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## China's Consensus Hegemony Approach and its Engagement with South Asia

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### ABSTRACT

China has enhanced its friendly engagement with South Asia in recent times, especially India. For the emergence of China as a great power in Asia, it wants to avoid any sort of resistance from regional countries and in this pursuance China considers India could be the hindrance. China is recently increasing diplomatic and economic engagement with the South Asian countries, after it has successfully implemented its 'feel-good' diplomacy in Central Asia and Southeast Asia. China's diplomatic initiative is based on Gramsci's 'consensus' theory approach by embracing the regional countries through cooperation and consensus in order to ensure that no one should oppose its supremacy in Asia.

**Keywords:** China; Hegemony; South Asia; Consensus

### INTRODUCTION

One of the major developments in Chinese President Xi Jinping's foreign policy is that China is increasingly seen engaged with South Asia region, especially India. By the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Beijing has started a well calibrated approach to enhance its status and prestige across Asia. Its growing economic and military power, expanding political influence, distinctive diplomatic voice, and increasing involvement in regional multilateral institutions are key developments in Asian affairs<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, it wants to convince the international community that China's 'peaceful' rise would not create instability in the region rather accommodating the regional countries' 'interests' in the pursuit of China's emergence as a great power. It wants to project that it is a constructive partner, a careful

listener, and a non-threatening regional power. Indeed, China has successfully convinced the world that in spite of its distinctive political system and ideology it can get along with other countries based on shared interests<sup>2</sup>. Beijing is gradually shedding the identity of historical victim as it has been used fervently in the past to rejuvenate nationalist sentiment that might lead to revisionist tendency of the state. Instead, Beijing is pursuing cooperative approach in its bilateral and multilateral foreign policy positions, which could enhance its prestige and power internationally. As realists argue, China seeks great power status, and that the ultimate aim of every great power is to maximize its share of world power and eventually dominate the system<sup>3</sup>.

One of the main developments of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy approach is a renewed focus towards its



neighbours<sup>4</sup>. Xi has articulated very clearly that China is a different economic power and it is going to use its economic capacity, built over the last 30 years, to create a new kind of Asian regional economic and security architecture<sup>5</sup>. It is important that to emerge as a great power it requires a favorable regional environment, at least in its immediate neighbourhood. The emergence of the United States as a great power and its endurance has largely been due to a favourable regional system in North Atlantic accepting its supremacy. Like the western Hemisphere for the US and Eastern Europe for the former Soviet Union, China necessarily needs a favourable regional system to enhance its global position. An economic consolidation in the Asia-Pacific region is not sufficient for China as it seeks to reformulate the world order, a political pre-eminence is necessary especially in the immediate neighbourhood. China envisions a new 'negotiated world order'<sup>6</sup> in which it aims a hedging strategy of avoiding direct confrontation with the United States but preparing favourable conditions for China to shape its own order — a hierarchical order — in the longer-term in Asia.

In fact, China needs a peaceful neighbourhood at present, otherwise its long-term ambitions may suffer. Indeed, history and baggage of the cold war-centric security alliance system under the United States hinder China in creating a favorable environment in East Asia. However, it has relatively established a favourable regional system in Central and Southeast Asia and is pursuing no-confrontationist and 'consensus' building mechanism towards South Asia. Since Pakistan has become China's 'all weather' friend, and smaller countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka may swing to accommodate China's interest with economic assistance, India is the only nation in the region that may not be ready to accept Chinese supremacy in Asia. Beijing realizes that New Delhi is an important stakeholder not only in South Asia but a major power in the entire Indo-Pacific, so that without India's acceptance it will be difficult for China to become a great power. In this regard, China wants to ensure that its emergence as a great power should be accepted by India and for that it has begun to embrace New Delhi in recent times. It is seeking this power and prestige through the process of Gramscian 'consensus' theory mechanism, rather than the sheer military strength. It has realized that 'consensus' approach is the best possible solution to making friends in the region without compromising its 'core interests', and finally to establish a 'Chinese order' in Asia. In this regard this article explains China's approach to its neighbours through a 'consensus' theory mechanism of Gramsci.

## GRAMSCIAN 'CONSENSUS' HEGEMONY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The theory of 'consensus' in international relations was applied by Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci. He defined

hegemony through 'consensus' which is created by a combination of 'coercion and consent' exercised not merely by the civil society, but by the state as well<sup>7</sup>. The underlying premise of Gramscian hegemony is that hegemony of the dominant class is possible through 'consensus' over other classes. Consent, on Gramsci's reading, is created and recreated by the hegemony of the ruling class in a society. It is this hegemony that allows the moral, political, and cultural values of the dominant group to become widely dispersed throughout the society and to be accepted by subordinate groups and classes as their own. In short, consent is an invisible way of acceptance by the inferior class/groups of the dominance of the superior class. While 'consensus' is a mechanism the dominant class exercises to win over the subordinate class through concession and coercion so that the subordinates will not be able to resist the dominance of the hegemonic class. Through the 'consensus', conflict between dominant and subordinate classes will be avoided. For instance, in northern Europe, in the countries where capitalism had first become established, bourgeois hegemony was most complete. It necessarily involved concessions to subordinate classes in return for acquiescence in bourgeois leadership, concessions which could lead ultimately to forms of social democracy which preserve capitalism while making it more acceptable to workers and the petty bourgeois<sup>8</sup>. For Gramsci, leadership can be derived through the image of power as a centaur: half man, half beast, a necessary combination of consent and coercion. To the extent that the consensual aspect of power is in the forefront hegemony prevails. Coercion is always latent but is only applied in marginal, deviant cases. Hegemony is enough to ensure conformity of behavior in most people most of the time.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony through consent has also been applied in the international relations as the state has expanded the notion of power, though consensus as integral to state's policy to achieve hegemony by way of 'internationalising' of the state. At the international level, a dominant state effectively with and over, rather than against, underdeveloped or developing states establishes its hegemony by the existence or absence of coercion, and by the degree of legitimization by the regional system. Gramsci argues that "at the purely foreign policy level, great powers have relative freedom to determine their foreign policies in response to domestic interests; smaller powers have less autonomy. The economic life of subordinate nations is penetrated by and intertwined with that of powerful nations. This is further complicated by the existence within countries of structurally diverse regions which have distinctive patterns of relationship to external forces"<sup>8</sup>.

