

China's Geo-political Diplomacy towards South Asia in Light of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Asia Pacific Journal of
Education, Arts and Sciences
Vol. 7 No.3, 42-48
July 2020
P-ISSN 2362-8022
E-ISSN 2362-8030
www.apjeas.apjmr.com
ASEAN Citation Index

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Date Received: June 5, 2020; Date Revised: July 10, 2020

Abstract - *Rise of China as a politico-economic power in the age of globalization is very substantial in terms of its regional and global implications. China's swift economic development in the region, socio-economic modernization, relinking with the Chinese migration, mostly in the western region, modernization of its military equipment, and animated maritime trade and navigation strategies are playing a key role in the entire region. In its rise, the government of China has taken several ambitious plans, for example Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). But, BRI will not be able to produce any substantial results in the South Asian region without the active participation and role of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and other South Asian countries considering their geo-political and economic implications. China, in its nonviolent rise, has astonished the world with the plans of One Belt, One Road Initiative (OBOR). This study has dealt with the geopolitical relations of the two regions. This study has discussed on four South Asian countries and their relationship with China. These countries are: India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal.*

Keywords: China, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, South Asia, Geo-political, BRI, CPEC, BCIM, Economic, Geo-strategic, Indian Ocean.

INTRODUCTION

President Xi Jinping of China, exchanged views on "Silk Road Economic Belt" in Kazakhstan in September 2013, and went on to take further

initiatives and suggested the idea of "Maritime Silk Road" in his official visit to Indonesia (October 2013). These two ideas can be termed as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is supposed to be impressive geo-political and geo-economic dream and a long lasting geo-strategic plan for China as well as its people [1].

In Addition, President Xi continues to stress on the operation of BRI at international meeting, such as the APEC summits in Beijing (2014 and 2018), G-20 Summit in Hangzhou (September 2016), China and Central and Eastern European 16 plus 1 Summit (November 2016), the World Economic Forum (January 2017) Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summits in Uzbekistan (2016 and 2018). President Xi presented a speech in the World Economic Forum at the opening session and inclined for a win-win position among the nations for cooperation, as the world economy was facing downward stress [2]. Besides, China also declared new plans under BRI in September 2018, for the African countries during the China-Africa Summit. Usually, the Chinese government claims that the key goal of BRI is to expand the cooperation and improve development activities in the regions, by linking more than 60 countries alongside the ancient silk roads right from the Asia-Pacific region to the Eastern, South Eastern and Central Europe [3]. The land and maritime connectivity would be done through several infrastructure projects, trade, economic corridor, and economic links. Furthermore, the idea paper of the BRI explains on the aim i.e., mutual discussion to

meet the demands and benefits of all the governments; and it is destined to be an inclusive contact process between China and the other countries which are actively involved in the initiative [1].

Largely, BRI passages beyond infrastructural projects' plans to policy coordination, connectivity facilities, trades and investments, financial incorporation and cultural exchanges among the member states. Thus, the Chinese Government is committed to put emphasis on that the BRI is made on three principles—negotiation, construction and the sharing of the results. In addition, currently BRI covers 63 percent population of the world; it also deals 32 per cent of the world's GDP, and 29 percent of worldwide supply business[4]. The six main economic corridors to understand the purposes of the BRI are: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Bangladesh-China-India Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor and New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor [5]. These corridors are committed to create more job opportunities and decrease the wide local and regional disparities along the BRI low-income countries. Also, BRI is financed by the all-out support from the China's state-owned banks and the Silk Road Fund (SRF), where China promised a capital of US\$40 billion, which was formed in December 2014 [3]. Subsequently, National Development Bank of China (NDB), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which is initiated by the Chinese government, Eurasia foundation and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are financing some of the BRI schemes [6].

