

China's South Asia Policy Under Xi Jinping

India's Strategic Concerns

Vinay Kaura

China has always been interested in enlarging its economic and political influence in South Asian geopolitics. Several factors are responsible for China's long-lasting interest in the region. China's policy towards South Asia has been a combination of unique bilateral relationships, characterised by economic opportunities, territorial disputes, security challenges, containing Indian power and resisting American influence. China is containing India's influence and power by strengthening Pakistan's strategic and military capabilities. While solidifying the traditional bond with Pakistan, China remains focused on enhancing its influence with Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. The article argues that Chinese diplomacy in the Xi Jinping era shrewdly blends strategic objectives with economic incentives. Under his watch, China's strategic challenges to India have thus increased in recent years. This threat intensification has been accompanied by a growing gap between India and China in terms of strategic capabilities, which has serious implications for India's national security.

Keywords: China, Xi Jinping, India, Pakistan, South Asia, Indian Ocean, Counter terrorism, OBOR, Afghanistan

A brief bonhomie between India and China was brutally challenged by China's communist leadership when the border dispute between two Himalayan countries resulted in a war in 1962. India was defeated and



Vinay Kaura. China's South Asia Policy Under Xi Jinping: India's Strategic Concerns, *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 12, no. 2: 8–29.

© 2018 CEJISS. Article is distributed under Open Access licence: Attribution - NonCommercial 3.0 Unported (cc by-nc 3.0).

isolated. Thereafter, China underwent a comprehensive review of her policies towards South Asia and enhanced its ties with Pakistan, a close ally of the United States (US). In the ensuing years, China's South Asia policy was shaped around the Sino-Soviet equation of the Cold War era, which largely remained one-dimensional as security was the primary concern. China's internal security compulsions had also forced her to extend friendly overtures to South Asian countries. Having adopted the policy of opening up in the era of Deng Xiaoping, China began a concerted effort to enhance economic ties with most of the South Asian countries. Around the mid-1980s, the former USSR re-oriented her policies, aiming at rapprochement with China. India also made a bold diplomatic initiative to engage with Chinese leadership. After the end of the Cold War, China redefined her South Asia policy to create space for enhanced political influence and economic partnership with the region, especially India.

Vinay Kaura

South Asia has assumed increasing significance in world politics in the post-Cold War era. Its importance has further grown since 9/11, as the region is home to one of the world's most intractable bilateral disputes between India and Pakistan, and between India and China. South Asia has embraced economic liberalization leading to stronger links with the rest of the world. By virtue of its sheer size and population, India is the dominant country in the South Asian region. However, India's relations with its South Asian neighbours have been affected by several territorial disputes. On the other hand, with increasing economic might, China's ability to shape international outcomes has gradually increased. While China's rise offers greater opportunities for global trade and connectivity, it has also fostered anxiety in some countries, such as over China's future intentions vis-à-vis its neighbours. Consequently, China's relations with South Asia have become more intensive and extensive over the past few years. China has been facilitating much deeper contacts between Beijing and regional capitals across many policy domains, including economic, diplomatic and security. Since South Asia has always been perceived by New Delhi as its traditional sphere of influence, China's actions have far reaching implications on India, both economically and strategically.

Given the relatively short period of observation, this article makes use of various current sources for analyzing the political, military and strategic significance of Chinese policies towards South Asia since Xi Jinping's assumption of Chinese leadership. The article is structured as

follows: (1) an overview of China's new foreign policy approach; (2) various pillars and tools of China's South Asia policy; (3) India's concerns and response. The article employs a qualitative analysis of secondary literature, with media reports, official documents and public statements providing important sources for grasping China's behaviour in the region. The assessment can assist academics and policy makers in understanding China's approach towards South Asia and enhance understanding of India's strategic concerns and response.

New foreign policy approach

As Chinese political, economic and military power grows at remarkable pace, the impact of Chinese external behaviour on the South Asian region has correspondingly undergone a perceptible change. Earlier, China had adopted a conservative and low-profile approach to international affairs under Jiang Zemin and his successor, Hu Jintao. Since Xi Jinping assumed leadership, it has become commonplace to refer to Chinese foreign policy behaviour as muscular and assertive. In comparison with the strategy of keeping a low profile, which was the cornerstone of previous Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping has laid emphasis on the strategy of striving for achievement in shaping a favourable environment for China's progress.¹ Under Xi, China's diplomatic establishment is increasingly viewing the country as a leading global power with wide-ranging interests and responsibilities, and is abandoning the traditional conservative and low-profile approach to international affairs and foreign policy.²

Some observers are of the opinion that China will gradually begin to treat friends and enemies differently by using varied instruments in its diplomatic toolkit. China would like to increase the dependence of its neighbours on good relations with China, and also ensure that their interests are closely aligned with those of Beijing. Therefore, those that are seen playing a constructive role in China's development will receive generous economic and security benefits, whereas the countries seen as seeking to prevent China's development will be ignored and punished.³

Periphery diplomacy

The concept of 'periphery diplomacy' has become a keystone in China's official diplomatic discourse. Beijing has been moving from a focus on traditional great power diplomacy to prioritizing peripheral or

neighborhood diplomacy. That shift has gradually transformed China's foreign policy since Xi Jinping came to power. Under his leadership, Beijing has undertaken several initiatives to expand its influence and restore China's image in the region since 2013. While major power relations remain one of the top priorities, China's neighbourhood has gained a new significance in the country's diplomacy. The shift was confirmed at an official conference organised by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in October 2013. President Xi Jinping observed that:⁴

The strategic goal of China's diplomacy with neighbouring countries is to serve the realization of the two 'centenary goals' and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. China needs to develop the relations with neighbouring countries in an all-round manner, consolidate the friendly relations with neighbouring countries, and deepen the mutually-beneficial cooperation with neighbouring countries...China needs to develop closer ties with neighbouring countries, with more friendly political relations, stronger economic bonds, deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people contacts.

