

Reducing the Dragon's Footprint: A Strategic Challenge for India

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Carly Fiorina a businessperson and political figure, once said, “The highest calling of leadership is to challenge the status quo and unlock the potential of others”. China has unlocked its economic, political and strategic potential. Napoleon was aware that China had the potential and would rise. His famous quote about China was, “Let her sleep, for when she wakes, she will shake the world”. This statement was made by Napoleon at a time when China was declining and Europe was rising. China has camouflaged its ambition to rise as a global superpower by referring it to a policy of “peaceful development.” It further states that China will develop economically by taking advantage of the peaceful international environment, and, at the same time, maintain and contribute to world peace by its development.¹ The philosophy that is being followed by China on its path to its rise as a modern nation by 2049 is: “think global to be a global power.” Contrary to the assertions made by Premier Wen Jiabao who said, “China’s rise will not come at the cost of any other country, will not stand in the way of any other country, nor pose a threat to any other country.” It is evident that this assertion has now fallen by the wayside as China is developing into an assertive global superpower. China has become more aggressive, assertive and proactive in salami slicing the periphery, along its continental as well as maritime boundaries. It is ruthlessly following a choreographed trajectory to achieve its strategic, diplomatic and economic interests.

Rise of China: Power Flows Through the Economic and Communication Corridors

The rise of China is a calibrated well thought out strategy, focussed on building its capabilities before looking beyond the territorial boundaries. The footprints have been planned and choreographed with the matching economic and military capabilities. With the rise in economic muscle, China has unveiled its maritime strategy from the near sea to far sea defence. Similarly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is just not an economic endeavour but a comprehensive strategy of masking China's hegemonic foreign policy goals and security policies.² The assertion by China that its policy of economic cooperation is inclusive, equal and cooperative for collective growth is a facade and meant to camouflage the real motive and that is expansion of its economic, strategic and military footprints. David Kang, a visiting Professor at Stanford University says, "It is an attempt to grow economically and increase China's diplomatic presence while keeping relations with other nations peaceful."³ This is reflective of the desire of China to take the centre-stage as a global power. The overall strategy to increase China's footprints across the globe is to ensure resource acquisition, eliminate competition from both regional and global economic competitors, so as to maintain favourable conditions for its consumer goods and for energy security. At the same time, China is also building comprehensive military capabilities to eliminate the threats that may manifest in the near and distant future from both state and non-state actors. China's rise needs to be looked at carefully because it will have implications for regional stability and peace. The economic innovation in China started in the early Eighties, beginning with Deng Xiaoping through Hu Jintao implementing innovative economic policies which lifted China's sluggish economy by introducing private ownership, market economy, and less governmental control, contributing to robust economic performance.⁴ Since then, China has grown economically and stands today as the second largest economy in the world which will soon surpass the US. The foreign exchange (Forex) reserve of China was US\$3.11 trillion at the end of October 2017⁵ – more than the collective Forex reserves of Russia, Japan, South Korea and India. China has maintained a growth rate of 8-10 percent on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) since the 1980s and that has given economic muscle to China to spread its footprints across the globe.

China's security interests have traditionally been oriented towards the continental rather than the maritime domain given the plethora of threats that

BRI projects are part of comprehensive strategy of masking Chinese hegemonic foreign and security policies.

have historically emanated from its northern and western land borders.⁶ However, in the recent past, China has become conscious of the importance of securing the maritime routes because sustaining resource acquisition and maintaining international trade have become vital for its economic growth. China, at this stage, can ill afford the disruption of maritime routes because the engine of its growth is foreign trade and, thus, the security of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) has become even more vital than before. For instance, some 90 percent of China's total trade and 80 percent of its oil imports transit the maritime route.⁷ In pursuance of its policy of securing the SLOCs, China, is developing 18 ports in the Indo-Pacific region, from the African coast to the northern Pacific. These ports will ultimately become forward listening posts or military bases for China apart from developing as hubs of economic activities. When China made forays into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) it only talked about the maritime Silk Route but its real intent has now surfaced, with Djibouti becoming the first overseas Chinese military base. Gwadar will become the next and the 'String of Pearls' will ultimately become the pivot for China to project military capabilities beyond territorial boundaries, sooner or later. Mao had said, "Power flows from the barrel of the gun", but the new Chinese strategy is that "power flows through the economic and communication corridors" and the BRI is an initiative in this direction. The US had developed alliances based on ideology and the threat from the Communist regime, but the alliances that had been built over the threats from a political ideology have become dated and are slowly being replaced by alliances built on economic cooperation. China has altered this philosophy and given a new narrative to build international alliances based on economic integration and inclusive development. This ideology is more appealing, especially to the weak and isolated neighbours, but the question is: will it be another way of Chinese colonisation through economic forays or will it give equal opportunity for mutual growth? The Chinese philosophy is that economic integration will be the new tool of building alliances. However, it appears that sooner or later, China would be shaping the political and economic landscape of its strategic partners. Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, Laos (among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – ASEAN) are beginning to see the unfolding of this strategy. Nepal, Bangladesh, New Zealand, Australia and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) would be next

