

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg

Regional Security Cooperation in South Asia: The China Factor

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

In this vast swathe of the Asian region, China and India are two global ‘mega states’, home to a third of the world’s population. They are both rising stars in the contemporary international firmament, particularly against the backdrop of America’s and the West’s perceived ‘elegant decline’, as Robert Kaplan would have us believe. Theirs is a relationship that could largely define the politics of our age. It is an acknowledgment of the importance of this relationship that caused India to be the country that Premier Li Keqiang chose to make his first foreign visit. Leaderships of both countries speak of cooperative partnership. They are agreed on what they call ‘the ten strategies’ to develop bilateral relations. At the same time there are palpable competitive elements in the relationship. These include irredentist issues, as well as the problem of 3,500-km of un-demarcated borders, a legacy of colonial times. Both enjoy a rich cultural heritage. However they have conformed, and still do, to two distinct political philosophies, some points of convergence in economic ideas notwithstanding. Both are nuclear–weapon powers, whether formally recognised as such or not, and according to the latest SIPRI Report, with expanding arsenals. Both also possess enormous conventional military capabilities. Their bilateral trade is expected to reach a significant figure of US\$ 100 billion by 2015. However, India suffers a large trade deficit currently, to the extent of US\$ 40 billion according to some calculations. The point is: there are great possibilities of cooperation. At the same time, also of competition and confrontation. Neither tendency is inexorable. That is, neither can be ruled out. The ‘Thucydides trap’ or syndrome is unfortunately ever present. That ancient Latin historian had said: ‘When Athens grew strong, there was great fear in Sparta’. That implies that apprehensions bred of an adversary’s rising power have the potential to lead to conflict. This axiom is derived from history. It must be

¹ Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh, and he can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

avoided. The best way to do so is to create institutional mechanisms, as this piece will endeavour to demonstrate.

China in South Asia

China's relationship with India remains the centrepiece of its South Asian policy. Most others revolve around it. That with Pakistan, as we shall see, enjoys a status of its own. Some see China and India as being the two powers, eventually, albeit ever so slowly, leading the process of Asian integration. This is just as France and Germany, despite their historically divergent paths, have done for Europe. Indeed Asia's great contemporary challenge is building its capacity for the coexistence of divergent views.

The Sino-Pakistani relationship, on the other hand, is qualitatively different. This 'all-weather, all-dimensional' friendship evolved into a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' due to categorical imperatives on both sides. Against many variables in international relations, this has been one constant. It cannot be judged by the data on the precise content of their bilateral interactions. It is larger than the sum of its parts. China sees Pakistan as a key to attaining its broader foreign policy objectives. Once, Pakistan was the conduit to America. One recalls how Zhou Enlai had reminded Henry Kissinger not to forget the bridge that helped close the gap between China and the US. Today Pakistan links China to the Middle East at which China looks to satisfy its thirst for energy. Pakistan's Gwadar port provides China a toe-hold to regional waters. Beijing wishes to hold up Pakistan to the rest of the world as an example of benefits to be had for good relations with China. Just as America is 'pivoting' or 'rebalancing' towards the Pacific, China is looking west, its own 'westward march'. The important point then is, there is nothing conflicting or contradictory about China's relationship with India, and with Pakistan. With India, it is an end in itself; with Pakistan it is a means to an end. There is no reason why both cannot co-exist harmoniously.

With other regional states China retains close links. Bangladesh, the third most populous country in South Asia, is like Pakistan, viewed by China as an 'all-weather friend'. The two enjoy linkages spread across a large spectrum of activities. There is one important element in the relations that is distinct from China's ties with Pakistan. It is the concept of a 'quadrilateral grouping' comprising Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar, or BCIM as it is called. There are connectivity projects that are on the drawing board. They acquire saliency with Myanmar getting increasingly linked to the outside world. Also China and Bangladesh are working together to set up a mechanism for exchange of data on the *Yarlung Tsangpo/Brahmaputra* river, which would also benefit New Delhi, given the positive nature of the current Bangladesh-India connections. As for Sri Lanka, China maintains good links with the Rajapakse government. While Beijing has stated its belief that Colombo should appropriately address post-civil war issues, it has urged the United Nations 'not to complicate matters'. This must be music to Colombo's ears! The Colombo connections have given Beijing a strategic ally near the crucial Indian Ocean shipping lanes that carry supplies from the Middle East, and a possible presence at Hambantota port. In Nepal, Beijing has been circumspect about taking sides between the Maoists and the others, and in the past has actually ceded some territory to Nepal to facilitate boundary demarcation, also endorsing Nepal as a 'zone of peace'. China's good neighbourly relations also extend to the mountain Kingdom of Bhutan, with its penchant for the 'happiness index', and to the isles of the Maldives, located in a strategic area.

