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GEOPOLITICS AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS IN SOUTH ASIAN/SUB CONTINENTAL COUNTRIES



Dr. M. Sakhawat Hussain

Geopolitics and Strategic Shifts in South Asian/Subcontinental Countries

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Abstract

In contemporary statecraft, geopolitics is a relatively new topic, but it plays a vital role in international relations and is necessary for developing military and foreign policy plans. It is a dependent variable that changes in response to global events, and no nation or region can maintain geopolitics that is rigidly constructed based on internal and foreign policy alone. Since ancient times, geopolitics has shaped the world significantly, with key geopolitical regions including the Middle East, Europe, China, the South China Sea, and South Asia. This study explores the global shift in geopolitics, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, due to China's rise as an economic and strategic 'big power'. Since the post-colonial era, India's position in South Asia has changed due to its strategic location, vast territory, growing economic might, and advancing military might. India has been able to advance due to its strategic location around the Indian Ocean and beyond. Following its partition and the end of colonial rule, India has had to deal with several geopolitical issues, such as disputes with Bangladesh, China, and Indo-Pakistan. With the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971, India was able to reclaim some of its former glory and establish itself as the leading nation in the area. Since gaining the nuclear capability to rival China, India has emerged as the dominant force in the region,

influencing all its small neighbors except Pakistan. Competition and conflict between China and India continue to impede the development of subregional cooperative mechanisms like BCIM and BBIN and regional cooperation mechanisms like SAARC. The paper discussed shifts in geopolitics in the subcontinent, including the anti-Chinese stands of India and the US and its allies in the Indian Ocean region, as well as Bangladesh's options.

Introduction

Despite geopolitics being a relatively new subject in the modern study of statecraft, it is considered an essential part of international relations and one of the important ingredients of foreign policy and military strategy formulation. Geopolitics was originally coined by the Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen at the turn of the 20th century. It was spread as a subject in Europe between the two world wars (1918-39). According to Kjellen, the state is a living organism.¹ Geopolitics is not only a monolithic but also a variable concept that shifts with changing global events. Neither a country nor a region can continue with monolithically formulated geopolitics based solely on foreign policy, and internal policy

¹ (Richard, George, Jim, 1946-, Percy, Sarah V. (Sarah Virginia), 1977-) But the fact remains that his theory of ‘politics and geography’ became the study of geopolitics. While explaining it in a simple way, reputed American political scientist Daniel Deudney (2013) stated geopolitics as the analysis and understanding of the geographic influence on power relationships in international relations. Similarly, Marshall Tim, a renowned British diplomatic journalist and commentator in his book *Prisoners of Geography* (2015) explains “Broadly speaking geopolitics looks at the way in which international affairs can be understood through geographical factors, not just physical landscape – the natural barriers of mountains or connection river networks But also, climate, demographics, cultural regions, and access to natural resources.” (Marshall, 2015, p. x).

rather than geopolitics imbues strong elements of hard power, i.e., military prowess.

Nevertheless, a geographical piece of land or region has been in the important hot spot of geopolitics. History is full of evidence that geography has played a major part in shaping the world of today. From Cyrus the Great to Alexander the Great, the colonial powers in the sixteenth century kept geography in mind while venturing militarily to conquer and shape the world. Also, the resources or proximity to global hot spots have been making geopolitically important geographical entities such as the Middle East, Europe, China, the South China Sea, and the South Asian region. Besides the Middle East and Europe, in the 21st century, the rise of China has initiated changes in geopolitics and strategy. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has brought a new dimension to geopolitics globally, especially in South Asia. So, China has brought a new dimension to the geopolitics of the South Asian region.

Purpose of the Study

This study will explore the shift that has occurred globally over the century, particularly in the Indian subcontinent, focusing on global events, especially the rise of China as an economic and strategic 'big power.'

The Context

As a research topic, geopolitics has not had much academic attention since WWI, when the war caused the downfall of three great Euro-Asian Powers: the Austro-Hungarian, the Russian Empire, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire. Thirty-two nations of Europe were involved in World War I from 1914 to 1919, which reshaped the borders of Europe and caused a significant shift in European geopolitics. The war also gave rise to a new superpower, the USA, as the savior of Europe, replacing Great Britain. The Ottoman Empire also disintegrated into several countries in the Middle East.

The partitions were made based on several agreements among the Allied Powers, Britain, and France (Helmreich, 1974). Such agreements were considered to trigger the most significant shifts in geopolitics that lingered on and affected international relations that continue even in the 21st century (Fromkin, 1989: 49-50). As WWI gave rise to the USA as a great power, Imperial Russia fell with the rise of Socialist Russia, renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, USSR.

WWI laid the ground for WWII, which again reshaped the world by setting the colonies free. WWII also reconfirmed the dominance of the USA. The transition between Britain and the USA appearing as superpowers was smooth, with no turmoil (Shankar, 2020) till the arrival of the USSR.

