



CHINA'S PERVASIVE POWER: AN OVERVIEW ON INDO-PACIFIC POWER EQUATION

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ABSTRACT

The strategic concept of Indo-Pacific has become significant in the international media of late. Though the term has been used in international relations before the strategic use of the term 'Indo-Pacific' instead of 'Asia-Pacific' by President Donald Trump in the international arena has created some excitement among some political analysts. The rationale is that while the term Asia-Pacific holds China at the centre the term Indo-Pacific brings India at the centre of attraction. However, China's power is pervasive whether the international community uses the term Asia-Pacific or Indo-Pacific. This paper in making a brief description of China's overwhelming presence in the Asian region argues that India shouldn't be complacent with such a strategic concept. India should build up a rational stratagem not to fall behind China. Long since IR theorists had observed China's inevitable growing power in the international system. The paper in highlighting China's pervasive power will analyse what that means to other Indo-Pacific countries. The question is how Indo-Pacific's power equation is going to refigure with China's pervasive power.

KEY WORD: *Indo-Pacific , international system , rational stratagem.*

THE POLITICS OF INDO-PACIFIC AND CHINA'S POSITION

The focus of international politics have shifted to Asia. Since Obama's administration, there has been an increasing interest in the Asian region which is commonly ascribed as 'Pivot to Asia'. There are two prominent Asian powers, India and China, who at the centre stage in this 'Asian Century'. However, these two Asian giants are different in their politics and international relations. The strategic culture of these countries produced different trajectories in the Asian Power relations. The power balance in the Asian region tipped favourably towards China. In a way, China is strategically imbalancing the Asian world. Observing the turning of the US foreign policy under Trump's administration India garners a favourable position against China. Trump was frequently referring to Indo-Pacific instead of Asia-Pacific at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum at Vietnam seen as a major irritant to China's dominance (Sevastopulo 2017). Needless to say, China's power is growing to be reckoned with in today's global arena not just in Asia. China's influence might be diluted in understanding a strategic term as Indo-Pacific but it is only a misperception. In examining the wider regional context in which China is rising, 'China is the quintessential Indo-Pacific power' (Medcalf 2012).



The world saw China's initiatives of mega projects like 'Belt and Road Initiative' and 'Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank' successfully launched which commenced a new global economic order. The initiatives have drawn in many countries as these projects bring prospective for connectivity to their doorsteps and see an opportunity for infrastructure investments. China is not only a game changer in the international political economy dominated by traditional powerful countries, United States of America, European countries and Japan among others, China's hard power in terms of military power is also persistently displayed by military drills along the South China Sea and commitment to the development of

naval power. This certainly creates an image of China as a strong and an assertive power, refusing to compromise its claimed sovereignty over the region. Other strategic approach of china can be observed in terms of its soft power as well. China gives international aid to influence national policies of other countries. For instance, in Nepal's policies on Tibetan refugees where China planned to open China Culture Centres (The Kathmandu post 2016)in Nepal for cultural exchange, and there are other agreements on high-level diplomatic exchange, military actions and strategic agreements for developmental projects. And it also engaged in soft power diplomacy in South East Asia greatly enhancing its presence in the region. China has garnered positive feedbacks on its climate policies too, from declaring a reduction of 40-45% of domestic carbon emissions by 2020 and recent ratification of the Paris Agreement.

The presence of such a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific region creates ripples across the foreign policies of other regional countries. States driven by their own national interests, capacity, and ideological content are behaving like a conduit to either adjust or adapt to China's rise. In the Indo-Pacific region some countries, mostly in Southeast Asia, are accommodating to China's rise while the politics of adjustment is receiving friction from the Northeast Asian states like Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea and also in South Asia region from India. The rise of China (Rapoza 2017) certainly brings about a possibility to change the international order as we know now which is one dominated by the United States of America. In this era of globalization and liberal institutional regimes, the entry of China's with its precedential economic growth and active diplomacy, a transformation is already in sway in East Asia. Ikenberry (2008) have rightly predicted that "the future decades will see even greater increases in Chinese power and influence." Now in 2018, states are all feeling the pinch of China's power. For India, this is more than a sour neighbour but a menacing power disrupting its area of influence especially in the South Asia region. China will always be in gridlock with India's security framework as it is reconfiguring the power balance in Asia.

