

China, India and the Balance of Power in South Asia: with Reference to Sri Lanka's Position

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Abstract

Since the ancient period, India is Sri Lanka's closest neighbor due to the geographical location as well as religious and cultural links between the two countries. Recently, China also becomes a close friend of Sri Lanka mainly in commercial ties. Despite of Sri Lanka, in Indian Ocean there is a competitive rivalry in between the two Asian giants, India and China. The main objective of the study is "to identify the position of Sri Lanka in between the rivalry among Indian and China in South Asia". Specially, the objective of the study want to find out the policy that Sri Lanka should follow in conducting firm relations with the both countries. The methodology that has used for the study is qualitative in nature and only based on secondary data. And descriptive analysis used for the analyzing part. According to the study, for Sri Lanka Indian as well as China both are significantly important in their sustainable development. Recently, even though China has become the in the first place of financial supporter, India also assist Sri Lanka especially after the humanitarian operation. In order to maintain the role of Sri Lanka in between the rivalry between the rivalry if the two Asian giants in South Asia, Sri Lanka need to maintain a neutral position in conducting relations with both India and China. The most important factor is that the Indian is the most immediate neighbor rather than China to Sri Lanka.

Keywords: China, India, Rivalry, South Asia, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Countries South Asia is one of the most important regions in the world. 7 countries are located in South Asia including Sri Lanka. The most powerful nation in South Asia is India which has a hegemonic power over other countries in the region. India was following a policy which influenced on certain countries in favor of their interest. Due to these reasons other countries in South Asia were tended to move towards China which always forwarded their helpful hands towards them. China is not a South Asian country and it belongs to East Asian region. At the same time, China had followed a peaceful coexistence policy towards the small countries and tended to grab the South Asian countries and that intention is to some extent successful in the recent time. This was a kind of a threat to India in their region. This situation has grown towards a competitive rivalry in balance of power in South Asia. On one side India is trying to regain its hegemonic role over other South Asian countries specially with Narendra Modi's policy. On the other hand China has built a chain of ports which encircled Indian in India Ocean and those ports are called as "China's string of Pearls". These ports have increased the naval power of China in South Asia. The study focuses on the position of Sri Lanka in between the rivalry of China and India in South Asia. For Sri Lanka China and India both countries are very important in their development. Specially during the peak of the humanitarian operation China was the nation who provided military assistance in the conduct of war and on the other hand India was one of the country who has given the financial assistance in the development projects after the conflict. The most important factor is that for the political stability of Sri Lanka India is a core component rather than China. With the all concern the paper discuss about the role of Sri Lanka and their policies towards the rivalry between China and India in South Asia in the balance of power scenario.