Intra-South Asian Relations

Within South Asia itself, some silver linings are discernible in what used to be a clouded set of relationships. The new Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, has held out, it seems, an olive branch to India; and his Indian counterpart, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is appropriately reciprocating. The Pakistan Army has gone public in saying that it no longer considers India as an existential threat. A significant economic conference was called in Islamabad in June 2013 to address trade issues by a dozen top business leaders in both countries giving an impetus to the implementation of Pakistan's MFN status to India. Certainly major issues of difference such as on Kashmir remain, but there is perhaps an intellectual acceptance of the need to first pluck the 'low hanging fruits', leaving the others for later. The same is the case between Bangladesh and India, who already enjoy good relations, and seem to be inching closer towards the resolution of the issue relating to the sharing of the *Teesta* waters, probably to be signed when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visits Delhi come September. To date it has hung fire due to the assertiveness, which is notably growing, of the Indian states, the components of the Indian Union, in foreign-policy making. This in itself is a phenomenon that merits serious study and analyses.

Of course as long as separate sovereign states exist, there will remain issues among them, including some seemingly irresolvable ones. This region is no different. The important thing is to keep the differences manageable. Having examined China's relations with each of the South Asian State actors, I shall argue that there exists an opportunity for China to play a role in the creation and operation of a structure that would buttress regional security cooperation.

The Chinese Dream

Such a role would be in consonance with what is now increasingly becoming the most favoured policy expression of the new Chinese leadership in Beijing. It is called the 'Chinese Dream' or *Chunguo Meng*. This might become the catch-word driving the new Chinese policy under Xi Jinping. Xi Jinping, who is clearly in command having consolidated his power by attaining all major posts early in his tenure (General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, President of the People's Republic, and the Chairman of the Military Commission) has already used the expression several times. Other leaders have followed suit. It is an evolving concept and views vary as to what it entails. As of now, there appear to be three elements to the 'Chinese Dream'.

The first is 'equality' (in negotiations with the US in particular and the West in general; the second is 'non-confrontation' (achieving aims without engaging in actual conflict with adversaries/rivals); and the third is 'win-win cooperation' (that is improving the quality of life of the Chinese people by close mutually rewarding collaboration with friends, allies and partners). This is entirely in line with the suggested role for China in the restructuring of the South Asian architecture of security cooperation, as elaborated below.

Reinforcing Regional Security

At the apex there could be an informal forum of the leaders of the South Asian States and China. They could meet, say biennially in different capitals. Unlike formal regional

cooperation arrangements there would be no secretariat or bureaucratic meetings. These would only encumber the leaders, as sadly, tends to happen in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Indeed, this is one of the principal reasons why SAARC, to many, now appear dysfunctional (Two other primary reasons are the need for consensus in all decision-making, and the avoidance of all contentious issues. As a result meetings in corridors and ante rooms in SAARC conferences supersede in importance the substantive plenary sessions with their set-piece speeches!) Concurrently there could be a parallel Track-II initiative involving thought leaders, and separate fora of business leaders, media, and women's issues, representing segments of societies that play critical roles in the relevant communities. (It is noteworthy that South Asia prides itself in having one of the most vibrant civil societies in the world.) Common challenges would be discussed, in a 'Big Tent' setting, across the broadest possible societal spectrum. This would include the non-traditional challenges to security such as hunger, disease, environmental degradation, poverty and others. Their outcome would feed the biennial summit with ideas. In this way cooperation can be institutionalised. The larger and powerful actors, such as China and India, may need to lead the way.

Yes, it is a huge challenge. Yes, it will be difficult. But today there is a palpable sense of the growing importance of Asia in the world, and in particular, of South Asia. It is necessary to make the best and appropriate use of this sentiment and utilise it in a positive fashion. The Asians, including South Asians, have not come thus far without the realisation that if there is a hill to climb, waiting will not make it any smaller!

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