

A Case for China's Security Role in South Asia

The paper focuses on the constructive role that China can play in enhancing security in South Asia. The potential contribution that China can make to enhancing non-traditional security in the region is significant. Two areas of non-traditional security, where fruitful cooperation between China and South Asia can be intensified, will be explored in depth, namely environmental security as well as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. China's contribution to economic security - another important aspect of non-traditional security - in the region has been well-documented and will therefore not be the focus of the present analysis. Armed with huge foreign currency reserves and a vast engineering and manufacturing capacity, China is facilitating infrastructure development at an unprecedented scale. An opportunity for cooperation on the non-traditional security front is also presenting itself in anti-terrorism endeavour. The threat of terrorism from the Islamic State, can catalyse closer China-South Asian anti-terror cooperation. The paper proceeds in the following manner. Arguing for the importance of South Asian security from the Chinese point of view, a peaceful South Asia is placed as the backdrop of the Chinese policy framework, both international and domestic. An attempt is then made to look at the details of cooperation in non-traditional security areas, following which there is a discussion of the potential collaboration in counter-terrorism efforts.

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China's Interest in a Peaceful South Asia

China has an interest in buttressing regional security cooperation in South Asia because this would be in consonance with its avowed aim of peaceful development. The guiding principles of Chinese foreign engagement will first be outlined, following which it will be argued that China has an interest in enhancing regional security and has indeed been pursuing this aim.

China has gone to lengths to project an image of a responsible player in the international sphere. This is in part reflected by how 'peaceful development' came to be articulated as one of the principles of Chinese foreign engagement. While there had been internal debate within the Chinese system some years ago as to whether the concept of 'peaceful rise' (or *heping jueqi*) should constitute a major policy doctrine, ultimately, by late 2004, it settled in favour of the less ambitious 'peaceful development'. Now, increasingly, the most favoured policy expression of the new Chinese leadership is 'Chinese Dream' (or *Chunguo Meng*), which appears to have three elements - firstly, equality in negotiations with the West; secondly, non-confrontation, that is, achieving aims without engaging in actual conflict; and lastly, 'win-win cooperation', which entails improving the quality of life of the Chinese people by mutually rewarding collaborations with friends, allies, and partners.

China has an interest in regional stability because it lends credibility to its stated aims of 'peaceful rise', 'non-confrontation', and 'win-win cooperation' - credibility that China needs to strengthen its image of a responsible global and regional player. Official representations have emphasised the need for peace and stability. Speaking at the Boao Forum for Asia 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for joint efforts of the Asian countries to pursue peace and stability. Indeed, the theme of the forum itself was instructive: "Asia's New Future: Towards a Community of Common Destiny". The emphasis was on the 'common destiny' of Asia, which China seeks to bring to fruition through its One Belt One Road initiative. China has clarified on multiple occasions that it will not use the Maritime Silk Road project as a geopolitical tool to manipulate neighbouring countries. Underscoring the need for cooperation in Asia, the Chinese president quoted an African proverb as saying in his keynote speech: "If you want to go fast, walk alone; and if you want to go far, walk together".

China's actions are consistent with its avowed interest in regional security. Chinese infrastructure projects in the region strengthen economic security, and will likely continue doing so given the upward trajectory of outward foreign direct investment (FDI) flows from China, with its colossal foreign exchange reserves standing at \$4 trillion. Even on the traditional security front, China's engagement of India's neighbours in the region is not destabilising, as it has sometimes been made out to be, for at least two reasons: firstly, India itself is warming up to China; and secondly, China too is altering its relationship with Pakistan, a major irritant in India-Pakistan relations and, thus, regional stability.

Firstly, on India's warming relations with China, there is a growing recognition in both Delhi and Beijing for the need for closer cooperation between the two countries. This is reflected in India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement during his recent trip to Beijing that India and China 'should strengthen mutual trust and confidence' and 'continue to manage [their] differences with maturity'. The two leaders specifically emphasised the need to ensure their relationships with other countries should not become a concern for each other, displaying their commitment to deepening relations. The dialogue between Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi proceeded despite the fact that maps of a 'truncated India' were being shown on Chinese television when Modi landed in China. Similarly, the dialogue between Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi in September 2014, during the latter's visit to India, did not breakdown but instead continued with extraordinary smoothness even though it took place concurrently with a face-off in the undisputed territory. This visit saw a more definitive affirmation of the case of civil nuclear energy cooperation between Delhi and Beijing, with Chinese officials expressing a strong interest in joining other countries in developing India's nuclear power sector. The 24 agreements that emerged from Mr. Modi's recent visit and the promise of US\$ 22 billion worth of Chinese FDI into India show signs of deepening relations between India and China.