The USSR appeared as another great power with control of Eastern Europe and was divided into Socialism, the force opposite to capitalism. Russia rose through its endurance of Hitler's 'Operation Barbarossa' in the then East Europe. This made the Soviet Union a superpower for the next 50 years, influencing newly emancipated Afro-Asian countries.

The post-colonial era saw numerous wars on geopolitical issues. It was a geopolitical and strategic blunder that made the Soviet Union invade Afghanistan in 1979. It ushered in the collapse of the superpower USSR and gave rise to non-state actors engulfing almost the whole world with violent extremism. As a result, the USA stepped in once again in Afghanistan and faced a strategic defeat after 20 years of war. The vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union gave space for once obscure the 'Iron Curtain,' China. China became an economic superpower and challenged the US supremacy, causing substantial geopolitical changes worldwide.

There is a new factor added other than the European tangle in South Asia around South China and Taiwan sea that caused huge polarization and a new geopolitical awakening centering the US and Chinese policies on Taiwan. These events remind the concept of Eurasia once again, dividing the world and putting the nations of the world into a political

and strategic conundrum. South Asia is already being engulfed in this geopolitical charade.

Conceptual Discussions

Geopolitics is the study of the effects of geography on politics and international relations. According to Christopher GoGwilt and other scholars, the recent concept of geopolitics implies the description of a broad range of notions that can not only be extensively used as “a synonym for international political relations” but, more specifically, “to imply the global structure of such relations”; this usage builds on an “early-twentieth-century term for a pseudoscience of political geography” and other pseudoscientific theories of historical and geographic determinism.

This paper is going to elucidate the basic concepts related to the nations that are still in sight of powers and jostling for hegemony over others. Furthermore, it will shed light on the policies to help big and middle powers become the hegemons. First, let us look at the most acceptable concept that shaped the foreign and strategic policy of the USA from the end of the 19th century till date.

Influence of Sea Power

Mahan elaborated in detail on the domination of two ocean concepts.² His two books³ took Europe as well as the USA by storm with new thoughts on the importance of sea power, supporting '*it is he who controls the sea dominates the world*'. His concepts were developed based on the historical evolution of the 17th-century conflicts between European nations like the Dutch, the Kingdom of England, the Kingdom of France, and the Habsburg Spain for dominating sea trade and routes. Mahan emphasized the overwhelming sea power of England and determined the factors in European history during the period mentioned (Mahan, 1998).

Mahan was mindful of the spread of British colonies over three continents and three oceans in the contemporary period. He believed that the rise of Britain to superpower was due to its superior naval power over other Eurasian countries. However, 'that Influence of Sea Power' was disputed by other concepts or theories. According to Peter Paret (1986)⁴, Mahan's concept did not explain the rise of land Empires from the pre-WWI period, for example,

² Admiral Alfred Thayer was a historian and naval strategist.

³ The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1784 (1890) and The Influence of Sea Power upon History: French Revolution and Empire 1793-1812 (1892)

⁴ Peter Paret was an American culture and intellectual historian. In his book Makers Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age (1986), he pinpointed Mahan's theory.

Otto von Bismarck's German Empire or the Russian Empire under the Czars, the Mongols, and the Chinese Empire.

Mahan's theory or concept of 'Influence of Sea Power' is more suited to countries with dominant naval forces like Britain. By the end of the 19th century, the USA started upgrading its 'civil war' period naval forces to modern navy to protect its economic interest and the sea lane of communication, especially in Europe. However, the American-Spanish War of 1898 in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans was the first US deployment of the oceanic war that further accentuated Mahan's evolving concept.

Heartland

It was Mackinder⁵ who came up with the geopolitical concept of 'Heartland'. He contradicted Mahan's theory of the supremacy of Sea Power and proposed a reverse model. According to Mackinder, in a given conflict, the land power has supremacy because of Heartland's location, making it inaccessible from all sides and its resources. In his article titled 'The Geographical Pivot of History' published in the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, Mackinder asserted that 'whoever controlled Eastern Europe – the Heartland—would control the world'. This

⁵ Sir Halford John Mackinder was a British geographer, academic, politician, and geopolitical thinker.

concept at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century gave him the recognition of being one of the founding fathers of geopolitics and geostrategy. He also conceptualized controlling the heartland to dominate ‘*Rimland*’, a thin crescent which, according to him, was the whole of Siberia & parts of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) (Mackinder, 1904).

