

China's Assertive Diplomatic Strategy in South and Southeast Asia: Engagement and Disengagement

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China's growing profligate movements in the Asian region remain a subject of discussion and debate in the domain of international relations in the last few decades. The background of these aggressive fast movements is existent in the domain of Chinese history. China always fought against the various imperial dynasties, warlord generals and feudal regimes and on 1 October 1949, emerged as a separate entity under the leadership of Mao Zedong and proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing by defeating the Chiang Kai-shek led Kuomintang of China (abbreviation KMT) government. Over the years, China has gradually developed an aggressive mindset, reflected through its way of functioning, exclusively based on the notion of communist thought. This resulted in that gradually it developed an ideological stance that was neither strictly communist nor purely nationalist, but seeking to rephrase and dominate the global order. It has been realized by the Chinese leadership, starting from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping that forceful way of exerting its posture could be a major means to exert pressure on the enemy. That is why the common people of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and South Korea today pleaded the idea of freedom and democracy as an alternative avenue of their existence. China's recent trends of global and regional assertive posture are exclusively based on ideologically determined, firm persuasion, consistent reciprocity and embargoing in character. This character was often reflected with reference to multiple issues in the past years and is still displayed in numerous ways of functioning, on account of domestic threat¹, which led to domestic political uncertainty and where the party leadership uses anxiety to exhibit loyalty within the party and convince the Chinese society of its needs for party protection. Similarly, China on a number of occasions, in order to generate confidence at the domestic level has used its emphatic posture with reference to a number of external issues. For example, China's war with India in 1962, annexation of Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974,

border war with Vietnam in 1979, the issue of Tibet, Hong Kong, Uighur ethnic minority group in Xinjiang, Taiwan, Diaoyu Island and the territories of the South China Sea, etc. In some of these issues, China used force as a means to display its power. Similarly, on a number of occasions, the Chinese leaders have used a forceful language to inspire its citizens, for example, when Mao Zedong in 1949 in a speech said: "Every Communist must grasp the truth-Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun."² On another occasion, the Chinese pre-eminent leader Deng Xiaoping, during its full-scale conflict with Vietnam in February 1979 said: "To teach a proper lesson to the Vietnamese".³ Based on this mindset, China's assertive outlook in recent times has been evinced on a number of issues, creating misgivings among many countries in the Asian region and beyond. It has been practically felt by the Chinese leadership that an economically rich and strategically strong country could be a prime parameter to dominate the global scenario, which it had learnt from the Western powers and which China has adopted in her foreign policy agenda. It removed the old notion as believed by late Deng Xiaoping "hide your strength, bide your time." Furthermore, China wisely felt to shape the world order it would be better to stimulate its national interests and stand up assertion. Such an order, in Beijing's perspectives, would be more fair and just than the capitalist world order dominated by the United States, since it would encourage peace, harmony and mutual respect in place of the contradictions the Chinese detect in global capitalism. China's viewpoint is that it would not stand alone at the apex of this new world order, but it would, at least, be one of a handful of great powers responsible for maintaining the global order.⁴

Furthermore, China has learned much from its history that it remains the last great empire and its present policy could be interpreted as a continuation of the means traditionally used to extend Chinese imperial rule through migration and administrative controls. In this sense, Chinese policy carries with it assertive implications.⁵ China is determined to regain its 'rightful' place as a global great power, to be recognized, respected and obeyed in the affairs of the world. Its strategic goals are to reunify its national territory, prevent its disintegration (as happened to the Soviet Union), secure its frontiers, and enhance its international standing to the status of an undeniable 'great power'.⁶ To gain the great power status, China sees it is as essential to modernize and develop its economy, strengthening the pace of the society through science and technology, industry and agriculture and to build a commanding military capability and where it prioritizes economics over ideological power.⁷ Thus, promotion of market economy in order to ensure rapid

economic growth, use of force directly or indirectly against the enemy and expansion of its international political influence, through multilateral interactions are the primary goals of its current foreign policy, which can be termed as propinquity and occasionally assertive in nature. Moreover, China's refusal to accept the verdict of the international tribunal in The Hague related to "territorial sovereignty and marine rights" and its expansive claim to sovereignty with reference to South China Sea (SCS) issue, as filed by the Philippines government, clearly exhibited its assertive mindset. This event is a clear retrospective of the stand taken by Germany and Italy during the inter-war period, when the League of Nations made a sanction on both these countries. The rest of history is known to everyone. Can this example be repeated in what China has done by defying the ruling by the international tribunal in The Hague in July 2016? As against such backdrop, the purpose of this article is to highlight the recent Chinese assertiveness with special reference to some issues in South and Southeast Asian regions. The article will also review how China's increasing power and influence has virtually interrupted the regional balance in the landscape of the above mentioned regions.