The hegemony is established by way of neoliberalism or hyper-liberalism as the trade concessions and investment opportunities marshal a convincing set of intellectual arguments to underpin dominant states material position



within a globalizing/regionalizing economy. The Gramscian inspired International Political Economy (IPE) sought to explain the combination of the state and market to exert influence of the stronger over the weaker states. Gramsci's ideas allow us to reconnect the individual to the state via the fundamental processes of alienation under capitalism<sup>9</sup>. As a neo-Marxist, Gramsci emphasized that exploitative political economy has been created through historical relations of class forces at particular moments of time. In the neoliberal perspective, the hegemony of a nation depends not only on its ability to organize consensus on problems related to the economic structure, but also on those problems of an extra economic nature. The problems themselves often depend on the relations of forces, that is, on the relative strength and organization of the fundamental forces. The hegemonic state induces the dependent one through the creation of common market or free trade agreements in order to accept its supremacy. It gives economic concessions to smaller countries and opens its market for them so that they get the benefits of the hegemon's large domestic market. In this pursuit the private firms which are connected to the government establishments become more influential in foreign policy mechanism. They get favourable access to resources abroad especially in developing countries so that these firms will become the engine of growth of the smaller countries. The transnational corporations have become the new agents of promoting dominant states' interests and win support of the political elites of the dependents ones. In the opinion of Cox, hegemony is achieved by consensual means, when a leading state sheds its immediate economic-corporate consciousness and universalizes its norms and values, thereby establishing a political and ethical harmony between dominant and subordinate states. A dominant states rules, but effectively with and over, rather than against, the peripheral region. Here we can measure the extent of hegemony by the absence of rivalry, and by the degree of legitimation which the regional countries accept and enjoy.

As per the Gramscian perspective, the contours of world order focuses on the social, political and economic power of an emergent transnational managerial class, and that has effected its own agenda within the context of a new and increasingly globalized world market. To follow Agnew and Corbridge's phrasing, the contours of this new hegemonic regime of transnational liberalism rest on the conditions of 'glocalization' and the attendant ideologies of neo-liberalism and market access economics<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, this hegemony largely as a one-directional power relationship: hegemony is fashioned by the dominant state on its own terms and then forced or imposed on inferior states. The inferior states in turn either resist such frontal assaults as best they can, or engross the interest of the dominant one and enjoy the benefit out of it.

Indeed, with the increasing nature of interdependence of regional economy through free-trade agreements and trade

concession, as well as creation of a single market, countries pursue higher degree common 'civil society' culture at the regional level. Gramsci's expanded notion of the state as a combination of political and civil society. To quote Konrad: "Political society includes the "public sphere" of government, administration and law and order, as well as security. Civil society includes those elements normally considered "private", such as free enterprise, political parties, Churches, trade unions, and so on"<sup>10</sup>. In this civil society, economic structure and political consent rooted in economic interdependence leads to hegemony by the stronger. Transposing Gramscian hegemony in international relations, Robert Cox argued that hegemony is as important for maintaining stability and continuity in the international system as it is at the domestic level<sup>11</sup>. Hegemony of Gramsci is established not by coercive method, rather it would appear that, historically, to become hegemonic, a state would have to found and protect a world order which was universal in conception, i.e., not an order in which one state directly exploits others but an order which most other states (or at least those within reach of the hegemony) could find compatible with their interests.

The dominant state seeks to establish ideologically legitimate norms to promote its interests, while in doing so they co-opt the elites of the peripheral countries. It tries to make sure that its rules and norms are internationally recognized so that its objectives are legitimately acceptable to the regional countries. It employs 'mutually acceptable' solutions on various disputes pertaining to it, but will try to prevail on its interests and objectives over others. The dominant state takes care to secure the acquiescence of other states according to a hierarchy of powers within the inter-state structure of hegemony<sup>11</sup>. In some cases, some second-rank countries are consulted first and their support is secured. The consent of at least some of the more peripheral countries is solicited. As Hobden and Wyn Jones point out, 'successive dominant powers have shaped a world order that suits their interests, and have done so not only as a result of their coercive capabilities, but also because they have managed to generate broad "consent" for that order even among those who are disadvantaged by it'<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, to establish hegemony states need to control transnational capital also. At the international level, global capitalism plays dominant role under the most powerful state- the United States. It is important that a close cooperation of political elites and international economic and political institutions is necessary to maintain hegemony.

Gramscianism is very much integral to critical theory which explains that hegemony can be established through the idea of 'free trade'<sup>8</sup>. The conventional theory of free trade argues that it benefits everybody and has been so widely accepted that it has attained a common sense's status. Yet the reality is that while 'free trade' is very much in the interest of the hegemon (which as the most efficient producer in the



global economy, can produce goods which are competitive in all markets, so long as they have access to them), its benefits for peripheral states and regions are less apparent<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, 'free trade' in many ways a hindrance to the less powerful countries' economic and social development. Gramscianism emphasizes that the degree to which a state can successfully produce and reproduce its hegemony is an indication of the extent of its power. The hegemonic state acquires maximum wealth and creates a favourable regional system through 'free trade' wherein it is the largest producer and consumer so that the peripheral countries are inextricably linked to it for their own survival. The success of the United States in gaining worldwide acceptance for neoliberalism suggests just how dominant the current hegemon has become.

Regional security frameworks are established to continue status quo so that powerful states would not be challenged. Regional powerful states will ensure that the regional economy is most suitable to its advantage with the support of other regional countries. They try to establish a neoliberal economic order which would benefit the hegemon as well as weaker ones. According to Joseph Nye, Jr., hegemons create institutions to legitimize their power in the eyes of others. He further argues that hegemony can be established with soft power also. Instead of using its military and economic capabilities as hard power, a country may obtain desirable outcomes because other states 'want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness'<sup>12</sup>. Following Gramsci's idea of cultural leadership, an attractive culture, ideology and institutions can serve as power maximizers. A favorable politico-economic surrounding environment provides a state levers to expand its influence to other regions as well. A hegemon will ensure that locally it is the most powerful state, while extending its acceptance to other regions through soft power. In a way China is seeking hegemony, a Gramscian model of 'consent and coercion' in Asia, and is expanding its soft-power influence to other parts of the world.

### CHINA'S NEIGHBOURHOOD DIPLOMACY: A 'CONSENSUS' HEGEMONY APPROACH

Ever since the 'reform and opening' of China under Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, China started to expand its influence and refined its foreign policy with cooperation and engagement with the outside world. It became more active when China began to respond to the international criticism of the Tiananmen incident. Between 1988 and 1994, China normalized or established diplomatic relations with 18 countries, including post-Soviet new republics of Central Asia<sup>13</sup>. It further cultivated various levels of 'partnerships' to facilitate economic and security coordination to offset the United States' system of regional alliances. China's regional diplomacy was not just exploiting the post-cold war situation to overcome the Tiananmen fiasco, but was also a well calibrated approach of making China a recognized world

power.