By 1943, Mackinder made the 3rd and final amendment to his much-discussed analysis, which was criticized by many geopolitical and geostrategic theorists. Many historians discussed that before Mackinder came up with his theory, Adolf Hitler took the ‘*heartland*’ theory into practice by launching the Russian invasion ‘*Operation Barbarossa*’ on June 22, 1941, repeating what Napoleon did in 1812. It was WWII that enabled the Soviet Union to dominate Mackinder’s heartland for over 50 years. Despite the criticism, Mackinder’s concept has been supported by the current US geopoliticians and practitioners, for example, Paul Wolfowitz, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Professor Samuel P. Huntington (Kearns Gerry, 2013, Brzezinski, p. 31, 2016).

Zbigniew Brzezinski⁶ has advocated that the chief geopolitical prize for America is Eurasia. For half a millennium, world affairs have been dominated by Eurasian powers and people who fought with one another for regional domination and reached out for global power,' he continued, "now a non-Eurasian power is preeminent in Eurasia - and America's global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained" (Brzezinski, p. 30, 2016). The ongoing war in Ukraine (2022) could be seen as a challenge to the domination of the 'heartland.' Russia has already annexed the southeast of Ukraine and made it an integral part of Russia, which would provide a land connection to Crimea, which was annexed earlier to the heartland. However, Mackinder has been criticized for ignoring 'sea power'. He also ignored other parts of the World Island, including Australia. He did not pay much attention to Mahan's Sea Power concept. However, in his last amendment, he certainly attached less importance to the outer crescent than the Americas, other oceanic countries, and the use of sea power. Mackinder's concept had come under sharp criticism, particularly from Spykman⁷.

⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski was a former national security adviser to the US President Jimmy Carter and professor of American foreign policy at Johns Hopkins University

⁷ Nicholas John Spykman was a contemporary, professor of International Relations at Yale University, USA.

Rimland

The Rimland came as a concept when Spykman, the founder of the ‘classical realist school of American foreign policy’ brought up the fact that geopolitics is the planning of the security policy of a country in terms of its geographical factors. In his book, *The Geography of the Peace*, he discusses the preponderance of the geography of a country while working out foreign policy based on geopolitics. He states, “Geography is the most fundamental factor in foreign policy because it is the most permanent.”

Comparisons between Rimland and Heartland

If a comparison is made between these two concepts, there would be many similarities. Mackinder looked at the world from a geographical point of view. He brought the concept of Heartland as full of resources and based on historical land power, the area that can refuse the sea power that Admiral Mahan discussed. With the last modification, he expanded Heartland, which included the Volga Basin, Steppes, the Himalayas, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, Asia Minor, etc. Mackinder was sanguine in his theory with the emergence of the USSR. Mackinder determined Southwest Ukrainian Steppes as the only gateway to the Heartland (the war between Russia and Ukraine in 2022 could be viewed through this prism).

Modification Brought

Mackinder has brought some modifications to his original concept. He has redefined the Heartland as the region to which sea power can be refused access. Mackinder became more assertive in his theory of Heartland because of the fall of the Russian empire and the emergence of the USSR as a superpower (Bolshevik Revolution). The world power seemed to be centralized around the Heartland which he said had all the resources and natural defense by the physiographic factors. It is invincible and represents the supremacy of Land Power. He considered the Southwest Ukrainian Steppes as the only gateway to the Heartland and the key to control it. However, his earlier defined Inner Crescent included the British Isles and Africa, and in his Outer Crescent, he talked about the New World and outer crescent. Therefore, his core concept is not only the importance of the Heartland but also, as he thinks, the “Command of world Island which includes ‘new world’ meant Americas” that would come from the control of the Heartland.

Application of Mackinder's Concept

The applicability of Mackinder's concept of the Heartland needs to be discussed in three following periods:

- Period Preceding the Cold War
- Period During the Cold War and
- Period Post-Cold War World

Periods Preceding the Cold War (before 1945)

- The demise of the Czarist Russia and the Bolsheviks establishes the USSR as the superpower and a huge land power. The inner crescent and part of Heartland are affected due to the European middle power's demise in the defeat of Germany and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire.
- Socialism spreads around East Europe and Eurasia between two world orders, which shows the efficacy of Mackinder's Heartland theory.
- Independence is achieved around the Inner and Outer Crescent. The rise of the USA is yet another superpower to contain the influence of Soviet Russia.

Period During Cold War (1945-91)

- Post-two world wars, in consonant with Mackinder's modified concept (1943), one can fathom both the USSR and the USA as two superpowers supported by the East and West divide-controlled Heartland and in conflict of interest. Geopolitics of the world now centered around East Europe and West Asia, particularly the most strategic source of resources, the Middle East.