Rationale behind China's Growing Assertiveness

Since the fall of former Soviet Union, China's core trajectories are to increase GDP and rapid economic growth, along with substantial urbanization development programme based on Open Door policy to play a greater political role in global affairs. This naturally encouraged private foreign investment in the form of joint ventures, centered initially on four Special Economic Zones in southern China. At the same time, China began accepting multilateral and bilateral foreign aid, which was not only expanded rapidly, but was diversified in nature. The core economic strength actually originated on account of overseas Chinese investments against the backdrop of globalization. This resulted in the share of overseas Chinese ownership increase in absolute terms in the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, the ethnic Chinese were encouraged to invest in China because they were Chinese, with advantages in language and business networks. In addition, its economic power greatly accelerated the pace of military build-up and modernization programme has soundly strengthened the People's Liberation Army (PLA's) military capacities to face any potential threat to its core national interest. China at present is following a process of reinvention, rebalancing and reform with a flavour of hard power, to counter any challenges it faces in the years ahead to meet its key strategic needs. Presently, China's assertive posture has been evident in number of global and regional issues and

which occasionally created a threat for many countries in the South, East and Southeast Asian regions and made the regional power equation highly volatile. The issue of South China Sea is one such case.

The South China Sea as a Cockpit Centre of Power Conflict

The recent COVID-19 issue has created a major threat to the entire human civilization. But while countries ascend to keep up with developments related to the virus, the situation in the SCS has not changed its power conflict discourse even in this pandemic scenario. In the domain of global history, the SCS remains a core debatable issue which started during the Cold War and continued into the post-Cold War period. The territorial disputes in this region have a long historical background, and their reemergence in the mid-1970s was a product of the changing balance of power associated with the end of the Vietnam War. The magnitude of this region lies in the enormous concentration of oil, natural gas, hydrocarbons and other natural resources as well as its strategic location on account of its connecting choke points between Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean (that is, the Straits of Malacca, the Singapore Strait, the Sunda Strait and the Lamdok Strait) and being one of the major oceanic routes for the passage of crude oil tankers from the Persian Gulf to Asia and routes for goods from Asia to the rest of the world.⁸ Besides, some of the ASEAN members claim China is a contending regional power which occupies some islands in SCS and has continued its conflicting territorial claims over the region. There are four groups of islands in the SCS, of which the Paracel and Spratly islands became potential trouble spots among the disputing countries mainly because of their strategic location. The two major clashes between Vietnam and China in 1974 and 1988 at Paracel and Spratly islands during the cold war period, the Mischief Reef clash between China and the Philippines in 1995 and other minor clashes among the disputing parties over the Spratly islands in the 1990s and 2000s, turned the entire SCS region into a cockpit of great power conflict in international politics and a major security problem for the countries of Southeast Asia and beyond. In view of its significance as a "global commons" site, it has been rightly acknowledged that a situation of volatility or instability would trigger serious consequences for global trade and commerce, in addition to dismantling the ambience of peace, security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.⁹

From the Chinese viewpoint, in 1992, the Chinese People's Congress codified in legislation Beijing's claim that the SCS is rightfully the sovereign territory of China and from that angle China's territorial sea

law stipulated Chinese sovereignty over the SCS and authorizes the use of force to keep foreign naval and research vessels away¹⁰ and also aspires for the day when the SCS will become, in effect, a “Chinese lake” and will be accepted as such internationally. However, in an effort to neutralize the disproportionate claims of China and other claimants in the SCS, mainly in the Spratly Islands, the Southeast Asian countries realized that multilateralism in the context of New Global Order would remain the best alternative to reduce tensions in the region, for the purpose of which, they involved China in their multilateral groups like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Furthermore, to resolve the internal conflicting claims on Spratly Islands amicably, the ASEAN members, at the 25th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting and Post-Ministerial Meeting in July 1992, held in Manila, for the first time brought out a Joint ‘Spratly Declaration’, which clearly stressed the sovereignty of the claimants and internationalized the Spratly issue in order to reduce tensions “by peaceful means, without resort to force”.¹¹

Following this Declaration, the ASEAN members were requested to sign the Declaration and thereby, obey the rules, which were laid down in 1992 and reduce tensions. However, in the wake of the clashes at Mischief Reef Island between China and the Philippines in 1995, most of the disputing ASEAN claimants have signed the Declaration. This Declaration was exclusively based on the ASEAN principle of Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), where non-intervention remains the core basis, As a result of this Declaration, the ASEAN members set a draft ‘Code of Conduct’ on the South China Sea disputes in their Summit Meeting held at Manila in November 1999, and placed their consensus proposal to China for resolving the disputes. Unfortunately, China in the initial years viewed these disputes at one-on-one basis, rather than submitting itself to a multilateral arrangement where it could come under a unified barrage of criticism. Finally, on 4 November 2002, China signed the ‘Code of Conduct’ for the South China Sea at the end of the Sixth China-ASEAN Summit (10+1) at Phnom Penh in an attempt to maintain regional peace and stability.¹² This ‘Code of Conduct’ remains the first political document concluded between ASEAN and China over the SCS issue and is a positive event for enhancing mutual trust between the two sides, because all the claimants have an interest to follow a preventive diplomatic approach, in order to minimize the risk of future crises, rather than resorting to military action. Unfortunately, at the operational level, since each signatory state interprets and implements the Code differently, prioritizing their individual national interests, this mindset has created serious challenges to the implementation of this Document. Therefore, against this backdrop, the ASEAN member

countries must unify their position on the tenets of materializing the principles of the Document into reality, and be proactive in engaging China to do so as well, so that the SCS is transformed into a sea of peace and tranquility. Also, through this 'Code of Conduct', China and ASEAN reaffirmed their commitment to the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the 1982 UNCLOS, the TAC in Southeast Asia (1976) and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Since then, the situation in the SCS has been more stable than the past years¹³ and tensions among the disputing countries temporarily shelved.

