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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHINESE DEVELOPMENTS IN INDIAN SUBCONTINENT: AN ANALYSIS FROM SECURITY PRISM

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Abstract

China's growing strategic investment in the Indian subcontinent was a concern to India. Infrastructural investment of China in India's neighbours indicated China's aggressive policy and agenda with India. Beijing's investment was not only strategically significant but also reshaped political arrangements in the Indian Subcontinent. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aimed to create a Sino-centric global trading network and the realm of influence. For, India the Chinese strategic and infrastructural developments in the Indian subcontinent were an interest and concern – particularly the huge infrastructural project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which projected Pakistan as a transit hub and route for central Asia. Beijing's growing economic and political influence in India's neighbourhood could not be fully understood without a solid base of information. Indian apprehension is based on the assumption that economic and political avenues as the BRI creates for China in the IOR can also be utilised to supplement its military capability by facilitating the extension of PLAN's operational reach across the region. India should also carefully analyse Chinese development activities in the neighbourhood and IOR from the security perspective and discern the futuristic plans of China.

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Introduction:-

An ally looks to the securing of his interests in the event of simultaneity of calamities and the event of the growth of the enemy's power. There is some self-interest behind every friendship and alliance formed by states. There is no friendship without self-interests. This is a bitter truth –Kautilya (Mishra, 2012: 145-148).

Kautilya said this in 350 BC and is still relevant in today's world for study and analyse International Relations. As was said by Kautilya, no alliances are forged without interests and the same applies in case of China and its growing closeness with Pakistan and other Indian neighbours. In Arthashastra, Kautilya made very pertinent observations on the behaviour and conduct of states that are still relevant in the modern era. It still has the same distrust of one nation by another, the same pursuit of its interest by every nation tempered only by the considerations of expediency, the same effort to secure alliances with the same disregard of them in self-interests.

In the past few years, India has experienced an unstable situation along its borders. India-China border, the Line of Actual Control (LAC), has seen unceasing tensions escalating and even leading to clashes and loss of lives. Along

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India's border with Pakistan, the Line of Control (LoC) continues to remain active with ever increasing ceasefire violations, attempts of infiltration and terrorists attacks. This paper is an attempt to examine the increasing Chinese activities in the Indian sub-continent to the extent of transforming the geo-strategic equation in the region.

The complex overlay of geographical proximity and historical memories on the Sino-Indian strategic landscape has created strong undercurrents of competition and contest between the two Asian giants. Apart from the competition in South East Asia, the issue of unresolved borders has continued to plague the relations between both countries. China represents a major long term and primary security challenge for India. The unresolved border issues further compound the tension between both countries as it is a matter of deep concern for India regarding its security and strategic engagement with China. This has been further propounded by the rapid modernisation and upgrading of China's military facilities. Each side mistrusts the intention and behaviour of the other. The tendency of each side to dismiss the other side's explanations also suggests that mistrust runs deep. Today, both capabilities and intentions play a significant role in shaping perceptions and misperceptions. Beyond the mistrust of intention and behaviour may lay a deeper reason.

China, since 2016 has blocked India's entry into the Nuclear Supplier's Group (NSG), invoking the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), stating that China along with other member countries want to have a discussion on whether or not non-NPT countries can join the NSG. China also blocked UN action against Pakistan for having released the Mumbai attacks mastermind terrorist Zakir-ur-Rehman Lakhvi on 23 June 2015. China justified its stand by saying that India has not provided sufficient information. Again in April 2016, China blocked India's other bid to ban the terrorist Maulana Masood Azhar, the mastermind of the Pathankot terror attack, in the UN on technical grounds saying that the decision taken was based on facts and relevant rules of procedure in an objective and just manner. Enhanced Chinese activities along Indian borders and in neighbouring states have been a major cause of concern in recent past.

Chinese Development in India's Neighbourhood

Nepal and China signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the BRI in May 2017. In 2019, Xi Jinping paid a state visit to Nepal, marking the first time that a Chinese president visited the country in 23 years. During Xi's visit, the two countries elevated their relationship to a "strategic partnership," creating the impetus to prepare work on projects such as a cross-border railway linking the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) with Kathmandu and a China-Nepal Friendship Industrial Park in Jhapa, eastern Nepal (Panda, October 15, 2019). Ahead of the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October and general and provincial elections in Nepal in November, top Chinese official Li Zhanshu, a confidant of Chinese President Xi Jinping paid an official visit to Nepal in September 2022 (The Economic Times, September 12, 2022). China overtook India as Nepal's largest FDI partner in 2014. China has pledged ₹15 billion in grant assistance to Nepal to invest in various projects this year (The Hindu, August 11, 2022). China's strategic inclination towards Nepal is evident from these statistics, and it is a serious challenge to India in its neighbourhood. This financial amnesty between China and Nepal has major implications for the security architecture of the region.