- Inner Crescent became the area of competition between the Capitalist and Socialist economies. The military confrontation between India-Pakistan, and India-China affected the Cold War confrontation. Crimean annexation with Ukraine, part of the USSR, sowed the seeds of geostrategic confrontation between the two superpowers.
- Among some major confrontational events between two superpowers to establish control over the Inner Crescent and World Island are the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) competition of deployment of missiles. Crescent countries under turmoil include the coup-counter-coup in West Asia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Northern Africa.
- Huge changes in geopolitical scenarios have been observed since the initiation of the Cold War. United Kingdom (UK), which was not only the lone 'superpower' till WWI and had ruled the entire Indian Ocean littoral, had lost its grip all over. New countries emerged in the post-colonial era exerting control over the Indian Ocean once known as the British Lake. India became the principal power in the region.
- On the other hand, the USA tried to fill up the power gap by establishing naval bases in the Indian Ocean and involved in Inner Crescent wars like North Korea, and Vietnam establishing a power balance in Mackinder's Crescent.

Post-Cold War (After 1991)

- A unipolar world emerged with the fall of the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union. With the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the future can witness the re-emergence of Russia.

- Russia has lost its economic power but not its defense technology and strategic alignments. There was a possible ‘strategic triangle’ between Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi (BRICS). Since multiple alignments are taking place in different regions now, the world is shifting towards a multipolar world.

Period Post-Cold War World (Since 1991)

- With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, both economic and political East Europe and a huge part of Eurasia got out of the Soviet Union, resulting in the collapse of Warsaw Pact countries. Similarly, the USA emerged as the lone superpower and Heartland fell due to the USSR’s collapse.
- The rapid rise of China, part of Eurasia and the Crescent, is alarming the West.
- Since the Afghan debacle and strategic defeat of the USA, and Russia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the formation of BRICS, is in the process of a triad which would put Russia on the path of recovery. The launch of China’s BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) is seen as a step to dominate the concepts of Mackinder’s Heartland, Inner Crescent, and Spykman’s Rimland in combination.
- A new geopolitical map is emerging in the wake of the Ukraine-Russia war and the annexation of Crimea including the capture of the southeastern part and annexing them as part of Russia. Thus, this results in closing the gate of Eurasia.
- USA has to reinforce NATO not to leave the domination of Heartland as advocated by strategic thinkers of Washington (Brzezinski, p. 30, 2016). The creation of QUAD can be seen as the domination of the Rimland of Spykman.

Rimland Concept- Summary

Though there are some similarities between Mackinder's and Spykman's conceptualizations of geopolitical and geostrategic fields, Spykman opines that geography is, of course, the main determining factor of a country's foreign and international policy. On the other hand, Mackinder based his concept on the geography and defensibility of the Heartland and the use of land power.

In opposition to Mackinder, he said that it is not the Heartland, but the Rimland is the power base because of the resources, demography, and approachability both by land and sea. In the post-WWII, USA's view and the formulation of the 'Cold War' policy, a new thought of geopolitics emerged, engulfing the entire Rimland and 'World Island'. As the countries around the Rimland and the World Island mostly achieved independence, they worked out their own geopolitical and strategic priorities that no power could command except that of the influence of two camps of the Cold War.

The Applicability and Some Variations to the Rimland Concept

Many experts supported the Rimland concept as an American policy with slight variations. One among them is Dr. Spyros⁸. According to him, important countries have played an important role in shaping Eurasian geopolitics, particularly countries like Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey, and he termed them the 'Rimland Bridge'. He terms this Rimland Bridge as a buffer and 'transit zone'. In the Cyprus-Turkey conflict, Turkey had remained the Southeastern corner of USA-led NATO⁹, which did not lose significance, especially with the fall of the USSR and the crumbling of East Europe and the Warsaw Pact to a unipolar world.

The rise of China and its quest for domination of the Rimland could be seen projecting the Chinese power in the Rimland, which is now being challenged by the formation of the QUAD. India, as one of the principal countries of the Rimland, not only tried to dominate the Indian Ocean but also Spykman's Rimla, which maintains strategic sovereignty over the BRICS and the QUAD with the USA.

⁸ Dr. Spyros Katsoulas was an expert on the Aegean which is between Asia and Europe.

⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a high-level diplomatic military union consisting of 30 member states (28 European and 2 North American).

Lebensraum

The term Lebensraum was used by Peschel¹⁰ in 1860. He claimed that the state is based on a society that needs space for survival. In 1901, Ratzel¹¹ extended his claim in his essay titled “Lebensraum”.

This theory, however, remained obscured till WWI, when the Allied Naval Block brought food shortage. This was the time when the German leaders and strategic thinkers took a serious look at Ratzel’s claim and started supporting the two Lebensraum, meaning the strategy of expansion eastwards, that is, towards Russia, mainly to control resources.

However, the theory was well taken during the rise of German nationalists during the intervening period between WWI and WWII in their political demands for the re-establishment of the German colonies.

However, the history of WWII suggests that Germany, under Hitler, followed the theory of Lebensraum, and tried to expand the vast area of the present East Europe, including the Eastern plains of the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ Peschel was a German geographer and biologist

¹¹ Friedrich Ratzel (August 30, 1844 – August 9, 1904) was a German geographer and ethnographer, notable for first using the term Lebensraum (“living space”) in the sense that the National Socialists later would.