However, in recent times, the row between China and Japan, China and Vietnam and China and the US concerning the status of disputed islands and waters in the South and the East China Seas has flared up the SCS issue once again. The issue of SCS has actually added fuel to the fire on account of a new convergence of interests of the US in the Straits of Malacca, first due to the wider scheme of security collaboration as welcomed by US allies in the region, including a majority of the ASEAN countries, Japan, Australia and South Korea; and secondly, the signing of the TAC of ASEAN by the US at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) Meeting held at Hanoi on 23 July 2010, which was actually prompted by China's official announcement that the SCS is a part of its 'indisputable sovereignty', clearly implying that it was not ruling out the use of force in the region. As a matter of fact, the statement of the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton during the July 2010 ARF meeting unequivocally upheld US' outlook that it is in the "national interest" of Washington to ensure security and stability of important sea-lanes of SCS for autonomy of navigation and trade, following the principles of international law. Furthermore, Hillary Clinton's assertion that it is in US' "national interest" to see the territorial disputes are resolved through a "collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants", created a debatable clamour on this matter, in addition to effectively internationalizing the Spratly dispute, particularly in the wake of Chinese media reports that "regional stability will be difficult to maintain" if they "allow themselves to be controlled" by the US. This further stated that, "Southeast Asian countries need to understand any attempt to maximize gains by playing a balancing game between China and the US is risky. China will never waive its right to protect its core interest with military means." However, in a press conference on 30 July 2010, the Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman, Geng Yansheng asserted that China had "indisputable sovereignty over islands in the South China Sea and their adjacent waters". He further mentioned that its "military opposes any outside military intervention in this area and the surrounding waters and push for the resolution of differences regarding the South China

Sea with 'relevant countries' through dialogue and negotiations and objected to having the issue internationalized"¹⁴, thus explicitly rejecting the story of "encirclement" and lambasted unwarranted interference by the US in this issue. Besides this, it was felt by the Chinese Government that the building of a new quadrilateral alliance in the Asia-Pacific, consisting of the US, Japan, India and Australia in a soft, 'values-based' containment initiative (the Quad Initiative), was directed against China. The Chinese leadership labelled this proposal as a straight menace to its naval deployment since it centered on China's core national interest, defined in terms of its economic survival and empowerment, in the quest of which, it seeks to develop a hefty presence in the SCS region, as it connects the hydrocarbon-rich Persian and Arab states to the Chinese coastline. This resulted in that China has, of late, augmented its defence budget and modernized its existing equipment, focusing on the building of new classes of conventional, nuclear and ballistic missile submarines.

Besides this, the Government of China has expressed its deep concern regarding the recent joint naval exercises conducted by Vietnam and US in the South China Sea, thereby encouraging US' regional tangibility. In order to counter this joint exercise as a threat to its regional existence, China's PLA Navy has conducted 4 high profile naval war games (including the long-range deployment of 16 warships from the PLAN drawn from the North Sea, East Sea and South Sea Fleets) between April and November 2010 to showcase its growing prowess in the region. Additionally, the South Sea Fleet is being modernized with the deployment for the first time of a *Jin*-class nuclear submarine and amphibious landing craft to Yulin Naval Base on Hainan Island. These exercises reflected the PLAN's potential in acquiring a greater level of operational flexibility in the simultaneous deployment of underwater, surface and air vessels, along with clearly spelling out the strategic implications for regional and external powers, and demonstrating its capacity to sustain larger naval deployments not only in the Spratly archipelago, but also further south in the eastern approaches to the Straits of Malacca. Currently, the region of SCS is more volatile on account of China's obstinate attitude and other claimant countries' (mainly Vietnam, Malaysia and to some extent the Philippines) suspicious mindset regarding China's grand design related to this issue. Unfortunately, the steam of the heat generated with reference to this issue has not evaporated in its entirety, and the heat of the tension still exists not only due to the stance of the surrounding countries, but also stem from the presence of some extra-regional powers in this crisis.¹⁵ Thus this dispute naturally poses a major hurdle for regional stability

and remain a clear testing ground for multilateral dialogue which most the countries of Southeast Asia always stressed through its platform of ASEAN.

