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Understanding China's Relationship with Bangladesh

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Abstract:

China as an emerging global power has sought the strategy of expanding ties with many countries across the world. Bangladesh situated in a critical region has been regarded by the country as a regional partner in South Asia. Meanwhile, China's rise has coincided with India's growing power in the region, thus China's relationship with countries such as Dhaka implies regional and international implications, further challenging India's rise. Such partnership in one hand allows Bangladesh to alleviate economic difficulties, and it guarantees China's influence and a stronger presence in South Asia to monitor India's activities. As such, by drawing upon the concepts of realism theory such as the balance of power, this study elaborates an analytical framework that presents a novel analysis of how the nature of Sino-Bangladesh partnership can be explained? In response, the authors believe that China attempts to balance the power of India and secure its national interests via developing ties with Bangladesh. Given that Bangladesh has tilted toward China these days, Beijing endeavours to enhance relations with the country to achieve its objectives. The current project becomes significant when one supposes that China's ties with South Asian countries will not be related only to the region and China. It can have both regional and international impacts in the world affecting South Asia and, then, creating a new form of balance of power. Hence, the present research attempts to analyse the nature of Sino- Bangladesh relationship using library resources in a descriptive-analytical manner.

Key Words:

Balance of power, Bangladesh, China, India, South Asia.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh and China have had positive relations for years. China recognized Bangladesh's independence in October 1975, and since then they have been pursuing to strengthen their political, economic, and military as well as diplomatic relations. "The Sino-Bangladesh partnership has been termed by a Chinese expert as being a 'trusted friendship' or 'all weather friendship'" (Uddin, Bhuiyan, 2011: 1-2). Moreover, they have had several visits and concluded a variety of agreements. During their meeting in a conference on the 'World Financial and Economic Crisis' in June 2009, "China assured Dhaka to strengthen and develop their relations and cooperation" (Uddin, Bhuiyan, 2011: 1-2).

China is now Bangladesh's main arms supplier, investor, and trade partner. "China has already invested \$10 billion in Bangladesh toward a string of power and infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative" (Ramachandran, 2020). In addition, recently there have been some reports that Bangladesh has shifted toward China. Whatever its objectives are, this can be a significant issue to be considered by experts. As China is growing promptly and making alterations in the international system, Sino-Bangladesh partnership accordingly becomes highly important. To be precise, China's relationship with South Asian states will not be limited to the region, but the whole international system, making changes in the structure. Therefore, the main question arising here is how the nature of Sino-Bangladesh partnership can be explained? In response, the authors believe that China attempts to balance the power of India and secure its national interests via developing ties with Bangladesh. Given that Bangladesh has tilted toward China these days, Beijing endeavours to enhance relations with the country to achieve its objectives. This paper has utilized the structural realism theory and seeks to answer the question through concepts such as external balancing and balance of power. Thus, the present research attempts to analyse the nature of Sino- Bangladesh relationship using library resources in a descriptive-analytical manner.

2. Conceptual Framework

Theoretically, this research employs structural realism to assess its research question. Structural realism explains state behaviour based on systemic characteristics. Kenneth Waltz suggests that a system is composed of a structure and interacting unit (Waltz, 2000: 126). The second element of the structure in Waltz's opinion is that the international system is anarchic rather than hierarchic. The third one is the fact that the distribution of capabilities across the states in the system varies from system to system and over time. Also, the most significant capabilities are those of the most powerful actors, and structures are defined by the major ones (Keohane, 1986: 166).

A closer look at Waltz's arguments reveals that he assumes that states are the key actors operating in an anarchic system in which they seek to survive. Therefore, those states would care about their position in the balance of power seeking to become powerful enough given that it would maximize their prospects for survival (Mearsheimer, 2009, p.243). Waltz has explicated balance of power theory as a central element in his structural realist synthesis (Keohane, 1986: 171) "if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, the balance of power theory is it" (Waltz, 1979: 117).

Hence, in a competition to become a superior power, balancing is sensible behaviour. Externally, states' goal is to increase their strength and to seek allies helping them doing so.

Waltz argues that balancing is a strategy employed by states when their rivals attempt to increase power. Those states build up their own capabilities – “internal balancing- or they join together and form a balancing coalition-external balancing” (Waltz, 2000: 126). In fact, balancing is seen as the basic rule of states facing the anarchic international system. Specifically, “internal balancing means to manage the external threats using internal resources, such as conducting military mobilization, accelerating economic growth, increasing military capabilities as well as pursuing clever strategy and political leverage. External balancing; however, refers to coping with external threats utilizing external resources, such as forging, strengthening, and enlarging one’s own alliance or weakening an opposing one” (He, 2008, p. 116).