Conclusion

Whereas Mackinder emphasizes the Heartland, Spykman does not discard Mackinder but lays more importance on the Rimland. On the other hand, with the rise and demise of the Bolshevik Soviet Union, the Soviet collapse made both Eurasia and the Rimland open to control by a singular power. However, challenges came once the USA almost withdrew from Western Europe. With the USA getting ready to counter a new emerging economic superpower within the Inner Crescent, China, and Russia staged back by first annexing Crimea and then part of Ukraine, the doorway to the Heartland. The USA so far reminds me of Mackinder's concept centering around Eurasia. As Brzezinski says, staying as an unchallenged lone superpower '..... Eurasia is critical. Eurasia is the globe's largest continent and is geopolitically axial. A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions' (Brzezinski, p. 31, 2016). The raging war in Europe is the manifestation of what Brzezinski advised US policymakers regarding three major geopolitical concepts that are now engulfing the entire world.

Has the concept of Lebensraum returned in the 21st century? Not at all does the desire exist, but it is Israel that has adopted this concept through the expansion of the state occupying and integrating

Palestinian land in the East, including Eastern Jerusalem, under the concept of Eretz Israel.¹²

Geopolitical Shifts: Past and Present

Introduction

Before discussing the geopolitical issues, the South Asian (SA) concept needs to be clarified for this paper. Countries contiguous to the Indian subcontinent and within the definition of ‘Indian subcontinent’¹³ have been discussed. But, countries of the subcontinent, mainly in the region between the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, are within the realm of South Asian geopolitics. Therefore, two of the Island nations of South Asia, Maldives, and Sri Lanka, are connected with the geopolitics of South Asia and have also been brought into the framework

¹² Note that it was from the concept of Lebensraum Rudolf Kjellen theorized that the state is a living organ and theorized ‘Geopolitics’. Eretz Israel (Greater Israel) is an expression, with several different biblical and political meanings over the times. It is often used, in an irredentist fashion, to refer to the historic or desired borders of Israel.

¹³ The Indian subcontinent is a physiographical region in Southern Asia, situated on the Indian Plate, projecting southwards into the Indian Ocean from the Himalayas. Geopolitically, it spans major landmasses from the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

as nations of IOR (Indian Ocean Region) as references.¹⁴

Geographic Features of the Subcontinent/South Asia

The geographical setup of the Indian subcontinent is open from two sides, West and East. But the North is bounded by one of the highest and the longest mountain ranges of the Himalayas, which makes it nearly impossible to cross except through limited prominent passes. The most historical and famous pass within the range is the Khyber Pass, and the Bolan Pass is in the Mid-west of Baluchistan. Both passes connect the subcontinent with Central Asia through Afghanistan and Iran. It was believed that the Aryans first arrived at the subcontinent through these western passes in 1500 BCE. However, the first massive invasion by foreign troops was through the Khyber Pass by Alexander the Great of Macedon in 326 BCE. Since then, invasions in Central Asia appeared through these passes, which instrumented the establishment of the rules of various dynasties. Across the Northern Himalayas is a tract of Tibet (now part of China), and northwest is Xinjiang, China.

¹⁴ There are 38 countries in IOR, 13 African, and 22 Asian. Among these 7 (including Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal) are South Asian countries, 1 Oceania, and 2 European overseas territories.

The Indian subcontinent has a huge land mass of around 4,440,000 sq km with a population of 1.8 billion. The landmass is bestowed by Indo-Gangetic plains¹⁵ with major river systems from the West to the East. These river systems nourish from the Himalayan glaciers and make the entire Gangetic–Indus plains, along with the plains around other river systems, fertile and remain cultivable throughout the years. The trace of the first settlement and civilization still exists in the Indus valley of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (Harappan/Indus Civilization¹⁶), proving the geopolitical importance of those ancient times.

The South of the subcontinent is bordered by one of the largest oceans of the world, the Indian Ocean, with an area of 70,560,00 square kilometers. The important strategic seas and the Bay of the Ocean are, in the north and southeast, the Bay of Bengal and the

¹⁵ The Indo-Gangetic Plain, also known as the North Indian River Plain, is a 700-thousand km² (172-million-acre) fertile plain encompassing Northern regions of the Indian subcontinent, including most of northern and Eastern India, most of eastern Pakistan, virtually all of Bangladesh and southern plains of Nepal.

¹⁶ The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), also known as the Indus Civilization was a Bronze Age civilization in the northwestern regions of South Asia, lasting from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE, and in its mature, from 2600 BCE to 1900 BCE. Together with ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, it was one of three early civilizations of the Near East and South Asia, and of the three, the most widespread. Its sites spanned an area from much of Pakistan to northeast Afghanistan, and northwestern India.