China continues to solidify its strategic outreach to Pakistan, which inherently isolates India, through controversial projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship of its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The military component of the CPEC has been clear from the beginning. These include the fibre-optic cable linking the headquarters of the PLA's South Xinjiang Military District in Kashgar initially to Rawalpindi, now being extended to include Islamabad, Karachi and Gwadar. The uninterrupted pace of development of the Gwadar port, after China was granted Sovereign Rights, highlights its importance to China. China has an electronic eavesdropping station near Gwadar to monitor naval and shipping activities in the Arabian Sea as far as the Gulf of Aden. As China's strategic and financial investments in Pakistan have grown, so has its influence and interest in the country. It is clear that China's ambitions far outweigh those of Pakistan.

In terms of bilateral trade, China is the largest trading partner of Myanmar. China occupies the largest share in both imports and exports of Myanmar. According to data from 2019, the bilateral trade stands at about USD 12 billion out of the approximately USD 36 billion trade it conducts in total which roughly amounts to 1/3rd of the total. In 2019, China occupied a 31.7 percent share in its exports and a 34.7 percent share in its imports far ahead of any other country including India which doesn't even break into the top five in either category despite sharing a lengthy land border. China has been one of the largest sources of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) for Myanmar which

reached USD 21 billion as of March 2020. In recent years China began diversifying its investments into several sectors besides energy, oil and gas.

In 2020, China and Myanmar signed many projects under the BRI. One of the major projects was the development of a deep sea port at Kyaukphyu for USD 1.3 billion. China has been one of the largest military suppliers of Myanmar since 1988. The Chinese proposals to build roads from the Yunnan province to Myanmar and railway from Kunming to Kyaukphyu might worry India about the possibility of China bringing troops right to its borders (Observer Research Foundation, April 26, 2021). Among the plethora of projects, the deep seaport at Kyaukphyu is the most strategically vital to China. It gives China access to the Indian Ocean and is uncomfortably near the Andaman Islands.

China has a significant strategic presence in Bangladesh. In 2017, Chinese companies bought three natural gas fields in Bangladesh, which account for more than half of the total gas output of Bangladesh from Chevron. One major project which has immense strategic implications for India is China's offer to Bangladesh to manage and restore the Teesta River which flows from India. The plans include building embankments along the river near the Indian border and are estimated to cost USD 1 billion, 85 percent of which will be provided by China as a loan. Besides the energy sector, infrastructure is one of the sectors where China has made significant investment. One of the most strategically important investments is in the ports of Bangladesh.

China is financing and constructing the Payra Deep Sea Port project estimated to cost between USD 11 billion and USD 15 billion. The port is the third largest port in the country and had started operating in 2016. China and Bangladesh have deep collaborative ties in the Information and Communications Technology sector. Defence cooperation is one of the significant pillars of the relationship between Bangladesh and China. China accounted for around 74 per cent of Bangladesh's arms imports between 2010 and 2019. China is also helping Bangladesh construct and set up its first submarine base, which will house Chinese built submarines, have a variety of facilities like wharfs, barracks, and ammunition depots and repairing dock (Observer Research Foundation, May 11, 2021).

China, which has already made deep strategic inroads into Sri Lanka through its predatory debt policies, is now assiduously working towards establishing its presence on the island nation as close to the Indian coast as possible. Red flags are going up in India over China's fresh attempts to expand its footprint in Northern Sri Lanka in the garb of infrastructure projects, with Beijing even making efforts to woo the ethnic Tamil community there (Pandit, September 1, 2021). Much like Beijing's interest in other of India's neighbours including the Maldives, China's interests in Sri Lanka are more strategic than economic. China has also consistently shown keen interest in engaging with South Asian countries as it provides a backdoor to the Indian Ocean as well as helps to strategically constrain India.

