
China Factor In South Asia

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The Western demonization of China as Dragon power has tried to create a bug bear image in the minds of people across the world, not excluding South Asia. However, not everyone has fallen for it. Even the West, though wary, is more than eager to expand trade relations with the fastest growing global economy. Countries like Britain have introduced Mandarin as one of optional new languages being taught in schools on par with European and other languages. Ideological caution notwithstanding, governments from Africa to Asia are more than ready to discard the stereotype image of China. South Asian countries are no exception.

A pragmatic approach

From Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and Nepal, China has assiduously wooed

South Asian countries with aid, trade and even military assistance when thought fit. Diplomatically too, China has been quick to exploit differences, as between India and Pakistan, or back a new regime, as in the case of Bangladesh after its birth in spite of old ties with Pakistan, as also in Nepal by heavily supporting the emerging Maoist forces after having earlier played ball with the royal regimes of Kings Mahendra, Birendra and briefly even Gyanendra.

Relations with India have necessarily been on a different plane because of India's size, strength and the 1962 war between the two countries. Yet China has not allowed the past to stop striking new paths like trade with India.

The Responses

On their part, South Asian countries

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too have displayed a practical approach in dealing with China. The Hamid Karzai government in Afghanistan, for instance, has had no hesitation in awarding the \$3.5 billion copper mining project in Aynak area of Logar province, south of Kabul. Afghanistan is thought to be sitting on copper ore worth more than \$80 billion. China has also been selected as the preferred bidder for petroleum exploration in northern Afghanistan. There is also talk of rail and road projects some time in the future. China is especially anxious to cooperate with Kabul in its fight against fundamentalist elements and prevent them linking up with the restive Turkic speaking Uighur Muslim minority demanding cultural and political rights in Xinjiang province.

Pakistan's relations with China go a long while back, especially to days when it brokered a thaw between Beijing and Washington under Nixon and Kissinger administration. Sino-Pak ties in military and economic fields are well documented and steadily progressing. The building of Karrakoram Highway through northern Kashmir territory controlled by Pakistan but disputed by India has led to a highly piquant situation between New Delhi and Beijing. Sino-Indian territorial disputes, of course, go back to British

Indian colonial times left unresolved since the Durand Line border drawn up by the British but unrecognised by China and Afghanistan. The resultant issues have been made more complex by China's recent involvement in the Gilgit region of Kashmir. Given the increasing Chinese role in Pakistan's development of Gwadar port and other infrastructure, the Indo-Pak-Chinese triangle will remain an area of "interesting" claims and counter claims for a long time to come.

Fortunately, barring the odd diplomatic spat, India and China have successfully charted the new path of bilateral trade relations, while putting aside border disputes. Indeed the border trade between the two countries has crossed the \$60 billion mark in less than a decade, and is racing towards the \$100 billion level. Whatever the historical territorial baggage, the two Asian giants have no desire to give up the fruits of trade for the sake of barren land strips where "not a blade of grass grows." That is not to say that the two giants are anywhere near the "Hindi-Chini" bhai-bhai (brotherly) euphoric days.

China's forays into Sri Lanka and the Maldives or Bangladesh and Nepal continue to be watched closely by India. China's establishment of a

fully fledged embassy in the Maldives and its tourist spending in the island nation, outstripping the combined spending of Western tourists, have not gone un-noticed by India. The talk of a Chinese naval facility a Marao, barely 40 km from the capital Male, too pricks the Indian security ears.

Similarly, with the development of Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, an immensely important location on the Indian Ocean sea trade route; perhaps smaller than Gwadar port in Pakistan, it is strategically of much greater significance. Nor has Chinese military assistance to Sri Lanka during the latter stages of the civil war against Tamil Eelam liberation forces gone unmarked in India. In purely bilateral terms, relations between Colombo and Beijing have been termed 'model' of ties between a big power and a small nation. At the same time Sri Lanka can be seen to have played its cards wisely in extracting the maximum from both India and China without putting all her eggs in one basket.

The primacy of national interest is unquestioned as the aim of diplomacy. And currently nobody among the South Asian countries is pursuing it better than Nepal. The construction of nearly a dozen big and small roads, a couple of airports,

including one at Lumbini, besides other schemes in the pipeline is no small gain extracted by a small country balancing the game between two big powers. Less noticed but of much greater significance is China's funding of compensation package to a large section of Maoist combatants for giving up arms after the successful conclusion of the 10-year civil war. In return, the Nepal government, in spite of internal fissures, has obliged Beijing by keeping Tibetan refugees and activists under tight leash and preventing them from hurting Chinese sensibilities.

Bangladesh too has its arms open for aid and trade with China which is already a major trading partner, with total volume topping \$7 billion by 2010. China, in turn, has its eye on opening a trade route to the Bay of Bengal via Myanmar for its landlocked south western province of Yunan. China is also engaged in negotiations for the development of a deep sea port in Chittagong.

Conclusion

Overall, the Chinese impact on South Asia keeps a fine balance between economic and strategic influence. In fact strategic influence derives its strength from trade and

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economic cooperation, which is perhaps overly interpreted as 'hegemony'. And that is equally true of India's place among its South Asian neighbours. Both big powers have to bear the cross of the 'Big

Brother' suspect image. Perhaps the smaller nations need to take a leaf out of the India-China bilateral book which has preferred the path of trade and prosperity and not be too afraid of the 'hegemony' bogey. ■