It is a fact that China's rising economic and military power is reshaping the regional security architecture of Southeast Asia and beyond on account of slightly eroding the US' dominant power in the region. Above all, China's growing power and influence has led to a changing strategic balance in East Asia and its peripheral region and has significantly fuelled the Sino-US strategic competition that has caused an escalation of tensions in the SCS disputes. Moreover, the underwater structures of James Shoal (off Borneo), Vanguard Bank (off Vietnam) and Seahorse Shoal (off the Philippines) are currently the vital sites in the battles over maritime resources in the SCS region. Besides this, China has been building up military bases on artificial islands in the area of its claimed "nine-dash line", construction of helipads, airstrips, piers and radar and surveillance structures in Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef and Woody Island in the Paracel islands¹⁶ are severely complicating the entire issue of SCS to the claimant countries of Southeast Asia. Now the pertinent question arises that how did China come to assert non-existent islands over a thousand kilometers from its coast as part of its 'historic territory'? Furthermore, China's rejection of the verdict of the international tribunal's judgment regarding its claim of historic right over most of the disputed waters of the SCS including its construction of artificial islands had no legal basis as mentioned in the judgment. This case was filed by the Philippine government in 2013 and in 2016, the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration by an international tribunal in The Hague, finally came down overwhelmingly in favour of claims by the Philippines and led global diplomatic pressure on Beijing to scale back military expansion in the region. The tribunal in its verdict clearly mentioned that China had violated international law by causing "irreparable harm" to the marine environment, endangering Philippine ships and interfering with Philippine fishing and oil exploration and effectively punches holes in China's all-encompassing "nine-dash" line that stretches deep into the South China Sea.¹⁷ This landmark case, brought by the Philippines, was seen as an important crossroads in China's rise as a global power and in its rivalry with the US and that led Beijing to exert more assertive tactics in the region. It was for the first time the Chinese government had been summoned before the international justice system.¹⁸

The Chinese government rejected this verdict of the tribunal established under Art. VII of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of

the Sea (UNCLOS) for dispute resolution under the auspices of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) of July 2016, which ruled that its claims to “historic rights” over the SCS encompassed by the “nine-dash” line could not exceed its maritime rights under the UNCLOS provisions. This rejection has perplexed the international community at large. It has also raised serious questions pertaining to maintaining the freedom, security and the notion of Grotian common right (*res communis*) of all nations to use the seas for the purposes of trade, navigation and scientific endeavour.¹⁹ While explaining the causes behind the rejection to this verdict, the Chinese president, Xi Jinping said China’s “territorial sovereignty and marine rights” in the seas would not be affected by the ruling, which declared large areas of the sea to be neutral international waters or the exclusive economic zones of other countries and insisted China was still “committed to resolving disputes” with its neighbours. The Chinese Foreign Ministry described the tribunal’s decision “is invalid and has no binding force and China does not accept or recognize it.”²⁰ Moreover, China expressed this ruling was “biased and unfair”, “absolutely terrible”, “a joke” and “a farce”.²¹ Interestingly enough, the US initially provided a relatively diminutive reaction to the 2016 arbitration ruling in favour of the Philippines and against Chinese actions in the SCS. This outlook changed suddenly, when on 13 July 2020, US Secretary of State, Michael Pompeo, in an interview said: “the Arbitral Tribunal’s decision is final and legally binding on both parties” and announced his strong support of the ruling, chastising China’s claims as “completely unlawful,” and suggesting that the US could come to the defense of the disputants if targeted by China.²² The growing aggressive presence of China created a fear psychosis among many countries of Southeast Asia and gradually endorsed the US presence in the region. For example, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have granted the US access to air fields and ship berthing and repair facilities; the Philippines, Thailand and Brunei have offered the US increased military cooperation; and the US retains its bilateral defence alliances and agreements with the Philippines, Thailand, Japan and South Korea. All these states are drawing closer to the US to ensure that its military presence in the region is maintained at a level sufficient to balance the PRC’s assertive and strategic mindset in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Unfortunately, China’s incessant assertiveness of flexing muscle over the sovereignty claims in the SCS, the growing US involvement to counter China’s ongoing threat on this issue and the Sino-US strategic power competition have made entire Southeast Asia severely volatile, more complex and fearful in its entirety.

China's Direct and Indirect Meddling in the Internal Affairs of South Asia

Before the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, China in the last few years directly or indirectly was actively involved in many countries' internal matters, like Nepal, Pakistan, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, etc. by using its economic prowess through soft power and practically disturbing the regional power balance in the South and Southeast Asian regions. This Chinese assertiveness largely challenges the normal functioning of many countries' foreign policy in their respective regional domain and often led a tension-pronged situation in the above-mentioned regions. Unfortunately, this growing Chinese assertiveness appeared quite eminent under the present Covid-19 phase. The recent scuffle between India and China, the two nuclear-armed nations in the disputed Himalayan border region in the Galwan Valley of the Aksai Chin-Ladakh region remains a contemporary example in recent times.