According to Waltz, unbalanced power is a potential danger to others. The United States thinks of itself as acting for the sake of peace, justice, and well-being in the world. However, “the internal development and the external reaction of China is steadily rising that to the great power level making it a hegemonic power even without trying very hard so long as it remains politically united and competent” (Waltz, 2000: 32-33).

Mearsheimer, for instance, argues that the rise of China appears to be changing the structure of great power politics and pursues security interests around the globe (Mearsheimer, 2014: 2-9). He also assumes that China will try to dominate Asia the way the United States dominates the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, a powerful China is sure to have security interests around the globe, which will prompt it to develop the capability to project military power into regions (Mearsheimer, 2014: 2-9). South Asian region, for instance, is highly crucial in China’s strategically important areas due to many reasons which have been discussed broadly at this research. Bangladesh is a highly influential country for China according to its aims. Therefore, China has sought to make alliances with the country and balance externally toward its rivals such as India to reach its goals. In the following, a brief overview of China’s aims in developing a partnership with Bangladesh will be discussed.

3. China’s Aims in Developing Its Relationship with Bangladesh

China- Bangladesh friendship has reached almost five decades. Diplomatic relations between Bangladesh and China were established in 1976, five years after Bangladesh’s independence. Consolidation of China-Bangladesh friendship and cooperation is due to the fundamental interests of both countries, common aspirations of their people. Both nations exchange high-level visits and promote communication at the local government level and enhance bilateral cooperation mechanisms, including diplomatic consultations, joint economic, trade and agriculture committees (Finnigan, 2019). China is a major investor in Bangladesh, and “it upgraded bilateral ties with Bangladesh to a strategic partnership during President Xi Jinping’s visit to Dhaka in October 2016” (Kumar, 2019: 149-150). However, China has some significant reasons regarding its cooperation with Bangladesh including:

3.1. China’s Rivalry with India

Both India and China are aware of the importance of Bangladesh. Located at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal, Dhaka has made it impossible to be ignored by the rising powers. Bangladesh makes it feasible for China to have easy access to its Western provinces while helping India to monitor China’s activities in the region (Yasmin, 2019: 331-332). However, India’s

commentator C. Raja Mohan has argued that China has started to have a proactive foreign policy toward the bay for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (Yasmin, 2019: 331-332).

This also becomes significant when one considers the significance of the Indian Ocean Region for both Beijing and Delhi. “The Ocean accounts for half the world’s seaborne container traffic, and 70 per cent of the total traffic of the world’s petroleum” (Khan, 2018) transiting a significant portion of China’s goods through the ocean. Therefore, China tends to have more influence in the region and protect the sea lines of communication (Khan, 2018). However, China is worried about the increasing cooperation between India and the United States. US-India rising ties, especially following the civil nuclear deal puts the supremacy of China’s position and its investments in the Indian Ocean Region at risk (Javaid, 2016: 73). To naturalize India’s threat, China has initiated to strengthen its relationship with all of India’s friendly neighbours such as Bangladesh. “The friendly relationship between India and Bangladesh, particularly political ties, have been plummeting ever since New Delhi rolled out the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as Dhaka is concerned that India will push towards it those who will be deemed “foreigners” under the National Register of Citizens (NRC)” (Basu, 2020). India, now, is more specifically worried about China’s activities at the Gwadar Port and its linkages with other ports throughout the Indian Ocean to encircle India or so-called ‘String of Pearls’ strategy. In fact, India feels threatened about China’s activities to secure port access agreements along the Indian Ocean using Bangladesh (Grossman, 2020).

Nonetheless, India has sought to deepen its relationship with Dhaka. “The visit of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June 2015 indicates that India is willing to maintain the status quo and retain its supremacy in the region” (Yasmin, 2019: 331-332). Therefore, China’s rivalries with India and its national interests are factors affecting Beijing’s ties with Dhaka.

3.2. Economic and Military Expansion in South Asia

Bangladesh is one of the key players in China’s long-term economic plans. Take the BRI project as an illustration by which China has invested in infrastructure development and modernization of the Chittagong in Dhaka (Yasmin, 2019: 331). During the meeting in July 2020, between Premier Li Keqiang with Sheikh Hasina, BRI funding was more emphasized. The two sides shared the view that the project is capable to promote regional connectivity and economic integration (Grossman, 2020).