By the second half of the 1990s China has reformulated its security concept more accommodative, rather than confrontationist aimed at sustained development<sup>14</sup>. Beijing initiated 'regional-security dialogue and cooperation at different levels, through various channels and in different forms', including the ARF and the Council for Security Cooperation in Asia and the Pacific (CSCAP)<sup>14</sup>. China began to engage with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and held a series of yearly meetings through the ASEAN plus China, Japan, and South Korea mechanism. In Central Asia, meanwhile, China led the establishment of the region's first multilateral group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Medeiros and Fravel argue that "when opportunities for cooperation exist, Beijing will bring much more to the table than in the past. But these developments also may have another result that as and when China expands its influence and refines its diplomacy, it will also get better at protecting its own interests, even when they conflict with interest of others"<sup>13</sup>.

### CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA

In recent years, as China's rise gathered pace, it has established strategic partnerships with various regions which can be leveraged to help shape a more favourable political environment for Beijing. China's new strategic partnership policy started with settling border disputes with its western neighbours such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia in a 'consensus' manner and it has sometimes done so on less-than-advantageous terms<sup>13</sup>. The partnership focused on the construction and maintenance of gas pipelines, which will be carrying central Asian gas to China 65 billion cubic meter per year by 2020 that would provide Beijing significant sway in the regional diplomacy<sup>15</sup>, are essential to China's energy security. The establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 with China and its four western neighbours was a stepping stone in China's neighbourhood diplomacy and it is the only multilateral organization wherein China enjoys supreme position<sup>16</sup>. Importantly, Central Asian republics also got the advantage of China's good neighbourly policy as China became one of the major importer of Central Asian oil and gas and has been constructing oil refineries in Central Asia which will reduce their dependence on Russian oil<sup>17</sup>. Under the One Belt, One Road initiative, of which one arm is the Silk Road Economic Belt that will pass from China to Europe through Central Asia, China has promised to construct roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure through the region with tens of billions of dollars' worth of investment<sup>18</sup>. China is pushing its financial institutions and banks to facilitate loans for various infrastructural projects to Chinese owned companies. With the Chinese money and physical presence, the One Belt, One Road initiative will further consolidate China's political and economic influence





through the Central Asia region. By participating actively in regional economic collaboration, China can strengthen both its economic links and political ties with the neighbouring region. With the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and Russia's continuing economic woes, China is certainly going to win the 'great game' in Central Asia.

## CHINA AND ASEAN

China has established friendly relationship with the South-east Asian countries since early 1990s. Its 'feel good' diplomacy has provided dividend for China to create a favorable regional system in its periphery. Beijing realizes that better economic and political relationship with Southeast Asian region could well serve to enhance China's leadership position in Asia. China used economic consideration for political advantage when it needed the most. Beijing showed magnanimity to the Southeast Asian elites when they faced serious economic crisis. When the East Asian financial crisis shook the region in 1997, Beijing did not devalue its currency, a move that might have caused additional pressure on Southeast Asian economies. Similarly, when China joined the World Trade Organization the elites of ASEAN feared that the entry of China into the WTO would push their products into competition with Chinese products for the same third-country market (the US, EU, and Japan) as both export many of the same products which will lead to loss of jobs as well as foreign direct investment. To alleviate such concern China reassured the Southeast Asian countries about its continued and long-term interest including its commitment to conclude ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA). Without losing any opportunity, China signed ten bilateral agreements and a Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and an action plan at Phnom Penh in November 2002 that set concrete goals for regional integration, including signing of ASEAN-China Free Trade Area between China and the original six ASEAN members by 2010 which would be expanded with four new members by 2015<sup>19</sup>. The bilateral trade between China and ASEAN has increased by 8.3 percent year-on-year to \$480 billion in 2014, from \$78.28 billion in 2003, which is expected to reach \$1 trillion by 2020<sup>20</sup>. The direct investment between the two sides has amounted to more than \$130 billion in 2014 and is expected to reach \$100 billion by 2020<sup>20</sup>. Besides, the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) concept will help China establish its consolidation through 'consensus' way<sup>1</sup>. Today, the Southeast Asian countries are unable to resist Beijing's aggressive proposition. It is gradually endorsing Beijing's hegemony, not by means of bandwagoning as argued by the realists, because Southeast Asian countries are not following Chinese position with

regard to other issues such as trade dispute or US role in the region. Rather, they accept Chinese hegemony in the region through 'consensus', although they want to resist it, but could not do so because of the interdependence and Chinese overall economic influence in the region.

## CHINA AND EAST ASIA

Although China is the largest trading partner of Japan, political friction still continues between the two over the territorial dispute of Senkaku/diaoyu islands in the East China Sea. China's larger strategy is to push back the United States from the western Pacific to the outer periphery of the second island chain then only Beijing can emerge as a great power in the region (Clark). Since Japan has a highly sophisticated defense system compared with the Chinese, China employs low level naval skirmishes to assert its power and position in the region. At the same time China has embraced Japan for technology, capital and trade purposes, and Beijing is now using its comparative economic advantage to gain political purpose<sup>2</sup>. As Yoshihara and Holmes<sup>21</sup> argue Chinese leaders 'merge diplomacy, economic and trade incentives, low-key shows of naval and military force, and cultural influence into a comprehensive outreach program towards Japan to assert its position in East Asia.

## CHINA'S 'CONSENSUS' APPROACH IN SOUTH ASIA

China has not been able to make any strategic inroads in South Asia, except in the case of Pakistan. It did make an attempt to get larger involvement in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, but that was short-lived only when unfriendly governments to India reigned in those countries. The unresolved Himalayan border dispute between India and China and the baggage of 1962 military skirmishes between the two still play a spoil-spot in the India-China relationship. China has never favored a comprehensive settlement in its six of China's 23 disputes; three cases over landmass, namely, India, Bhutan and Taiwan and three islands — Paracel, Spratly and Senkaku<sup>22</sup>. Besides, China's ambition for great power status and its military modernization is viewed in India's as long-term security threat. Similarly, China's political and military support to Pakistan is not only for Islamabad's national security consideration but its anti-India positions also. China has the tendency to propping up anti-India regimes to constrain India continuously in the South Asian regional security complex. At the same time Beijing has tried to create wedge between New Delhi and its neighbours by providing them financial and military support

<sup>1</sup>China has committed to contributing \$50 billion to the AIIB of the planned \$100 billion USD in capital, \$40 billion in capital to the Silk Road Fund, and the Maritime Silk Road Bank hopes to attract 100 billion RMB (\$16 billion) in investment.