The shift of China's foreign policy outlook actually originated since late 1980s'. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, initially China, in order to keep the integrity as well as seeking to unify the motherland (referencing to Taiwan) followed to maintain the dominance of the communist party and to defend sovereign and territorial integrity influenced by nationalism to safeguard and sustain its economic development (communism with a capitalistic view, through the concept of market economy). Thus, China's foreign policy was moulded by the growth path and mostly by domestic issues. However, after the 1989-Tiananmen Square incident, China swapped the course of its foreign policy from ideology-driven to a more pragmatic way of acting, focusing on 'independence and peace'. This resulted in that from the early 1990s, after Deng Xiaoping's opening up of Chinese economy, it immediately activated its diplomacy with neighbouring countries by participating in different regional institutions, initiated to normalize diplomatic relations, which was lacking in the past years and demarcating mutual borders with its neighbors (like Former Soviet Union, Vietnam, Mongolia, unfortunately not with India). The next shift of China's independent thought took place following the East Asian financial crisis, known as 'Asian Contagion', in 1997/98, which severely affected its economy. It had learned from this crisis that a more pro-active self-reliant attitude towards economic development would be essential and not too dependent on the US and Europe and enlarged its accent more on national interest and nationalism was witnessed in this time. This initiative led China to develop its economy on a solid base and between

2000 and 2009, China again experienced strong economic growth, averaging 10% a year and after joining the WTO in 2001, the growth of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows stimulated China's economic growth accelerated further its share in world trade mainly in exports increased quite rapidly. Furthermore, against the backdrop of the global financial crisis of 2008, which severely affected the western economy as well as created a substantial impact on China's export performances, the Chinese leadership quickly advanced a massive economic stimulus plan engrossed on investments in order to achieve relatively high GDP growth projections. During that time, China has initiated a revisionist attitude with reference to its foreign policy domain based on multi-polarization, equality in international relations, and empowerment of developing nations. Simultaneously, it has given huge prioritization on its military modernization programme, with special emphasis on naval sector to make her image a strong naval cum military powers in the field of international relations. Thus, since 2010 China's assertive outlook was evidenced in its foreign policy posture with reference to some regional issues and outstanding territorial disputes in the Asian region.

President Xi Jinping's Geo-Economic Global Power Dream

After President Xi Jinping's ascendance as a General Secretary of the PRC in 2012, gradually his regrouping of the top CCP power and became the Chairman of both the Central Military Commission (CMC) and the Central National Security Commission (CNSC— which was established at the 3rd Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee in November 2013). Since then, President Xi Jinping has rejuvenated a new vision for Chinese foreign policy in world affairs. The amalgamation of different wings and overall institutional reforms clearly exhibits Xi's aspiration to play 'big power diplomacy' in world affairs. Moreover, in October 2014, President Xi Jinping in a speech presented the concept of 'major-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'. This was the first time after many decades that Beijing's leadership has described China's diplomacy as that of a 'major power'.²³

In a short span of time, we see that President Xi progressively playing a dominant role in foreign and security policymaking and inter-agency coordination among the Party, the government and the PLA in an unprecedented way among Chinese leaders about his more assertive use of the country's economic and military might since 1949. President Xi clearly set out visionary goals centered around the "Chinese Dream" and the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation", by launching the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, asserting Chinese claims in

the SCS via massive land reclamation projects and an expanding military footprint mainly in South and Southeast Asia, a geo-political cum economic playground connecting China through trade, investment and infrastructure across Eurasia and beyond. Besides this, to rule and run the country under his leadership, he had done his attentiveness of power in manifold sectors, like imposing conformity within the party and public, reiterating party control over the PLA, draping the country with unpleasant surveillance systems, demanding an submissive and unquestioning media, imprisoning hundreds of thousands of Muslim Uighurs in “re-education” camps.²⁴ Besides this, President Xi's hold on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and in early January 2021, China has revised its National Defence Law, expanding the power of its armed forces-headed by Xi Jinping—to mobilize military and civilian resources to defend its national interests both at home and abroad and thereby weakens the role of the State Council, headed by Premier Li Qiang, who previously formulating military policy.²⁵ Not only that, the CCP has officially banned media and classroom discussion of seven topics associated with Western values that are considered subversive: universalism, press freedom, judicial independence, civil society, citizens' rights, the historical mistakes of the Party, and cronyism within elite financial and political circles.²⁶

Moreover for the first time since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP at the party level often hears the voices of protest. However, the present Chinese leadership mindset and assertive action with reference to issues, like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, Muslim Uighurs, Nepal and its maritime territorial claims in SCS clearly exhibits that it has no intention to rectify its past outlook. One of the prime initiative that President Xi Jinping has taken in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) arguable geo-economic vision and/or geopolitical ambition is to consolidate and upgrade a dense network of bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTA) into a multilateral arrangement, anchored for China's gravitational pull and vast open market. The BRI is basically a new global architecture premeditated by China to frame its new role as a leading global power. It is also a massive project involving the funding and construction of an infrastructure system of roads, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, fiber-optic and communication systems, ports, and airports.

Although BRI in the initial stage is by no means China-centered, but currently it is changing its discourse sometimes by creating problem, which are aggressive in nature, and thereby losing its cooperative long-term inter-regional symbiosis which led tremendous global reverse reactions. Moreover, the Corona epidemic to a large extent has greatly

disrupted China's BRI programme, because many of its partner's economy are relentlessly affected with this Covid-19 rampant crisis. Besides this, the coronavirus pandemic, which is originated from Wuhan (as mentioned by WTO and media), made China's image dramatically unpopular all of the globe and everybody looks China from squint eyed/ oblique for this epidemic. Thus, its long drawn programme, are still numerous, sometime opened door of stringent difficulties, unpredictability and generated crises reflected through aggressive outlook with reference on number of issues with many countries, like in recent times with India in the Ladakh region.