in line. Any nation that will act as an irritant or impediment in China's new doctrine of global alliance-building, will face the ire of the Middle Kingdom. Keeping the above strategy in view, China will endeavour to isolate and subvert India's neighbourhood by the economic pull. As a result, India will see China's footprints at its doorstep. China has made deep inroads into Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CEPC), and similarly, it has moved into Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka with infrastructure development projects.

India must build its maritime power projection capabilities to increase its footprint in Indian Ocean.

Footprints of China in India's Immediate Neighbourhood

The foundation for geographic and strategic outreach beyond territorial boundaries was laid by China in 1997-98 after the 15th Party Congress. It was at that time that the national security strategy and military strategy was drawn up and a roadmap was prepared to implement these strategies, after many years of study and debate. This included key areas of interest and influence that were considered essential by China to protect its vital national interest. This also coincided with China's military modernisation and its becoming a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Military and economic growth was considered the implementation arm of the new Chinese strategy of looking outward. Thus, China embarked upon consolidation of geopolitical relations with regional neighbours and economic integration of the weak but resource rich nations. Rediscovering the Silk Route as part of the strategy became paramount to secure economic interests. Thus, came the idea of establishing footprints along the SLOCs that fuelled the Chinese economic growth. At the same time, the military capabilities that were required to support this strategy followed right behind the economic caravan of the Middle Kingdom. Three things happened at that time: Russia was consolidating and regaining its lost geostrategic space post the Soviet break-up; the US was involved in the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq; and the free trade regime became the plank for the economic growth of the industrialised nations. The window of opportunity gave China an opening for its strategy "Go West and Leap East". No nation had expected that China's economic leap would be so huge that it would propel it to become the next superpower. By the time the global community became aware of the rise of the new emerging global power, China had already established a 'String of

Pearls' in the Indo-Pacific region and had begun the 'Economic Long March' by rediscovering the trade routes on the land and oceans. Subsequently, the new Silk Route was rediscovered by China, now known as the "Belt and Road Initiative" that is expected to connect more than 50 countries right up to Europe and Africa.

Why did China choose to establish its footprints in India's neighbourhood? Was it to encircle India or was it for geostrategic reasons? If we examine each case separately, it becomes evident that each of these bases was created as part of a well thought out strategy for economic and military reasons. Sittwe port on the Arakan coast is required by China to gain access into the Bay of Bengal from Yunnan and also to transport oil and gas from the Arakan coast. And, thus, Sittwe port became an ideal port for alternative access to the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka offers a trade, refuelling and security hub for China to secure its long line of shipping to and from the Gulf. Hambantota sits right on top of the SLOC linking West Asia with the Malacca Strait. Gwadar port in Pakistan offers access to the Arabian Sea through Pakistan and, willy-nilly, Gwadar becomes a second coastline. The ports of Sittwe, Hambantota, Gwadar and Maldives give China a foothold in the Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and northern Indian Ocean. Nepal is being cultivated by China because China can ill afford a cultural and religious reversal in Tibet from the periphery, since Nepal itself has a large Buddhist population. Another advantage China gains by creating bases in India's neighbourhood is that this 'String of Pearls' acts as leverage against India because China considers the emergence of India as an alternative pole.⁸ The question is: where does India stand in this game of Chinese Checkers? What is the best way to defeat the Chinese strategy?

Implications for India

India has three important concerns with regard to the increasing footprints of China in and around the subcontinent. First, is the indirect involvement of China with the northeast insurgent groups, to give impetus to instability. The United National Liberation Front of West Southeast Asia (UNLFW), an alliance of insurgent groups operating in the northeast, has been established to give a fillip to the sagging insurgent movements in Nagaland, southeast Arunachal Pradesh and north Assam. Similarly in Manipur, the Coordinating Committee (CorCom) has been established to coordinate the insurgent activities and prevent inter-group clashes. Both organisations have their bases in Myanmar and will be more than willing to take the help of Chinese intelligence agencies to increase their

spheres of influence. If the insurgent movements in the northeast are reenergised, it will further slow down the development activities in the northeastern states. Similarly, Left Wing Extremism (LWE) could look to engage with the Chinese agencies through Nepal and that would be bad news for India if China makes forays to destabilise India's internal security.