Chinese Development in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)

The world's third largest body of water, the Indian Ocean is an extremely important region for India due to its connectivity and the volume of trade and energy resources that pass through it daily. The growing significance of the IOR in China's geopolitical calculus is synchronous with the growing strategic significance of the IOR in global geopolitical discourse. Resources are always a logical starting point of geopolitics and the source and transportation of oil, which is a strategic resource to any modern economy, is a major factor that dictates the strategic significance of the IOR. Out of the eight major oil and gas reserves in the world, three reserves that account for over 70 per cent of the World's total reserves are situated in the IOR (Bhushan, July 4, 2022).

50 per cent of the world's merchant fleet capacity passes through the Strait of Malacca making the IOR the globe's busiest and most important interstate shipping route. The growing middle class population of India and China has made these two nations into becoming the largest consumers of oil in this region. As an enclosed oceanic space in which access and exit are through the critical chokepoints and Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs), any threat to these geographic features would result in enormous economic costs being inflicted upon the nations that rely on shipping in IOR for its energy supply and other economic resources. Hence, the security of the chokepoints and SLOCs of the IOR is paramount to all the major stakeholders of the region including China and India.

China fears that India's geographically advantageous position in the IOR with its territory of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which is situated in close to the Strait of Malacca bestows India with strategic leverage of blocking the strait in the event of a conflict. Such fears and insecurities have attracted focus from the Chinese leadership

towards the IOR. Predominantly driven by its need to secure and consolidate its access and presence in the region, the Chinese have calibrated their political, economic and strategic presence in the region.

China has leveraged its commercial and financial capabilities to solidify its influence in the Indian neighbourhood. These activities are transforming the nature and complexities of the political and security dimension of the region that has far-reaching consequences for India. Increasing Defence partnership is an important arena of strategic manoeuvring by China in South Asia. Initiatives such as Sagarmatha Friendship, a joint military exercise between China and Nepal, and the possibility of joint patrolling of the border by the two countries have taken place in recent years. China accounting for the largest arms supplies to Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka reflect this development.

With the rise of China and the proclamation of the BRI by President Xi Jinping, the IOR has seen an increase in Chinese activity and investments in the surrounding countries. Due to this expanding footprint, India naturally has tangible concerns. Due to the proximity of BRI projects to India, many analysts believe that the Chinese are using the BRI projects to encircle India and keep a check on her ambitions (Jacob, 2017:81). As part of 'String of Pearls', China is taking on economic and investment projects with the various Indian Ocean states to secure ports or places where its military could potentially set up facilities. The location of these ports, which include the Kyaukpyu port in Myanmar, Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, are encircling India from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. Furthermore, there have been reports of China wanting to build a naval base on the Marao Island in the Maldives (Chandra, 2015).

The Hambantota port, with its strategic location near busy Indian Ocean shipping routes, was touted as good for Sri Lankan commerce. But it wasn't profitable, and the government defaulted on those Chinese loans. Chinese then foreclosed the default loans by taking over the port's operations in 2017 on a 99 year lease making it a classic example of a Chinese debt trap (Gupta, 2022). China's satellite tracking vessel Yuan Wang 5 on August 16 arrived at Sri Lanka's southern Hambantota Port, despite India and the U.S. voicing concern with Colombo over the military ship's visit (Srinivasan & Krishnan, 2022). Chinese spy ship entered the Indian Ocean on 5th November, just three months after an intelligence gathering vessel of China was docked at Sri Lanka's Hambantota port. The vessel's entry into the Indian Ocean was just days ahead of a planned missile test by India. Equipped with advanced surveillance equipment and sensors, the Chinese ship was capable of tracking ballistic missiles and satellites and gathering of signal intelligence (Swarajya, November 5, 2022). Over several years, China has increased its military presence in the Indian Ocean via "Debt Trap Diplomacy" and "String of Pearls Strategy".

Chinese Developments from Arthashastra's Perspective

The Arthashastra is an ancient Indian Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, political science, economic policy and military strategy, it was written around fourth century BC (Lal, 2016). There had been a significant shift in political, economic, social and technological aspects since then. The monarchy has been replaced by Democracy, economic activities have shifted from agrarian-based to manufacturing and services, technology like internet and satellites have blurred the physical boundaries of Nations and enhanced the battle field transparency. However, Kautilya's Arthashastra encompasses some universal facts and principles that have defied time and space and are still relevant in today's world. Several studies on Kautilya's Rajamandala theory in the Indian context suggest that China fits into Kautilya's ideal Vijigishu (would be a conqueror) state aspiring for the regional power and expansion. Kautilya deals with the Mandalas in the final Manual of his work, which covers foreign policy.