Paradoxically, some of the policy architects and critics of BRI incline to show arguments that the main aims of BRI initiative could be: Commonly, the growth of BRI is connected to the idea of Chinese diplomatic and security related policies since the 1980s, like the Chinese foreign policy that always pursued to acquire capabilities with manifold purposes such as taking steps to develop multiple regional and global links to enhance economic growth; taking the decision to resolve the long-standing clashes with neighboring countries, and to encounter US power in the region [7]. Besides, President Jiang Zemin, emphasized on “cooperation, multilateralism and regionalism” and later on President Hu Jintao, stressed on ‘peaceful development’ and “strategic opportunity” for China [3] (Clarke, 2017: 76). Consequently, BRI is

an outcome of strategic thinking of consecutive Chinese Presidents to confirm China's peaceful rise both politically and economically. Assumed that China has been effective in following its soft power policy in most of the regions, BRI will be a huge increase and apparently permit China to play a substantial role in political and economic aspects at the regional and global level. Every tactical move by the Chinese government is continuously seen as to challenge the US domination. In this respect, BRI is considered as a reply to previous US President Barack Obama's idea of ‘Pivot Asia Policy’ (March 2013), and to provide substitute ideal and leader to the US global hegemonic attitude. In promoting the plan of BRI, the South Asian region is a strategic partner where most of the countries are very optimistic about the initiative, except India.

Study Methods

This is a qualitative research paper in terms of methodology. One of the authors of this paper was involved in a Research project, “Rise of China and future of South Asia” that was financed by the World Bank and implemented by the Ministry of Education, Bangladesh, and University Grants Commission of Bangladesh. As member of research project, the author paid visits to Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal, Delhi University, India, Karachi University, Pakistan and Yunnan University for Finance and Economics, Kunming, The Academy of World Watch, Shanghai, and The Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, China to attend seminars on “Rising China and Its Policy in South Asia, and Sino-South Asian Relations. Also the author participated in a number of seminars at the different Universities in Bangladesh on Sino-South Asian Relations. Besides, we have exchanged views with professionals to collect key information on various perspectives of Sino-South Asian relations. Also, secondary data such as books, magazines, research monographs, journal papers, daily newspapers and some online sources have been used in this study.

China's Official Perspectives on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

If we think in light of regional connectivity, people to people's contact and socio-economic, political and cultural activities in the Sino-South Asian region, the BRI can be considered an important initiative. During Vice Foreign Minister, Le Yucheng's visit to Kazakhstan, he told about the

importance of regional connectivity, people to people contacts, economic cooperation and development. He further reiterated the significance of Belt and Road Initiative. Both China and Kazakhstan have been greatly benefited through connectivity and mutual trade. He also described how the China-Europe Railway Express has played a pivotal role in local economic growth and development. Here it has to be mentioned that through the connectivity the land locked country of Kazakhstan has gained an easy access to the deep sea. The people of Kazakhstan highly appreciate the initiatives of infrastructure development, connectivity, trade and investment of China in the Central Asian countries [8]. Because, most of the Central Asian countries want direct access to the Chinese territory for various socio-economic and cultural reasons.

Besides, gas pipelines, highways and ports, are the vital components of the BRI through which natural gas transits and supply can be ensured in both China and other neighboring countries. Zhang Gaoli paid an official visit to Russian Federation and Kazakhstan in April 2017 where he discussed about the importance of gas and oil pipelines. Also China's trade and foreign policy experts and spokespersons have raised the issues oil and gas pipelines in the different international seminars on "Oil and Gas Exploration, Production and Supply". There was a time when China faced severe difficulties in relation to its energy scarcity. Now regional connectivity through BRI will, of course, be playing a meaningful and significant role to ensure energy supply to China. Particularly, Zhang Guobao, in charge of energy planning in China in 2006, emphasized on construction of gas pipelines and connectivity, because at that time Russia was reluctant to build gas pipelines connecting both China and Russia[9]. Improving infrastructural development is an essential tool of economic development. It can be noted that the OSCE countries have failed to attract required foreign investments in infrastructure development; thus it is an opportunity to be a part of such a global development initiative. It means that China will be actively involved in the infrastructure and economic development in the Eurasian countries [10]-[12]. Besides, other partner countries will have some economic opportunities, at the same time; probably they will be obliged to develop their reliance on China and its leadership. China's official document: the 'vision and action paper' of the Belt and Road Initiative and the Chinese 12th (2010–2015) and 13th (2016–2020) Five-Year programs clearly

describe the actual goal and objective of the initiative. The BRI project has been developed based on China's socio-economic development experience. BRI put stress on China's continuous socio-economic and infrastructural development, trade and investments, in contrast to the criticisms of BRI that China will use it as their geopolitical and strategic weapon to contain rival countries [10]-[12].