Andaman Sea, respectively, and in the west is the Arabian Sea, and in the southwest is the Laccadive Sea. Adjacent to the subcontinent is one of the most strategic and resourceful regions bordering the subcontinent, the Persian Gulf, which carries the bulk of the energy of the modern world to the east and the west through the choke points of the Indian Ocean. Some of these choke points have made the most contested geopolitical real states since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869; thus, Bab El Mandap became the hottest choke point in the West. Other chokes like the Mozambique Channel, the Strait of Hormuz, the Sunda Strait, and the Lombok Strait have been geopolitically important in the control of the Indian Ocean.

By the 19th century, the geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent was fully exploited by the British colonial rulers. By then, the Suez Canal had shortened the distances from Europe to the Indian subcontinent. It was easier for the British sea power to control all the choke points that formed a string of pearls around the Indian subcontinent. The newly opened Suez Canal served to further accelerate the pace of communication into and out of the Indian Ocean. The British built major naval bases at Simonstown at the Cape of Trincomalee in Ceylon and expanded to become vital nodal points of power in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Kearney, 2004).

The British were dominating their colonies from east to west and controlled almost all choke points to guard the Indian Ocean. As Amitav Chowdhury puts it, “Between the early exploratory adventures of the late 16th and the 20th century, the British in the Indian Ocean were a consistent presence. In this period, much of the competition for global commercial hegemony, territorial expansion, and the control of strategic vantages were played out in the ocean’s arena” (As of 01 June, 2023).

By the beginning of the 20th century, the British Royal Navy, with the help of the Bombay Marines, had defeated most of their French and Dutch rivals from the rim of the bay. On the other hand, they controlled all the atolls and islands in the Indian Ocean, developed all facilities for agriculture, took the manpower from India up to the Malayan Peninsula and Hong Kong, and controlled the Malacca Strait. In the east of India, the entire Burma was brought under British rule, controlling all the ports. With the unrivaled control of the Indian Ocean, the British remained the superpower controlling vast tracts of the Middle, South, and East Asia until WWI, when the USA began to emerge as a superpower.

It was WWII when Britain became economically weak, and the colonies started achieving their freedom. The religious division of Hindus and Muslims resulted in riots for a separate Muslim religion-based country. The rest of the colonies

within the northern rim of the Indian Ocean got their independence from the colonial rule after India and Pakistan came into existence, like Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1948, Burma (now Myanmar) in 1948, and Maldives much later in 1965.

With the withdrawal of the British from most parts of the Indian Ocean and its rim, less Diego Garcia, a total of 38 independent countries became IOR (Indian Ocean Littoral) by the 1960s, among which was India, situated both on the shore of Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, till 1971. India, however, had geostrategic ascendancy over other littorals with strategically located Andaman Nicobar Island in the eastern, southeastern Bay of Bengal.

Re-shaping Indian Subcontinent: Post-1947

The independence of the Indian subcontinent resulted in the division into two countries with a huge alteration in the geography. With the loss of Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), independent India was deprived of direct overland access to the Middle East and Central Asia. No more than that, British India's geopolitical readiness, as Halford Mackinder once mentioned in his geopolitical perception of the British Empire, laying importance on the North West Frontier¹⁷

¹⁷ One of the great geopoliticians, Halford Mackinder remarked on the importance of the Northwest Frontier in his writing, "In all the British Empire there is but one land frontier on which

(Menon, 2021, p. 12) and the geopolitical perception of the ‘Great Game’¹⁸ if not dead, carried no more geopolitical importance for India.

India and Pakistan on the west shared a 3,310 km border, which includes the Line of Control (LOC) in disputed Kashmir¹⁹. The north boundary remained unchanged as India shares 3,488 km of borders, which includes 890 km of the ‘disputed McMahon Line’²⁰. This was agreed upon between British India

war-like preparation must ever be ready. It is the North West Frontier of India”.

¹⁸ The Great Game was a rivalry between the 19th century British and Russian Empires over influence in Asia, primarily in Afghanistan, Persia, and Tibet. The two colonial empires used military interventions and diplomatic negotiations to acquire and redefine territories in Central and South Asia. Russia conquered Turkestan, and Britain expanded and set the borders of British colonial India. By the early 20th century, a line of independent states, tribes, and monarchies from the shore of the Caspian Sea to the Eastern Himalayas were made into protectorates and territories of the two empires.

¹⁹ Pakistan-administered Kashmir known as Azad Kashmir as an area of 13,279 km.