Secondly, China has been careful to alter its relations with its 'comprehensive all-weather friend' Pakistan in a manner that furthers regional security. While it can be argued that at its outset, the relationship between Beijing and Islamabad was built to allow Pakistan to act as a counter-weight to India in the region, this argument is considerably weakened now. China has made clear that it is not seeking any 'selfish gains' from its ties with Pakistan and does not want it to get in the way of its relationship with India. This sentiment is being echoed by Mr. Modi as well, who explored the potential for limiting Pakistan's salience in Delhi's engagement with Beijing, emphasising the pursuit of mutual interests with Beijing, for instance in

countering terrorism. The Cold War Sino-Indian tensions that dictated strategic relations between Pakistan and China are long gone; indeed China is now an ardent proponent of jettisoning Cold War mentalities. China's response in the wake of deteriorating India-Pakistan relations after the 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai shows the responsible role it can play regarding India-Pakistan relations, which weigh heavily on the security scene in the region. China paid great attention to the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the region and sent a special envoy to mediate between India and Pakistan for the first time. In light of these considerations, it would be incorrect to cast China's engagement of South Asian countries as destabilising regional security. As India's former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh put it in 2009, there is sufficient room for both India and China to develop and contribute to global peace stability and prosperity.

Non-traditional Security Cooperation

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

South Asia is a disaster prone area, but regional cooperation for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) has been low, as exemplified by the regional countries' responses to the 2004 tsunami and, more recently, to the Nepal earthquake. Modi envisages a more active role of SAARC in HADR initiatives in the future and China can contribute meaningfully to such regional cooperation. Such cooperation would be consistent with China's evolving approach to HADR and its overall principles of foreign policy. The recent experience of the Nepal earthquake will be used to make the point that the approach to HADR in the region should be undergirded by regional cooperation.

There has been a discernible change in Chinese approach to HADR and this is consistent with China's overall foreign policy. While in the past there was a perception that China uses humanitarian assistance as a narrowly targeted foreign policy tool which is incompatible with the principle of impartiality that governs humanitarian intervention, this view is giving way in light of China's willingness to cooperate with multilateral agencies, notably the United Nations. China's eleventh Five Year Plan that provides national political guidelines for 2006-2010 features a section on disaster relief highlighting the trans-border nature of disasters and the

importance of multilateral cooperation. This approach is consistent with China's overall framework of foreign engagement. It strengthens its reputation as a responsible partner in international affairs by evincing its willingness to share responsibilities. HADR contributions are a strong tool for building goodwill, as is exemplified by the positive effect that United States' 2005 post-earthquake assistance to Pakistan seemed to have had on U.S.-Pakistani relations. Several surveys show that one month after the earthquake a 'favourable opinion of the United States' among the Pakistani population had increased from 23 to 46 percent. This figure rose to 55 percent three months after the earthquake.

Furthermore, there are noticeable domestic gains from China's increasing cooperation on the HADR front. Firstly, international acknowledgement of successful engagement in HADR activities can act as a measure of domestic political success for the Communist Party of China (CPC) and act as an additional source of its legitimacy. Secondly, it can also help China strengthen its domestic disaster management capabilities, by providing an avenue for more on-the-ground training for its disaster management teams and the potential for knowledge and technology transfer. The ability to manage domestic disasters deftly will also add to the CPC's legitimacy.

The need for regional cooperation in HADR operations in South Asia becomes apparent after considering the experience of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the recent Nepal earthquake. As far as the former is concerned, media reports highlight how key stakeholders were 'carving up disaster zones among themselves, flying their own flags and showcasing their involvement to the world instead of working together'. While such a blatant perverse contest was not clearly visible in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake, there was a clear absence of cooperation among the nations engaged in relief efforts. The earthquake saw India, China, Pakistan make significant *individual* contributions to relief operations. The contributions of India and China gave rise to a perception of rivalry for regional influence between the two Asian giants. Such views were expressed by leading international news outlets like the *Time* and *Observer*, and within India, by the *Times of India*. Although some diplomatic statements were made to dispel the notion of such rivalry taking place, these were overshadowed by speculations suggesting the presence of a tussle between the regional powerhouses. A few diplomatic statements are unlikely to be able to successfully mount the perception of the rivalry; institutionalisation of cooperation would be necessary to achieve this end. Institutionalisation would have the added advantage of improving information exchange and coordination ensuring that the interests of

the disaster-hit countries are better served. While some competition between the stakeholders may benefit disaster victims in the sense that it drives the former to be more responsive, it is typically the case that excessive competition only results in poor allocation of resources and efforts in disaster relief operations.

