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, and Sabka Vishwas, we also apply this to our neighbourhood. You have seen it on several occasions, including during COVID, when we had the Vaccine Maitri; we started with our neighbourhood because if you are immunised against a particular pandemic and your neighbours are not, then it is bound to come back to you. So, it makes sense that you know that as you prosper and as you grow, your neighbours also prosper and grow with you. And that's the whole philosophy of Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas.

Rami Desai:

Absolutely. I also agree with you that being able to engage with all stakeholders would make for our very successful Neighbourhood First policy. But, Sir, how do we then engage with a neighbour like, let's say, Nepal, who we have very strong people to people connect with? We have cultural, historical, and civilisational connections. However, there seems to be a recent provocative move that has come from their end, which is wanting to print their new 100 currency with Kalapani-Lipulekh contested areas. Now, India has called it an artificial enlargement of territory. It's also said that it's untenable. How do you see us engaging? How will our diplomatic relations work if this is untenable?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Well, what has happened is that India has been inserted into the politics of our neighbourhood, specifically with Nepal. We might not have been

responsible for that, but competitive politics has meant that you are either for India or against India. Various parties have taken it upon themselves as either for or against us. And as I said, our approach should be to work with all, irrespective of their ideological or perceived approach towards us. Nepal is no different. You had the Maoists in power, you had Prachand there, now you have Oli from the CPN (UML). Before that, you had Deuba from the Congress party. There are four or five significant leaders, all of whom know India well and work with us closely at various times. They also take advantage of the relationship when they feel it's in their political interests. I think Oli has been moved to declare the Lipulekh area part of Nepal or the Kalapani area part of Nepal and get on to this cartographic aggression, which we call purely out of political expediency. But I did visit Nepal, you know, in, I think, October 2021, and that was when we felt that we needed to talk to our neighbours and engage our neighbours, and a cold and frozen relationship with Nepal was not in our interest. So, we did engage him, and he was forthcoming in many areas. We need to work on all concerned to push back on this narrative of Lipulekh and Kalapani and work on the more critical issues of how our relationship can benefit the people of our two countries. One good example is the synergies that we have developed, especially in the hydroelectric sector. I think that's been a game-changer. Indian private and public sector investments in Nepal's hydroelectric projects have allowed over 1000 MW of Nepal's power to be exported to India. I think the potential is up to 10000-12000 MW. So, if that happens, you already have a paradigm that would enable Nepal to benefit significantly from the power it sells to India. So, it

becomes a very strong symbiotic relationship. At the same time, if you see some of the links that we've developed, including the Motihari-Amlekhganj pipeline that is now being extended up to Kathmandu, a new pipeline from Siliguri, again to going into Nepal, provides them with access to energy, to diesel etc at very reasonable costs like we are doing with Bangladesh. And again, it creates positive interdependencies that both people of our countries can benefit from. So, we need to work on that approach, wean the relationship away from the negatives, and move it towards the positives.

Rami Desai:

Fair enough, Sir. This can be because of our underlying relationships being built upon, and, like you rightly said, again speaking to all the stakeholders. But what happens in a country like Pakistan? We know that the SCO meeting is there. Dr Jaishankar is in Pakistan right now. But in your opinion, what benefit is it to India for Pakistan, being a part of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) part of the SCO, when we believe that a lot of the terrorism in India is state-sponsored by Pakistan?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Well, we have always maintained that a relationship with Pakistan cannot be seen as normal until their support for cross-border terrorism does not cease. You have seen that in the context of the SAARC. We and several SAARC members felt that SAARC could not be a successful regional mechanism for growth and development because of Pakistani's unhelpful and negative attitude. And I think that continues to hold today. As you said, their support for cross-border terrorism in Jammu

and Kashmir is simply one that we cannot condone, and we cannot call it business as usual. You cannot have a normal diplomatic relationship with that country until and unless we find that there is a reasonableness that comes into their approach and some of the adverse effects of having Pakistan as a border are neutralised. And I think in today's context, we have a sort of a frozen relationship, a cold peace, you can say. And you know, development continues to go on unabated. We could work as we did with all of our other neighbours, and Prime Minister Modi did visit Lahore and made overtures to then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. But some of the attacks that took place subsequently actually negated everything. I think the best relationship you can have with Pakistan is the current one, where there is no activity of any kind, and you can manage it within a framework that is best for both countries.

