

# China's Foreign Policy towards South Asia: Knocking at the Doorstep of Indian Backyards

\*<sup>1</sup>Baljinder Singh<sup>ID</sup> and <sup>2</sup>Dr Hakim Singh<sup>ID</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, CT University, Ludhiana

<sup>2</sup>Assistant professor, Department of Political Science, CT University, Ludhiana

## Abstract

Before 18<sup>th</sup> century China along with India had 50% share of world economy. It is believed that China will emerge as largest world economy till 2030. Domestic circumstances and public opinion always effected the foreign policies of countries and also are major drivers of foreign attitude of China. South Asia occupies an important place in foreign policy of China which includes Nepal, Bhutan, India and Pakistan having common border with it. India is big South Asian giant and dominating power of the region. Furthermore, South Asian region is also known as Indian backyard and Chinese foreign policy towards the sub region revolves around the India - China relationship. During the initial years of post-cold war era, Chinese export of South Asian states increased from 71,910 million US dollars to 182,917 million US dollars from 1991 to 1997 and import expanded from 63791 million US dollars to 142,189 million US dollars within same span of time.

**Keywords:** India, China, South Asia, Foreign policy, States.

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## \*Author's Correspondence

 Baljinder Singh

 Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, CT University, Ludhiana

 [baljinderheir88@gmail.com](mailto:baljinderheir88@gmail.com)

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## Introduction

South Asian people are descendants of a civilization which got birth on the brim of the Indus River. This civilization passed through the thousands of years and has emerged in the form of many countries, which are jointly known as South Asian states. Now South Asian region consist of 22% inhabitants of world, having 1.3% of share of total global earnings. It is also a painful fact that 60% population of the sub region is considered as poor, which is unable to fulfill their basic needs of life. But it does not mean that South Asian sub region is without opportunities of economic growth and it is worth mentioning here that sub region's economic growth was registered as 7.2% in 2018 (Ranjan, 2022).

South Asian region also known for India domination in the wake of gargantuan size and huge population of former. Furthermore, its geographical location is also very important and it enjoy easy access to all South Asian countries. Previously, India was considered as the only source of economic and military aid for the countries of the sub region and former provided a security umbrella to most of the countries of sub region. New Delhi never hesitated to use of

coercive force whenever these states tried to go out from the influence of India. In the wake of such kind of domination and geographical location of New Delhi, South Asian sub region is known as Indian backyard. China do not accept India's role of big brother in the sub region and it is providing economic and military aid at large scale to the states of South Asian region in order to mitigate Indian leverage and to consolidating its own position in South Asian region as well (Malik, 2001).

### China's economic lift off

There was a time in history when China was considered as superior in economic domain. Before 18th century China along with India had 50 % share of world economy. But it failed in maintaining its status during 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although China was an influential economic power than but its landlords did not show any interest in the establishment of heavy industries in the country. Consequently, China lost hold of its age-old middle kingdom status (Zhang, 2015).

Later on, in the wake of economic reform of 1978, China became a crucial destination of foreign direct investment (FDI). Approximately 50000 foreign companies were supporting China financially till 2004 and consequently it became number one destination of foreign capital in the world, which proved as panacea for the economic development of China (Basu 2007). Since economic reforms of 1978, China has achieved extraordinary economic development and prosperity and in 21<sup>st</sup> century its economics capabilities have become wider and more influential. It is worth mentioning here that China became 11.2 trillion US dollars economy in 2015 which was 2.3 trillion US dollars in 2005. This endorsed the Chinese emergence as an economic giant throughout the region and world as well. (Parpiani, 2022).

It is believed that China will emerge as largest world economy till 2030. Economic growth is major objective of present foreign policy of China, having support from its leadership and political stability along with abundant cheap labour. Hence China is ready to match its economic capabilities with developed countries of world and it is evident by its economic presence throughout the world. It has successfully maintained remarkable economic growth and exporting goods to world market at a large scale (Bhoothalingam, 2012).