The increasing attention paid to the periphery or neighbourhood is not without reason.⁵ China has gradually realised that becoming a power centre in the regional system should be a logical outcome of its rise. Positive relations with the neighbouring countries would improve China's strategic position and help expand its global influence. If China's periphery remains unstable, it would not be able to secure societal cohesion and national security. Although China has always paid attention to its relations with neighbouring countries, until very recently its diplomacy was not considered as an organic whole in terms of an overarching foreign policy strategy.⁶ Diplomacy towards neighbouring countries was conducted mostly on bilateral terms, focusing on specific issues.

It has been suggested that China's diplomacy can be analysed through the 'three circles framework', which presumes that China's foreign policy is focused on three areas – three concentric rings – with China in the centre. The first circle-level handles bilateral relations with neighbouring countries; the second circle-level deals with the South Asian region and China's counter-terrorism diplomacy, and the third circle-level is all about global powers including the US and the European Union. It has been argued that Xi is paying more

attention to China's periphery as well as the Asia-Pacific region, and is displaying more activism at the global level. Since China shares land borders with 14 countries, it is natural that it would put more emphasis on peripheral diplomacy. Thus, China's diplomacy toward neighbouring countries and South Asian region can be framed as a part of its peripheral diplomacy.⁷

Xi has made the revival of the celebrated Silk Road trading route through the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and '21st Century Maritime Silk Road' a centerpiece of his foreign policy agenda. In September 2013, he proposed the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt in a speech titled "Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future" at Kazakhstan.⁸ Silk Road refers to the historical trade routes linking Asia to Europe through a region that spans South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia and West Asia. Projected as a network of regional infrastructure projects comprising roads, rail links, energy pipelines, and telecommunications ties, the initiative called for the integration of the countries situated on the ancient Silk Road into a cohesive economic area. In October 2013, Xi proposed in Indonesia the creation of the "Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road"⁹ as a complementary initiative aimed at fostering collaboration in Southeast Asia, Oceania and North Africa through the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean and the wider Indian Ocean area.

Pillars of Chinese strategy in South Asia

China's South Asia policy is primarily aimed at sustaining its global rise. Beijing is eager to increase its strategic, economic and political influence in the region, to ensure economic development of China's Western regions including Xinjiang and Tibet, to reduce political instability and jihadist threat in the restive Xinjiang region, to curtail India's growing influence, to reduce the ability of potentially hostile powers like the United States and Japan to Chinese interests and to promote economic integration. In order to achieve these objectives, China has employed various means, which are discussed below.

One belt, one road project

The major objective of the two highly ambitious projects, referred to as the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is to win over neighbouring and other countries in the region through increased trade incentives and transport connectivity. Beijing is fram-

ing its diplomatic approach in strategic terms with frequent reference to OBOR. Different explanations and interpretations have been offered as to what drives OBOR. Broadly speaking, there are four political and economic objectives behind the OBOR. First, China wants to build up a regional system with Chinese leadership, which promotes closer ties between China and its neighbours. Second, this would build a more extensive infrastructural and communication network in the region, facilitating closer economic integration. Third, this would help Chinese companies to invest abroad and export its surplus production, thus helping in the development of its western region. Fourth and most importantly, this China-led and Eurasia-wide initiative is seen as a profound challenge to the current global politico-economic status quo maintained by the US, prompting a Chinese analyst to term OBOR as heralding a 'post-Westphalian world'.¹⁰

Xi Jinping considers the OBOR project to be in the interest of South Asian countries. One needs to pay close attention to what Xi had stated in Islamabad in April 2015 (that China was prepared to align its strategies with those of South Asian countries for mutual benefits). He further said that 'the Chinese side is willing to, within the framework of South-South cooperation, offer assistance and support to South Asian countries within its own capacity and that China-Pakistan economic corridor project will bring prosperity in all parts of Pakistan and the region, The Silk route project is a significant move on the part of China to fully open up'.¹¹ Clearly, Xi has been trying to argue that the OBOR would lead to boosting the interconnectivity of countries along the traditional land and maritime Silk Road. For instance, Beijing wants Bangladesh to align its seventh Five Year Plan with China's thirteenth Five Year Plan. Similarly, during the meeting between Xi Jinping and former Nepalese Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli in March 2016, it was hoped that both sides could fit together China's 'Belt and Road' initiative with Nepal's reconstruction and development plan as well as speed up the establishment of a China-Nepal free trade zone.¹²

A number of regional economic corridors that China has launched are actually part of OBOR. The most important are the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) providing China's western provinces with access to the Indian Ocean through the Pakistani port of Gwadar, the Bangladesh China India Myanmar (BCIM) economic Corridor giving Yunnan Province access to the Bay of Bengal, the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor as well as the new Eurasia land bridge

economic corridor. Nevertheless, there are some structural challenges that confront the Chinese formulations on OBOR proposal. The implementation gap, unilateral conceptualization and lack of transparency are some of the factors that weaken any attraction for India regarding OBOR. New Delhi has refused to join the project since it is wary of increased Chinese influence over its neighbourhood. Hence, the OBOR initiative would find it extremely difficult to 'navigate the irreconcilable geometries of South Asia that prevent India from providing full backing to OBOR'. If India gives the green light to the project, it would be tantamount to 'legitimation to Pakistan's rights on Pakistan Occupied Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that is "closely related" to OBOR'.¹³ However, an Indian analyst feels that the Chinese have the capital, the technology and the requirement to speed up the development of the countries along the OBOR project, adding "that the tunnel, road and rail links that it intends to build will pierce the natural ramparts of South Asia, the Himalayas, and end India's geographical hegemony over the rest of south Asia."¹⁴