Rami Desai:

So, let me ask my final question because this is what everybody thinks about when discussing Pakistan. We've had a statement from Nawaz Sharif saying, "Oh, I wish Prime Minister Modi had come as well." It seems like the political dispensation wants to thaw relations, but considering, the deep state or whether it's the army, decisions are taken by other people. In that context, is there any way we can move forward, in your opinion?

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Well, I think, as I mentioned, you have to have the circumstances to move forward. We have tried in the past to have sort of periodical talks and try to work out our differences, but that didn't work because those were only used in a certain way, which was political upmanship. And secondly, of course, the strong vested interests that worked against a good relationship then struck back through acts of terrorism. And I think that situation hasn't changed since those days. So, I don't know whether there is any basis right now for taking that relationship forward in any way.

Rami Desai:

And especially not just based on political dispensation and lip service.

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Yeah. I mean, of course, there have been good sentiments. There's a public sentiment and some positivity in that respect. But it needs to be a comprehensively positive and sincere approach, and I don't think that's available yet.

Rami Desai:

Thank you very much for taking the time to be here, have this chat with me, and give us a snapshot of our neighbourhood. I hope we continue to build the kind of bridges that we have previously, especially as examples in countries like Sri Lanka. Thank you so much for being here.

Harsh Vardhan Shringla:

Thank you.



Beyond Religious Boundaries: The Need for a Uniform Civil Code

Vandana Sharma 'Diya'*

In the tapestry of human civilisation, secularism and a uniform legal code stand as hallmarks of societal progress and development. While religion initially emerged as a response to the transcendent, it now influences both sacred and secular life. However, religion's domain should be confined to the sacred realm, recognising that worldly life, though intertwined, is distinct from religious life. These spheres, differing in nature, mode, and purpose, must not be conflated, especially in pluralistic societies. Failure to recognise this distinction leads to complex challenges that must be addressed for peaceful coexistence. Addressing these issues requires conceptual clarity and rigorous logical analysis to delineate their distinctions and interrelations. This is especially pertinent when considering a Uniform Civil Code to govern the secular affairs of all citizens. Such a code is not an imposition on unwilling segments of society but rather a rational acknowledgement of the necessity and utility of legal uniformity in certain aspects of life.

While these issues are fundamentally sociological, they often acquire religious and political dimensions from these perspectives. They pertain to the lifestyles of a religiously diverse society, where various groups adhere to different sets of beliefs and practices, often claimed to be sanctioned by religious tradition. However, in a

secular framework, these matters are not inherently spiritual, and religion should not dictate civil life. This contrasts sharply with theocratic societies, where civil life is inextricably bound to a particular religion. Regardless of how one defines secularism—be it state indifference to all religions, equidistance from all faiths, or equal regard for all beliefs—the spheres of religious and civil life must be demarcated. While human life is an organic whole, and its various aspects cannot be entirely separated, they can and should be distinguished and addressed separately when necessary. This is similar to how different organs in a body, while interconnected, can be examined and treated individually for medical purposes.

Implementing a Uniform Civil Code becomes further complicated when distinctions are drawn between majority and minority communities based on religion. In a truly secular system, such distinctions are illogical, as the very concept of secularism precludes such divisions. However, practical realities often diverge from logical ideals, especially when vested interests become entrenched. In democracies with lower education levels and prevalent vote-bank politics, these sociological issues frequently take on political hues. Exploiting the religiosity of the masses, self-proclaimed protectors of faith may mislead people into believing that these issues are intrinsically tied

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to their religious identity. Political leaders, in turn, may seek refuge in these religious figureheads for electoral gain.