RATIONAL AND SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH PAPER

It is naïve to say that the West is declining but Asia is certainly rising. India and China are clamouring as Asia leading powerhouses. It has become a political rhetoric to play India and China off each other but the ground reality is that China's power and influence have pervaded the nature of international relations and networks of strategic communication. Therefore, it is relevant for India to understand the nature of China's rising power and critically examine what that rising power means to the rest of its neighbouring Asian countries. More importantly, to analyse and speculate foreign policy choices that a state should make in this current Asia's power configuration. No doubt, China's power affects international relations in a global scale but the scope of the paper limits to examining only to Indo-Pacific region because the intensity of China's presence is felt strongest in this region and what this means for India. It is in this Sino-India relations that there is a heightened study on their public policy discourse. In this era of growing political and economic importance of Asia the regional rivalry between China and India is so captivating that it immediately captures world's attention. India, which is also Asia's major growing economic power, is strategically concern about China. Stemming from the fact that under the structural constraints of a liberal economic order like trade regimes, international laws, finances, etc China had excelled splendidly in terms of economic growth and political power. However, there is always a question of China free-riding the current international system as long as it serves its national interests. These are the areas to be critically examined and will briefly set out some ramifications of such political expectations in the paper. The argument is that while India is a responsible power unlike China as it doesn't seem to challenge the current international order.

METHODS

Foreign policy analysis is employed for examining China's relations with major countries of the Indo-Pacific region. It is a vast region to cover beyond the scope of this paper so a selected case study of China's relations with few major Asian countries is undertaken. Nevertheless, the arbitrary selection of cases and issue areas undertaken in the paper satisfactorily covers a wide region to capture diverse perspectives on

the dynamics of inter-state relations. The purpose of such an analysis is to find a pattern in China's foreign policies towards other major Asian powers. The paper attempts to identify the pervasiveness of China's power. Such an analysis can give us a rough basis of the present political landscape of the region. This method tries to consolidate the inter states relations and briefly sketch the dominance of China in terms of economic power, military prowess, aid and soft power constituents, cultural diplomacy in the region. With this background, China's plausible behaviour towards its neighbouring states is studied to bring out the contrast in perception between what China thinks they are doing as a rational state-actor and how other Asian states perceived China's expanding presence as a threat in the region. The paper relies on primary data like the leader's speeches and newspapers. Secondary sources like books, think tank policy analysis, and online resources are corroborated as well.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the paper is to explain the process of how China has changed the political landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. India's position in the Indo-Pacific power equation is a challenge despite world leaders trying to bring India to the forefront by using a strategic concept like 'Indo-Pacific'. China is still the dominant power even though the usage of strategic shift of Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific. Thus, the paper examines Asian states' suspicion about China's power whether based on rational empirical grounds or if it is just a misperception of China's intentions? It is an analysis of power dynamism in the Indo-Pacific region. The meaning of power carries different connotations from the one that wields it and the one who is not wielding it. And surely, it brings about an asymmetry of power even in the Indo-Pacific region. The major argument of this paper is that it doesn't matter whether one uses the strategic word i.e. Indo-Pacific to deflect China from the centre stage the fact remains unchanged that China is still the power dominant figure.

BACKGROUND

Foucault (1998) rightly said that "power is everywhere", power is pervasive and it is truer for China's power for its neighbouring Asian states. The following indications lay out how China's pervasive power effects in the region. It has certainly altered the political landscape producing different trajectories in terms of accommodation, adjustment, balancing behaviours in the region.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CHINA'S SOFT POWER PERCEPTION

Unlike hard power, defined in terms of material capability and economics, soft power operates in a subtle and non-evasive way. As Joseph S. Nye (2004) laid out, "The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)." China has both the political and economic resources to influence other states' behaviours by attracting and persuading them through its strategic diplomacy, foreign assistance, trade, and investment. In fact, Pew Research Center (Bruce 2015) study shows that the Indo-Pacific public views favourably to China 57% just next to Japan 71% and India 51% on the list.

SOUTHEAST ASIA REGION

The Southeast region is where China's soft power is visible the most. According to Thomas Lum, Wayne M. Morrison, and Bruce Vaughn (2008), China is a major foreign aid provider in Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Philippines. China is the largest exporter of manufactured goods for the international market since 2009 and with its population, it is also a big market especially for Southeast Asian goods. Since 2013, China became the largest trading nation in the world. It is not surprising that economic growth and opportunities have enhanced China relations with Southeast Asian states. China's evolving diplomacy has been quite oft-quoted and rightly so. Thomas Lum observed that China is considered to be

the “primary economic patron” (Report for the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2010: 121) of this region especially for the strategically important states of Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.

