

Historical Turning Points in China's South Asia Policy: Prospects for 21st Century

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Abstract

Chinese and South Asian interactions can be found back into history in 3rd century BC. Besides a long shared history their relationship never remained strong but limited to culture, religion and hardly ever commerce. The political interactions between them started in late 1940s when British Raj ended in subcontinent and new establishment took over the charge in China. The relations between them earlier to this are not much significant. Ensuing the foundation of Communist China in 1949, it has started interacting with Asian and farther nations. South Asia gained significance in China's foreign policy priorities in accordance with the general ideological shove whereby it normally opposed the role of United States and other western powers sentenced the UN and emphasized on the unity among Afro-Asia in the post-colonial era. This paper is an attempt to explore the nature of relationship between China and countries of South Asia especially India and Pakistan. Historical and

analytical approaches with secondary sources have been adopted to conclude.

Keywords: *China, South Asia, India, Pakistan, Nuclear Region, Security, Economy.*

Introduction

South Asian geo-political milieu is changing with the passage of time and acrimonious bequests of history will not be beneficial. During previous century, experts labeled China as an isolated state with limited interaction with the external world. Its links with subcontinent was also remained limited in history. During Mao Zedong's whole tenure, China remained in aloofness and had no interactions and diplomatic terms with most of world countries¹. Throughout the history China has played an important but restricted role in South Asia. People's Republic of China (PRC) is a vast, most populated and economically strong country in the world. However, civilization and philosophies played a more relevant role throughout the Chinese history. An era of battles and attacks, discord and protections has been witnessed but the prevailing Chinese priorities in regional politics are of concepts and institutions. With the foundation of a communist regime in China, it has owned an important responsibility to maintain peace and prosperity not only in regional settings but at universal level².

Southern Asia carries a geostrategic significant, located in the middle of continent of Asia and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). It is linked up with China in the North, Central Asia in the North-West, and Middle-East in the West. It consists of eight countries but this study focuses on two major regional states: India and Pakistan. Since independence in 1947, both India and Pakistan remained wary and hostile with each other. Both antagonist neighbors have fought four terrible wars during last seventy years. They are also involved in power gamble and alliance formation to balance each other's power. They have maintained huge armies and spend lion's share of their annual budget on

arms procurement to ensure their territorial integrity. In this scenario, China being a responsible and large Asian power owes the responsibility to maintain strategic equilibrium in the region.

Historical Perspective of China

Viewing China's role in historical perspective, as among the oldest civilizations, having a noted past of 5000 years. Back into history, China, which considered itself the crux of whole world, was rich and prosperous, having an advanced culture, regarding the remaining world nations as "barbarians". Nevertheless, facing the virtual isolation, it failed to achieve industrial boom³. During the period of decline, which is denoted as "century of humiliation"⁴. it suffered from western manipulation and colonization. The last emperor of ruling Qing dynasty (1644-1911) was ousted in 1911 by a revolt headed by Sun Yat-sen (leader of Nationalist party or United League of China, known as the father of modern China)⁵. The professional Revolutionists of the League, who had made Sun Yat-sen their leader in Tokyo in 1905, established Chinese Republic party at Nanjing on January 1, 1912, declaring Sun as provisional president⁶.

There was a phase of instability, uncertainty and fight with warlords in different Chinese regions⁷. Sun Yat-sen resigned from the presidency in March 1912 and handed over the command to Yuan Shikai⁸ to establish integrity. Yuan promised to establish a republic government but could not fulfill his promises. In 1915 he tried to declare himself emperor but could not succeed. After Shikai's death in 1916 Sun Yat-sen, once again became supreme Chinese leader till his death on March 12, 1925⁹.

The communist movement was started in 1921 which gathered its public support from different areas of the country particularly of peasants. Japan invaded China in 1937 which intensified the complications for Chiang Kaishek's Nationalist government¹⁰. Civil wars and Japanese invasion deteriorated the situation, tore the immense country and stunted its modernization and weakened the Kaishek's republican regime. Ultimately, Mao Zedong's Communist Party triumphed in 1949, the Nationalists

fled to an island called Taiwan. People's Republic of China was formed on October 1, 1949 declaring Beijing as its capital.