It is imperative to understand that no satisfactory solution can emerge if these issues are approached from misguided religious or political perspectives. Such considerations obscure the real problems and generate discord among different sections of society, jeopardising peace and harmony. We aim to forge a path towards a more integrated and harmonious society by addressing these challenges through a lens of rationality and secular principles. Implementing a Uniform Civil Code grounded in secular principles and applied equitably across all communities is crucial to achieving this goal. It offers a framework for legal consistency that transcends religious boundaries, promoting social cohesion while respecting the diverse cultural fabric of society.

The intricate tapestry of religious and social dynamics in pluralistic societies presents formidable challenges to implementing a Uniform Civil Code. The protagonists of various religious traditions often resist solutions or dissolutions to these problems, as the perpetuation of such issues serves their self-aggrandisement. This resistance stems from a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors that have become deeply entrenched. Attempts at inter-faith dialogues and similar conciliatory measures often prove ineffective for two primary reasons:

- Firstly, the issues are not genuinely religious despite being framed as such.
- Secondly, those who engage in these dialogues must be more open-minded and positive in their intent for productive

discourse. The veneer of religiosity applied to these essentially sociological issues creates a barrier to rational discussion and resolution.

Political approaches to resolving these challenges are equally fraught with difficulties. Parties in power and those aspiring to govern must navigate the treacherous waters of vote bank politics, often prioritising electoral support over principled policy-making. This political calculus frequently leads to the perpetuation of divisive practices and the postponement of necessary reforms, including implementing a Uniform Civil Code. The suggestion of utilising referendums to gauge public opinion on these matters must be revised. Such processes are often susceptible to manipulation by vocal minorities who wield disproportionate influence over public discourse. The masses, who may need more comprehensive knowledge or accurate information about the issues, can be swayed by charismatic leaders claiming to represent their interests. This dynamic results in a situation where the views of a minor, albeit influential, elite are misrepresented as the majority's will.

It is crucial to distinguish between influence and scientific validity. Only a scientific mind, characterised by dispassionate objectivity and logical reasoning, can approach these issues without succumbing to partisan biases. Cultivating such a mindset through proper education is essential for disseminating rational solutions among the concerned populace. While the practical implementation of this approach may seem daunting, it is manageable given sufficient determination and resources. In the context of

Bhārata, a democratic and secular republic, the issue of a Uniform Civil Code has persisted since independence. The judiciary has repeatedly expressed concern about this matter, highlighting constitutional anomalies that require rectification by the Indian Parliament. Lawmakers cannot abdicate their responsibility by arguing that the Supreme Court's pronouncements are merely suggestions rather than directives. Similarly, the fear that enacting a Uniform Civil Code might lead to further societal fragmentation is an insufficient justification for inaction.

These arguments often serve as smokescreens for vested interests seeking to maintain the status quo. The constitutional amendment that introduced the concept of 'Secularism' into the Indian Constitution demonstrates that political will makes fundamental changes possible. Implementing a Uniform Civil Code, a logical corollary to secularism, should be equally feasible. The fact that demands for a Uniform Civil Code may originate from one section of society and face opposition from another does not diminish its necessity or desirability. In a truly secular state, the law should transcend religious boundaries and apply equally to all citizens, regardless of their faith or cultural background. This principle is essential for fostering national integration, gender equality, and social justice.

Implementing a Uniform Civil Code in Bhārata, as in other diverse societies, requires a multifaceted approach. It necessitates sustained efforts in public education, fostering inter-community dialogue, and building political consensus. Policymakers must work to dispel misconceptions about the nature and intent of such a code, emphasising its role in

promoting equality and social harmony rather than erasing cultural identities. Moreover, drafting a Uniform Civil Code should be inclusive and consultative, considering various communities' concerns and perspectives while adhering to constitutional principles and international human rights standards. This approach can help mitigate fears of cultural erasure and build broader support for reform.