The second is China's increased footprints in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK). This could manifest in manipulation of the political set-up in these countries that may be anti-India and also become a pivot for cyber and information war (unrestricted war) against India. Nepal has joined hands with China to get internet services for its citizens, ending India's decades-long monopoly in the Himalayan nation's cyber connectivity network.⁹ Chanakya had said, "Neighbouring countries are most vital for foreign policy". The neighbouring countries acted as buffer states against external threats to India and have remained a consumer market for India. If China is able to pull away the neighbours from India's sphere of influence, willy-nilly, the Sino-Indian border will extend from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. No nation can afford to have a neighbourhood that can be manipulated by inimical forces to create insecurity through traditional and non-traditional adversaries. Thus, it is vital that these nations remain as a buffer for India.

The third is the concert in the Chinese footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This may undermine India's geostrategic position and impact its maritime security. It has the potential to disrupt, and degrade India's manoeuvre space. If India is to play a larger role in the Indo-Pacific and IOR, it must retain the ability to influence events in its courtyard (IOR). The IOR is a leverage for India to balance the threat from China on the northern border. Thus, it cannot be allowed to slip away.

Strategic Options for India

The manifestation of Chinese footprints in the immediate and extended neighbourhood is the result of a well-orchestrated strategy that was unveiled by the Chinese leadership almost three decades ago. With its economic and military rise, China kept refining and reorienting its strategy to achieve the stated objectives. It is now maturing and forcing its neighbours to react. A counter-strategy should not be reactive and should be based on economic, political and military capabilities, and well thought-out contingencies. By suddenly waking up, without a perspective plan, and in the absence of economic back-up,

alternative strategies are unlikely to succeed when the adversary is working on a structured and choreographed path. Thus, a knee-jerk reaction is not the answer to deal with an assertive China.

Resolve Internal Fault Lines: China will make forays in the northeast and LWE if India allows the internal fault lines to grow wider. Peace accords and development of the border states comprise the way forward to prevent Chinese intelligence agencies meddling in India's internal affairs. Redressal of the grievances of the public is a must, otherwise more areas may slip into turbulence. Gorkhaland has the potential to spiral into a big conflict and may lead to a demand for a Gorkhaland within India or even a merger with Nepal, as greater Nepal. Inimical forces are on the lookout to trigger such controversies and, thus, a conflict resolution mechanism is a must to keep China away from India's internal security. Exposed flanks, especially in internal security, will be an invitation for China to meddle in, and needle, India.

Managing Buffer States: Integration of the neighbouring countries, culturally and ideologically, is not enough. Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Maldives are aware of their geostrategic positions and, thus, would leverage this for economic benefits. India has to move fast and deliver on economic and infrastructure development, whereas the Indian response has been lethargic, as compared to China. Though the relationships with Myanmar and Bangladesh have seen an upswing, the relationship should be with the nation and not with the political ideology. India's relations with Bangladesh and Nepal are aligned to a political ideology and that is detrimental to the overall national interest. What is most important is that India needs to integrate these buffer states through education, economy, communication, energy, consumer markets, culture and tourism. The following aspects need to be focussed on to remove certain apprehensions among those countries and for restoring India's favourable relations with its neighbours:

- It was a bad political decision to support the blockade of Nepal in the Terai region – it has created anti-India feelings among the Nepalese people. Nepal is heavily dependent on India for energy and almost its entire supply chain, including of foodgrains, and such an action created doubts about, and mistrust in, the Nepalese government/people that India can cut the supply lines and electricity transmission to Nepal at will. This has forced the Nepalese government to announce an energy development plan to end load shedding, and dependence on India, in two years, and develop 10,000 Mega Watts (MW) of electricity in 10 years.¹⁰ Ironically,

most of these contracts have gone to Chinese firms and it is a big loss for India. It is important for India to develop trust among the people and show that irrespective of the government in Nepal, the people of India are always with them.