### Meaning of Foreign Policy

In the era of interdependence, no country of the world can fulfill its needs alone and live in isolation. In the wake of enhanced expectations and needs every country has to deal with the different states of the world. Foreign policy is way in which a country deal with the other states of this world in order to pursue its national interests. It is fact that national interests are fundamental base of the foreign policy of a country. Every country tries to affect the behaviour of other states according to the national interests of itself. Sometime a state wants to change the behaviour of other states in order to serve its national interest which is known as positive approach towards the other states and sometime it favour to continue the behaviour of other states towards itself without seeking any change, which reveals the reluctant behaviour of it. Foreign policy of a country revolves around some major ingredients like media, nature of foreign ministers, thinking of architects of foreign policy which are worth mentioning here in making a foreign policy of a country in order to pursue its national interests (Khanna, 2013).

### Major ingredients of China's Foreign Policy:

First phase of Chinese foreign policy was dominated by Mao, in which main focus was on uniting country and export of communist values to different countries of the world. It was time when China favoured Soviet Union in order to counter American block. On this stage primary focus of foreign policy of China was on political issues and ideology was major milestone. Mao focused on three power elements game. It established cordial ties with Soviet Union in the hope of help against any anti-Chinese activity by United States of America. Another prominent reason for close ties between Beijing and Moscow was ideology (Robinson, 1994).

Public opinion occupied strong position in the domain of foreign affairs of China. Beijing made patriotism as integral part of its education policy in 1990s, in order to boost patriotism in Chinese people. Consequently, Chinese leadership has been enforced for many times to use coercive force to protect its national interest, in the wake of demand of public opinion. For instance, trouble over Diaoyu/Senkaku island between China and Japan in East China sea is worth mentioning here. Both China and Japan are very keen to maintain the control over these islands since cold war. Diaoyu/Senkaku island (along with eight other inhabited islands in East China sea) have huge resources of energy and fisheries. Due to the rich energy resources of these islands and pressure from public opinion China is always ready to be a dominating power in the region in any way either diplomatically or coercively (Zhu, 2011).

Mutual respect is crucial ingredient of Chinese policy makers while dealing with major and dominating powers of the world like USA. Beijing always striven to learn a lesson from history, but some contradictions existed in its views or action. For instance, China perceives that arms race between America and Soviet Union is a major cause of demolition of latter, therefore it always preferred economic development over military modernization. But on the other hands it is spending millions of dollars for modernization of its arm forces by incorporating anti satellite weapons and stealth aircraft. Whenever a developing power started getting its due share in world and region, it created panic in its neighbourhood and abroad. In case of China, it successfully obtained economic and political interests in the region as well as world without any major resistance from countries of world till initial year of 21<sup>st</sup> centuries except USA (Lampton, 2014)

International environment is another factor in determining foreign policy of China. It was time in history when China was penetrated by western powers and Japan too exploited its resources ruthlessly. It is believed that China reacted the policies of outer world towards itself. Furthermore, Chinese people are described as peace loving or having non expansionist mindset or their association policies are result of outer world's approach towards China. (Ibid 2014).

Domestic circumstances and public opinion always effected the foreign policies of countries and is also are major drivers of foreign attitude of China. Leaders of China always used it as a helping hand to consolidate their position inside the country and to overcome the challenges arising by domestic contenders of power sharing. Furthermore, changing domestic conditions of China after reforms of 1978, which included more literate people and leadership in system, transparent process of recruiting bureaucrats and loosing grip over society by government are worth mentioning here in order to national revival of it as a major giant in world politics, (Ibid pp-75,78 2014).