Greater interest in SAARC

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is a regional association of eight South Asian countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Although SAARC is not a vibrant association like Association for Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN), it remains the only regional grouping which comprises all members of the Indian sub-continent. China has always been interested in becoming associated with SAARC. It was granted observer status at the Dhaka Summit in 2005, with Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh supporting the move. Ever since, China has made significant progress in terms of its participation in SAARC.

Many of the SAARC countries have expressed interest in joining either the Silk Road Economic Belt or its oceanic equivalent, the Maritime Silk Road. China has strengthened its foothold through funding various development projects in the region. For instance, in November 2014, China's Deputy Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin, declared China's intention to increase the level of trade between South Asia and China to \$ 150 billion.¹⁵ The high-level bilateral visits between China and SAARC countries have strengthened the po-

litical, economic and military ties and have also allowed China to play a greater role in SAARC, seriously reducing India's role. However, China's role in SAARC is limited by its observer status, the slow progress of SAARC, and India's increased role, which act as counterweights to China.

*China's South Asia
Policy Under Xi
Jinping*

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made renewed efforts to reach out to South Asian countries. This regional outreach includes a new vision for SAARC. On the face of it, India and China share common goals for SAARC. But, both would like 'to be at the center of this regional integration process'.¹⁶ With the SAARC remaining fractured due to ongoing India-Pakistan tensions, the possibilities of South Asia becoming a unified trading and diplomatic bloc has diminished. Meanwhile, China's own plan is working on a bilateral basis, a strategy Beijing has already been pursuing with lucrative trade and investment deals in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Maldives and Afghanistan.

All weather friendship with Pakistan

China has serious boundary disputes with India. It claims huge portions of India's territory in Jammu and Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh, with a large chunk of India's territory in Jammu and Kashmir already under Chinese occupation. A close China-Pakistan relationship has allowed China to construct all-weather roads, railway, airfields and ports to connect all passes and military posts in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) for securing energy and transport routes as well as for easy movement of its troops. The China-Pakistan relationship continues to be underpinned by a mutual rivalry with India. As undermining India's emergence as a great power is a common objective of both the countries, Beijing's strategy in South Asia has been to ensure that Pakistan can ably perform a credible balancing role. The convergence of strategic interests between China and Pakistan also characterises the policy outlook of Xi Jinping, who has expanded China's military and economic relations with Pakistan.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said during Chinese President Xi's visit to Pakistan in April 2015 that 'Friendship with China is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy'.¹⁷ China has termed Pakistan as its 'irreplaceable all-weather friend' and the two often describe their friendship as higher than mountains, deeper than oceans, stronger than steel, and sweeter than honey. China has always valued the

geostrategic position of Pakistan and considers it useful in countering India. China has helped Pakistan build its arsenal of nuclear weapons and has emerged as Pakistan's top arms supplier, a position until recently held by the US. Andrew Small rightly argues that 'China has been Pakistan's diplomatic protector, its chief arms supplier and its call of last resort when every other supposed friend has left it in the lurch. Virtually every important moment in Pakistan's recent history has been punctuated with visits by its presidents, prime ministers and army chiefs to Beijing, where the deals and deliberations have so often proved to have a decisive impact on the country's fate'.¹⁸

Beijing has emerged as Pakistan's great economic hope, which is apparent from the triumphant declaration of energy and infrastructure projects worth \$46 billion, projected as China's biggest overseas investment. Pakistan is the most crucial link to China's grand designs for a new silk road connecting the energy fields of West Asia and the markets of Europe to the East Asian region. The ambitious 3000-kilometre-long China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) would link the northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang to Pakistan's Gwadar port via PoK through a massive network of roads, railways and pipelines. The Gwadar port is already operational, but lacks road connectivity to central Pakistan. It is expected that Gwadar would be linked to China at the end of 2017 with the completion of the M-8 motorway and the upgrade of the Karakoram Highway.¹⁹

Pakistan plays an important role for Beijing in dissuading the Islamist extremist organizations operating in its territory from targeting China, and cracking down on uncontrollable elements. But this relationship is not without its underlying tensions. It must be recalled that President Xi had to cancel his scheduled Pakistan tour in late 2014 due to security concerns arising from political disturbances in the country.²⁰ Xi's first Pakistan visit was also the first visit of a Chinese head of state in a decade. The CPEC would pass through politically volatile Baluchistan province of Pakistan, where a long-running separatist insurgency raises important questions about the feasibility of the plan. Given Pakistan's ideology of Jihad and the policy of asymmetric warfare against India, Pakistan army cannot go all out against terrorist groups functioning within its territory. However, Beijing shares a very complicated relationship with Islamabad in this respect for the simple reason that Pakistan's practice of state-sponsorship of terrorism has actually benefitted China in the first place. Chinese strategists are fully

aware that Pakistani terrorism today is directed not only against the Jammu and Kashmir but also the entire Indian state. Pakistan's intention to undermine India's emergence as a great power suits China well. Although Xi has been pursuing the policy of prioritizing economic interests in China's South Asia policy, he is not likely to give up either the China-Pakistan nexus or Chinese assertiveness on Sino-Indian border.