<sup>2</sup>When Japan detained captain of the Chinese trawler which collided with two Japanese coast guard vessels in the disputed area in 2010, Chinese government has blocked exports to Japan of a crucial category of minerals used in products like hybrid cars, wind turbines and guided missiles as a revenge for Japanese action.



whenever there was anti-India establishments at the helm in these countries. Its 'string of pearl' strategy was believed to contain Indian navy's manoeuvrability in the Indian Ocean<sup>23</sup>. However, in recent times, Beijing is conspicuously enhancing bilateral cooperation with India and wants to convey that Beijing's emergence as a great power is not a threat to India. Rather, India could get the benefit of China's 'peaceful rise' thereby engrossing India in its effort to becoming a regional hegemon. This is because China's policy is to establish a 'consensus' mechanism in the relationship so that India's ability to oppose Beijing's emergence could be thwarted. Along with China's 'outward oriented' diplomacy in the 1990s, it has extended 'working and constructive partnership' approach to normalize its relationship with India<sup>24</sup>. In accordance with Deng's modernization plan China was eager to hold talks with India for economic reasons, more eager than India was, and wanted to put border dispute as a peripheral matter for Beijing. The confidence building mechanisms started in the 1990s have been the main operational instrument to establish peace and tranquillity in the border. Den Xiaoping's proposed "package settlement" and "mutual accommodation" principle of the 1980s<sup>24</sup>, is still a dominant aspect in the negotiation process to resolve the border dispute between the two countries. The bilateral Framework Agreement signed in 2005 states that both India and China must 'make meaningful and "mutually acceptable" adjustments to their respective positions on the boundary question so as to arrive at a package settlement to the boundary question'<sup>25</sup>. Under the "package settlement" China wants to negotiate with India in the Eastern border, which include the status of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, without compromising on the Aksai Chin area of the western sector. Although India has encouraged an overall 'sectoral approach' resolving the border dispute, but finds difficulty in persuading China not to carry out any infrastructural development in the disputed area of Aksai Chin<sup>26</sup>. Chinese option of a "package settlement" is similar to what it has adopted towards East China Sea and South China Sea dispute that whatever area China controls is unwilling to discuss, rather Beijing wants to negotiate the disputed territory controlled other countries.

China is unwilling to recognize Indian primacy in southern Asia- South Asia and its adjacent waterbed in the Indian Ocean which include Arabian Sea, Bay of Bengal and the south Indian Ocean region. India is, of course, a naturally the largest power in the region with its huge land mass and military prowess, especially in the naval domain, and New Delhi considers Indian Ocean as its 'strategic backyard'<sup>27</sup>. China is well aware that, unlike in the western Pacific, it could never become a dominant player in the Indian Ocean region, so its policy is to preserve the vacuum intact and to establish a "legitimate" stake-holder position while containing India of its becoming a dominant power in the region. Until recently, China had employed a 'divide

and rule' policy towards the region by singling out India in South Asia by supporting anti-India establishments in the neighbouring countries. However, now India is considered as a friendly partner for most of the South Asian initiatives. In this purpose Beijing is courting a friendship with all the regional countries.

Pakistan already enjoys an 'all weather' friendly relationship with China and is getting sound financial support from Beijing, the latest being the Chinese offer of \$46 billion financial assistance for various infrastructural projects in Pakistan<sup>28</sup>. Apart from propping Pakistan up against India to achieve strategic parity in South Asia, Beijing sought to establish permanent physical presence, under the so called name of 'string of pearls' at strategically important locations of Chittagong, Hambantota, and Gwaddar, drawing away Bangladesh and Sri Lanka from Indian influence. Beijing has attempted to influence Nepal through diplomatic and economic engagements, and has become an important partner for Nepal in recent times. A series of collaborative efforts have been made between the two in recent years such as: laying an optical fiber linking Kathmandu to Hong Kong Data Centre which is one of the two biggest global data centres in Asia, which will allow them to watch Chinese Publication, Radio, Film and Television for Nepalese citizens; China has recently inaugurated the first transport service to Nepal, a rail bus, 10-day journey from Lanzhou to Kathmandu; and a joint Nepal-China researcher team has begun hydrocarbon (petroleum and natural gas) exploration in Nepal<sup>29</sup>. Nepal's recent overtures to China which, among other things, resulted in a historic transit treaty between the two countries that now allows Nepal to import goods from third countries via Chinese territories. China has seemed more comfortable making "suggestions" to Nepal. According to the joint Nepal-China statement issued during the visit of former Nepalese Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli to China in March 2016, China has agreed to upgrade two road links between Nepal and Tibet, pledged financial support to build an international airport at the tourist hub of Pokhara, agreed to extend the Chinese railway to Kathmandu and then to Lumbini, and given its nod to a long-term commercial oil deal<sup>30</sup>. Up until now Nepal has imported all its fuel from India.

Similarly, during Begum Khaleda Zia administration in Bangladesh, China enjoyed unparalleled sway in Bangladesh's regional diplomacy<sup>3</sup>. China is now the biggest arms exporter to Bangladesh and Bangladesh armed forces are today equipped mostly with Chinese military hardware. Since 2010, Beijing has supplied Dhaka with five maritime patrol vessels, two corvettes, 44 tanks, and 16 fighter jets, as well as surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles<sup>31</sup>. China signed Defense Cooperation agreement with Bangladesh in December 2002- first such agreement ever signed by

<sup>3</sup>Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was considered as anti-Indian political dispensation and has always pursued strong bondage with both Pakistan and China.



Bangladesh in its history<sup>32</sup>. Both countries are strengthening their military cooperation in recent times not only their cooperation in hardware exchanges but for training and military exchanges. China's PLA sends nearly as many delegations to Bangladesh each year as India does, and also provides training for Bangladeshi military personnel<sup>31</sup>. Although the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is close to New Delhi, but Beijing has grabbed every opportunity to court friendship with Hasina government of Bangladesh. Bangladesh features in the Belt and Road both as part of the overland component — via the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor — and as a port hub for the Maritime Silk Road, with Chittagong as the hub port.