India's execution of Mandala Theory, geostrategic thought and strategic intention can be understood by analysing strategic vision shown by India in the Southeast Asian region to take advantage of growing discomfort with the rising Chinese muscle in the region to strengthen its strategic posturing. Afghanistan bordering Pakistan has been a traditional ally of New Delhi. India's strategic partnership with Mongolia signals something vital to the Chinese that the country can reach out to its backyard for apparent strategic considerations. In recent years, it has witnessed New Delhi cultivating Mitras (friends) as a bulwark against the Aris (enemies). India has been engaged in the introduction and consolidation of several strategic corridors that allow it to counter its Aris.

A case in point is the opening up of a strategic corridor with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). India and the United Arab Emirates have started a new strategic partnership after a landmark visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Abu Dhabi in August, 2015, which includes unprecedented cooperation on counter terrorism, especially significant given that the UAE has traditionally been a close ally of Pakistan. India and Vietnam signed a joint vision on

defence partnership, (Indian Express, June 8, 2022) which aims at enhancing bilateral defence cooperation, with primary objective to undermine China's hegemony in the South China Sea. Indian alliance with Iran in the backyard of Pakistan is also a strategic one. There are few issues of contention with Iran and Iran's growing closeness with China in recent times is also cause of concern. However keeping Mandala postulates in mind Iran plays a very important role.

China's unsavoury policies of 'debt trap' and 'warrior wolf diplomacy' have worked to antagonise various nations in South Asia and South East (SE) Asia, but India must project itself capable of rising to the regional hegemony of China in order to command the trust of these nations. The recent selling of the BrahMos missile system to the Philippines and the future prospect of a similar deal with Vietnam are steps in the right direction (Singh, 2022). Although India faces its own challenges in ironing out the differences with its neighbours, it must aim at exploring new areas of convergence that will help to foster an environment of trust and cooperation. An active role by India in forging new alliances keeping in mind the Mandala concept will not only foster India's standing in the Rajamandala but also help to solve various security related issues arising due to increasing Chinese presence in Indian neighbourhood.

Security Implications of Chinese Developments

The root cause of India's apprehensions towards China's growing political, economic and military presence in the Indian Subcontinent stems from a multitude of genuine factors. Among them is the ability of China to precipitate anti-India rhetoric in India's neighbourhood which has been evident from the emerging political fault lines in nations like the Maldives. China has also constructed several villages, new roads, military bases, security outposts and administrative and communication units in northern Bhutan by unilaterally claiming sovereignty over these areas. These incidents combined with the regular transgression of the PLA across the LAC have resulted in the Indian Strategic community viewing China's growing presence in the neighbourhood with suspicion. China's growing military capabilities and defense modernisation as well as its increasing role as a development and security partner for not only Pakistan but also for many states in India's neighbourhood foment security concerns for India.

In recent years Indian Space programme has picked up pace and has made India a significant space power with a diverse array of satellites in orbit. Recently China has gifted Pakistan, its cutting-edge SLC-18 space surveillance active phased array radar, which would downsize the Indian military's dominance over Islamabad (Michel, 2022). While close Sino-Pak ties in the diplomatic, economic, military and nuclear fields and the development of weapons systems is fairly well documented. China-Pakistan cooperation in the maritime domain is becoming a greater and more lethal concern. In addition to collaborating in building frigates, there is now mention of collaboration on submarines and Unmanned Underwater Vessels (UUVs) (Mansoor, 2022). If China supplies these to Pakistan they will be based at Gwadar, Karachi and Jiwani, increasing the vulnerability of India's western coast and the Arabian Sea.

China is also increasing its presence in Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh. In the tiny Kingdom of Bhutan, China is building villages in isolated, mountainous regions, upping the pressure on the capital Thimphu to yield contested areas to Beijing (Pollack & Symon, 2022). All these incidents cannot be seen in isolation and when these dots are joined, they glaringly point out to the evolving security dynamics resulting from growing Chinese presence in Indian subcontinent. China not only poses a threat to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity but is also determined to obstruct India's rise as a major power.

There can be no doubt that the economic and political avenues that the BRI creates for China in the IOR can also be utilised to supplement its military capability by facilitating the extension of India's (PLAN) operational reach across the region. In 2017, China set up a logistics support unit at Djibouti port which is now being modernised to a full-fledged naval base with a 1,120 feet pier, as per the satellite images of May 2020. The naval base can now harbour China's largest aircraft carrier Liaoning. In March 2022 Chinese Navy ship docked in Djibouti for the first time (Xuanzun, 2022). Since the establishment of the Chinese overseas military base in Djibouti, defense experts are speculating that possibility of more such bases is on the cards.