Vinay Kaura

According to Andrew Small, China-Pakistan relations have become more important to China than they ever have been before. Pakistan's utility to China has been growing and 'now Pakistan is a central part of China's transition from a regional power to a global one...Its coastline is becoming a crucial staging post for China's take-off as a naval power, extending its reach from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.'²¹

Military modernisation and maritime assertiveness

The central location of China makes it the geostrategic heartland of Asia. As all the regional states are located along either its land or maritime periphery, the rise in China's military power affects almost every Asian state. China's assertive external behaviour can be explained with reference to the persistent growth in China's military capabilities, dramatic shifts in the global distribution of power, particularly those resulting from declining faith in America's leadership capabilities. China was the driving force behind the Obama administration's policy that called for America to 'rebalance' its forces to the Asia-Pacific region.²²

The growing military expenditure of China is reflected in modernization plans in all military spheres – the Army, Navy, Air Force and nuclear force. Until recently, China's military equipment was reverse-engineered Soviet equipment. But things have been changing fast. For instance, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has inducted Type 98 and Type 99 tanks which are thought to be equivalent to the best 'Main Battle Tanks' in the world, while also testing new attack and reconnaissance helicopters, the Z-10 and Z-19.²³ China has also unveiled its own stealth fighter, the J-31, which seeks to match the world's most advanced fighter plane. China is reconfiguring its entire range of land based atomic missiles, by enabling them to carry multiple warheads. That includes changes in the single warhead DF-5 as well as the DF-31A missiles.²⁴ China's share in the international arms exports market has risen from 3.6% in 2006-10 to 5.9% in 2011-15.²⁵ South Asia geopolitics cannot remain unaffected with this pace of military modernization.

Xi Jinping has relentlessly consolidated his personal grasp of military power through intensive political will and the military reform announced in 2015, which remains the most comprehensive since the one started by Deng Xiaoping 30 years ago.²⁶ Xi's initiatives for streamlining the functioning of the military are aimed at improving the efficiency, professionalism and war-fighting capability of the military. Seven PLA's regional commands have been consolidated into five 'theaters'.²⁷ More than 100 high-ranking military officers have been punished for various offenses, particularly on corruption charges. Xi has recently created and become the chairman of the Central Commission for Integrated Military and Civilian Development (CCIMCD), whose aim is to reduce costs and facilitate the sharing of technology and resources between the armed forces and the civilian sector. The maritime and cyber domains are likely to benefit from the adoption of civil-military integration.²⁸

The transformation and modernization of the military could create new operational challenges for the US military as well as threaten India's security.²⁹ The speed and scale with which China has undertaken infrastructure modernization in Tibet and the PoK undermine the current military balance along the India-China border.³⁰ Besides testing new tanks,³¹ China is also building its missile capabilities in Tibet, basing them on the region's growing infrastructure. With China upgrading its nuclear and ballistic missiles to target India, it is highly unlikely that India's nuclear deterrence will reach full maturity for another decade. Together with military modernization, Beijing has been trying to make sure that China faces no hurdles in getting access to South Asia through well-built highways and rail networks.³² This has enabled China to have unobstructed access towards Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and to the whole Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean provides critical sea routes connecting West Asia, Africa and South Asia with the broader Asian continent to the east and Europe to the west. Some most important strategic chokepoints, including the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, are found in the Indian Ocean. India is the central power in the Indian Ocean, which is the life-line of India because of 7,500 km of coastline. The geo-strategic and geo-economic significance of the Indian Ocean has grown over the years. It is not without reason that Robert Kaplan mentions that geopolitics of the 21st century would be shaped by events in the Indian Ocean.³³ Whereas China's rising international stature and India's grow-

ing economic rise have heightened the strategic value of the Indian Ocean, America's 'rebalance' to Asia has also raised concerns over security in the region.³⁴

China's efforts to bolster its military presence in the Indian Ocean region counter the geo-strategic and geo-economic pillars of India's grand strategy. India perceives China as trying to reshape the strategic environment in its favour, particularly by forming alignments with countries in the Indian Ocean region that could be used against India. Port developments in Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka and Gwadar in Pakistan have been made possible by China's technical and financial assistance.³⁵ Although the efficacy of these ports as full scale naval bases has been questioned, it would not be entirely inaccurate to claim that they could be useful logistics points for Chinese naval vessels. Building strategic ties with India's neighbours might be driven by China's economic and strategic reasons, but it has been viewed by many Indian strategic experts as 'aimed at preventing India's emergence as an Asian and global power'.³⁶ China has recently announced its intention to build its first overseas naval base at Obock in Djibouti, ostensibly to support China's anti-piracy and peacekeeping operations. The US and Japan are already operating their naval bases at Djibouti.³⁷ China's logistical base at Djibouti enables a round-the-year naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

The deployment of Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean raises disturbing questions about Beijing's long-term objectives. With the geopolitical scenario in South China Sea heating up significantly due to aggressive posturing by China and its creation of artificial islands, it seems strategically reasonable that the Chinese navy is beginning to shift its focus to the Indian Ocean not only in terms of power projection but also in terms of securing the sea lines of communication through the Indian Ocean region.³⁸ China's recent acquisition of commercial facilities in the Indian Ocean region seem more in the nature of dual-use bases that can be upgraded to military facilities in the event of a crisis.³⁹

Furthermore, the maritime component of China's Silk Road project runs through the Indian Ocean. The \$46-billion CPEC would provide China with smooth access to the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar port besides running through PoK. As per Chinese calculations, CPEC and BCIM would connect the Maritime Silk Road with Silk Road Eco-