Environmental Security

Addressing the problems posed by climate change is an area of converging interest between China and South Asia, making the pursuit of environmental security a viable area of cooperation between the two.

Both China and South Asia face serious threats from climate change. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has reported that climate change has caused an increase in the frequency of short duration heat waves, extreme rains and floods, which can undermine crop yields and food security. Assertions of deteriorating air and water quality affecting the standard of living are made with alarming frequency. Similarly, the World Bank has highlighted the impact of higher temperatures, more variable precipitation, more extreme weather events and sea level rises that are felt in South Asia and ‘will continue to intensify’, with crop yields projected to decrease up to 30% in South Asia by the middle of the 21st century. Extreme heat is already disrupting the growing season for regions in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. Low-lying Bangladesh is vulnerable to flooding and cyclones in the Indian Ocean, which scientific literature suggests will grow more intense in coming decades.

Cooperation in tackling climate change can be viably explored given the alignment of mutual interests. Modi and Xi, in their joint statement following the former’s visit, also flagged this as an area of cooperation between the two countries going forward. Two specific avenues for closer cooperation can be explored. Firstly, China can share its expertise on clean sources of energy - an area in which it is acquiring strong capabilities. New renewable power capacity surpassed new fossil fuel and nuclear capacity in China for the first time in 2013 and China is presently the largest investor in renewable energy, even ahead of the United States. Its total solar power supply is second only to Germany’s. This puts China in a strong position to provide thought leadership in the region’s efforts towards clean energy. Second, an institutional mechanism for dealing with the Himalayan glaciers should be seriously explored. Glacial melting is projected to pose water, food, and energy security issues, in light of the fact that

these glaciers feed ten of the significant rivers in Central and South Asia. The lack of comprehensive and effective regional frameworks for cooperation hinders sustainable management of the waterways. China's upstream dam-building has been causing some discomfort in South Asian countries, especially in India and Bangladesh, and should be addressed within a formal institutional structure that allows for information exchange, policy dialogue and collaborative projects concerning sustainable livelihood and environmental conservation in the region.

Traditional Security Cooperation: Counter-terrorism

China and South Asia face a common nemesis - the Islamic State (IS). IS has openly declared its territorial ambition toward China's Xinjiang province, and its spread in the Middle East has the potential to threaten China's oil investments in Iraq and nearby regions. Within South Asia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have reported incidents of IS' recruitment drives being unearthed. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, both forming a part of the *khurasan* (the Islamic caliphate that the IS aspires to establish), the tussle between Al-Qaeda and IS for influence is also emerging.

In responding effectively to the challenge that the IS poses, the two can explore deepening cooperation on this front. South Asia's counter-terrorism cooperation has failed in the past because India and Pakistan could not agree on specific issues - specifically, on Pakistan's failure to address the 'export of terrorism' to India. However, the problem presented by IS affects both Pakistan and India, so cooperation may be more achievable. Furthermore, the issue of terrorists trained in Pakistan increasingly plagues China as well, which may be in a better position to put sustained pressure on its 'all weather friend' to crack down on the export of terrorism. China has been spearheading multilateral cooperation in counter-terrorism operations via the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (RATS SCO), but this process has not engaged South Asia. The members of the SCO include Central Asian countries, although both India and Pakistan are observer states. A regional anti-terrorism cooperation framework that involves China and deals with issues such as training, border control management, electronic surveillance and intelligence-sharing can be explored.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to argue for a positive role that China can play in enhancing security in South Asia. ‘Peacefully developing’ China has an interest in a stable neighbourhood, and in establishing a ‘win-win relationship’ with it. There is clear convergence of interests on issues such as HADR, environmental cooperation, and counter-terrorism operations, which present opportunities for increasing cooperation. Not only will such cooperation improve the effectiveness of the policy response to these problems, which by definition are not confined to national borders, but also, it will increase interaction and dialogue between the different players, strengthening a sense of a ‘shared future’ and mutual interests, possibly providing a nudge towards amicable approaches to thornier issues like territorial disputes.

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