### Importance of South Asia for China

The industrial development resulted in increasing needs of energy and Beijing has emerged as one of the largest energy importers in the world. Indian ocean which is known for its trade routes and energy passes, is witnessed of 85% of oil import of China from different parts of world via strait of Malacca. These trade routes of the Indian ocean always became the victim of piracy and terrorist attack and China is well aware about these kinds of risks. South Asian countries occupy very important place in these trade routes and in Indian Ocean as well, therefore in order to provide protection to its goods transportation and energy supply it is looking to consolidating its position in India ocean. Now China is also looking to diversify its routes of trades and energy supply by making roads and pipelines from Bay of Bengal to Yunnan a Southern province of China. Moreover, Beijing has developed Gwadar and Chittagong ports in Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively, which are two significant powers of South Asian region in order to increase its influence in Indian ocean (Ali, 2010).

### China's foreign policy towards South Asia

During initial years of cold war China considered India and Pakistan as puppets in the hands of Western world. China perceived India and Pakistan as apparent ally of western block to contain ideological influence of communist camp. During this time Beijing strictly followed ideological sentiments, while engaging with world and South Asian region as well. This was time when new communist China was not capable enough of dealing with cold war politics alone. In

order to avoid any direct clash in international politics. It supported Soviet camp and its policies wholeheartedly against American camp. It received financial as well as military support from Soviet Union against U.S.A and latter's approach towards the sub-region. During initial stage of cold war China focused on exporting communism towards the world in general and neighbourhood in particular. Beijing made full effort in preaching communist values to non-communist countries under its policy of "uniting with revolutionaries". In the early stage of cold war, China was not in position of dominating the sub-region. Now it was struggling for integrating whole China and membership of united nations organization. India provided unconditional support to communist China inside as well as outside the United Nations. Indian role during Korean war impacted Chinese mentality positively and latter replaced its policy of "uniting with revolutionaries" with "union with all". In this era whole world was being dominated by the policies of two superpowers of the time and Asian region was not exceptional. Mutual hostile relationship of superpowers and their attitude towards China always molded Chinese policies towards the countries of South Asia. After passing the time Beijing reshaped its foreign policy towards South Asian region. It started having a soft corner on ideological lines while making foreign relations with countries of the sub-region and its amicable approach towards non-communist Pakistan is worth mentioning here (Chaudhury, 1990).

South Asia occupies an important place in foreign policy of China which includes Nepal, Bhutan, India and Pakistan having common border with it. India is big South Asian giant and dominating power of the region and Chinese foreign policy towards the sub-region revolves around the India - China relationship. Beijing is a hegemonic power of the region and India consider South Asia as its backyard or worried of the way in which China is increasing its influence there. Hence common interests in the region and border dispute impacted their mutual relationship negatively and remained lousy till the end of 20th century. Therefore, foreign policy of China revolves around the India - China relationship in sub-region (Malik, 2001).

It is believed that Chinese economy will be largest till 2030, which is growing on a very fast track. Hence with increased economic capabilities along with improved military strength, China is increasing security apprehensions across the world in general and Asia in particular. India is major contender of China in South Asia and both are known as rival of each other in the region. India always favoured China since 1950s and never accepted any kind of assistance from capitalist block against communist China. But China never trusted India and invaded latter in 1962. Consequently, a trust deficit emerged between both Asian giants which still casting shadow on the India China relationship. Despite economic ties between India and China latter perceived India as rival in South Asian region particularly, and using anti-India approach while dealing with South Asian countries (Tripathi, 2013).

China shares common border with many South Asian countries including Bhutan, India Nepal and Pakistan. After being a communist power in Asian belt, it focused on resolving its border disputes with its neighbour countries. Beijing has made agreements with all its big or small countries on border in this respect except India and Bhutan. China always preferred five principles of peaceful coexistence while described state to state relationship in South Asian region. India is a hegemonic power in the sub-region and China condemned India's as big brother in India sub-continent. New Delhi consider South Asian region as its backyard due to its big size and geographical location. Whenever small countries of the sub-region tried to resist its position and go away from its orbit of influence, India use coercive force to bound them with itself. China always condemns this kind of Indian approach towards the other countries of the region (Malik, 2001).