*China's South Asia
Policy Under Xi
Jinping*

conomic Belt and bring all South Asian countries into the OBOR network. China's acquisition of overseas military facilities in the Indian Ocean may be defended as essential for maritime security as well as for Maritime Silk Road project, but what really causes concern is the issue of 'the lack of transparency',⁴⁰

Enhanced relations with Afghanistan

For Beijing, Afghanistan should not become a safe haven for Uighur radical groups; insecurity in Afghanistan should not destabilise Pakistan and other Central Asian republics; the rise of extremist Islamist forces in Afghanistan should not exert ideological influence in Xinjiang; and proxy battles in Afghanistan between India and Pakistan should not escalate tensions in South Asia. For more than a decade, China was satisfied to be on the sidelines in Afghanistan, trying to minimise its political involvement and avoid being seen cooperating with the US. Beijing also relied upon Islamabad to play a leading role in ensuring a stable outcome in Afghanistan, and to take care of Chinese interests there in the aftermath of imminent American withdrawal. But Xi Jinping seems to have realised that China can no longer avoid a more active role in dealing with Afghanistan if it wants to secure the desired geopolitical, security and economic outcomes. Ever since the US decided to scale down American presence in Afghanistan, China has given more importance to its bilateral ties with Afghanistan in order to plug the political vacuum as well as to secure OBOR projects.

Since Ashraf Ghani came to power in 2014, and repercussions of increasing influence of the Islamic State (ISIS) came to be discussed, China has begun to take part in international efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table for maintaining peace in Afghanistan, including its bordering areas of Pakistan, where China is planning to invest in a number of projects under CPEC. Beijing became involved in the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and the United States.⁴¹ Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan established a new Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), which was a Chinese initiative, but the Pakistan army actively contributed to its establishment.⁴² The urgency of establishing another 'quadrilateral' mechanism stemmed from the failure of the QCG dialogue process.⁴³

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Kabul and Islamabad in June 2017 in a bid to reduce tensions between Afghanistan and Paki-

stan. Wang's mission was a significant shift in China's Afghan policy, as it was aimed at creating an opportunity for Beijing to exercise greater influence over South Asian geopolitics.⁴⁴ Seen from an Indian perspective, the emerging axis between Moscow, Islamabad and Beijing seems to have put Pakistan once again in the driver's seat over the future of Afghanistan. China's diplomatic efforts in tandem with Pakistan and Russia to accommodate the Taliban as a tool against the ISIS have implications for India. However, unilateral efforts by China to reach out to the Taliban have not yet had concrete results.

Vinay Kaura

Selective counter-terrorism

China views terrorism, separatism and extremism as posing potential threats to a wide range of national security interests that include social stability, national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. China's counter-terrorism efforts presently focus mainly on its Muslim ethnic Uighur population in the Xinjiang region. China's official use of the term 'terrorist' seems to be reserved almost exclusively for describing those tied to Xinjiang. However, some Chinese scholars and government-affiliated experts have also characterised the riots among ethnic Tibetans as terrorism. China's primary concern is the prevailing instability and lawlessness around its periphery. The proximity of these locations to Xinjiang has given rise to fears that Uighur separatists could use these areas as staging grounds for attacks against China or link up with Islamic radicals already operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan which are the primary focus of Beijing's efforts in this regard. China has leaned heavily on Pakistan to do more to combat the activities of the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP), both of which operate in Pakistan's tribal areas, where offshoots of Taliban and al-Qaeda provide training and monetary support to Uyghur Jihadists.⁴⁵

India and China have been engaged in counter-terrorism cooperation. In May 2015, when Prime Minister Modi visited China, both the countries 'reiterated their strong condemnation of and resolute opposition to terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and committed themselves to cooperate on counter-terrorism'.⁴⁶ In November 2015, India and China issued a joint statement in which they 'agreed to enhance cooperation in combating international terrorism'.⁴⁷ In September 2016, R N Ravi, Chairman of Joint Intelligence Committee of India and Wang Yongqing, Secretary General of Central Politi-

cal and Legal Affairs Commission of China held 'in-depth discussions on enhancing cooperation in counter-terrorism and security and on measures to jointly deal with security threats and reached important consensus in this regard'.⁴⁸ However, this commitment is not reflected on the ground.

China seeks regional and global support for targeting Uighur Islamists but refrains from backing India's efforts to weaken the terror groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), who are considered the Pakistani army's 'strategic assets' to wage asymmetric war against India. This selective characterization poses several challenges for the success of counter-terrorism efforts in South Asia. India's application to the UNSC Sanctions Committee (also known as 1267 Committee) to designate the JeM chief, Masood Azhar, as a terrorist has been repeatedly rejected because of China's veto. China is the only country in the UNSC to oppose Masood Azhar's inclusion in a UN blacklist of terrorist individuals, entities, organizations and groups. Even a former Chinese diplomat who had once served in India has struck a different note and expressed his disapproval of China's official policy of blocking India's bid to get Azhar branded as a global terrorist.⁴⁹ China's decision is a logical corollary of its friendship with Pakistan. Beijing has a long history of supporting Pakistan in the UN whenever India has brought up the matter of Pakistan-sponsored terrorists. When India sought UN censure of Pakistan for releasing LeT commander Zaki-ur Rehman Lakhvi, China blocked the move on the grounds that India did not provide sufficient information against him.⁵⁰

China's friendship with Pakistan stands in the way of Beijing cooperating meaningfully with India in tackling terrorism in South Asia. However, it has not been easy for China to navigate the relationship 'with a country that is both the greatest source of China's terrorist threat and the crucial partner in combating it'.⁵¹ Unfortunately, it would most likely take a major terrorist attack inside China with links to Pakistan to force a change in current Chinese policy. That Xi Jinping's China, Islamabad's biggest benefactor and stakeholder, is reluctant to do much about these perils darkens the prospects for peace in South Asia.