“China is a pervasive presence and influence in Myanmar” (Ramachandaran 2016). Of late, on May 16, 2017 Xi Jinping met Myanmar Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and stressed on strategic partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2017). China also provide economic aid to Indonesia and the Philippines. Although the issue of South China Sea looms over their relationship China has been able to promote trade with the region through establishing free trade agreements (FTAs). When Philippines and China held bilateral talks on the South China Sea on May 19, 2017, seen as a move that is strengthening China’s position (Hunt and McKenzie 2017). The relation between China and the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte had come closer as both states established a bi-annual consultation mechanism (Xinhua 2017). Philippines, which had move the international court over the dispute in South China Sea against China and won the case, is evidently warming up to China. This purports to China’s successful diplomacy in bilateral relations.

SOUTH ASIA REGION

China’s bilateral success can also be felt in the South Asian region as well. Most prominently in its relations with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Nepal. China’s interest in the South Asian region can be established from its increasing activities in the region. China is making closer ties with Pakistan and Sri Lanka through its prospects of connectivity initiatives like Belt Road Initiative (BRI) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). China has a strategic interest in the development of Gwador port in Pakistan which is leased to the Chinese company for forty years (The Economic Times 2017). The port is strategic to China’s mega BRI projects. In Sri Lanka, China built a strategically located Hambantota port. Through these strategic port development, China’s limited maritime presence is perceived in the Indian Ocean expanse. While in the heartland of the South Asian region, China promotes China Study Centers (CSCs) and Nepal-China Mutual Cooperation Society (NCMCS) in Nepal which are completely funded by China. The purpose was to strengthen diplomatic relations between the two countries and create an image of a friendly China as opposed to hegemonic India (Bhattacharya 2009). China provides both economic and military assistance to Nepal and has been able to sway Nepal’s attitude through its power and money towards the status of the Tibetan refugees (Demick 2015). China has increasingly been playing a role in determining the future of Nepal politics. This is creating tension with India which is Nepal’s neighbour Asian power seen as a competitor to China. India finds it irritating of China’s overwhelming presence around India’s neighbouring countries Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Nepal.

REGIONAL ORGANISATIONS

China’s diplomacy in multilateralism also helps China’s standing among the Asian countries. Engaging in multilateral platforms increased its international image and reduce suspicions among member-states as they perceived it as China being sensitive and willingness to cooperate for common interests. China has been increasingly active in multilateral organizations such as ASEAN plus three (China, Japan, and South Korea) and the East Asia Summit (EAS). China has actively engaged in the development of BRICS New Development Bank and has successfully launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment bank (AIIB) which are alternative multilateral financial ventures rivaling the already existing liberal international system like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Additionally, China has championed in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Indo-Pacific FTA and the ASEAN-FTA to integrate regional players.

CLIMATE CHANGE POLITICS

China is also using environmental diplomacy in projecting itself as a responsible country. It is an attractive avenue for China to bring Asian states in its manifold of area of influence. It gives assurance to wary Asian states to become more receptive towards China’s power. Recently, the US President Trump

withdrew from the Paris agreement making China and India as potential climate leaders. This unfortunate environmental tragedy left a vacuum for a global climate leadership. To be a climate leader it is expectant on the state to be environmentally responsible and able to influence other states for a clean planet to live. But the power element doesn't escape in the study of climate politics. To be in a leadership position on climate change also means another avenue for exercising one's power of influence. This climate activism succinctly translates into "soft power". This argument is reflected in an article written in the South China Morning Post by Coco Liu as it stated that "More leadership from China will help it build international credibility, cultivate trust in the region and ease tension in other areas" (Liu 2017).

POSITIONING CHINA IN ITS ECONOMIC AND SECURITY POLICY

The great influx of trade and growth of Asian investment in China are a direct manifestation of greater Chinese prominence in Asia. There is a rapid growth of economic interchange and adroit Chinese diplomacy that involves a series of leaders and ministerial meetings and agreements with Asian neighbours and its increasing relations with Asian regional organizations. By virtue of the present liberal economic order China has achieved this economic success but China is loyal to the present liberal order as long as it serves its national objective but it has not shown any interest in committing to that order. The international economic order is changing, in fact, China's growing influence is reshaping the rules and institutions of the international system. For instance, the successful launch of the mega multi projects like BRI is unparalleled in the world. The establishment of AIIB introduced a strong financial institution as par with the already existing World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank. Stuenkel (2016) has warned that the "parallel order" will initially seem to complement, but later it may possibly challenge today's international institutions. The perception is that China's creates them to better project their power.