China is very clear about some basic principles which to be followed by its surrounding states. It includes not to indulge in any anti-China activity by any neighbouring and South Asian countries as well. China considers itself as sole power of Asian region. It never seems to share its sphere of influence with India at regional level. Beijing always favoured multi polar order at international sphere to get its due share in world politics. But it did never show any interest to establish same multi polarity on the regional level. China perceived itself as major power with Russia and United States of America in world politics, but at regional level it considers USA as major contender in power sharing structure. In

order to counter American influence in the Asian region, it has proposed Russia-China -Iran alliance without giving any weight-age to India even in regional politics (Ibid, 2001).

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and trade which were focal point of Deng Xioping' changed foreign policy shifted country's focus from politics centric to economic centric. Consequently, Beijing started to diffuse its economic leverage across the world, which is also a major milestone in determining its relationship with South Asian countries. In post-cold war era, it was very clear for Chinese leadership that only the military strength alone is not enough in the emergence of China as great power of world, therefore economic strength was given preference in this respect. Hence economic requirement of China along with Indian factor stabilized its foreign relation with South Asian countries. China enhanced trade with major countries of the sub region which includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Nepal in last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. During these initial years of post-cold war era, Chinese export of South Asian states increased from 71,910 million US dollars to 182,917 million US dollars from 1991 to 1997 and import expanded from 63,791 million US dollars to 142,189 million US dollars within the same span of time (Chishty, 2000).

Regional financial institutions are another tool in Chinese foreign policy to get leverage in South Asian states. Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB) led by China has significant place in this respect. India is also a major player in AIIB. In order to integrate and dominate the regions, financial institutes have important role for China in which it has leading role. Now China has active engagement with all South Asian states through different regional organizations and associations. India is not member of BRI but it is member of SCO, BCIM and AIIB. With Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Pakistan and Afghanistan are another important South Asian state from strategic and economic point of view, which shared membership of conference on interaction and confidence building measure in Asia (CCIA) along with China. It is worth mentioning here that China is interacting with all South Asian countries including India via different kind of regional organization, which signifies its importance in the development of the states of the sub region. (Freeman, 2017).

It is well known fact that China wanted uni polar order in region. In order to emerge as sole power in the region, it need to check Indian leverage in South Asia. Furthermore, China is well aware about strained relationship between India and its neighboring countries. It is very favourable for China and it always tried to encash this opportunity to keep India under check. In order to keep India under pressure, China has been exporting military apparatus on large scale to these small countries of South Asian region. Beijing always wanted to see India as incapable to resolve its issues with neighbouring countries, which will be helpful for China to increase its influence in the South Asian region. Therefore, military aid is gargantuan ingredient of Chinese foreign policies towards South Asian countries and Pakistan and Bangladesh are major recipients of Chinese military export in this respect in the sub-region. Whenever India objected to this act of China, latter always ignored former's concern and describe it as major step to improve state to state relationship (Malik, 2001).

Moreover, South Asian countries are multi ethnic and multi religious that is why they always face civil wars, which endangered their security and integrity. In order to overcome such kind of civil war, they always need good military apparatus. South Asian countries are not capable to develop such kind of military equipment therefore they depend on arm import to fulfill the need of hour. China has occupied a significant place in missile and technology development in defence sector. Consequently, it has become a major source of arms import after denying of India in doing so. Beijing now utilizing arms export to get leverage in the South Asian countries. It is major arms and missile technology exporter to Pakistan, latter import 35% of total Chinese export in defence sector and Bangladesh can be placed at second with import of 20% of total Chinese arms export to outside world. It was total 55% total Chinese export in defence sector in 2015 which was received by only two South Asian countries. China has dual benefits by exporting arms to South Asian countries, getting leverage in defence sector of sub region along with economic benefits by selling the arms to the states of Indian sub-continent. This one is to changing the balance of power in the sub region which was previously in the favour of India (Freeman, 2017).