India's concerns and response

Beijing's indulgence with India's smaller neighbours has influenced India's threat perception in South Asia. China's economic and security overtures to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, Paki-

stan and Sri Lanka confirm India's apprehensions of China's strategy of the encirclement of India. Concern has been growing in New Delhi that China is taking advantage of India's difficulties with some of its South Asian neighbours. Although China has not declared a formal military alliance with any South Asian country against India, New Delhi has been apprehensive of a two-pronged attack by China and Pakistan along its northern border. Because of these factors, the Modi government has paid particular attention to deepen the special bonds of friendship with smaller neighbours by catering to their economic and infrastructural requirements. As India presently lacks the material capacity to engage in a zero-sum game with China in the South Asian region, using soft power diplomacy to influence the neighbours is the right strategy.

India has taken a serious view of China's military modernization and maritime assertiveness. Consequently, New Delhi's bilateral and multilateral defense cooperation with regional actors such as Japan, Australia, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam has increased in unprecedented ways in recent years. Prime Minister Modi has upgraded India's 'Look East Policy' into 'Act East Policy'. One of the attractions of close relations with India from the perspective of ASEAN countries is the belief that those relations would help alleviate the effects of Chinese assertiveness in the region. India is treating its engagements with states in the region as a counterbalance to China's power aspirations. In the current century, India wants multipolarity to emerge rather than Chinese hegemony in the region.

One of the major determinants of Xi Jinping's South Asia policy is to neutralise the perceived American strategy to contain China with the support of regional allies. It is worth noting that the US-China relationship is characterised by a mix of competition and cooperation, with the balance of those elements varying by issue and region. Although the US-China competition has remained less acute in South Asia, where Beijing's current military reach is more modest,⁵² the present scenario is likely to change in coming years when India comes closer to the US in the global strategic calculus. India's geostrategic significance in the Indian Ocean with a powerful navy along with contemporary geopolitical dynamics operating in the Indo-Pacific region leaves no option for the Trump Administration but to co-opt New Delhi as America's preferred strategic partner.

In a significant departure from India's traditional policy of not entering into a military agreement with any major power, Modi has

made India's strategic preference in favour of the US unambiguously clear with Indo-US Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). By deciding to sign the LEMOA, the government has overcome a long-held resistance to the agreement.⁵³ India's only agreement of a broadly similar nature was the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation ahead of the Bangladesh war. Fundamentally strategic in nature, that agreement did not have much scope of military cooperation.⁵⁴ In contrast, the LEMOA allows militaries of India and the US to operate by using each other's bases for logistics support. This will have far reaching ramifications on the regional balance of power in South Asia, where the US has acquired the strategic support of India and Japan as it readies to meet China's challenge. Chinese 'unilateralism' and 'coercion' in the Indian subcontinent and the Indian Ocean region risks inviting responses from both inside and outside the region. Obama administration's 'pivot' policy was partially aimed at constraining Chinese power strategically in Asia. Hopefully, Donald Trump will not only continue but also step up this effort.⁵⁵

India's leading strategic affairs analyst, C Raja Mohan, forcefully argues that it is in India's interest to seek out greater cooperation with the US, primarily because of two reasons. First, despite significantly expanding its material capabilities in the last two decades, India does not find itself in a position to contain Pakistan unilaterally as well as balance Chinese power. Second, any strategy being adopted by India that emphasises on achieving these outcomes 'would strengthen India's position by pooling its resources with that of another power that shares these interests'.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Until the end of the Cold War, China's interests in South Asia were centred on geopolitical imperatives. By 1990s, China economic reforms required it to engage with the economies of South Asia. The rising threat of extremism has heightened China's concerns about the risks of instability across the whole region, though it has remained loyal towards its closest friend, Pakistan, so far. China has continued to see the jihadist threat as containable, or at least one that can be managed by the Pakistani military. Besides its security relationship with Pakistan, China's main tools in the region are still diplomatic and economic. Yet the scale of its economic resourc-

es and the nature of the investments are consequential to South Asia's stability, if China chooses to deploy them more actively with strategic goals in mind.

Some South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Maldives, are not likely to attach the desired weight to Indian perspectives unless India emerges as a major economic power by introducing suitable economic reforms. India should continue to persuade its neighbours not to blindly agree on Chinese projects that might imperil their own security and sovereignty in the long run. Moreover, China's continued goal of balancing India through Pakistan, and its narrow conception of the terrorist threat, means that it cannot be expected to deal effectively with stability issues in the region. It does not serve China's interests to have tensions with India as it cannot rise successfully without winning the support of all its South Asian neighbours.

Vinay Kaura

There is a deep reservoir of frustration and disillusionment in India concerning China's South Asian policies. The dominant view exists that New Delhi needs to get tougher with Beijing on a broad range of issues, including boundary disputes. At a time when China's power and influence is growing both regionally and globally, while those of the US seem to be relatively declining, getting tough with China could be potentially dangerous. In such circumstances, India would like to see greater US presence to balance potentially disruptive Chinese behaviour in South Asia.