A majority of Chinese investments in Bangladesh have been in energy (8.1 billion dollars), transport (6.6 billion dollars), real estate (2.4 billion dollars), metals (2.1 billion dollars), utilities (8.7 billion dollars), and chemicals (400 billion dollars) sectors. According to The Daily Star, however, until June 2020, agreements for only seven projects worth 5.4 billion dollars had been signed with only 1.4 billion dollars disbursed. Including two earlier Chinese projects which are in progress, the nine projects have resulted in 1.8 billion dollars being disbursed by China. Recent examples of Chinese investments and projects in Bangladesh include the building of a new terminal and expanding the Sylhet Airport in 2019 by the Beijing Urban Construction Group. China will also play a key role in developing Bangladesh's first smart city and largest planned township in Purbachal, on the outskirts of Dhaka. The Chinese United Water Corporation, along with Bangladesh's United Delcot Water Ltd., will build a 72-million-dollar water distribution network in Purbachal under a Public-Private Partnership. It has been stated that this project does not come under the BRI.<sup>33</sup>

In June 2020, the economic relations division of the Bangladesh government sought funds for nine new projects at an estimated cost of 6.4 billion dollars. The projects include the first phase of the Payra Sea Port, a bridge that will become one of the country's longest, linking the island district of Bhola with the city of Barisal, the Sheikh Hasina Institute of Information Technology, and upgrading the Barisal — Kuakata Highway. Chinese companies have also shown an interest in constructing and operating the proposed high-speed railway on the Dhaka — Chattogram route<sup>33</sup>. Situation was similar in Sri Lanka when former President Mahindra Rajapaksa ruled the island nation and facilitated greater presence of China in the port sector, which Beijing considered crucial to continue its 'legitimate' presence in the region. The construction of Hambantota port with Chinese money and material and a private dock in Colombo port, built, controlled and run by a Chinese company—the China Merchants Holdings (international)— is a case in point<sup>34</sup>. Recently, Sri Lanka is courting China for economic assistance in the reconstruction process ravaged by decades of civil war. After initial lull, when the new Srisena

administration came to power and later under Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe who was considered close to New Delhi, China sought to enhance cooperation with Sri Lanka which was fructified during the visit of Wickremesinghe to China in April 2016 and he has expressed Colombo's willingness to join the Chinese led One Belt One Road initiative<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, China has continuously deployed its navy in the Indian Ocean from 2008 on an escort missions in anti-piracy operations in Gulf of Aden and Somalia under UN resolution. The naval deployment in the guise of anti piracy operation has been to project its power in the "far seas" operations. China had even mooted an idea of a division of the sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean being patrolled by international navies under Shared Awareness and De-Confliction (SHADE) group into separate national sectors<sup>36</sup>, which would provide China a 'sovereign' region in the Indian Ocean water body.

Indeed, the increasing frequency of Chinese anti-piracy deployments and naval exercises, and Beijing's growing investments in maritime infrastructure projects, have established the Peoples Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) as a major security player in the region. China's latest rapprochement with Sri Lanka is with the aim of retrieving the lost ground in the island nation as well as part of Beijing's larger Indian Ocean strategy.

Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic in April 2021, China's Defense Minister General Wei Fenghe visited Sri Lanka to emphasize the growing military aspect of bilateral ties. During his visit, the Military Assistance Protocol was signed, the official website of the Chinese National Defense University Alumni Association of Sri Lanka was launched, and discussions took place on enhancing pragmatic military cooperation<sup>33</sup>. During the 2022 Sri Lanka economic crisis China announced an "urgent emergency humanitarian aid" package of 200 million RMB (31 million US dollars) to Sri Lanka, extended through the China International Development Cooperation Agency. Also, China's Yunnan Province has announced a donation of 1.5 million RMB (230,000 US dollars) worth of food packages to Sri Lanka. Despite this humanitarian aid, China has maintained a silence on Sri Lanka's requests for debt rescheduling. On the other hand, there are reports that China has communicated its reservations about debt deferment to Sri Lanka, saying there is no such provision in their financial system<sup>37</sup>.

Sri Lanka's financial dependence on China has led to security concerns for India as it can greatly bolster Chinese leverage to turn the Chinese use of Sri Lankan infrastructure for strategic-military purposes. The recent docking of the Chinese navy's scientific ship Yuan Wang 5 in Hambantota port and the allegations of Chinese tankers providing mid-sea logistical support to Chinese naval ships can be taken as an example<sup>38</sup>. Along with Sri Lanka, China considers Maldives as an important strategic partner in the Maritime Silk Route initiative. Chinese President Xi Jinping chose



Maldives as his first country to visit South Asia, and during his tour in September 2014 he suggested that Malé will be “prepared to actively participate” in the Maritime Silk Road initiative of China<sup>39</sup>. China is a major economic partner of Maldives, owes 70% of its external debt to China, making itself heavily dependent on Beijing's largesse<sup>40</sup>. China is investing heavily in infrastructure projects in Maldives and is assisting the expansion the international airport as well as the Maldives China Friendship Bridge which will link the airport island with Male. China's view is that the investment and construction of ports in these countries not only serve its economic purpose but strategic interest also. China wants to wean away the island countries of Sri Lanka and Maldives from the ‘India-first’ foreign policy approach and making Beijing as a reliable partner for them in their necessity.

After President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih came to power in November 2018, the Maldivian government shifted tracks and was skeptical of China having run an election campaign that promised to root out corruption, constrain debts and restore the Maldives foreign relations. China's reputation in Maldives was further tarnished as Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party dubbed the Chinese government as enabler of the previous Maldivian president Abdulla Yameen's corruption and misuse of public funds. There were also reports of BRI projects being suspended, cancelled, or renegotiated along with the possibility of scrapping the Free Trade Agreement that was signed by Solih's predecessor Yameen<sup>33</sup>.

Despite the criticism, new agreements and projects were signed by the Solih government with China in 2019 and 2020, which included developing an office complex in Hulhumale, an MOU between their foreign ministries on strengthening cooperation, and an agreement on Economic and Technical Cooperation. An agreement was also signed for the construction of an Olympic standard stadium to host the 11<sup>th</sup> Indian Ocean Island Games in 2023. With the Covid-19 Pandemic, China has also extended its health diplomacy by donating medical supplies, and vaccines, and helping the country with its relief efforts under the HSR<sup>33</sup>.