China in the Domain of South Asia: Reflection of Assertive Posture

In recent times, the assertive mental set up of Chinese leadership is clearly reflected through its multiple activities, with all the countries of South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), which directly or indirectly reshaping the regional politics of the South region. China by using different means, like use of soft power, providing aid for economic development, building of roads and other construction projects, interference in internal matters and open confrontation, etc. in this regions. This Chinese growing expansionist and assertive step in forwarded moving activities in the South Asian region have severely affected the geo-political and strategic scenario quite volatile and often led to greater rift and coercion in the region. India views these Chinese activities in the South Asia neighborhood quite cagily. China on account of its rich economic strength, has initiated multiple aid programme with countries like, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar and calculatedly re-balancing the regional balance of power in the South Asian region. One of the prime agenda of Chinese government is to implement its BRI programme in order to grab the turf of South Asia, through which it would create a linkage of railways, roads, pipelines, and utility grids that would connect China and Central Asia, West Asia, and parts of South Asia and to relieve it's too much overreliance on the Malacca Strait for trade to fulfill its plan to become next superpower. However, while implementing its BRI programme, in some cases China's assertive outlook has been reflected quite prominent with reference to countries like, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, those who are partners of BRI and with India, who is opposing the BRI. China's deep rooted direct assertive and aggressive vigorous mindset clearly reflected the ways with reference to the countries like, Pakistan, Nepal and India and which are quite prominently in current scenario.

First, China's attitude toward India-Pakistan disputes progressively always went in favour of Pakistan because backing Pakistan will benefit China to crisscross India as an emerging power in Asia. Moreover, promoting Pakistan through its heavily invested plan of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) of the BRI project could lead China to enter in the Gwadar port and an overland transit route to the Indian Ocean. China pursues a strategic strongpoint of Gwadar port, which is just 400 km from the important Hormuz Strait and through which 40% of Chinese imported oil flows regularly. Strategically, Gwadar port facility will help China to strengthen the designed encircle strategy to prevent India's 'Neighbourhood First' Policy. Thus, China's wholehearted moral, strategic and material support to Pakistan, gradually made the latter a satellite state of the former clearly reflecting Beijing's strategic aims by creating tension in the South Asian region which may force India to divide its resources and strategic attention, based on Kautilyan model, in two different domains, i.e. one against Pakistan and another against China.

Secondly, with reference to Nepal, China's assertive outlook has been evident in recent years quite prominently. From Nepal's perspectives, both India and China are trying to influence it for their own national interests, since its location squeezed between Tibet and India makes it an important buffer zone for China particularly for the defence buildup in Tibetan plateau. Over the years, Beijing has been pressing Nepal to tighten its borders with Tibet and has traditionally alleged that international forces are operating against China through Tibetans based in Nepal and expressed serious concerns against the Maoist insurgent groups active in Nepal. In recent years, China has been involved in a number of projects with Nepal, like road building and hydropower projects, signed several agreements, including a permanent arrangement for energy supplies and signed a transit protocol in 2019, which allowed Nepal to access Chinese sea and land ports for third-country trade, and tries to reduce intensely its dependence on Indian ports.²⁷ In fact, Chinese goods flooded Nepali markets as Nepal diversified its imports and lessened its dependence on India and has made the old ties between India- Nepal slightly into a state of disrepair. Although, Nepal believes in sovereign equality, China's assertiveness in recent times is clearly evident when it seriously interfered in the political process of Nepal and removed the past foreign policy commitment as spelt out by former premier, Zhou Enlai at the 1955 Bandung conference agreeing "abstention from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country"²⁸ has been abandoned. The recent constitutional crisis following Prime Minister KP

Sharma Oli's decision to dissolve the lower house of Parliament on 20 December, 2020, once again re-surfaced an intra-party power tussle between two rival communist groups-Pushpa Kamal Dahal-led CPN (Maoist Centre) and the KP Sharma Oli-led CPN-UML in Nepal. The situation appeared so much acute that on 24 January, 2021, the ruling Nepal Communist Party led by rebel leaders Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' and former Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal expelled Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli from the party. This decision divided the party into two groups and sparked an intense constitutional crisis within Nepal.²⁹

Thus, the chaos and anarchy that dominates the multi-party democratic system in Nepal received a severe jolt internally due to China's carefully constructed long drawn plans. Following this incident, in last week of December 2020, a delegation of Communist Party of China visited Nepal and attempted to resolve the internal crisis between these two factions of the ruling Nepal Communist Party. Unfortunately, the Chinese mission failed to produce any concrete solution. This incident clearly explains Chinese assertiveness and brazenness of growing habit to interfere in any country's internal matter has been jettisoned and amply evinced its motive to dominate Nepal, where moral ethics is subsided by economic and power ethics and made the balance of power in the South Asian region at stake.