Century of Humiliation: A Period of Chinese Ignominy

The period between 1839 and 1949 in Chinese history is considered as "Century of Humiliation" an account of shame and disgrace. China deprived of the control over different parts of its land by western invaders, this bitter experience has laid down a deep impact on modern China's foreign policy preferences¹¹. A nominal sovereignty retained by China in this period, but a vanished control of its fate. Even Chinese duties and taxes were collected by foreigners, who gained favor from Chinese rule and law.

This century starts with the arrival of Britain boats on Yangtze River. They forced Chinese rulers to open their markets and ports for the trade of opium. Subsequently there was first opium war 1839-1842. Then the same demands were made from the other powerful western states which exposed imperial China's defensive and political weakness. China was also asked to yield its territories entirely or somewhere partially. For instance China has to cede Hong Kong, Taiwan and portions of Manchuria Japan, comparatively an inferior state, also invaded much larger China twice.

Almost whole 19th century was deteriorating for China, driven by massive rebellions resulting tens of millions deaths. There was a wave of independence in Tibet, Xinjiang and Mongolia, which also worsened the situation. This period was over after World War- II and defeat of Chiang Kai-shek by Moa Zedong. After winning the Chinese civil war, Mao Zedong proclaimed that today China had "stand up" and capable to decide its own fate.

Isolationism

Historically, China had sat contentedly at the middle of a ring of tributary interactions with rest of the world. Its cultural values and civilization was so rich that its rulers paid no attention to other civilization outside of Asia. Its limited but well-disposed links with the outer world had cleared that they required the same regard from far-away leadership¹². This virtual isolation from the outer sphere made potential over the period of centuries and elaboration of Chinese culture, due to that China could not prepare itself to manage with the world when it was challenged by technologically advanced nations.

Even after the independence under the leadership of Mao Zedong, China, due to some reasons or the others, remained in isolation till 1971. United States fearing from expansion of communism did not recognize this newly established communist state and also not allowed its allies to recognize it; even China could not get membership of UNO in this period. China had established strong links with neighboring states; Soviet Union and India; however, it proved short living and deteriorated soon. China felt threatened and aloofness being encircled among three big states; the United States (US), the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and India. So, it moved towards Islamic Republic of Pakistan, who cordially welcomed this newly established state. Pakistan offered full diplomatic and strategic support to China enabling her to link up with the world¹³.

During deterioration of relations with Soviet Union and India, China found Pakistan a blessing in disguise. According to 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' Beijing established affable relationship with Islamabad. China adopted the strategy to balance the power in the region by signing a border contract with Pakistan in 1963, soon after the Chinese military conflict with India in 1962. In spite of diverse political systems and practical variances of opinion regarding western alliances, China started providing military and strategic support to Pakistan. The theory 'balance of threat' best explicates the Pakistan-China extended mutual relationship¹⁴. No doubt the distribution of power is a crucial factor in formation of an alliance, however the threat level is also noteworthy.

Viewing two superpowers the US and the USSR face to face in the region, China prudently decided to have cooperation with Pakistan irrespective of ideological differences. Pakistan's support as a strategic partner helped China in balancing the threat by deviating Indian focus to the western front. On the other hand, Pakistan aligned with China to ensure its political and military support during any confront with India. Sino-Pak alliance was based on the fact that in the case of threat or any confront with India, none of them will leave the other alone¹⁵.

Pakistan served as a window and paved the way for China to connect with outer world. It played a crucial role in easing US-China tensions. Resultantly, the US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger paid a secret visit to China in July, 1971¹⁶. Next year President Richard Nixon also visited China, which was the first visit of any American president to China¹⁷. This helped to thaw the ice between two great nations, following Chinese recognition in United Nations Organizations (UNO). While, on American side Nixon's goal was to keep China apart from cold war to lessen Soviet influence in the region¹⁸.

China and South Asian Politics

South Asian political milieu has a very effervescent scenario. Convergence and divergence among regional and outer states can be seen in different spells of time.

Tibetan Issue

In order to resolve border disputes and its territorial claims, Chinese management decided to leave no stone unturned. Even they showed intentions to use power to accentuate its status resulting in Sino-India war in 1962 and confront with Soviet Union in 1969¹⁹. It was China's basic national objective to regain its lost territories including the control over Tibet to make China great again²⁰.

Tibet had avowed itself autonomous in 1913 and officials appointed by China's Qing dynasty to supervise this region were expelled. However, Tibet's independent status was not accepted by the Chinese Nationalist regime till 1949²¹. Sun Yat-sen, an

extreme nationalist, during his tenure was very much anxious to make China a strong state and restore its former status by taking back their occupied or separated territories like Manchuria from Japan, Mongolia from Soviet Union and Tibet from Britain²².