- Similarly, the citizens of Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka who come to India for pilgrimages, complain that they are not treated with the same dignity as other foreign tourists, and are often exploited. Most of the religious places that the citizens of these countries visit are well known, but, hardly any arrangements are made to ensure their safety and smooth pilgrimage. Tourists Centres, catering to the needs of these people, can be established and better facilities provided, to earn their goodwill.
- People-to-people contacts and making India an education and cultural destination will create ambassadors, especially if the students are given opportunities to study in premier institutions. India can consider opening of South Asian Association of Region Cooperation (SAARC) institutions of excellence for education, where students of member countries, excluding Pakistan, can study along with the Indian students. Mr Karzai had always been pro-India because he had studied in India and is still rooted to the Himachal Pradesh University.
- One of the complaints of the regional countries is that India must deliver on the promises made, especially in the field of economic and infrastructure development. Opportunities need to be captured and not allowed to slip away. The bottom line is that without a roadmap and perspective plan, implementation of a long-term strategy is not possible. On the diplomatic front, the only way is, "India could punch above its weight as a champion of smaller nations in promoting a just and moral order in the world".¹¹ Thus, India needs to be seen as a compassionate and empathetic neighbour.

India as a Regional Player: There are only two options available to India: either to go alone or to take the route of alliances and cooperation. Without military and economic capabilities, no nation can earn respect. India needs to build its maritime power projection capabilities and also develop maritime infrastructure to increase its footprints in the northern Indian Ocean region. Getting a foothold on a few islands will not be enough: India will have to look at the development of certain strategic islands from the Andamans to the African coast, backed by potent maritime capabilities. India may not follow the port versus port strategy with China, but, certainly, strategic maritime

space cannot be allowed to slip away. Similarly, India's forays in the northern Pacific require a strategy of cooperation with regional countries such as Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, Australia and the US. This would require long-term investment, and how far India should go, needs to be defined, considering the tradeoff and pitfalls it may face, especially at the northern borders. There is scope for building alliances in information and cyber warfare with Japan. But before India does so, it needs to create its own cyber and information command. Iran and the African nations are indispensable for India to maintain its influence in the IOR. The Indian diaspora has contributed a lot to the development of some of the African countries, and the role of India as the voice of the weak and poor African countries through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) has ensured an India-friendly Africa. However, unless these relations are backed by economic cooperation, they will not go far. Thus, doing good alone will not be enough and, India will have to undertake smart investments in the African nations without it appearing as a reaction to Chinese investment or forays into Africa.

Cooperation with Regional Countries in Areas of Common Interests:

There is large number of issues that equally bother the regional countries and their well-being. Disaster relief, environmental hazards, public health and human resource development are some of the areas that can be looked into. India must take the lead and extend support for capability and capacity building of these nations in disaster relief and disaster management. It will be a good idea to establish a regional disaster management authority, with Indian expertise and infrastructure. Similarly, epidemic control and public health programmes can be steered by Indians with the expertise in these fields because they equally impact India. In fact, the smallpox eradication programme was steered by India in South Asia under the World Health Organisation (WHO). Similar projects in the field of malaria, polio, hepatitis control can become flagship cooperation platforms. Human resource development and environmental awareness programmes are some of the good platforms to forge cooperation.

Conclusion

China has deep pockets and can lure the nations for immediate gains with the development model that would ultimately lead to a debt trap. If India does not act with a plan, there are chances that these nations may align with China for short-term gains. China has given indications of its debt traps and that is good news

for India because there is rising apprehension about the Chinese development model. Hambantota and Gwadar port have even put the closest allies of China in doubt about whether to go ahead or hold back Chinese investments. For India, the danger of Chinese investment in the neighbourhood, including the CEPC and BRI, is that though the investment and economic cooperation may be bilateral, their impact is likely to spill over to India. Most nations in India's neighbourhood are hungry for development; however, they are also conscious of the importance of maintaining strategic and economic autonomy. While dealing with these nations, India should look at equality, transparency and a mutually beneficial model for growth. Deliverance of projects on time and in good quality by India is also vital for its reliability and credibility.

To suggest that India should attempt to reduce the Chinese footprints in the neighbourhood is impractical because China has grown too big to be tamed, economically or militarily. What needs to be done is to make smart investments in projects that benefit citizens directly such as roads, electricity, education and public health. India should endeavour to become the destination for neighbouring countries for education, health care, religious and cultural tourism.

There are areas where India should endeavour to increase cooperation with the regional countries in the fields of disaster management, environmental protection and the rights of the lower riparian states. These are certain common issues that impact India and almost all the regional countries. In addition, the advantage that India has over China is that the Nepalese and Bangladeshi diasporas have been seeking jobs in India, whereas they do not enjoy the same advantage with China. Thus, marketing of the Indian model of cooperative development is more appealing and assumes significance, coupled with the promotion of cultural, religious and historical relations.

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Notes

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