China's less developed provinces such as Yunnan and Xinjiang will be greatly benefited by the BRI. Certainly, the BRI is not only a local and regional project, but also it involves the many countries of Asia, Europe and Africa; thus it can be considered a global project. Summer observes, that the issue of CAFTA rightly explains that local level political elites are trying their best to formulate nationally initiated policy frameworks to ensure their provincial developmental necessities to minimize the gap among the different provinces [10]-[12]. It is true that the BRI is extraordinary in nature and has many goals and objectives. It is, of course, closely related with the China economic development policies, trade and investment, regional development, foreign policy, international development and cooperation. China wants to ensure its energy security; it has a long term vision of development at both local and global level. It is important to note that the BRI will play a leading role in implementing the Chinese long term vision of development. The opinions of local political leaders and masses are also equally important while implementing the BRI policy by the Chinese central government.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Geo-politics in South Asia

In this context, during the BOAO Forum for Asia conference 2018, President Xi stated: "BRI should not be considered a Chinese conspiracy, neither is it the post-World War II Marshall Plan, nor is it a Chinese plot" 1 and China is keen to talk and make clear on the hesitations of other countries about the BRI and maintained that it is not based on ill-motive towards any country. But these statements have yet to convince the Indian government[13]. In this context, it is rightly pointed out by one prominent European commentator that BRI is nothing but "One Belt, One Road and One Trap", as the projects could push smaller countries on the road into a crushing debt cycle, destroying the ecology and disrupting local communities. The question of debt repayment to China by Ukraine, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Pakistan

and Sri Lanka remains a questionable concern. According to the 2016 International Monetary Fund (IMF) report, out of Cambodia's USD3.9 billion bilateral public debts with China, 80 per cent is owned by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) [13]. Accordingly, Pakistan has been trapped into debt crisis of around US \$ 20 billion which is one fifth of its total debts. Besides, the CPEC loans are also increasing dramatically which will add \$14 billion to Pakistan's total national debts [14]. However, some of the Chinese tend to argue that these debts are less than 10 per cent of their total debts, but the big question remains whether these countries—Ukraine, Zimbabwe, Cambodia and Pakistan, can repay their debts, given their fragile economic conditions. To address these concerns, in Bali, Indonesia in October 2018, Ms. Zou Jiayi, China's Vice Minister of Finance, in a statement assured the different countries and international community to resolve possible debt issues. Ms. Zou emphasized that "projects which are developed under the BRI are mostly commercial projects and host countries may accept them or not". Nevertheless, the debt trap of smaller nations such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal is one of the concerns for India not being part of BRI.

China's Geo-political Diplomacy, Trade Relations and Security Concern of India

China shares joint borders with four South Asian countries which make China very close and integral to the South Asian countries. What makes these borders dangerous is that all of these have been doubtful and have inhabitants that overlap into each other's claimed lands. China has later solved most of its land borders' disputes with other countries; however, its unsettled borderline with India makes these minor South Asian countries very dangerous buffers between the states of China and India. Even Bangladesh, which was not the part till 1971, and it does not openly share a border with China remains significant for China [15]. Similar to some of the European countries, the Indian government's frequent statements has emphasized on the prevailing ambiguity about the BRI. For instance, on 13 May 2017 it stated that BRI is not based on the ideologies of rule of law, good governance, transparency, responsibility and accountability. It further explained that "we are of strong confidence that connectivity initiatives must be based on collectively accepted global norms, honesty and equality, and must be followed in a way that show respect to sovereignty and regional integrity" [16].

Overall, India argues that lack of detail and insufficient discussion of the BRI proposal, prior to its launch is the reason for its silence. At the same time, India also regard that BRI has been a unilateral decision without any consultation with partners. Although, China tends to argue that it is open for joint development and implementation of projects, but in reality it tends to control projects. In this context, former Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar in 2015 had argued that "BRI wasn't a multilateral initiative that they discussed with the world, that countries are interested or affected, more discussions were needed, that has not happened" [17]. At the same time, whoever are investing in BRI still remains unclear, however it is alleged that 90 per cent of funding comes from Chinese banks and companies. As a result, India is so far cautious and reticent. Also border tensions between the two neighboring nations, both India and China encountered each other with a fatal fight in June, 2020 where at least 20 Indian military forces were died.