Rivalry in South Asia

Since the ancient times, India was the giant “big brother” in South Asia who had the hegemonic power on its neighbors. Mainly with the Pakistan issue, Indian hegemonic power across the South Asia region tended to be withdrawn. Currently, the balance of power in South Asia fluctuates between India and China. In the 21 century, China came into the scenario of balancing the power of South Asia. Now the rivalry among India and China is affecting the other countries in region and Sri Lanka is one of them. Both giants are powerful actors who have rapidly growing economies and both countries have their own trade relations besides the rivalry. China’s main interest in South Asia is to expand its power over the Indian Ocean which is concerned as most significant maritime trade hub. China’s two way trade seemed at around \$3.5 trillion (2011 estimate). The combined value of India’s merchandise exports and imports was around \$750 billion in 2011. Most of this trade is seaborne. The protection of the sea lines of communication became an important commercial concern as well as the principal justification of naval bureaucracies in both India and China (Mohan, 2012). Due to that both countries paid their attention toward the naval expansion programmes. Due to the large population, both countries are highly depending on the raw material, minerals and energy resources of other countries. The next most important reason to expand their naval capacities is to secure their access to those countries, especially to Africa and Middle East. Since 77% of China’s oil comes from the Middle East and Africa, Beijing has increased its activities in the Indian Ocean region by investing in littoral states’ economies, building ports and infrastructure, providing weaponry, and acquiring energy resources. Delhi and Beijing had unveiled plans for the construction of more than one aircraft carrier each and signaled their political commitment to build their blue-water capabilities. On the other hand, China has followed two effective strategies to approach the other countries in South Asia that it can invest in those countries for future benefits. Those are the China’s string of pearls strategy and Beijing’s “hexiao gongda” policy in South Asia: “uniting with the small”- Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Burma, and Sri Lanka—“to counter the big”- India. China has been succeeded to some extent in maintaining the peaceful coexistence with many countries in South Asia by enhancing the trade and commercial links with them. And China’s string of pearls strategy is working very effectively in Indian Ocean which includes the chain of ports in Gwada (Pakistan), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh) and Kyaukphyu (Myanmar). The rivalry among Indian and China in South Asia region has drawn the attention of the world nowadays. According to the John Garver, he argues that there are two ways the conflict might play itself out: "China could agree that South Asia is India's security zone and sphere of influence and [thus] desist from actions there which are objectionable to New Delhi," or "India could accommodate itself to a seemingly inexorable growth of China's political-military role in South Asia" (Garver, 2001). My argument supports the second option of Gaver’s, which says that China is gaining the power in South Asia while India accommodates it. China has gained more power in South Asia rather than India. Most of the neighboring countries of Indian have welcomed China with establishing economic ties which exposes a threat to the Indian existence. While acquiring the chain of ports in Indian Ocean, China could create a ring around India. And also by funding on construction of railway and pipeline projects in Gwada and Kyaukphyu which link these territories to China, it is to create a land lock around India. Even though China is becoming more powerful in South Asia, India is still the historic major player in South Asia. With the new leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Indian is now in a strategy to regain their hegemonic power across the region.

Sri Lanka in between the Rivalry

Sri Lanka sits at the heart of the Indian Ocean, adjacent to major shipping routes, within the world's most strategically and economically dynamic region- the Indo-Pacific. In the recent times, China's presence in Sri Lanka could make a considerable impact on India. Indo- Sri Lanka relations were historic; even though the relations were worsen with the civil conflict in Sri Lanka. India's approach on the civil conflict in Sri Lanka was aggressive to some extent and their forceful intervention into the issue prove it. India plays a key role in the political stability of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka relations with China also has an ancient history and during the peak of the civil conflict, Sino- Sri Lankan relations tended to be more stronger than the past. China support Sri Lanka in arms as well as provided financial aids during the war. Since 2009, the relations between two countries have grown rapidly and it caused to disturb the relations between Sri Lanka and India. Sri Lanka and China signed a "Strategic Cooperative Partnership (SCP)" agreement in 2013 and it covers whole range issues including bilateral trade, investment, financial assistance and strategic cooperation providing to benefit both the countries. China is Sri Lanka's biggest source of foreign direct investment (FDI). Sri Lanka's recent selection of a Chinese firm a strategically important project for setting up a maintenance workshop for Sri Lankan air force in the vicinity of Trincomalee is an example of such cooperation (Hariharan, 2014). The most important investment of China in Sri Lanka is the Hambantota port project which is one of the significant port in China's string of pearls. Strategically, China considers ties with Sri Lanka as key to the success of its Indian Ocean policy. It realizes that Sri Lanka is the gateway to resource rich regions of Middle East and Central Asia, especially Iran, a vital exporter of oil to China (Rajan, 2015). In the context of balance of power in South Asia, countries like Sri Lanka have to have the ultimate benefit of both giants in the scenario. Such small and developing countries do not have to fully depend on one country or two. They need to have cooperation with all giants in the region to sustain their development. Specially Sri Lanka as a country that recently defeated terrorism, need much financial and political support from the regional heads to ensure its stability. In the mean time Sri Lanka has strong economic ties with India as well as China. However, the volume of Sri Lanka's exports to China does not yet seem comparable to that vis-à-vis India. However, the trade balance has remained constantly in favour of China. India has become one of the top five countries investing in Sri Lanka mostly in the services sector like health, education, fuel distribution, hotel industry, tourism, IT training, computer software, and airlines industry. China is now poised to overtake India as Sri Lanka's biggest trading partner despite Sri Lanka benefitting from the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India which has helped India-Sri Lanka trade to grow to \$ 5 billion by 2011. But even without the FTA, China's bilateral trade figures reached nearly 50 per cent of the Indian figure (Hariharan, 2014).