²⁰ The McMahon Line is the boundary between Tibet and British India as agreed in the maps and notes exchanged by the respective plenipotentiaries on 24–25 March 1914 at Delhi, as part of the 1914 ‘Shimla’ Convention. The line delimited the respective spheres of influence of the two countries in the eastern Himalayan region along northeast India and northern Burma (Myanmar), which were earlier undefined. The Republic of China was not a party to the McMahon Line agreement, but the line was part of the overall boundary of Tibet defined in the Shimla Convention, initialed by all three parties and later repudiated by the government of China (Lamb, 1966, *The McMahon Line*, Vol. 1, p. 4). The boundary extends for 550

and Tibet at Shimla in 1914, but the dispute remains to date, defining the line drawn 'arbitrarily' by the British Raj. On the other hand, China and India share borders with Nepal and Bhutan, who maintained their freedom to a great extent during the British Raj in India.

On the East, the Indian border with East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) stands at 4,096 km. The part became a wedge between India and the Indian North Eastern part, only to be linked by the narrow Indian corridor of the 'Siliguri Corridor'²¹, which made it difficult for the rest of India to be integrated with the North East with a hostile Pakistani part.

Independence of India and Pakistan

As WWII came to an end, the world was getting divided between two victorious powers, the USA and the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in Europe. Britain disappeared from the horizon of

miles (890 km) covering parts from Bhutan in the west to 160 miles (260 km) east i.e. the Brahmaputra River.

²¹ The Siliguri Corridor, also known as the Chicken's Neck, is a stretch of land around the city of Siliguri in West Bengal, India. 20–22 km (12–14 mi) at the narrowest section, this geo-political and geo-economical corridor connects the eight states of northeast India to the rest of the Indian Republic. The countries of Nepal and Bangladesh lie on each side of the corridor and the Kingdom of Bhutan lies at the northern end of the corridor. The Kingdom of Sikkim formerly lay on the northern side of the corridor, until it merged with India in 1975.

superpowers, and the Indian subcontinent was divided into two independent states.

The geopolitical and geostrategic orientation of these two newly independent countries made a drastic change soon after a year when Pakistan wanted to settle the most strategic piece of land, Kashmir, with force. Both countries fought the first war over the Kashmir dispute a few weeks after independence in 1947, which ended under a truce brokered by the UN. As a result, Pakistan gained one-third of the land of Jammu and Kashmir, which was named Azad Kashmir, Gilgit Agency, and Baltistan. On the other hand, India got two-thirds of Jammu and Kashmir, with the rest of the Ladakh district bordering China yet remaining disputed over the boundary line.

Be it as it may, the alteration and possession of part of Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, makes the border dispute more complicated. As Joshi puts it, the border dispute between China and India is ‘always going to be a source of tension, and it certainly became one, since the Chinese do not agree to the length of the border they claimed to be around 2000 km, the boundary for the area was always going to be a source of tension, and it certainly became one, once other geopolitical interests intruded’ (Joshi, 2022, p.3). The discrepancy arises because the Chinese do not include the border with Pakistan, and then their straight-line border in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh (old NEFA: North East Frontier Agencies)

helps make the figure (Joshi; 2022; p. 45) (Chinese Claim).

For independent India, it was difficult to come out of the shoes of the British Raj. But it was India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, who decided to go against his colleagues like K. M. Panikkar, C. Rajagopalachari, T. T. Krishnamachari, and others. They were keen to see India maintaining close ties with England in India's geopolitical sphere. Their idea, much before India's independence, was that India took a pivotal role in Asian countries to start by keeping England tied (Menon, 2021, p. 44). These strategic and geopolitical thinkers of India also saw a big role in India dominating the Indian Ocean, particularly K. M. Panikkar, echoing Mahan with, of course, the British Indian Navy (ibid, p. 45) in mind. Panikkar did not stop there but wrote and advised Nehru, "The Indian Ocean area, together with Afghanistan, Sinkiang, and Tibet as the Outer Northern Ring, constitute the real security of India. Geographically, this is also one strategic unit, with India as its great air-land center and the base and arsenal of naval power. From the central triangle of India, the whole area can be controlled and defended" (Panikkar, 1946, pp. 85-90, as quoted by Menon).

Mr. Nehru was also forced and persuaded by others to form Indian defense and foreign policy (ibid), much that is currently apparent. V.D. Savarkar, who

espoused Hindutva, even pleaded with the British Raj to keep the armed forces under British command by recruiting Hindu youth (The Wire, 2022). But Nehru wanted an independent role for India, championing those Asian countries that were yet to achieve independence and where the Indian-origin troops were present till then.