China is the dominant military power in the region. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (2017), China ranked second in military expenditure in 2016 with a \$215 billion budget, which is a 5.4 percent increase from 2015. It is more than the combined military expenditure of India (\$55.9 billion), Japan (\$46.1 billion) and Australia (\$24.6 billion). China is a dominant military power which is tilting the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Harsh Pant (2017) observed that China's military presence is also expanding beyond the East and the South China Sea "Its (China) naval presence is also growing in the Indian Ocean and the larger Pacific."

Carrying along with the vision of the Chinese leader Hu Jintao (2012) the scope of China's security got a new dimension. On November 8, 2012 Hu Jintao's report delivered at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (2012) stated that "We should implement the military strategy of active defense for the new period, and enhance military strategic guidance as the times so require. We should attach great importance to maritime, space and cyberspace security." China's military-industrial complex has expanded over the time. From President Hu Jintao calling China to become a maritime power in 2012 to the announcement of the ambitious plan of "Made in China 2015" China's maritime development is going at a phenomenal pace. This led McDevit (2016) to observe that the Chinese leader saw "It is an essential national development strategy to exploit, utilize and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power."

The consequence of such domineering economic and military power is that it leaves the Asian region unbalance. The weight of China's economic power is bearing down on other Asian powers. A balance of power in international politics brings stability and some sort of order. But as there is an imbalance of power among the Asian states it makes the region vulnerable, making some Asian states worry about China's power and behaviour as a consequence (Rajagopalan 2017).

A REALISTIC POLITICAL EXPECTATION OF CHINA: A PROBLEMATIQUE

Mere economic growth and material capability do not in itself tell us how it affects power relations although it cannot be denied that economics, material capability, aid, and cultural relations are traditional

indicators of power. However, the best way to recognise the element of pervasive power, which is intrusive, is by observing where other states are agitated. The logical reason behind is that when a state feels the presence of the “other” power then it starts to agitate and manifest the behaviour of balancing, forming strategic alliances, accommodating, negotiating and bargaining. It is in these contested sites and agitations where attempts to refigure China’s power relations are made and in the process, we come to a dim conclusion about certain expectations of China. There are some factors that can tell us something about the political expectation of China on pluralism and its regards for rules-based international order. China seems to show the tendency of a reluctant multilateralist and can be seen under the following few selected areas of conflict and studying China’s responses although they are not exclusive cases.

LOCATING CHINA IN RULES-BASED INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

Firstly, India objected to one of the BRI project “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” (CPEC) as the CPEC corridor passes through a disputed territory of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) region. China has shown insensitivity to India’s territorial sovereignty claim while it has been adamant on its claims over the East and the South China Sea. China didn’t act responsibly over the CPEC issue with India over dialogue and consultation Chinese official suggested changing the name of the project to appease the Indian government. Later, this controversial statement was pulled out from their official page. Though China has recently halted financing this corridor as some of its related projects came under the alleged charges of corruption (Khan 2017) it was not because of India’s sovereignty concerns but due to its internal management crisis.

Secondly, China rejected the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea dispute in favour of Philippines undermining rules based international engagement (Times of India 2016). China is showing contradictory behaviour for one engaging in multilateralism is now not ready to be bound by a multilateral institutional rulings. This shows the picky nature of China’s multilateralism which makes other states cautious of its behaviour. Their suspicion is not unfounded as China happened to give warning through its ‘decisive power’ if actions were taken to enforce the international tribunal’s verdict over its claims in the South China Sea (News18, 2016). China is not reluctant to use the threat of force in international politics which go against international law that forbids it.

Thirdly, China’s unilateralism in the South China Sea. Smith observed that “Beijing seems increasingly determined to construct and operate within a parallel set of laws and norms governing freedom of navigation and maritime entitlements gradually abandoning its commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and customary international law” (Smith 2017). China prefers narrowing the fundamental principles on the universal right of free use of seas and safety/security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) of any nation, generating strong disagreements between China and other seafaring nations China’s assertive maritime claims (Yoji Koda 2017).