So, after the success of Mao's Communist Party (CCP) in its fight with the Nationalists rulers, China decided to revenge Tibet. So Chinese troops invaded and controlled over Tibet in 1950. Later there was again a revolt in Tibet in 1959, when rebel Tibetans made effort to overthrow Chinese control with the help of Lama, evacuee in India. However, Chinese troops used force and curbed this rebellion effort²³. Still Tibet is considered an unstable region near China.

Sino-Indian Conflict

During Tibetan revolt, India supported Tibetans and provided political asylum to Dalai Lama which led to intensification of Sino-Indian relations. In spite of that there were some other boundary disputes that brought a twist and drastic change in Sino-Indian friendly relations which were started in 1954 with the "agreement of peaceful co-existence"²⁴. Later, there was a low scale border war between China and India in 1962. Chinese military crushed their competitors and marched deep into Indian Territory²⁵. After that a complete cessation was seen in China-India relations²⁶. However, this situation started easing in late 1980s after China's adoption of new economic policies.

Chinese Foreign Policy: Impacts on Regional Politics

In the start of its interactions with outer world, communist China established strong relations with neighboring communist state Soviet Union. It also focused on South Asian states; Pakistan and India emancipated from British Raj²⁷. The basic objective of China's foreign policy was to have links with like-minded nations considering imperialistic west as major opponent²⁸.

In later years China has to face serious consequences from its single dimensional and friendly policy towards Soviet Union and India. Viewing Indo-Soviet coalition against Chinese actions in

restoring its territorial claims, China decided to abolish its policy favoring communist Soviet. So, Chinese foreign policy undergone a drastic shift in 1960s and it has adopted a self-determining policy behavior. To make its defense impregnable Peoples Republic of China (PRC) tested its atomic capability in 1964, entering China in international nuclear club (Mao's China, 2013). In 1978, Deng Xiaoping renewed Chinese policy preferences by focusing on economic and industrial development²⁹.

China describes its foreign policy and state objectives in expressions of a sequence of Philosophies and mottos. Since 1980s China is following an independent foreign policy, accordingly the essential goals of its foreign policy are:

- Securing its sovereignty, integrity and power capabilities.
- To create an environment favoring Chinese development and modernization.

Beijing has presented the idea of world peace and harmony into its state objectives to complement its dedication for peaceful development, and a symphonic society at home. Chinese apprehension over its territorial sovereignty is much related with (re)supposition of complete command over Taiwan and continuous hold on deteriorated autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. As 'communist ideology 'has decayed its credibility, Chinese Communist Party has to regain its credibility to play a leading role, boost up national prosperity, national unity and over and all to reestablish Chinese respect as a global power.

China has to develop cordial relations with all neighboring and regional countries to restrict external involvement in it are deteriorating regions. It has to use it soft power image and has to adopt following measures in this regard:

- Peaceful settlement of conflicts with neighboring countries;
- Strengthening bonds and confidence building among regional states; and

- Establishing economic and multidimensional cooperation.

It is also a part of Chinese agenda to internationally isolate Taiwan by forcing those countries that have recognized it and established their diplomatic links with Taiwan. Chinese utmost need at present is to have sufficient natural resources to meet its energy requirement, necessary for economic growth. It pushes Beijing to have contacts with other regions which can fulfill these needs.

Implications

- The basic defensive stance of China is based on establishing an environment of peaceful co-existence in international milieu. It has to curb internal issues and mutual understating with all regional and farther states including the US, to endure regional stability and collective development.
- Questions rise about China's future behavior, particularly as China is becoming more powerful; for instance, how will different intersecting territorial issues be settled down? and how will China use its economic and political influence in future.
- To satisfy its energy needs, China is following energy diplomacy through which it had maintained its relations with relative regions, which raise concerns about China's role as a trustworthy international actor.³⁰

China's Limited Policy towards South Asia

During last four decades of 20th century, Chinese policy towards South Asia was centered on a single agenda of economic thrive. Strong Sino-South Asian relations was started in 1980s through China's open door strategy, introduced by Deng Xiaoping³¹. China focused only on economic aspects in its dealings with different regions like South Asia, Africa and Europe. Furthermore, it established strong trade links with the US and Europe by mitigating political clashes. China has focused on the political and military aspects and having interactions with South

Asia nations. However, their economic relations have not much developed and people to people exchanges were also remained limited between China and regional states during 20th century. However, this attitude has been changed and their interactions have enhanced to economic, political and strategic domains in 21st century³².