China has now become the Asia's largest economy superseding the economy of Japan; and it has also turned herself into the world's second-largest economy with a GDP of about \$13.6 trillion. India's total export to China is comparatively low, and it transacted only 5% of its total exports in financial year of 2019-20 and India imported more than 14% of its total imports from China. Meaning, there is huge trade gap between India and China, the biggest exporter to India. While the absolute value of imports from our neighbor may have fallen, their share in the overall price rose from 13.68% in the previous fiscal year [18]. China exports these items to India: electrical appliances, smartphones, power plant inputs, fertilizers, auto components, finished steel products, capital goods like iron and steel products, power plants, telecom equipment, metro rail coaches, pharmaceutical ingredients, chemicals and plastics and engineering goods, among other things, according to the Ministry of Commerce. India's imports from China jumped 45 times since 2000 to reach over \$70 billion in 2018-19. That means there is around US\$ 50 billion trade deficit between India and China. The diplomacy and economic relationship of China with India and other nations in South Asia is Sino-centric and one sided. As a big nation, China should open up its policy so as to ensure balanced economic relations and diplomacy.

Through the declaration of the Maritime Silk Road, probable measures will be taken by China to

invest in the entire Ocean Rim countries. As China's three-fourths of trades pass through the route of Indian Ocean which is also linked to the Bay of Bengal, it is widely believed that China will be trying to find ways to use its naval forces in the Indian Ocean, while it will have restrictions or problems by India. Thus, China and India should come ahead to ensure peace and security in the region[19].

China-Bangladesh Geo-political and Trade Relations

“Friendship with All people and countries, Hatred to None” was the message from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of the nation. This message is the supervisory light for the Foreign Policy issues of Bangladesh. We proudly remember the periods between 1972 and 1974 when his government had achieved ground in diplomatic passage of a war-torn Bangladesh. The China-Bangladesh friendship is a long-standing one. China is greatly involved in development assistance to Bangladesh [20]. For Bangladesh, the economic relations with China are of greater importance as Beijing is now the principal trading partner of Dhaka. Bilateral trade stood at \$12.40 billion during the 2017-18 fiscal years between Bangladesh and China. If the present trend of trading remains, economic policy analysts predict that the bilateral trade volume would probably reach up to \$18 billion by 2020-2021. The ‘Look East’ policy of Bangladesh is basically designed to open up new paths of cooperation with China and the ASEAN countries. China became the top source of foreign direct investment for Bangladesh with a volume of \$1.03 billion in 2018, whereas the figure was only \$119 million in 2017 Bangladesh [20].

The two countries have made substantial progress on the diplomatic front in the past decade. The historic visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2016 gave a new momentum as Dhaka and Beijing signed 27 investment deals worth of nearly \$40 billion, some of which were in line with the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). Bangladesh is blessed with her juxtaposition to global trade and financial hubs such as Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. It has now emerged as a ‘Relocation Hotspot’ for many economies around the world and has grown confidence of foreign investors, particularly from China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the USA and India. On the brink of global trade war, Bangladesh

is open to ‘sunset industries’ from China on ground of their rising cost of production. Presently, fully operational nine (9) Export Processing Zones (EPZ) and the government’s plan to develop 100 Special Economic Zones (SEZs) have been performing as ‘growth enablers’ for Bangladesh, marking it as a favorite destination for many foreign investors [20]. As the BRI enters into its 5th year, prolonged synergy should be made between the trades of the two countries to tap evolving opportunities. Since, Bangladesh is an important connecting point for the land and maritime Silk Roads; therefore it has become a usual partner in the “Belt & Road Initiative” [20]. Moreover, Bangladesh necessities to modernize and expand new channels of economic cooperation by making proper use of Chinese platforms, for instance, AIIB and Silk Road Funds connecting Bangladesh’s dynamic private sector. Taking into the account of China’s “role model” image in mainstreaming EVs to compliment together environment and business, Bangladesh is enthusiastic to cooperate with China in this area [20].