Thirdly, with reference to India, the recent clashes and border standoff between India and China in eastern Ladakh put New Delhi's role of balancing cooperation and competition at stake and naturally limited China's ability to pursue prospects of India market over the years. This issue of conflict is well connected with the abrogation of Article-370. After 5 August, 2019, when India abrogated sections of Article 370 and separated Ladakh as a Union territory from Jammu and Kashmir, which led China to re-activate its intrusion plan exclusively focused on Ladakh across the LAC, against the backdrop of fearing safety of its CPEC programme. J&K has been the outmoded trade route of Central and South Asia to the East and Tibet. The current vicinities between Pakistan and China due to their economic and strategic ties generated enlarged interest in erstwhile J&K, particularly Gilgit-Baltistan and POJK. Following the abrogation of Article 370 and Article 35A, it put a grave strategic blow to both Pakistan and China in many ways. The Xinjiang and Tibetan plateaus both adjoining Ladakh constitute a wedge into the Himalayas and considered by China to be truly strategic. China wants to grip those areas that permitted them to launch roads between Xinjiang and Tibet. With the undetermined border between Soviet

Turkestan and Xinjiang, a source of friction and tension with Russia, China desired a substitute line of linkage with Xinjiang through Aksai Chin.³⁰China faced a severe strategic blow due to these developments. They are marking the Ladakh bordering China, since this region has very strategic importance due to Siachen and CPEC passing very close to this region. Recent India-China standoff is a result of this growing frustration of China due to these developments and also on account of rising anti-China world public opinion amid Chinese Corona virus crisis. The Galwan Valley is just 70 km away from an area where CPEC is passing. India's strong posturing relating to Gilgit-Baltistan and increased resentment of locals against Pakistan and China in that area has multiplied worries of China. Besides this, Pakistan tried to declare POJK and Gilgit-Baltistan as part of Pakistan, but this move was contested by the local population by tooth and nail. Due to anti-Pak sentiments in POJK and Gilgit-Baltistan, the progress of CPEC possibly maycurved into a hard dream ofPakistan'seconomic growth.³¹Pakistan is also facing the same geostrategic fallout like China after the amendment of Article 370. Pakistan's position has turned more miserable in many ways. First, it lost its separatist base operating freely in Kashmir Valley with legal, constitutional protections due to abrogation of these provisions. Second, activities of foreign terrorists have declined to a minimum level due to negligible infiltration and local recruitment and life of domestic terrorists have declined to an all-time low. Third, the local emotional sentiment is also turning against separatist forces in Kashmir. Local people were first to celebrate the detention of separatists and mainstream Kashmiri politicians after 5th August developments due to their anti-masses attitude all these years. Fourth, after the amendment of Article 370 and abrogation of 35A movement of locals in POJK against Pakistan has intensified. People in POJK are up in arms against the discriminatory, oppressive and racial attitude of Pak authorities. Finally, after seeing the democratic rights being enjoyed by people in J&K and Ladakh, they have become more vociferous and led severe disquiets to both Pakistan and China of their dream CPEC programme.³²Thus, the recent standoff between India and China in Ladakh region is not at all an isolated event and is well connected with China's assertive mindset reflected through its foreign policy outlook. In fact, putting military pressure in Ladakh, the Chinese are assertively conveyed multiple messages, including exhorting New Delhi to restrain itself on Aksai Chin and Gilgit- Baltistan region.

Finally, growing understanding between India and the US in the sphere of diplomatic, economic, technological and military areas mainly in the Asian region and validation and engagement with the US administration

under the Indo-Pacific doctrine, followed by the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), originated in 2007 and re-activated in 2017, which is an informal strategic dialogue between India, USA, Japan and Australia with a shared objective to ensure and support a "free, open and prosperous" Indo-Pacific region, which Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his Shangri-La speech in 2018, defined as an inclusive Indo-Pacific, based on the rule of law. The root causes behind the formation of QUAD platform is fundamentally against the plethora of strategic challenges emanating from China, e.g. aggressive territorial grabs in the SCS, presenting potential obstacles to freedom of navigation; use of debt traps to develop influence overseas; aggressive military behavior and forward move towards its neighbours and implementation of BRI initiative mainly in the Asia-Pacific region, etc. India, on account of China's strategic and gross aggressive posture in the SCS issue and the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, currently involved in this QUAD initiative for hastening the modernization of India's military, conducting joint military exercises, making the U.S.-Australia-Japan-India Quad militarily effective, and expanding intelligence cooperation and military interoperability to get closer to Washington and other democratic partners. Moreover, the US initiated Asia-Pacific growth corridor can counter the Chinese BRI narrative since it stretches from Japan to South East and Africa and beyond. From Chinese point of view, China consider this Quad initiative is essentially to encircle China's BRI programme and which was described by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi as a "headline grabbing" exercise which will "dissipate like sea foam".³³ So, this QUAD initiative can be dubbed as a natural reaction and backlash of the struggle between the free world versus Chinese authoritarianism. Therefore, the above reasons clearly exhibit the unhappiness which has been evolved among many countries of the globe regarding China's assertive activities in the Asian region stretching from South, Southeast Asia and beyond. In fact, the ongoing standoff between China-India in the Ladakh region and India's fitting reply largely satisfied many countries of this region regarding China's assertive mindset in the name of economic aid and strategic cuddle through this BRI programme.