The judiciary can play a crucial role in this process by highlighting the need for legal uniformity and providing reasoned judgments that underscore the importance of secular governance. Civil society organisations, academic institutions, and media outlets are also responsible for facilitating informed public discourse on this issue, countering misinformation and promoting a nuanced understanding of the benefits and challenges of a Uniform Civil Code. Ultimately, the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code in Bhārata and similar pluralistic societies represents a critical step towards realising the ideals of equality, justice, and secular governance. While the path may be fraught with obstacles and resistance from various quarters, the long-term benefits to social cohesion, gender equality, and national integration far outweigh the short-term political challenges. It is incumbent upon lawmakers, jurists, and civil society leaders to work collaboratively towards this goal, guided by the principles of constitutional democracy and the vision of a genuinely secular state.

The discourse surrounding the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in Bhārata has long been controversial, often obscured by religious and political rhetoric. However, to truly address this issue, we must approach it from a scientific and

sociological perspective, transcending the narrow confines of sectarian interests and vote bank politics. The failure to recognise the UCC as a sociological rather than a religious or political matter has led to a persistent misunderstanding of its nature and implications. A crucial distinction must be made between reforming the personal laws of specific communities, such as Muslim Personal Law, and implementing a comprehensive Uniform Civil Code. These concepts, while related, are not synonymous. The scope of a UCC is far broader, encompassing all sections of Indian society, whereas changes to personal laws affect only specific communities. This distinction is vital for framing the debate in its proper context and avoiding the pitfall of perceiving the UCC as targeting any particular religious group.

The case for a Uniform Civil Code stems from the foundational principles of equality and secularism enshrined in the Indian Constitution. It represents a step towards creating a more cohesive national identity while respecting the rich tapestry of Bharat's diverse cultural heritage. The Supreme Court's repeated advisories on this matter, beginning with the landmark *Shah Bano case*, underscore the constitutional imperative for such a code. However, these judicial pronouncements should not be misconstrued as singling out any specific community but rather as a call for comprehensive reform across all sections of society. To navigate this complex issue, it is essential to distinguish between religious identity and sociological reality. For instance, while Islam as a religion remains constant globally, the sociological entity of "Muslims in Bharat" is distinct and shaped by the unique historical, cultural, and social fabric

of the nation. This nuanced understanding allows us to address the concerns of Bharatiya Muslims as citizens first, without compromising their religious identity. The same principle applies to other religious and cultural groups within the Bharatiya mosaic.

The argument that personal laws, particularly those based on religious scriptures, are immutable and beyond the scope of reform needs to be more logically and historically accurate. As interpreted and applied by humans, divine injunctions have always been subject to reinterpretation in light of changing social conditions and advancements in human knowledge. Many Islamic countries have successfully modified their laws to align with contemporary needs while maintaining their Islamic character. This demonstrates that change is not only possible but often necessary for the progress and well-being of society. Moreover, the fear that a Uniform Civil Code would erode the cultural identity of minority communities is unfounded. Identity is a multifaceted concept, of which legal codes form only a tiny part. A well-crafted UCC would aim to harmonise civil laws across communities while respecting cultural diversity in other spheres of life. It would focus on ensuring gender equality, protecting individual rights, and promoting social justice – principles that transcend religious boundaries and are essential for developing a modern, egalitarian society.

Implementing a UCC is not merely a legal exercise but a step towards realising the constitutional ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity. It is particularly crucial in addressing the persistent inequalities women face across all communities in Bharat. A UCC would go a long

way in empowering women and ensuring their equal status under the law by providing a common framework for marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption. The process of drafting and implementing a Uniform Civil Code must be inclusive, consultative, and sensitive to the concerns of all communities. It should be seen as an opportunity to codify the best practices from various personal laws, creating a syncretic legal framework that reflects the composite culture of Bhārat. This approach would not only allay fears of cultural erasure but could also serve as a model for other diverse societies grappling with similar challenges.

Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in Bhārat is a legal and sociological imperative. It marks a significant step in Bhārat's journey towards genuine secularism and social equality. Although the path to this goal may be challenging, Bharat must undertake this journey to realise its potential as a modern, progressive nation. By addressing this issue with a scientific, sociological perspective and a commitment to shared values, we can develop a civil code that unifies rather than divides and strengthens rather than weakens the fabric of our diverse nation.

The UCC represents a commitment to constitutional equality, justice, and fraternity ideals. It aims to harmonise civil laws across Bharata's diverse communities while respecting cultural uniqueness, addressing gender inequality, and promoting national integration. It is important to note that the principles applicable to Muslim Personal Law are equally relevant to Hindu,

Christian, Parsi, and other religious and cultural groups in Bharat. Various harmful customs within these communities, including tribal groups, must be addressed through the UCC. This noble endeavour requires mutual trust, which can only be fostered through proper education—the key to addressing many of our country's issues.

The success of the UCC depends on several factors: clear separation between religious and civil spheres, an inclusive and consultative drafting process, widespread public education, and strong political will. The UCC is not about erasing diversity but creating a common ground of civic rights and responsibilities applicable to all citizens, regardless of their religious or cultural background. As Bhārat evolves as a modern, democratic nation, implementing a UCC is a testament to its commitment to secularism and equality. It is a bold yet necessary step towards a unified and just society, honouring diverse heritage while moving confidently towards a shared future. The successful implementation of the UCC could serve as a model for other pluralistic societies, demonstrating that legal uniformity can coexist with cultural diversity. In the final analysis, the journey towards a Uniform Civil Code is not just about legal reform but about realising the full potential of Bharat's democracy. While challenges may arise, the long-term benefits to national unity, gender equality, and social cohesion outweigh the short-term difficulties. We stand at a crucial juncture and have the opportunity to make a decisive move towards a more integrated, equitable, and progressive society. This endeavour will resonate for generations to come.

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Deconstructing China's Engagement in Conflict Resolution

Shivani Deswal*

Introduction

China's foreign policy principle of "non-interference," presented at the Bandung Conference in 1955, was a strategic move to distance itself from the Cold War bloc politics. China strengthened its relationships within the global non-aligned movement by promoting a non-interventionist stance. This concept of non-intervention took on new significance under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, as he prioritised a "low profile" in foreign policy to focus on economic development. Chinese leaders believed that pursuing an assertive foreign policy could hinder China's economic progress by limiting trade partnerships or diverting resources toward military spending rather than economic investment (Sofer, 2012).

Deng carefully employed the "keeping a low profile" (KLP) strategy to achieve selective progress. According to Deng, a balance should be maintained between achieving success in some areas and not overreaching in others. He emphasised the importance of safeguarding China's core values, including sovereignty, regime security, and national interests. Deng also stressed the need to support the rights of developing countries, promote global and regional stability, and work towards a fair, reasonable, and just international economic and political order. However, he warned against seeking global leadership or hegemony, arguing that China should avoid overextending

itself in pursuing such ambitions (Wei, 2020).

The 2008 global financial crisis and China's subsequent rise as the world's second-largest economy sparked debate among Chinese scholars about shifting from the ASA strategy (Attaining Some Achievements) to a more proactive international engagement proportional to its growing economic power (Chen & Wang, 2011). China officially endorsed this idea, asserting that countries should take on global responsibilities in accordance with their national strength, stating, "China will assume more international responsibility as its comprehensive strength increases" (White Paper, 2011).

When Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, the ASA strategy was revitalised and expanded into what he described as "striving for achievement" (fenfayouwei). Xi advocated for active peripheral diplomacy to secure a favourable environment for China (Yamaguchi, 2014). The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a notable example of this shift. The BRI has significantly increased China's involvement in international mediation. Research by the Mercator Institute for China Studies indicates that China engaged in nine mediation efforts in 2018, compared to just three in 2012, the year after the BRI was launched. As a result of the BRI, Beijing's mediation efforts have expanded to South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa—strategically essential regions to the initiative (Legarda, 2018).