China’s assertiveness and unilateralism have political repercussions. China achieved great economic strides and so, political prominence under the current liberal order but China is not hesitant to bypass that very international structure when it suits its interests. This is sending mistrustful signals about its power to other countries. China is not truly committed to the existing global rules based system which compromises its international credibility to cooperate in this multilateralist institutional global order. No doubt, in this global shift to Asia in terms of trade volume, strategic alliances and for climate leadership China has great political and economic clout to shape global climate change discourse. China has been poised as potential climate leader but we have to keep in mind that the apparent stable order in today’s climate politics is produced by the rules-based system, e.g. UNFCCC, COPs, and other international climate protocols and agreements. And as it is doubtful that China will follow a rules-based order if its interest is at stake it does not seem to possess the capability to potentially lead one. Donning the role of climate leadership can be an opportunity for China just a strategic

avenue. Not only is China's commitment to rules-based system precarious, its leadership is also complicated by the fact that it has major stakes in the coal processing industry. A study by the New York-based Natural Resources Defence Council found that from 2007 to 2015, China is the largest foreign lender for coal projects in Indonesia and Vietnam.

LOCATING CHINA IN INDO-PACIFIC BALANCE OF POWER

China's militarization in the region is growing and gets embolden as its economic power flexed. China claimed to fight an informational war as highlighted in its 9th defence white paper released in 2015 issued by the State Council Information Office that China's strategy of active defence and commitment to winning local wars under conditions of informationization. China is certainly raising its stakes in conflict management. This invites balancing responses from other Asian countries and Australia. China is acutely aware of the situation and it attempts to downplay formation of formidable strategic alliances by tacit diplomacy to keep the United States of America out of the picture. In the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures (May 2014) President Xi said that "Asia's problems ultimately must be resolved by Asians, and Asia's security ultimately must be protected by Asians." (BBC 2014)

A concert of Asian powers can make an intra-Asian balance but they need the US, without it balancing China will prove very difficult if not impossible. As Pant (2017) noted "Naval cooperation with countries like Australia, Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam is a top priority of Indian defense diplomacy. Yet without active participation from the US, the regional states lack the ability to resist China's maritime ambitions." China concerted its efforts to reduce third party, most prominently the United States' ability to intervene in regional crises (Joshi 2017) with China recommending Indian, Japanese, and Australian involvement in the region as a means of multilateralizing external power engagement (CRS reports, 2015). In fact, when Australia and Japan pushed for reviving a security grouping with India and the United States to balance the power in the region China resisted it. It is China's ambition for a strong military "with Chinese characteristics" that provides China with a diplomatic payoff, enhance its regional pre-eminence and protect its interests across the globe.

Notably India, China's formidable regional rival, is expanding its strategic alliances with Asian powers. It was noted that "The Indian reluctance has confirmed a widely held belief that China continues to influence the formation of various strategic alliances in the region" (Bhattacharjee 2017). India and South Korea had signed a strategic defence shipbuilding as part of its military ventures much to China's annoyance (The Economic Times 2017). India also conducted Malabar exercise drills which China saw as a "designed to target China's submarine activities in the East and South China Seas in recent years, [and] promote the US rebalance to the Asia-Pacific" (Li Chen 2016). Indian think tank strategic analyst like Harsh Pant from the Observer Research Foundation also recommended India to invest in heavy naval artillery in terms of submarines, antimissile cruise (Pant 2017).

CONCLUSION

The manifestation of China's power and influence in the region is prominent in the contested areas where there is a heightened interaction between China and other Asian powers. The change in the power configuration in the Indo-Pacific region because of China's rise is not an existential threat although China is a major irritant to aspiring powers like India and for good strategic reasons. China can't deliver the expectation of a good neighbourhood state as it operationalises its economic and political resources to shape the region with Chinese characteristics. China does have the potential to lead as an Asian power but China can only expect that if China acts sensibly to disputed issues, have respect for international law, and is more forthcoming to pluralistic approach towards crisis. So what does China means for the Indo-Pacific? A mere change in the usage of strategic concepts like Asia-Pacific and Indo-Pacific doesn't hide the

fact that China is a pervasive power. In conclusion, Medcalf rightly stated that “While the new name of the region may suit India, the quintessential Indo-Pacific power will be China, and the indispensable one will remain the United States” (Medcalf 2013). A major implication for India’s strategic initiative would be to, as Happymon Jacob (2017) wrote, smart balance China as hard balancing China either militarily or economically is not realistic. A pervasiveness Chinese power even in the strategic concept of Indo-Pacific shouldn’t dampen India but gear up its choice of strategy.

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