Pakistan is considered as major ally of China in the region and latter is very clear regarding its allies in the South Asian region. Chinese policy makers perceived Islamabad as counterweight of New Delhi and utilizing their mutual rivalry to mould balance of power in the sub region against India. India and China share 4004 KM one of the biggest borders in the world which still remain unresolved. China scrutinized it as an opportunity to make pressure on Indian side and keep it under check. Unresolved border between India and China is also favourable for latter's all weather friend Pakistan. Border dispute between India - China is helpful for Islamabad to avoid all concentration of New Delhi towards India - Pakistan which let the former to continue its anti-India activities though borders. Hence China favors continuing border dispute with India in order to provide shelter to Pakistan in its anti-Indian approach (Malik, 2001). Therefore, Pakistan is very important in Chinese foreign policy as counterweight to India in sub region. China provided military apparatus or missile technology to Pakistan at a large scale to counter Indian military hegemony in South Asian region. Nuclear aid from Beijing to Islamabad is worth mentioning here in this respect. Prevention of Indian influence and its role as sole super power in the sub region is the major goal of Chinese foreign policy towards South Asian region (Ibid, 2001).

In 21<sup>st</sup> century China has emerged as significant power at world scenario which has affected its attitude towards outside world as well as regional hierarchy. China is now more proactive in protecting its interests under new leadership of Xi Jinping. This is referred as very important period of Chinese foreign policy in which China remained supporter of stability and peace in world along with assertiveness in order to protect and achieve crucial goals including stability and economic development. This changed foreign policy of Beijing is also called "Peaceful Rise 2.0". In the wake of new foreign policy China is ready to play more active role in world politics, thereby it can pursuit its national interest without hiding its capabilities and willingness of playing role in world politics. China's foreign policy architects always prefer term "Peaceful development" than peaceful rise in era of new foreign policy. According to Chinese assessments, rise of new power always disturb the world as well as regional power structure and annoy the international community. This pinprick among regional as well as world powers against a rising great power could become a hurdle in economic growth of latter. In order to avoid such kind of circumstances, China replaced term "peaceful rise" with "peaceful development" (Zhang, 2015).

## Conclusion

It is fact that with the help of foreign direct investment and cheap labour China has emerged as an economic giant in Asia and world as well. At the initial stage after becoming of a communist country, Beijing followed the policies of Soviet Union but within a short span of time it started to pursue an independent path of foreign policy in order to obtain its objective of economic development and prosperity for its people. Public opinion always occupied central place in foreign policy of country which always demanded respect for its sovereignty and integrity. South Asian region has become a major area of interest for China in which India is considered as a major challenge for former in the way of emerging as a hegemonic power in the sub region. Beijing is well aware about the economic and strategic importance of the countries of the South Asian region; therefore, it is enhancing economic interaction with these states from the sub region including India. India who is known as a hegemonic power of South Asian region, is being challenged in its own sphere of influence by China and latter has become a major source of economic and military aid for the countries of South Asia.

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### Author's Biography:

**Baljinder Singh** received his Bachelor of Arts from D.A.V. College Amritsar, Punjab, India. He's completed his M.A. in Political Science from Guru Nanak Dev University Amritsar, Punjab. He earned his Bachelor of Education from Sidana institution of education, Amritsar, Punjab. He received his M.Phil. from Khalsa college Amritsar, Punjab. He is pursuing Ph.D. in Political Science from CT University Ludhiana, Punjab. He is currently employed as a Lecturer in Political Science at Government Senior Secondary School Kiyampur, Amritsar, Punjab. He has been a senior secondary level teacher for seven years.

**Dr. Hakim Singh** is M. Phil-Ph.D. from Central University of Jammu, J&K, India. He is B.A, B.Ed., PGDRD and M.A Political Science from Jammu University. He has qualified SLET, NET and JRF also. Currently, he is working as Assistant Professor and COD of the Department at CT University, Ludhiana, Punjab. He has total 3.10 years of teaching experience in Higher Education.

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