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China's engagement in conflict resolution

China's engagement in conflict resolution has two dimensions: its contribution to international efforts as a member of the UN and its mediation efforts along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China views the UN as a legitimate platform for anchoring its role as a global security provider while simultaneously working to reform the international liberal order by promoting Chinese norms. Initially, China opposed the UN, considering it a mandate of the Western bloc. However, it later shifted its position, recognising the UN as a forum for international cooperation and conflict resolution. China has since become one of the largest providers of peacekeepers among the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Despite this, China actively contests some of the normative foundations of UN peacekeeping operations, particularly Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which outlines measures for maintaining peace and security. Specifically, China resists the third pillar of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle (Arrey, 2023). R2P is based on three pillars: "the responsibility of each state to protect its populations" (pillar I), "the responsibility of the international community to assist states in protecting their populations" (pillar II), and "the responsibility of the international community to protect when a state is manifestly failing to protect its populations" (pillar III) (Simonovic, 2016). China views the third pillar as conflicting with its long-held principles of non-interference and mutual respect for sovereignty. It is wary of states using R2P to justify actions motivated by self-interest, including the forceful imposition of liberal norms (Fung, 2016).

China's most vigorous critique of the R2P

principle emerged following the 2011 military intervention in Libya, which was carried out without the host state's consent. This was the first instance in which the UN Security Council authorised the use of force for humanitarian purposes without the permission of the involved state. Historically, China's approach in the UN has been to ensure the legitimacy of the governments in question. For instance, during the 2006 conflict in Sudan, China was pivotal in persuading Khartoum to agree to deploy peacekeepers in Darfur. Similarly, in late 2008, China actively urged the governments of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to resolve the conflict in eastern DRC, exacerbated by Rwanda's support for rebel groups (Saferworld Report, 2011). However, the Libya intervention and the Council's failure to block the resolution despite objections from members sceptical of using force prompted China to rethink its stance on R2P (Gowers, 2012). Beijing is also concerned that R2P could be used to justify military interventions or sanctions aimed at promoting regime change or influencing China's policies in sensitive regions like Xinjiang and Hong Kong (Li, 2019).

Moreover, China does not fully adhere to Western norms of peacemaking and peace-building. Chinese officials and diplomats often adopt a cautious and measured approach when discussing peace, preferring terms such as "sustaining," "supporting," and "safeguarding" rather than "building" or "making." This choice of language reflects China's focus on maintaining stability and preserving the existing order rather than actively engaging in peace-building or peacemaking as understood in Western contexts

(Mariani, 2022). In official Chinese discourse, “hotspots” or “hotspot issues” often refer to conflict zones.

During a press conference on March 7, 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “Constructive engagement in settling international hotspot issues is a due responsibility for China as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council. China learns from international practices and draws wisdom from Chinese culture, and has found the Chinese way to address hotspot issues.” Wang outlined four commitments regarding China’s approach to hotspot issues: non-interference in internal affairs, a commitment to political settlement, “commitment to objectivity and impartiality,” and “commitment to addressing both symptoms and root causes.” China’s commitment to addressing root causes has been evident in its conflict resolution efforts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

China’s Developmental Peace agenda under the UN and involvement in African Peace and Security

Drawing from its own developmental experiences, the Chinese model of peace emphasises addressing the root causes of conflict through economic advancement. It views economic development as a crucial precondition for achieving sustainable internal peace. Unlike the liberal peace agenda, which imposes governance structures to safeguard civil and political rights (Kuo, 2020), the Chinese approach opposes such external impositions. Instead, it advocates for the involvement of outside parties in peace-building only in an auxiliary or necessary

capacity. Dai Bin, China’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, underscored that national reconstruction is primarily the country’s responsibility. He emphasised the need for the UN and the international community to help these countries enhance their development capacities (Yuan, 2022).