China's Role in South Asian Regional Politics

In initial years Beijing remained limited to develop friendly relations with its neighboring countries only; even it remained weak on establishing economic ties with outer world. China also confronted with a strong country India on a border dispute which caused severe geo-political concerns. However, in later years it has made efforts to maintain a regional stability by establishing cordial relations with regional states³³.

Though South Asia is important near global powers however none has considered the region its top geopolitical priority. China-Pakistan carries strong strategic relationship but none of them has ever admitted to cooperate in countering Indian advancements. This was also observed practically during second and third Indo-Pak war, when China did not provide any physical support to Pakistan except verbal sympathy. China has also established diplomatic ties with Bangladesh in October, 1975³⁴. Since 1970, China has been connected with all regional nations on diplomatic grounds except Bhutan. It looks that China by no means assimilated its specific mutual alliances with minor neighboring states to grasp a definite regional determination. China also did not boost or collaborate with any other South Asian state to counter Indian advancement in the region, which shows defensive charm of Chinese policy³⁵.

Previously China has followed her limited policy in South Asia and Chinese government has never tried to involve in internal regional affairs until unless it is relevant to China's security. For example, China did not provide physical support to Pakistan to regain rule over Kashmir, also not try to check the Indian control over some of its disputed regions. Even during Sino-Indian war when China crushed their competitors on borders and also sent

its troops deep into Indian Territory, it did not declare its control over its regions and pulled out its army from there. Someone can say that it was due to logistics hindrances but the actual reason was China's limited and peaceful policy. Beijing also has never showed hegemonic intentions towards its peripheries³⁶.

Paradoxes of Sino-Indian Relations and Pakistan Factor

Sino-India bilateral relations are in continuous progress for over two decades. Meanwhile, the relations among China and other nations of South Asian also have wonderful achievements; however Pak-China links remained distinctive and marvelous. As compared to its previously adopted single dimensional policy, now China has made multilateral interactions with different states. It has established close economic relations with New Delhi by setting aside their boundary clashes as China did not bear India, a huge market and potential economic power of Asia, titling towards United States that will also harmful for her development agenda and establishing her global status. So, it incited India through economic and trade ties. Simultaneously it has maintained its close links with Islamabad. Furthermore, it has also attained cordial reception from rest of the states in region.

Keeping in view the past and geopolitical explanations, it is logical that Islamabad does not bear its time tested ally stepping towards New Delhi. Guessing these Pakistani apprehensions, Beijing has tried to address Pakistani concerns on Indo-China strategic partnership through strengthening its customary friendship and affiliation with Islamabad equivalent to Chinese collaboration with New Delhi³⁷. The "special relationship" between Beijing and Islamabad is a part of Chinese impressive policy that maintains South Asian security settings. Despite some patients in Sino-Indian relations, Islamabad rests the linchpin of PRC's South Asia policy. Viewing at the regional level in South Asia only Pakistan is the country who challenged the Indian hegemonic intentions and its aggressive desire to dominate the region through power capabilities³⁸. Pak-China relations also sets an illustration of restraining India's hegemonic maneuverings in other countries of South Asia.

With their bilateral efforts, China-Pakistan friendly relations and multi-dimensional cooperation has continuously maintained its status. Pakistan is the first country that had signed “Free Trade Agreement” with China. Both have also enhanced their defense and security relations. ‘Friendship 2006’ is the name of joint anti-terrorism exercise between China and Pakistan in hilly area Abbottabad on December 11th to 19th 2006. Chinese naval forces shared their first ever multinational maritime exercises in March 2007, which has strengthened their defense collaboration³⁹. Pak-China air forces have conducted 9th joint air exercise ‘Shaheen-IX’ in southern parts of Pakistan in December 2020, a series of joint drills conducted each year in both countries on alternative basis started in March 2011. China’s flagship program CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) is also being protected and led by the elements of Pakistan army⁴⁰.

China’s Role as Strategic Balance between India and Pakistan

South Asia can be denoted as effervescent region due to its geopolitical and strategic distinctiveness in the world. There is a history of troubled relations between two nuclear states Pakistan and India. US led interference has reasoned the negative security milieu in this region. Now it seems that China with all the incentives and competencies is the only actor which has the capacity to curb and deal with the threats to the regional security, stability and peace. Viewing the hegemonic intentions of India and its fortifying links with United States, China views Pakistan as the best option to allying with and strengthening its ties to counter negative impacts of Indo-US strategic engagement.