India under Narendra Modi has both opportunities and challenges in Xi Jinping's South Asia policy. India can work towards economic opportunities which may arise in South Asia as China promotes regional connectivity. Strategically, India needs to be prepared to face challenges as Xi Jinping's diplomacy is aimed at establishing a new Asian order in which China would play the leading role.



VINAY KAURA is affiliated to the Department of International Affairs and Security Studies, Sardar Patel University of Police, Security and Criminal Justice, Rajasthan, India, and may be reached at vinaykaura76@gmail.com.

Notes

- CEJISS
2/2018
- 1 For comparative analysis on the strategy of keeping a low profile and the strategy of striving for achievement, see, Yan Xuetong (2014), 'From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,' *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(2), pp. 153-84.
 - 2 Nien-chung Chang Liao (2016), 'The sources of China's assertiveness: the system, domestic politics or leadership preferences?,' *International Affairs*, 92(4), p. 818.
 - 3 Camilla T. N. Sørensen (2015), 'The Significance of Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" for Chinese Foreign Policy: From "Tao Guang Yang Hui" to "Fen Fa You Wei,"' *Journal of China and International Relations*, 3(1), pp. 53-73.
 - 4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2013), 'Xi Jinping: Let the Sense of Community of Common Destiny Take Deep Root in Neighbouring Countries,' 25 October, available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/wjbz_663308/activities_663312/t1093870.shtml> (accessed 24 April 2017).
 - 5 Shen Dingli (2013), 'Diplomacy with neighbors,' *China Daily*, 30 October, available at: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2013-10/30/content_17067913.htm> (accessed 5 May 2017).
 - 6 Zhao Huasheng (2016), 'Afghanistan and China's new neighbourhood diplomacy,' *International Affairs*, 92(4), pp. 891-908.
 - 7 Dong Ryul Lee (2016), 'China's Perception of and Strategy for the Middle Powers,' in Sook Jong Lee, *Transforming Global Governance with Middle Power Diplomacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 61-86.
 - 8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China (2013), 'President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Propose to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries,' 7 September, available at: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml> (accessed 18 May 2017).
 - 9 ASEAN-China Centre (2013), 'Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament,' 03 October 3, available at: <http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm> (accessed 22 May 2017).
 - 10 At the June 2016 Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, Professor Xiang Lanxin, director of the Centre of One Belt and One Road Studies at the China National Institute for SCO International Exchange and Judicial Cooperation had given this remark.
 - 11 Xinhua (2015), 'China, Pakistan will move forward together: Xi,' *China Daily*, 21 April 21, available at: <http://www.chinadailyasia.com/nation/2015-04/21/content_15254001.html> (accessed 25 May 2017).
 - 12 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Xi Jinping Meets with Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli of Nepal,' 23 March, available at < http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1349933.shtml> (accessed 4 June 2017) .
 - 13 Samir Saran and Ritika Passi (2016), 'Seizing the 'One Belt, One Road' opportunity,' *The Hindu*, 02 February.
 - 14 Prem Shankar Jha (2016), 'Why India Must Embrace China's One Belt One Road Plan,' *The Wire*, 13 August, available at <<http://www.thewire.in/58810/india-must-embrace-chinas-one-belt-one-road-plan/>> (accessed 25 May 2017).

- 15 Xinhua (2014), 'China pledges increased engagement with SAARC,' 26 November, available at: <http://www.news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-11/26/c_133816410.htm> (accessed 2 June 2017).
- 16 Shannon Tiezzi (2014), 'China Makes Inroads Into India's Backyard,' *The Diplomat*, 27 November, available at <<http://www.thediplomat.com/2014/11/china-makes-inroads-into-indias-backyard/>> (accessed 29 April 2017).
- 17 Saeed Shah (2015), 'China's Xi Jinping Launches Investment Deal in Pakistan,' *Wall Street Journal*, 20 April, available at <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-jinping-set-to-launch-investment-deal-in-pakistan-1429533767>> (accessed 21 March 2017).
- 18 Andrew Small (2015), *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.2.
- 19 Arif Rafiq (2015), 'How China and Pakistan Are Beating India in the New Great Game', *The National Interest*, 12 June, available at <<http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/how-china-pakistan-are-beating-india-the-new-great-game-13096?page=show>> (accessed 16 May 2017).
- 20 Mateen Haider (2014), 'Chinese president cancels Pakistan trip, India visit still on,' *The Dawn*, 05 September, available at <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1130052>> (accessed 21 June 2017).
- 21 Small (2015), p. 1.
- 22 Anthony H. Cordesman (2015), 'Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization: A Comparative Analysis,' *The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 01 September, available at <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-strategy-and-military-modernization-comparative-analysis>> (accessed 4 August 2017).
- 23 Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan (2017), 'India-China relations A new turn under Xi Jinping?,' in Hoo Tiang Boon (ed), *Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi*, Routledge, pp. 98-99.
- 24 Atul Aneja (2016), 'China focuses on nukes as tensions with U.S. rise,' *The Hindu*, 18 December.
- 25 Abheet Singh Sethi (2016), 'China behind Pak's growing confidence, supplies 63% of Islamabad's arms need,' *Hindustan Times*, 30 September.
- 26 Ka Po Ng, 'The Xi Jinping imprint on the Chinese military,' in Hoo Tiang Boon (ed), *Chinese Foreign Policy Under Xi*, Routledge, pp. 36-48.
- 27 Cristina L. Garafola (2016), 'People's Liberation Army Reforms and Their Ramifications,' *Rand*, 23 September, available at < <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/09/pla-reforms-and-their-ramifications.html> >; Michael Chase and Jeffrey Engstrom (2016), 'China's Military Reorganization Aims to Tighten Party Control and Strengthen the PLA's Warfighting Capabilities,' *Rand*, available at <<https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/09/chinas-military-reorganization-aims-to-tighten-party.html>> (accessed 6 August 2017).
- 28 Leo Lin (2017), 'China's Answer to the US Military-Industrial Complex,' *The Diplomat*, 11 April.
- 29 Pinaki Bhattacharya (2016), *Transforming PLA: Impact on Indian Security*, New Delhi: Centre for Joint Warfare Studies.
- 30 Vinod Bhatia (2016), *China's Infrastructure in Tibet and POK-Implications and Options for India*, New Delhi: Centre for Joint Warfare Studies.
- 31 Sutirtho Patranobis (2017), 'China tests new tanks on Tibet plateau with an eye on India,' *Hindustan Times*, 29 June.
- 32 Arun Sahgal (2012), 'China's Military Modernization: Responses from