Conclusion

If one can evaluate China's growing assertive posture, it already existed in their history. The PRC came in existence after a long struggle against the nationalist China and where they were too much influenced with the concept of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. The basic tenet of Sun Tzu's philosophy is that if your strategy is well founded, you will win-and if

you have a truly great strategy, you will win without fighting. Moreover, the PRC has tried to create an impression that Manchu and Republican China were victims of western and Japanese imperialism (the century of humiliation). Thus, fighting warrior type mindset and to airunfair language, false claim with the help ofmaps and contemporary travelwere often practised by China as a vehicle to create pressure to the opponent to justify its arguments, which is an inevitable ingredient in their overall strategicoutlook. This was clearly evident when China used these tools with reference to its border war with Vietnam in 1979, number of times against India by presenting false maps of demarcation with reference to border conflict against the latter and the current conflicts in the SCS issue, etc. Fortuitously, during the Cold War years, this mindset was less reflected compared to post-Cold War period. It has been rationally realized by the current Chinese leadershipthat development of sound economic structure could challenge the domination of the capitalist world and might give space to play a more celebrated role in emerging security architecture of the current global order. Thus, in the domain of China's foreign policy under President Xi Jinping, it is evident that China has wielded a more ambitious, innovative and often assertive foreign policy thinking than his predecessors.

The pertinent question which cropped up in this juncture that why China is so successful in influencing South Asia? There are several factors which can be appraised. One of the major reasons is that it has managed to project itself as a strong economic power with the help of its soft power means. BRI has been hit with less democratic countries in the region due to its massive economic aid. Moreover, China's increasing involvement in SCS and South Asia largely poses a severe strategic challenge for India as the regional economic and diplomatic heavyweight. China's attempt to eclipse India across South Asia and where its assertive policy is clearly evinced with reference to countries like, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Maldives Myanmar and Nepal. China, through its BRI economic diplomacy, accompanied by prolonged strategic cooperation, is slowly and steadily expanding its wings in the South Asian region. This agility of China gradually led counties like, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, which were once Indian allies, slowly tilting toward China. In the last few years, China has undertaken a number of development projects and provided sufficient military assistance in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan and Nepal to increase its leverage vis-à-vis India. Its direct involvement in Nepal's internal matters and increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the effort to strangle India economically appears a grave concern for India. China's grand strategy is simple- it gives loans to

smaller less-developed countries on high rates for infrastructural projects, acquires equity into projects, and when the country is unable to repay the loan, it gets ownership of the project and the land. Then, it can put this land to strategic use against India, which can be termed as Chinese debt trap, as it is happened with reference to Sri Lanka. A similar story is unfolding in Maldives too. Pakistan and Nepal, too, run the risk of falling into the Chinese debt trap in future.³⁴ Moreover, despite New Delhi's objection, except Bhutan and Afghanistan, other South Asian countries have signed in China's BRI programme. China through its mega BRI financial strategy tries to encompass India's goodwill understanding with its South Asian neighbour.

China is willing to join as a full member of SAARC, but it has been stalled on account of objection raised by India and some other members of South Asia, because SAARC may lose its original mandate and character. India being the pivot to South and South East Asia, China's entry in this region will not only affect its regional politics but will also have geopolitical implications. Conversely, China views the Indian oil exploration activities in SCS in collaboration with Vietnam, its ongoing plan of the Trilateral Highway between India, Myanmar and Thailand, too much closer to the US and joining in latter's QUAD initiative as sources of grave concern for them. To combat China's aggressive investments and assertive posture, India, in turn, has stepped its aid to its neighbours and re-scheduling its orientation and focusing more on implementation of its own development projects through Narendra Modi government's 'Neighbourhood First' policy. Besides this, the recent activation of the SAARC platform through Covid-19 pandemic can be branded as the right initiative as taken by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Moreover, India's response to China's aggressive attack in the Ladakh region could be termed as a fitting reply and a judicious use of carrot and stick policy, which is re-active in nature. Therefore, China's assertiveness is becoming a headache for its neighbours and friends and its increasing economic power and influence practically intervallic the regional balance of power in the South and Southeast Asian region, which is as an attempt to pinch India within South Asia and limit its decades old goodwill gesture in the security architecture of Asia and beyond.

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- a) religious groups consist of Muslims, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, Tibetan Buddhist monks, and Falun Gong practitioners;

- b)** property owners opposing forced evictions, college students helping to organize labor unions, 'MeToo' activists, economics professors, artists, and photojournalists; **c)** Hong Kong democracy advocates; **d)** unending internal power struggles, etc. [See Samantha Hoffman, "The Chinese Communist Party's biggest fear is that it cannot control all of Chinese society-or even itself", *Foreign policy*, 24 January, 2019, see <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/24/the-chinese-communist-party-always-needs-an-enemy/> (accessed on 22 November, 2020)]
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