China’s Peaceful Rise 2.0 under Xi Jinping

China has continued to follow policy of peaceful rise and development during current establishment under President Xi Jinping. Mr. Xi has introduced numerous changes in Chinese foreign policy preferences according to his own aspirations and provided a clear guideline to be implemented. He has not tried to abolish previous peaceful policy but new deviations have been

combined with it. This is called ‘peaceful rise 2.0’ which focuses on three basic elements.

- China has decided to follow its policy of peaceful development but requires same response from the interacting state, which means that all countries have to show commitments for peaceful co-existence,
- China has adopted a firm attitude in securing its national interests,
- A more coordinated and proactive attitude to have and shape a stable external environment which serves for Chinese domestic development.

Moreover, Mr. Xi has emphasized to establish more effective and active ties with regional states to have a worldwide favorable environment⁴¹ .

Latest Chinese Strategy towards South Asia

China’s latest policy towards South Asia can be best described by President Xi’s statement during his historic trip to India and Pakistan in September 2014 and April 2015 respectively. He said that, “a peaceful, stable and prosperous South Asia conforms to China’s interests and that China is willing to align its development strategies with those of South Asian countries to achieve mutually beneficial development and common prosperity”⁴² .

This tour consists of several mutual agreements and friendly collaboration explaining the dimensions of policy that Beijing follows while maintaining its relations with regional countries. China wants a more comprehensive and flexible policy towards South Asia as it wants to justify its position as some describe its role as a threat for regional peace and stability⁴³ .

Specifically, India showed its concerns on China’s active and participative role in the region and its some assertive policies towards regional states. China has showed its interests in regional growth and cooperation for win-win agenda but its increasing role in South Asian region is not perceived favourable

in some Indian assessments. According to some Indian analysts PRC's increasing influence in regional affairs is a part of its plan to encircle and destabilize India through "string of pearls". Further they describe it as a threat for Indian security and economy as well ⁴⁴ .

Chinese Maneuverings for South Asian Development and Stability

Some significant characteristics of modern China's South Asia policy, aiming at addressing the threat perception from Chinese rise in regional countries, are listed below:

- China emphasized on shared struggle for progress and showed consent to live in harmony along with all regional states by contributing in the regional development.
- Mr. Xi has recommended that Beijing should work and collaborate with regional countries for economic integration and also proposed to link up with Road and Belt Initiative (BRI) aiming at strong connections and trade among regions.
- He denoted BRI as a project for collective wellbeing of regional and connecting states and hoped that this plan will help to provide a connective structure for states which will enhance their economy and prosperity.
- China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) will bring fortune in South Asian states especially for Pakistan⁴⁵.
- President Xi while addressing "Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia" (CICA) held at Shanghai, in May 2014, made a call for promotion of mutual cooperation for peace and sustained security in Asia and to establish a new security infrastructure in Asia.
- Some other salient features of China's South Asia policy are; defusing American plans to contain China with the help of India and other Asian nations, building economic ties with border states, cooperate with regional states to overcome energy crises in South Asian, securing the routes of Chinese energy transportation, struggling for 'One

China' plan and to counter threat of terrorism in unstable Chinese provinces and the whole region with the collaboration of regional states.

Conclusion

Due to geopolitical compulsions, South Asian region has become an area of great interest near China. Traditionally, it remained an area of low priority in overall foreign policy calculations of Beijing. However, a series of special Chinese interactions with South Asian states has been witnessed in current century. With the passage of time Chinese relations with two major South Asian states i.e. Pakistan and India have become multi-dimensional, deeper and more complex. In this regard, Beijing's economic development, its explicit needs of natural resources and security of transportation routes in Indian Ocean Region have expressively transformed the intensity of its relative influence and the nature of interactions with regional states. Due to diverse Chinese interests in this region, it is expected that Beijing will pay more attention towards South Asian affairs in future and will play a role of more responsible stakeholder. Chinese administration has showed consent to continue its harmonized policies towards regional states and extra-regional states like United States and Russia. It is quite possible that China may not prove helpful in resolving the chronic regional territorial disputes however; it will be cooperative in bringing peace and stability in this nuclearized region along with economic boom.

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