Chinese scholars and officials argue that underdevelopment is a fundamental cause of conflict. They assert that through trade, investment, and development assistance, China contributes to Africa’s economic growth, promoting peace and security. They also point to a positive correlation between conflict reduction and development, which justifies China’s increasing role in the economic aspects of peace-building in post-conflict nations. In 2015, Xi Jinping committed \$1 billion to support the United Nations’ peace and development efforts over ten years. By 2020, the PRC-financed fund had invested approximately \$100 million in nearly 100 projects to support the UN’s work in peacemaking, preventive diplomacy, poverty reduction, and development. The fund prioritised collaboration with regional organisations, especially the African Union. It focused on strengthening peacekeeping capacities in regions such as the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, West Africa, North Africa, and the Middle East.

At the fund’s fifth-anniversary commemorative conference, the official PRC summary highlighted the benefits the fund brings to the UN system in promoting peace and security while fostering cooperation among member states, particularly in Africa. (Freeman et al., 2023). In a message to the Security Council, UN Secretary General António Guterres stressed the importance

of China-Africa cooperation for the UN's peacekeeping missions, noting that African nations are the largest regional contributors of troops and police. Despite significant political and economic security challenges, these countries remain committed to peacekeeping operations. China's support for African contributors aligns with the Secretary-General's 2018 Action for Peacekeeping initiative, demonstrating tangible results in countries like the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan. Moreover, the African Union and its member states have made substantial progress in enhancing their effectiveness, self-reliance, and collaborative efforts in peacekeeping (UN Press, 2019).

Critics argue, however, that China acts as a neo-colonial power, using its developmental peace agenda in Africa primarily to secure access to natural resources. This perspective is bolstered by the fact that a significant portion of trade between Africa and China consists of natural resources. The World Bank reported that, in 2006, loans from the China Export-Import Bank for infrastructure projects amounted to over \$12.5 billion, with much of this aid directed toward resource-rich countries such as Nigeria, Angola, and Sudan. This pattern suggests that Beijing's assistance is closely tied to its strategic interests. A prominent example is the 2005 agreement in which Angola received a \$2 billion loan from China in exchange for 10,000 barrels of oil daily (Saferworld Report, 2011).

The Saferworld report also highlights that one of China's strategic motives for deepening its economic and security relations with Africa is to bolster its 'One China' policy regarding Taiwan. Except for the Vatican, Taiwan is officially

recognised only by a few developing countries, four of which are in Africa. African support has played a crucial role in blocking repeated proposals to allow Taiwan to participate in the United Nations, thereby reinforcing China's diplomatic position. This support has aided China's rise as a global power and strengthened its relationships with neighbouring countries.

While the report acknowledges China's policy drivers in its security engagement with Africa, it also raises concerns about the risks of over-prioritising the developmental peace agenda for conflict resolution. In some cases, the revenue generated from resource sales to China has been used to purchase weapons, exacerbating conflicts, as seen in Sudan (Saferworld Report, 2011). More broadly, such revenue has enabled regimes operating through patronage systems to consolidate their power and amass wealth. Over time, this dynamic can weaken governance structures, perpetuating cycles of instability and violence.

China's mediation efforts along BRI

Mediation diplomacy involves resolving disputes through diplomatic channels rather than military or legal means, with the agreement of all involved parties. China has increasingly prioritised mediation diplomacy to enhance its global presence and influence in recent years. In its approach, China typically focuses on issues of significant global importance where international mediation efforts are underway, particularly concerning security matters related to countries involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Rumi, 2022). Notable examples include China's active mediation in the Syrian conflict, the Israel-Palestine war, and the

Rohingya crisis between Bangladesh and Myanmar, which reflect its focus on security concerns in BRI regions. China's emphasis on maintaining stability along the BRI stems from a desire to ensure the smooth flow of commerce and investment in unstable regions. This strategy goes beyond economic interests and aims to enhance security conditions for Chinese citizens and businesses operating in these areas. A failure to maintain stability in crucial BRI countries could present significant obstacles and potentially jeopardise the success of the entire initiative (Legarda, 2018).