Bangladesh characterizes its development cooperation with China as mostly “aid in the form of projects in-kind, government concessional loans, preferential buyer’s credit, technical cooperation and scholarships” (Samaranayake, 2019: 8-10). In 2019, “Bangladesh signed a MoU with a Chinese firm to build renewable energy projects to provide a total of 500 megawatts of power by 2023. Earlier this year, Bangladesh sought Chinese funding to develop nine new projects worth \$6.4 billion, which include a seaport, a bridge and hi-tech parks among others” (Basu, 2020).

Moreover, according to the Belt and Road News in 2019, China has spent \$30 billion on Bangladesh’s infrastructure such as:

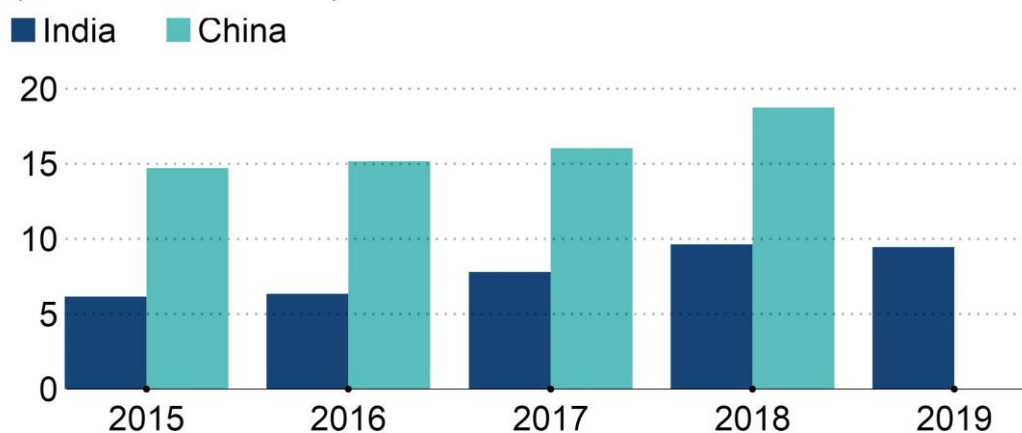
1. “Construction of Dhaka-Chittagong Highway’s 4-lane extension project, which is the largest road infrastructure project;

2. Acquisition of 25 per cent shares of Dhaka Stock Exchange by Shenzhen-Shanghai Stock Exchange Consortium;
3. Padma Bridge Rail Link Project;
4. Payra 1,320-megawatt coal-fired thermal power plant;
5. Multi-lane Road Tunnel project under the Karnaphuli river;
6. Dasherbandi Sewage Treatment Plant Project funded by Export-Import Bank of China;
7. A strategic partnership between Ant Finance and Bkash;
8. Mutual Trust Bank's collaboration with Union Pay International to jointly launch debit and credit cards with mobile payment services" (Belt and Road News, 2019).

Apart from economic ties, China and Bangladesh have also been deepening their defence cooperation. "From Chinese tanks, frigates, and fighter jets, Beijing has provided Dhaka with a number of military equipments under a 2002 Defence Cooperation Agreement" (Basu, 2020). "China is the largest arms supplier of the Bangladeshi military, providing 71.8 per cent of weapons from 2008 to 2018, suggesting that Beijing seeks to further ingratiate itself with Dhaka through these sales" (Grossman, 2020). Beyond these, "Bangladesh achieved a milestone in 2016–17 by acquiring two Ming-class submarines from China". Nilanthi Samaranyake at her report assumes that though the Ming-class submarine is an old platform, it is useful for a country learning how to operate submarines. She also argues that Bangladesh's ability to buy these vessels reflects Beijing's willingness to make expensive platforms normally associated with high-end militaries affordable to developing countries (Samaranyake, 2019: 8-10). Bangladesh has even allocated two special economic zones for Chinese investors in Chittagong, a major port, and Dhaka, the capital. In return, China played a large role in developing and modernizing Bangladesh's port at Chittagong (Khan, 2018). The table below illustrates the total trade of China and India with Bangladesh. China has sought to have a higher level of cooperation compared with India which has increased over the following years.

Total trade with Bangladesh

(In billions of dollars)



Source: United Nations

3.3. Controlling Terrorist Activities

One of the main challenges of China is the threat of areas such as Xinjiang and Tibet. “There are 55 recognized nationalities in China that account for 8.4 per cent of China’s total population. The riots in Tibet in March 2008 and Xinjiang in July 2009 bold the significance of the difficulty” (Kumar, 2019: 139). Bordered with South Asian countries, any instability in these two areas can challenge the security of China. For instance, “it has been reported that the East Turkmenistan Islamic Movement have found safe areas in Pakistan-Afghanistan tribal regions” (Kumar, 2019: 139). Hence, it is safe to say that the stability of China’s borders and the attempt to avert the influence of terrorist groups into the country are other contributing factors impacting China’s intention to develop ties with Dhaka.