- India,' in Ashley J. Tellis and Travis Tanner, *Strategic Asia 2012-13: China's Military Challenge*, Washington, DC: The National Bureau of Asian Research.
- 33 Robert Kaplan (2010), *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York: Random House.
- 34 Eleanor Albert (2016), 'Competition in the Indian Ocean,' CFR Backrounders, 19 May, available at <<http://www.cfr.org/regional-security/competition-indian-ocean/p37201>> (accessed 15 June 2017).
- 35 Joseph Yu-shek Cheng (2016), *China's Foreign Policy: Challenges and Prospects*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, p. 329; Robert D. Kaplan (2012), *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts*, New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, p. 250; Arijit Mazumdar (2015), *Indian Foreign Policy in Transition: Relations with South Asia*, New York: Routledge, p. 131.
- 36 Dinesh Yadav (2016), 'Look East' to 'Act East': India's Policy Shift or 'Old Wine?,' in Gurpreet S Khurana and Antara Ghosal Singh (ed.) *India and China: Constructing a Peaceful Order in the Indo-Pacific*, New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, p. 59.
- 37 Katrina Manson (2016), 'China military to set up first overseas base in Horn of Africa,' *Financial Times*, 31 March, available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/59ad20d6-f74b-11e5-803c-d27c7117d132>> (accessed 11 April 2017).
- 38 P K Ghose (2016), 'Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean: Are they a real threat?,' *Observer Research Foundation*, 24 May, available at <<http://www.orfonline.org/research/chinese-warships-in-the-indian-ocean-are-they-a-real-threat/>> (accessed 14 June 2017).
- 39 Abhijit Singh (2016), 'India may not admit it but its new deal with the US can change the balance of power in Asia,' *Quartz*, 12 September, available at: <<http://qz.com/778177/lemona-india-may-not-admit-it-but-its-new-deal-with-the-us-can-change-the-balance-of-power-in-asia/>> (accessed 29 April 2017).
- 40 Gurpreet S Khurana (2016), 'India and China: Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific Region,' in Gurpreet S Khurana and Antara Ghosal Singh (ed.) *India and China: Constructing A Peaceful Order in the Indo-Pacific*, New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, p. 119.
- 41 Office of the Spokesperson, Washington (2016), 'Joint Press Release of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan Peace and Reconciliation,' 11 January, available at: <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/01/251105.htm>> (accessed 20 March 2017).
- 42 Dawn (2016), 'China-mooted counterterrorism alliance takes shape,' 04 August, available at: <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1275303/china-mooted-counterterrorism-alliance-takes-shape>> (accessed 3 June 2017).
- 43 Atul Aneja (2016), 'China now a major player in the AfPak-Central Asia theater: Chinese scholar Hu Shisheng,' *The Hindu*, 26 August.
- 44 Vinay Kaura (2017), 'China Makes Diplomatic Play in Afghanistan,' *Middle East Institute*, 12 July, available at < <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/china-makes-diplomatic-play-afghanistan>>.
- 45 Shannon Tiezzi (2013), 'Who Is Fighting China's War On Terror?,' *The Diplomat*, 26 November, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/who-is-fighting-chinas-war-on-terror/>> (accessed 11 May 2017).
- 46 Press Information Bureau (2015), Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, 'Joint Statement between the India and China during

- Prime Minister's visit to China,' 15 May, available at <<http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=121755>> (accessed 30 May 2017).
- 47 Press Information Bureau (2015), Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, 'Joint Statement between the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China,' 21 November, available at: <<http://www.pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=131765>> (accessed 10 March 2017).
 - 48 KJM Varma (2016), 'India, China hold 1st high-level dialogue to combat terror,' Livemint, 27 September.
 - 49 PTI (2017), 'Ex-Chinese diplomat asks China to 'adjust' stand on Masood Azhar,' Times of India, 06 January.
 - 50 Hindustan Times (2015), 'China blocked India's move at UN for action against Pakistan over Lakhvi's release,' 23 June.
 - 51 Small (2015).
 - 52 Andrew Small (2014), 'Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia: China's Role,' A Background Paper of the CSIS Program on Crisis, Conflict, and Cooperation, Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies, January.
 - 53 Varghese K George (2016), 'India, US sign military logistics pact,' The Hindu, 30 August.
 - 54 Sushant Singh (2016), 'India, US sign key defence pact to use each other's bases for repair, supplies,' Indian Express, 31 August.
 - 55 David Shambaugh (2017), 'Dealing with China: Tough Engagement and Managed Competition,' Asia Policy, 23, January, p. 6.
 - 56 C. Raja Mohan (2014), 'Regional security challenges,' Seminar, 653, January.

Vinay Kaura