Bangladesh has a growing flower market where Yunnan model of cooperative invention including enterprises, academia and independent research institutes can be surveyed. Also, China is promptly emerging as a desirable and affordable destination for individuals looking for healthcare in a wide range of medical specialists, including neurology, cardiology, and orthopedics. In sight of Bangladesh’s lack in modern medicinal infrastructure, solid interaction and cooperation can be drawn in this area [20]. China’s Yunnan has played a pivotal role in medicinal invention, cancer treatment and curative treatment in Southeast Asia and Southwest China. Joint cooperation to boost up the medical businesses between pharmaceutical industries of Bangladesh and Yunnan can be expedited. In this regard, business-to-business seminars, and visit to factories manufacturing raw materials for medicinal products, will help make the path for building a strong high-tech foundation for this industry in Bangladesh [20]. Despite having a huge trade deficit between the two nations, Bangladesh and her people always optimistic regarding the BRI of China; and it hopes that it has ample scope to be gainer from the different projects of China such as BCIM, AIIB and BRI. However, currently the two countries’ diplomatic relations are very warm. China and her companies are investing a good amount of money in the different sectors. Also the Chinese government is

implementing several infrastructure and development projects in Bangladesh among which the Dhaka-Chittagong four-lane high way and Karnaphully river tunnel projects are remarkable.

China–Pakistan Geo-strategic and Bilateral Trade Relations

The diplomatic and geopolitical relationship between China and Pakistan are excellent. However, Pakistan imports volume from China is \$10 billion a year, but its exports to China is only \$2 billion. After the commencement of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a part of Belt and Road Initiative, started in 2013, the business transactions have increased in favor of China. Exports from China have grown due to increasing demand for less costly Chinese industrial, agricultural and consumer goods in the all states of Pakistan. Pakistani scholars think that they are not good business strategists, good planners and hard workers' [21]. The global pandemic of Covid-19 has tremendously hampered the economic growth and development worldwide; and it will continue to jeopardize the situation till the invention of vaccine. The whole world is very frustrated that it is going to face a serious global economic recession. There is possibly a greater need for encouraging intra-regional commercial transactions to take benefits of trade and investments. The US and China have involved themselves with trade war and trade nationalization through which the pacific nations' peace and stability have been put at risk [21]. It is believed that through the implementation of BRI, BCIM, CPEC and AIIB Pakistan's exports to China will grow, and her economy will be in a good position than ever before to a large extent.

China-Nepal Trade and Investment and Development Cooperation

China has long borders with Nepal. In the financial years of 2017/18, Nepal exported US\$ 23 million to China. At the same, it imported from China US\$ 1.5 billion. However, it can be noted that China has appeared as the largest foreign investor in Nepal for socio-economic and infrastructural development. The business conglomerates and investors of China have committed to invest around \$ 8.3 billion in Nepal in 2017. The diplomatic relations between China and Nepal are very good. Nepal is playing a vital role as buffer state between the two major rivalry powers; and sometime had to suffer seriously from the

pressures of both sides, India and China, geopolitically and diplomatically [22].

CONCLUSION

China is increasingly being evaluated in the western countries as a potential economic and political super power on account of its fastest economic growth [23],[24]. China's rise has been treated as one of the greatest events of the last century. Chinese economic boom and unbelievable continuity of economic growth is like a miracle to the scholars of the World [25]. However, the BRI which is a combination of Silk Road Economic Belt, Southeast Asia, South and North East Asian countries economic corridor, Central Asia and Europe and Maritime Silk Road. To implement this initiative, the government of China now has initiated many plans and policies to accumulate political, economic, diplomatic mechanisms at regional and global levels. But, it is still a big challenge that whether it will be able to accommodate all stake holders equally with providing proper facilities; at the same time, it will have to find out new opportunities and facilities through BRI; it has to work closely with South Asia to strengthen cooperation in trade and investments, people to people's contacts and regional connectivity [26]. Presently trade deficits among China and South Asia are very high. The Chinese government may take some measures to reduce the existing trade imbalance through which the South Asian nations can feel encouraged to participate in the BRI and other infrastructure and development related initiatives of China spontaneously considering their geopolitical and geo-economic implications. In a nutshell, a strong and prosperous China and South Asia will help promote regional peace, stability and development, and will insert dynamics to cordial and fruitful cooperation among China and South Asian countries [27].

Acknowledgment

We hereby acknowledge the input of every member of this team for their tireless efforts during this work.

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