4. Regional and International Impact of China’s Relationship with South Asian Countries

Recently, a newspaper of Bangladesh reported that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina did not meet India’s high commissioner despite repeated requests for a meeting in the last four months. *The Hindu* also reported that all Indian projects have slowed down since the re-election of Prime Minister Hasina in 2019 with Chinese infrastructure projects receiving more support from Dhaka. Moreover, despite India’s concern, Bangladesh has given the contract of some projects to Chinese companies (Clarion India, 2020), which signifies Dhaka’s shift toward China and its allies. This change in one of the South Asian state’s foreign policy and developments in the relationship might bring both regional and international implications. The possible alterations will be discussed in the following part.

4.1. The Militarization of The Region

China has been increasing its military presence in South Asia due to many reasons. Its growing number of naval and maritime facilities especially in the Indian Ocean region and supporting countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan have been threatening both for India and the vulnerability of the region. As an illustration, Dr Siegfried O. Wolf states:

“New Delhi is extremely worried about the safety of its Siliguri corridor, also known as the ‘chicken neck’, which is a thin strip of land connecting mainland India with its north-eastern states. It is apparent that the deepening and extending military partnership between Beijing and Dhaka is perceived as a crucial threat to the stability of India’s north-eastern flank. This would function as an additional burden in the Dhaka-New Delhi ties and further complicate unsolved issues between both countries” (Wolf, 2014:5).

To neutralize the activities of China, India will seek to defend its national security making use of the other great powers including the United States or strengthening the relationship with other countries. However, China has been reported that is pursuing to construct military bases in countries such as the Maldives. “A military base in the Maldives would tilt the geopolitical balance towards China. Currently, India does not have any military bases in the area and has only established radar outposts or surveillance systems in Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritius” (EurAsian Times Desk, 2020). These all can threaten India and lead to the *isolation of India’s power and its allies*. These are accompanied with the report that “Beijing has also access to outposts in strategic locations in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Djibouti”

(EurAsian Times Desk, 2020) which can be considered as China's attempts to encircle India. In addition, in "Myanmar, China has control over Kyaukpyu port, which is a commercial maritime facility. China also maintains a naval intelligence unit at a base in the Coco Islands, near the UT of Andaman and Nicobar Island" (EurAsian Times Desk, 2020). Nonetheless, China's endeavour to influence the smaller South Asian states will not be limited to India and the region. Not only will it *create some blocs of power* in the region, but it will also change the balance of power of the region in favour of China and its allies. As China seeks to deepen relationships with those smaller countries around India, it also increases its influence in entire Asia further challenging the hegemonic power of the United States in other parts of the world. Hence, Bangladesh with its strategic location can be highly influential for China to fulfil its goals and boost its economy. However, it would be demanding for Bangladesh to balance its relationship with China and India as it needs them both for its economic growth and maintaining peace and stability in the region.

5. Conclusion

As discussed before, structural realism argues that rising powers who cannot tolerate the hegemonic power of the United States tend to seek alliances externally to become a hegemonic power. Mearsheimer also assumes that China can challenge the power of the US by which the structure of the international system might change. China already has made alliances around the globe and pursues the strategy via developing its projects such as BRI. Nonetheless, China has confronted with obstacles by reaching its goals. Its rivalries with India have made it demand for Beijing to influence South Asia in which the smaller countries still consider India as the super-regional power. This has made China develop a relationship with those countries such as Bangladesh to decrease the role of India in the region. Bangladesh is located at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal where provides China access to the Indian Ocean Region. China transits plenty of goods across the ocean and secures China's energy transition. Nonetheless, India is aware of China's attempts to increase its footprints in the region, feeling threatened and dissatisfied with it. For India it is crystal clear that China is making every attempt to encircle India by means of strengthening the relationship with South Asian countries, thus, isolating New Delhi. In addition, as China seeks to balance the power of the United States, the US- India ties have doubled China's endeavour to seek alliances to create military bases in the region. However, it is safe to say that although Bangladesh and China's ties can bring an economic boom in Dhaka, it can divide the region into the two blocs of countries supported by India and China. The intensification of those rivalries might also further increase the militarization of the region leading to a higher level of instability. On the other hand, China and Bangladesh's partnership accompanied with the cooperation of other smaller South Asian states increase the influence of Beijing in the region and cause major changes in the pattern of the regional and international system. This can increase the influence of India and its allies and lead the power politics into a more polarized world.

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