The IOR is dotted with a string of Chinese commercial port facilities like the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar and Bagamoyo Port in Tanzania, which can be used for military/PLAN's operations in case of any contingency. Regular visits of Chinese naval vessels including docking of submarines is indicative of the fact that these ports are not merely for commercial purposes and do have planned

military usage in an eventuality of a conflict. These facilities can play a very crucial role in extending the area of operations of the PLAN by serving as replenishment sites along the IOR.

India being a resident power of the IOR is concerned with the threats to its national security posed by the growing Chinese presence in its maritime vicinity. Chinese inroads in the Indian Ocean Region are a significant security and strategic challenge for India. Instances such as the Chinese naval base in Djibouti, the submarine docking in Sri Lanka, assistance in the water crisis of Maldives, submarine deployments and training with Bangladesh, and oceanographic data mapping of the IOR have only accentuated these concerns. These have huge potential to undermining the geographical advantages of India in the region. Growing Chinese presence in IOR through its BRI project and other economic and political linkages with nations in India's neighbourhood is a postulation of strategic encirclement of India by China. All these are valid reasons for India's national security establishment to be apprehensive.

The above facts are indicative of the fact that building defense capability is an integral part of China's strategic plan for enabling dominance in IOR. These geostrategic underpinnings are embedded in China's flagship BRI project that has been grandiosely promoted by President Xi Jinping as an infrastructure development programme to facilitate economic integration. Although China has repeatedly reiterated the BRI as solely an economic initiative, its underlying geostrategic designs have not escaped the eye of analysts and strategic think tanks.

India recently concluded bilateral military exercise with the US, *YudhAbhyas*, which was focused on surveillance, mountain warfare skills, casualty evacuation and combat medical aid in adverse terrain and climatic conditions caused by high-altitude warfare. The joint exercise from 16 November 22 to 03 December 22 took place in Auli, Uttarakhand less than 100 miles from the disputed border with China. China denounced the exercise for violating the 1993-1996 bilateral border agreements. On 09 December 2022 a face-off erupted between Indian and Chinese troops, is this a mere coincidence or can these two events be linked together and can be seen as responsive action from Chinese side?

It appears that China is working to a strategy of violating the LAC at a time and place of its own choosing, to test the Indian Army's response, analyse diplomatic and QUAD leverage being used by India and most importantly to try and extend its long-stated claim lines into Indian Territory. The recent clash in Tawang also seems to be a firm message from China that it believes India is deliberately and willfully ignoring its political and military red lines. Clashes along LAC whether Galwan, Doklam, Depsang Plains, Pangong Tso or recent at Tawang cannot be merely seen at the tactical level nor should these be taken as independent incursion activities. These clashes showcase strategic design of China and miscalculation or under-assessing these incidents could lead to a major setback.

Conclusion:-

The application of Kautilya's teachings transcends time and allows strategic insight by establishing a cognitive tool to analyse the present and most importantly anticipate the future. China's BRI can be seen as the execution of the Mandala Theory. To increase its presence in Indian neighbourhood China is using the economic instrument of power to expand its influence, complemented with increasing military ties. China's increasing engagement with Pakistan can be viewed from Kautilya's postulate stating that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

The power asymmetry between India and China, along with a gradual shift in China's intent has changed the character of the bilateral relations. In the present scenario, it seems that the two nations stand at a crossroads of bilateral relations. They can go down one of four paths, a downward spiral toward armed confrontation, armed coexistence, coexistence with cooperation and rivalry and partnership. The partnership looks unlikely at present. Armed confrontation would be an unwise move because both sides have very high stakes and much more to lose than to gain. Armed coexistence with frequent clashes at LAC, which may spiral into local conflict, seems a highly possible scenario shortly.

India must, therefore calibrate its response deliberately, in conformity with its strategic priorities, and capabilities and keeping overall security calculus in mind. India should also carefully analyse Chinese development activities in neighbourhood and IOR from security perspective and discern futuristic plans of China. Alliances, Modernisation, Capability Enhancement, Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Infrastructure Development in Border areas and scientific developments should all be terminus with national security requirements and Need of the Hour, which today conspicuously points out to Chinese increasing presence in Neighbourhood.

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