## CHINA'S DEFENSE ENGAGEMENT WITH INDIA

During the visit of the then Indian Defense Minister Pranab Mukherjee to China May/June 2006 and Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the two countries for the establishment of a mechanism to ensure frequent and regular exchanges between leaders and officials of the Defense Ministries and the armed forces of the two countries, in addition to developing an annual calendar for holding regular joint military exercises and training programs<sup>41</sup>. In pursuance of the spirit of the Confidence Building Mechanisms and defense cooperation, the first ever joint military exercise between China and India conducted in Kunming in Yunnan in 2007, followed by a week-long China-India joint anti-terrorists training exercise

code named ‘Hand-in-Hand’ at Belgaum in Karnataka in December 2008<sup>42</sup>. Subsequently, Indian Chief of Naval Staff attended the International Fleet Review 2009 at Qingdao from 21-24 April 2009. Indian participation included guided missile destroyers INS Mumbai and INS Ranveer, the guided missile corvette INS Khanjar and the tanker INS Jyoti<sup>43</sup>. Followed by the India's naval participation in China, Chinese “Shenzhen” Missile Destroyer made port call at the Kochi port from 8-11 August 2009. The latest ‘Hand-in-Hand-2015’ exercise was conducted in October 2015 in Kunming, China. Indeed, the ‘Hand-in-Hand’ joint military exercise is an anti-terrorist training program rather than a full-fledged military exercise. The scope and importance of the military exercise is limited to the purpose of creating awareness about various mechanisms both countries have adopted for anti-terrorism operations.

On the other hand, Beijing is seeking more enhanced defense engagement with India in the maritime domain. For the first time ever India joined in a multilateral naval exercise with China, held at Qingdao with six other countries, including Pakistan, alongside the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) in April 2014<sup>44</sup>. Further, China wanted to increase its naval presence in the Indian Ocean region (IOR) in its effort to establish a ‘legitimate stakeholder’ in the region. For that purpose, Beijing conspicuously ensures that it doesn't want any confrontation with India nor to create any situation wherein India raises its objection to the Chinese presence in the region. At the same time, it carefully tries to allay India's concerns over increased Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean including docking of its submarines in different ports in the region.

In order to fructify this effort China has stepped up maritime cooperation and dialogue with India and other South Asian countries as Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying told in a media briefing that “China is willing to work with India and relevant countries to step up maritime cooperation and dialogue and to contribute constructively to peace and stability in the Indian Ocean region”<sup>45</sup>. Chinese scholars like Wang Jisi argues that wooing India will, therefore, be China's long term endeavour in consonance with the PRC's “Look west” strategy which accords primacy to and rebalance ties with India<sup>46</sup>. China tries to establish its presence in the Indian Ocean by courting India as ‘cooperative’ partner for non-traditional security cooperation mechanism so India would not oppose its naval deployment in the region through which its hegemony will make it acceptable for India. At the same time China wants to convey its message to the regional countries that India is not the lonely power whom they can depend on as and when any security crisis emerges in the region. In the first meeting of the International initiative on Ocean Escorts hosted by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) at Nanjing in February 2012, China indicated that India and Japan were two countries with which China wanted to





increase exchanges and strengthen coordination of escort missions<sup>47</sup>. China had clearly stated that improvement in the efficiency of international escort missions deployed in the fight against piracy can be achieved through greater exchange of intelligence, commander visits and joint escorts and exercises. To enhance Beijing's naval presence in the IOR it has extended the maritime silk route concept to the India Ocean also.

## ECONOMIC COOPERATION

During Chinese President Xi's state visit to India in September 2014, both countries decided to explore new areas for economic cooperation under the rubric of Strategic Economic Dialogue (SED) in crosscutting fields including industrial investment, infrastructure development, high-tech industry, clean energy and sustainable urbanization, and also signed an agreement to establish two industrial parks in India. Further, President Xi committed an investment of \$20 billion in the next 5 years in "various industrial and infrastructure development projects"<sup>48</sup>, even as the Chinese Consul General in Mumbai indicated an ambitious \$100 billion Chinese investment in India<sup>43</sup>. The agreement to establish two industrial parks in India is aimed to partially offset the trade deficit accrued to the tune of about US \$40 billion dollars to India, which will encourage Chinese investments especially in the manufacturing sector as "an aspect of strategic and cooperative partnership"<sup>49</sup>. When the Vice President visited Beijing, an MoU was signed to establish Special Economic Zone and National Investment and Manufacturing Zone to facilitate Chinese government grants while the conditionalities were lower than what are Chinese prevailing policy frameworks<sup>43</sup>. China believes that the significant amount of Chinese investment and strategic economic partnership would reduce India's concern about the China "threat" perception.

The rejuvenation of economic investments, however, cannot be seen having positive impact in the trade arena. Sino-Indian bilateral trade crossed 10-billion-dollar mark nearly a decade back which was anticipated to touch the 100 billion mark by 2015 (Olla ply, 2014). However, it reached \$72 billion only in 2014-2015 from \$57 in 2010-2011 (Department of Commerce, 2012-13). China expects once the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is signed, the gap will be filled. Although India still faces a huge trade deficit with China, New Delhi supported in creating of RCEP right from the beginning and participated in the negotiation. India believes the vitality of ASEAN in the Asian multilateralism needs to be maintained and that it will enhance India's "Act-East" policy towards the region. For China, New Delhi's participation in the RCEP is another opportunity to enhance economic engagement to reduce political mistrust. Since China is the largest economic partner of most of the RECP countries, Beijing could influence the overall regional integration process and

could curtail US' economic presence in the region. Beijing expects that RCEP would provide a China drive to regional economic integration, similar to the role US plays in the Western Hemisphere<sup>50</sup>.

Similarly, Beijing employs greater cooperation with India at various multilateral fora which include BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), World Trade Organization and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)<sup>51</sup>. With the background of globalization and interdependence, the BRICS was expected to emerge as the world's principal "engine of new demand growth and spending power" in less than 40 years, when it was conceived in 2003<sup>52</sup>. Through the BRICS, these emerging economies have got an institutional mechanism to interact politically as well as economically and considered moving towards closer political union. Hempson-Jones<sup>53</sup> argues that China's participation in such intergovernmental organizations has softened its practice, and adopted a cooperative approach on various international issues. China also benefits from this cooperation by stabilizing its international environment, helping other developing countries, strengthening its identity as a developing country, coordinating its position with other BRICs to maximize leverage, and hiding in a group to avoid negative attention<sup>54</sup>. Indeed, BRICS has facilitated to defuse the tension between China and India which emerges at bilateral level.

Polachek<sup>55</sup> argues that greater economic interaction with external actors will force the governments averse to exacerbating conflicts. States are dissuaded from initiating conflict with trade partners because of the resultant decrease in the economic gains derived from that relationship. The most favored nations status and other WTO mechanism such as Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Trade-Related Investment Measures (TRIMS) has imposed certain obligation on China that compelled to implement a certain degree of transparency in its action. China's increased interactions with WTO member countries has strengthened China's argument that its emergence will benefit all countries it cooperates with. Importantly, India and China are not competing on any of the areas that come under WTO primarily because the bilateral trade is less vital to the Chinese economy than to the Indian economy<sup>56</sup>.