One of the motivations behind China's peace-brokering efforts in the Middle East is the security of BRI investments. The BRI has expanded across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania and has seen investments exceeding \$1 trillion. By 2016, China had already positioned itself as the leading foreign investor in the Middle East, committing \$29.7 billion to new projects in the region. Chinese investments have primarily targeted countries such as Egypt, Iran, Israel, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), focusing on port and infrastructure development. China has also secured agreements with Egypt, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, and Israel to enhance telecommunications infrastructure, despite Israel facing U.S. diplomatic pressure to reconsider such partnerships. The reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran could significantly bolster the security of BRI projects, including safeguarding transportation routes and vital infrastructure. Improved coordination between these two nations could reduce geopolitical risks and uncertainties, creating a more stable environment for BRI operations. This would also

promote energy cooperation and facilitate the diversification of partnerships along critical BRI routes, strengthening the initiative's overall success and resilience (Baabood, 2024).

The BRI, which includes many Arab and Muslim-majority countries, is seen as a factor influencing China's evolving stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Historically, China has tried to maintain a delicate balance, supporting both sides diplomatically. Initially pro-Arab, China was a strong advocate for an independent Palestinian state while simultaneously maintaining commercial relations with Israel, mainly to protect its investments and assets along the BRI. However, during the 2024 conflict between Hamas and Israel, China faced criticism for failing to uphold a neutral stance (Banerjee, 2023). In October 2023, as the conflict escalated along the Gaza Strip, Beijing refrained from directly criticising Hamas, which it has not officially designated as a terrorist organisation. A week later, Chinese authorities stated that Israel's bombings had gone beyond self-defence, condemning them as "collective punishment." This stance contrasted with the ongoing support for Israel's military operations in Gaza from many of its Western allies (Ahmadi, 2024).

China's Vision of a Global Security Provider

On February 21, 2023, China released a concept paper on the 'Global Security Initiative' (GSI), calling for "a new vision for common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security." While the paper offered proposals for addressing conventional and unconventional global security issues, it has primarily been seen as a declaration of China's ambition to position itself as

a global security provider in the future international order. The GSI is the latest addition to several initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Development Initiative (GDI), reflecting China's vision for reshaping the international order. The GDI, introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the UN on September 21, 2021, was presented as a solution to the economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The GSI, seen as the political counterpart, was proposed in response to the global security crisis triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war. China has turned to the GSI as a strategic response to the growing security challenges accompanying its expanding economic and geopolitical influence on the international stage. While China has traditionally maintained a cautious approach to security engagements, particularly in conflict resolution in regions like Africa, its rising status as a global power with significant economic and military clout is prompting a broader international outreach. Emphasising multilateralism, China is now championing the creation of Sino-centric organisations to promote its vision of conflict prevention and security development (Das, 2023).

Conclusion

Emerging as a sovereign state during the Cold War, China's foreign policy was initially grounded in non-interference principles and national sovereignty preservation. It deliberately avoided involvement in conflict resolution and power politics, maintaining a low profile while focusing on domestic economic growth. However, as China

transformed into a significant global economic power, there was increasing pressure for it to take on greater international responsibilities. In response, China began actively participating in security affairs, mainly through contributions to UN peacekeeping efforts, while introducing its standards and approaches to peace-building. Drawing heavily from its developmental peace model, China shifted its focus to security issues in Africa and the Middle East, where it sought to contribute to peace and protect its foreign assets and investments in fragile states. This developmental peace approach is the cornerstone of its broader global security framework.

However, questions remain about how China intends to ensure global security, particularly as its own Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) faces numerous challenges (Economic Times, 2022).

Additionally, there is growing concern about China's perceived lack of commitment to respect the sovereignty of other states, as evidenced by its assertive security actions in the South China Sea, which seem to contradict its longstanding non-interference stance. Furthermore, the intensifying rivalry between the U.S. and China for influence presents a significant challenge to international security cooperation. Building a stable and secure global environment requires constructive engagement, dialogue, and collaboration among all stakeholders, including the U.S., China, and regional actors. Without such cooperation, the prospects for effective international security governance may remain elusive.

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