Though the two sides claim that this merely a commercial venture, its future utility as a strategic asset by China remains a real possibility to India's consternation. For China, Hambantota will not only be an important transit for general cargo and oil but a presence in Hambantota also enhances China's monitoring and intelligence gathering capabilities vis-à-vis India. According to Garver's argument, China as a super power in South Asia would be more advantages to Sri Lanka as per the present situation. China is the nation who helps Sri Lanka as an all-rounder. Indian has expressed its displeasure about growing Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka on a number of occasions. In 2007, India's then-national security advisor had openly criticized Sri Lanka for attempting to purchase a Chinese-built radar system on the grounds that it would "overreach" into the Indian air space (Courtesy, 2012). In 2014, Chinese submarines have made port visits to Sri Lanka twice, raising India's concerns.

India has certain advantages in its complex relations with Sri Lanka. They are conditioned by their shared social, religious and cultural traditions over hundreds of years. Thanks to this, they have developed good understanding of each other's needs and priorities. Over the years they have evolved large areas of cooperation in strategic security, trade and commerce, development assistance, communication, and in securing the national interests of both nations in the Indian Ocean. Even though, China tend to be more favorable for Sri Lanka, as a small country in South Asia the situation need to be handled carefully. This has enabled Sri Lanka to carefully balance its relations with both India and China. In this situation Sri Lanka need to maintain a neutral position in between these two countries. How Sri Lanka navigates through this geo-strategic line of India and China in the Indian Ocean would test its diplomatic skills. Sri Lanka's relations with China are likely to be smooth for the foreseeable future because by policy China does not interfere in the internal affairs of country and its strategic interests are covered by the 1963 agreement. On the other hand, Sri Lanka's relations with India would be influenced more by pressures from the Tamil communities in both countries than by geo-strategic interests since they are covered by the Indo-Lanka Accord. As a result, issues relating to human and minority rights would continue to be the weapon for India to grate Sri Lanka notwithstanding their own dismal record. But in this point, China is in favor of Sri Lanka. And it tended to attract Sri Lanka towards China rather than India. Subsequently, as a developing country in South Asia, Sri Lanka does not need any "big" enemy in the region and all it need is to cooperate with both Titans in order to sustain its development. But the point is that, India is the immediate neighbor to Sri Lanka rather than China. Even though, China's rise in South Asia would be advantages for Sri Lanka, India is also important to Sri Lanka as much as China do. Sri Lanka has to maintain cordial relations with India for its peaceful existence in the region. When it come to the balance of power scenario, for Sri Lanka both giants are equally important. Because Sri Lankan economy mostly sustain due to the financial links with both countries and in the context of socio-cultural, India and China share equal position. The policy that need to follow by Sri Lanka in this power rivalry between India and Sri Lanka, is to maintain a neutral position while obtain the ultimate use of both powers. Such a strategy would help Sri Lanka to be stable and prosper while Titans compete in their scramble for global power.

Conclusion

In South Asia, China has recently jointed to the balance of power despite of India. India and China are the two giants who help the small countries in the region to sustain their development. Recently, China seemed to be more favorable rather than India in the context of economic as well as in politics for Sri Lanka. On the other hand, India is the closest neighbor of Sri Lanka who has continued historical relation in social, economic and cultural context. As a small country in South Asia, Sri Lanka needs to maintain a neutral position within the competition between the two giants. Being favorable towards China will be a disadvantage to Sri Lanka in the region. Even though China is a friend of Sri Lanka, India is the most immediate neighbor of Sri Lanka. Maintaining a neutral position among the giants will be the most suitable strategy for Sri Lanka to walk towards the development.

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