As a new emerging great power China seeks to create an alternative economic system parallel to US dominated western hemisphere but has not been successful so far. However, one institution it has partially become successful is in the case of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) which is now considered as parallel to the World Bank. Importantly, as a China led Bank, Beijing has extended warm friendship to India in institutionalising the AIIB and offered the first Vice President post and membership at the Board of Governors<sup>57</sup>. Being the second biggest shareholder after China, India is expected to receive the first loan worth \$500 million for renewable energy project<sup>58</sup>. China believes



greater economic integration of India with Chinese led regional economic system would enforce New Delhi silently accept Chinese supremacy in Asia.

### **MARITIME SILK ROUTE: A NEW MANTRA FOR 'CONSENSUS' MECHANISM**

Of late, contours of China's changed strategy towards the South Asia and the Indian Ocean region indicate a shift from containment to cooperation. The 'string of pearl' strategy received a lot of criticism, not only from India but the US and other countries about China's 'expansionist' power mind-set, although China has never accepted or validated the "string of pearls" theory. Similarly, the change of regime in both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka- India friendly Awami League under Sheikh Hasina, who came to power in Bangladesh in 2009 and got re-elected in 2014, while Rajapaksa was replaced by Srisena Maithripala and Ranil Wickramasinghe in Sri Lanka in 2014, who immediately rolled back some of the geopolitical concessions made by his predecessor to Beijing – has also forced Beijing to reformulate its strategy. All these developments have dented. China's earlier plan of 'containment' of India. Rather, China readily employs now the 'feel good factor' to South Asia and has extended the MSR concept to Indian Ocean region. China has extended a formal invitation for India to join the MSR during the 17th round of border talks held between the Special Representatives from both countries, Yang Jiechi from China and Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon in New Delhi in February 2014<sup>59</sup>.

The Indian response was lukewarm, and certainly not one of immediate acceptance. But the Chinese Special representative deliberately communicated to the press as if India had accepted the invitation<sup>60</sup>. In his address to the media, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson elaborated the necessity of cooperation between India and China in MSR that "the purpose is to integrate all kinds of ongoing cooperation especially cooperation on connectivity in the spirit of (ancient) silk road so that they can connect with each other and promote each other and accelerate regional countries' common development"<sup>61</sup>. GaoZhenting, councillor, department of international economic affairs, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that "we have a belief that China and India both placed the trail of silk roads and MSR, and we both have benefited from the (ancient) roads,"<sup>62</sup>. During Indian Vice President's Hamid Ansari's visit to Beijing in End-June 2014, China further made another unsuccessful attempt at getting India to sign-up the MSR<sup>59</sup>. Beijing's renewed pitch for the construction of ports, logistical stations, storage facilities and free-trade zones in the Indian Ocean was again met with a passive response, while India sought concrete details on the project to help reach an early decision.

As an emerging power in Asia, however, India is considered as a major rival to China's emergence of a great

power in Asia. Beijing seeks to contain India's influence beyond the South Asian region, both economically and politically<sup>63</sup>. Beijing outstripped India in acquiring energy resources in Central Asia and creates hurdles in Southeast Asia. Similarly, China provides covert and overt support to Islamabad in its attempt to acquire parity with New Delhi strategically. Beijing is highly critical of India's growing strategic partnership with both the US and Japan. India may not be part of US alliance system but the growing partnership will help India acquire advanced defense systems and technology from the US that will make India a formidable power in the region. Beijing wants to contain Indian influence in the Indian Ocean, as realists' argument that the emerging great power will contain others in different regions. Beijing is establishing 'dual use' infrastructure facilities in various countries in the Indian Ocean in its effort to expand its naval influence from the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean<sup>64</sup>. Beijing attempts to constrain Indian navy's operational maneuverability in the Indian Ocean that India considers its own backyard.

### **INDIA-CHINA GEOPOLITICAL TENSIONS SINCE 2019**

The military clash in Ladakh's Galwan Valley between the Indian and Chinese armies on June 15, 2020, which left at least twenty Indian army soldiers dead and an undisclosed number of Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) soldiers dead, has been the worst military standoff between the two regional powers in over 45 years. However, this military clash and the recent tensions between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) should not be seen in isolation and must be viewed in the context of the larger geopolitical issues between the two countries. In 2019, with the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution, the erstwhile Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir was bifurcated into the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh leading to tensions between India and China as China considers Ladakh to be the disputed territory<sup>65</sup>. This marks the entry of geopolitics into question as China enjoys cordial relations with India's arch-rival Pakistan.

During the 1960's China became a major arms supplier to Pakistan. China's defense relationship with Pakistan further strengthened over the following decades. Under the 1963 Pakistan-China boundary agreement, Pakistan ceded the Shaksgam valley of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir to China. This became significant geopolitically as the Shaksgam valley provided China with a critical military route from Xinjiang through Tibet into Kashmir though the region remained under dispute with India. During the cold war and in the 1990s, China maintained a close relationship with Pakistan much to India's dismay. The Shaksgam valley route provides logistical and military access for China into Tibet. The start of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) a multi-billion- dollar project forming an integral part of China's Belt



and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015 marked the strengthening of ties between China and Pakistan. The goal behind the project is to build a network of highways, railways, and pipelines that will connect China's easternmost landlocked region, Xinjiang, with the warm waters of the Arabian sea at Gwadar<sup>65</sup>.

CPEC also passes through the Pakistan administered part of Kashmir, which India claimed as an integral part of its territory. India has objected to the CPEC project for violating India's territorial integrity. Military cooperation between China and Pakistan continues and China may want to maintain close ties with Pakistan as a hedge against being surrounded by a hostile United States, Japan, and India in an unknown future<sup>66</sup>. The tension between India and China is further fuelled by competition between the two, especially in South Asia. India sees itself as the dominant South Asian power and India sees China as challenging its regional dominance with China's investments and growing relationships with its neighbours like Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. However, China does not see India as a primary threat or competitor when it comes to great power competition. Instead, it sees the United States as its main rival on the global stage. India has also been careful about entering into a formal strategic alliance with the United States against China and instead seeks to maintain its balance and strategic autonomy in its dealings with the United States as it does not want to antagonise China. India has also moved to strengthen its ties with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to support freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific region and conduct joint military drills with the United States of America's navies, Australia and Japan. Engaging with Quad serves two geostrategic goals of India. The First is countering China's aggressive behaviour on the border with India's assertiveness in the maritime domain. The second is for India to emerge as a net security provider in the region. As part of this strategy, India has also invited Australia to participate in the annual Malabar series of naval exercises in November 2020. India had not invited Australia since 2007 due to objections raised by China<sup>65</sup>. Therefore, India in recent years has continued to pursue policies of cooperation with China while at same time seeking alliances to contain Chinese hegemony in South Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific region.

## **CORONAVIRUS AND THE LAB LEAK / BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS THEORY**

In 1952 and 1984, the People's Republic of China signed the Protocol and Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC) respectively. During the Second World War, China was the victim of countless biological attacks by Japan, leading to Beijing's future efforts to develop a stronger biodefense infrastructure and a biotechnology industry with substantial dual use capabilities that can be used for both biodefense and bioweapons. Because of China's experience

with biological attacks, Beijing maintains that it does not have an offensive biological program. However, despite these declarations many have suspected that China has maintained a biological weapons program since before the signing of BTWC.

The 2005 US State Department report identifies two facilities that have links to an offensive biological weapons program: The Chinese Ministry of Defense's Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS) Institute of Microbiology and Epidemiology (IME) in Beijing, and the Lanzhou Institute of Biological Produces. China refutes the claims of the 2015 US State Department report and instead claims that the Chinese Ministry of Defense's Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS) is a bio-defense facility while the Institute of Microbiology and Epidemiology (IME) is a vaccine production facility. In addition to these two central laboratories, US agencies estimated that there are at least 50 other laboratories and hospitals being used as biological weapons research facilities<sup>67</sup>.

A US house investigation into the origins of Covid-19 has concluded that the virus may have been part of a Chinese biological research program when it was accidentally released from a laboratory in Wuhan<sup>68</sup>. This investigation resulted in the publication of an interim report in 2022. This interim report contradicted the 2021 findings of the US intelligence community which was unable to comprehensively conclude the origins of Covid-19 as to whether it was result of a lab leak or it originated due to natural exposure to an infected animal (Unclassified Summary of origins of Covid-19, 2021). The 2022 interim report of the US House investigation by Republicans on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence on the other hand noted "Based on our investigation involving a variety of public and non-public information, we conclude that there are indications that SARS-CoV-2 may have been tied to China's biological weapons research program and spilled over to the human population during a lab related incident at the Wuhan Institute of Virology" (Unclassified Summary of the Second Interim Report on the origins of the Covid-19 Pandemic, 2022). The report also notes "The Committee has not seen any indications that the Chinese military intentionally released SARS-CoV-2" (Unclassified Summary of the Second Interim Report on the origins of the Covid-19 Pandemic, 2022).

The 2022 interim report also alleged that the US intelligence community had withheld information from the US Congress and downplayed the possibility of Covid-19 being linked to Chinese Bio-weapon. Thus, the debate around whether Covid-19 was leaked from the Wuhan lab deliberately or by accident remains hotly debated in the global arena. If the allegation that Covid-19 virus was leaked from the Wuhan lab deliberately as part of a bioweapons strategy to harm its adversaries' economies, it could damage the credibility of China in the international community



and its image as a rising power. However, epidemiologists strongly argue that Covid-19 was not a human-manipulated strain, and hence, cannot be a “genetic weapon”<sup>69</sup>. At this juncture of building itself as a world power using a bioweapon to deliberately damage the economies of its adversaries such as the United States seems to be too far fetched given how closely integrated China's economy is with the United States and the rest of the world.

However, the possibility of an accidental lab leak cannot be ruled out as China is not new to lab leaks. The SARS leak in 2004 from the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention; and the brucellosis outbreak from an accident at Lanzhou Veterinary Research Institute in 2019 are a few examples<sup>69</sup>. After the present Covid-19 Pandemic, the fact that the Chinese leadership has been emphasizing increasing lab safety gives credence to this theory<sup>70</sup>. China on the other hand has rejected US allegations of Covid-19 originating from a lab leak in Wuhan. China in February 2023 strongly responded to the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's claim that Covid-19 originated from a lab leak in China. The Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning stated “Byrehashing the lab theory the US will not succeed in discrediting China, and instead, it will only hurt its credibility”. She further added “We urge the US to respect science and facts, stop turning origin tracing into something about politics and intelligence, and stop disrupting social solidarity and origins cooperation”.

Hence, from this response it can be said that the Chinese government wants to counter narratives that it views as being aimed at tarnishing China's international image as it knows that if it is internationally accepted that Covid-19 outbreak was due to an accidental lab leak or it was deliberately employed as a biological weapon for political and economic gains then it could result in China facing severe sanctions as well as demands from several countries for reparations for the economic and human losses caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Such an outcome could also obstruct China's quest for hegemony through consensus as it could give its adversaries like the United States and India an opportunity to undermine the confidence of other countries in developing world about China's sincerity as an economic partner.

## CONCLUSION

China, in recent times, has enhanced cooperation with India with a view that New Delhi must not be a spoil-spot in its pursuance of its being a great power. At the same time China wants to make sure that its hegemony is to be accepted through ‘consensus’ manner. The new confident China that has shed its victimized mind-set to rejuvenate nationalist fervour, is seeking parity with the United States. To emerge as another great power on equal terms with the United States. For this, Beijing requires a favourable regional system like the western Hemisphere for

the US. China is currently pursuing to create such system in its neighbourhood. No other power, including Russia, is contesting for influence with China, not even in its backyard Central Asia. It has already made successful inroads into Southeast Asia and deftly divided the so called ASEAN, at least over the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, while asserting its position and enforcing other parties to accept it. Gramscian notion of ‘coercion and consent’ perhaps best explains China's changing strategies to achieve its objective in Southeast Asia.

On the contrary, China has adopted a ‘consent’ approach only in South Asia to win support of the regional countries its ambition to emerge as great power. Unlike in Southeast Asia, South Asia has India which is a formidable single power with vast maritime interest. India has been warming up with the United States while preserving its principled policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ which is going to be a major obstacle for China, especially in the maritime domain. Peace and tranquility has almost been established in the Himalayan border area while a final resolution of this unsettled border dispute has been procrastinated by Beijing should it resolve on Chinese terms. Today China wants to become a major maritime power in Asia and there has always been some sort of major power vacuum in the Indian Ocean region. At the deeper level China's policy is to contain India from emerging as a dominant power in the IOR until China is able to project its naval power in the Indian Ocean. In both the cases China is seeking to apply friendly and ‘consensus’ approach to India so that its forays into the Indian Ocean will not be obstructed. Similarly, India must not assert its position to seek supremacy in the Indian Ocean waters although India is the predominant littoral naval power in the IOR. In a way, China could achieve establishing its hegemony in Asia without antagonising its immediate regional rival India.

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