Nehru saw 'India's Independence as the rise of Asia'. He decided to maintain 'strategic sovereignty' and keep India away from two superpowers, and to a great extent, he succeeded. The idea that Mr. Nehru got, much before the 'independence', was from 'The Asian Relations Conference' in New Delhi held in March-April 1947, a few months before India declared independence, organized by the Asian Council of World Affairs²². The conference, with the idea of gathering newly independent Afro-Asian countries together in the Indonesian city of Bandung in 1955, was Nehru's idea. He was a key organizer along with Mr. Sukarno, the President of the newly independent Indonesia, and a few other countries, including Pakistan. The Delhi conference also gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in the 1950s after the Korean War. Ultimately, NAM was given shape at the Cairo conference in 1961. It was

²² Appadorai, A. (1948). *Asian Relations: Being Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March-April, 1947*. New Delhi, India: Asian Relations Organization.

an outstanding achievement for India's geopolitical policymakers headed by Nehru.

India, as its diplomacy in Asia, first participated as a peacekeeper in Korea in 1950 and Suez in 1956²³. Under British auspices, Indian-origin persons were settled all over the countries under British colonial rule. India also raised its voice for their independence.

Sino-India²⁴ Relations: 1959 – 1962

After the first Indo-Pak war in 1947-48, the more significant strategic concern that upset the entire geopolitics of India was when China took control of Tibet in 1950. By 1959, China breathed on the Indian neck, bringing the Chinese boundary along a big Indian track (Menon, 2021, p. 56). It was not only a setback for Indian foreign policy orientation but a second geopolitical shift after the creation of Pakistan in India's western and eastern flanks, as Olaf Caroe observed (Brobst, 2005, pp. 145-46). Nevertheless, after years of turmoil where allegedly CIA-trained Tibetan guerrillas, with India's covert knowledge²⁵, and with the base Provided by Nepal

²³ Famous as the 'Suez crisis' when Naser nationalized the Suez Canal and the second Arab-Israeli war erupted.

²⁴ China, in places mentioned as Sino in case of relations with other countries.

²⁵ In 1966, Indian SSF (Special Security Force) operating along the Indo-Chinese border were trained by the CIA (Patrik).

alongside the Tibet border, Mustang²⁶ and in collusion with the then Pakistan authority (in the then East Pakistan), involved in fomenting guerrilla resistance.

The involvement of the Government of Pakistan is an interesting episode in this fray with India since both countries had, by then, divergent geostrategic and political perspectives around the Kashmir dispute. In this regard, Riedel (2015), an ex-CIA officer, mentions in his book, “The ISI arranged for them to stay briefly at an abandoned World War II airbase named Kurmitola (*Dhaka*) the base was relatively primitive with a landing strip of 1,000 meters (*sic*) long.”. He further writes, “By October 1957, the first team of Tibetans was ready to go home and use their newly developed skills to help the rebellion. Polish anti-communist emigres flew the B-17 bomber and dropped the trained fighters in Tibet, overflying Indian territory from Kurmitola again so that no American would risk capture if anything went wrong...the mission was a success, and the second flight from East Pakistan followed in Nov 1957.”²⁷ It

²⁶ After the failure of its airdrop operations, the CIA changed its approach and decided to create a guerrilla base in Mustang, a region in Nepal. The plan was to support 1,000 fighters under the command of monk-turned-freedom-fighter Baba Yeshe, who had fought the PLA since 1955.

²⁷ It was an overlapping period of two Pakistani PMs, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Ibrahim *Ismail Chundrgar*. The operation continued even when Sir Feroz Khan Noon remained the last civilian PM. By then the US was in the process of

is interesting to note both India and Pakistan were colluding with the USA to stop the spread of communism in the rest of Asia, but till the Chinese occupation of Tibet, India was the closest friend of China, and Mr. Nehru and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai were towering leaders of Afro-Asian countries and were regarded as best friends. In India, both countries, India and China, were known as Bhai-Bhai (brothers) with the slogan 'Hindi Chini Bhai-Bhai' (Rachenko, 2014).²⁸

Therefore, communism was perceived as a common threat to all three countries. India, Pakistan, and Nepal willingly got into the fight against communism, which spread in Asia, in particular. India stood clearly against the earlier stand of the 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' concept of cooperation in the Asian region.

Though India-Pakistan relations were exacerbated soon after the partition on the dispute of Kashmir, on the hind side, Pakistan not only gained strategically important territory but also put a handicap for India to manoeuvre easily on the west. In 1948, the Kashmir ceasefire brokered by the West and implemented by the United Nations (UN) provided

acquiring a base in Peshawar known as Badaber for spying on Russia and China, it was the main spy base and the ill-fated U-2 was flown from here inside Russia in 1960. CIA pilot Gary Power was captured.

²⁸ Retrieved from, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/09/18/the-rise-and-fall-of-hindi-chini-bhai-bhai/> as on 11July 2023.

Pakistan a close link with the West, particularly with the UK and the USA. In this regard, Dasgupta, as quoted by Menon (2021), showed how power politics was played by the UK and USA for a solution that went in favor of Pakistan. This favored and put Pakistan willingly into the lap of the West. Though Pakistan had been at the Bandung conference as one pioneer country and later a member of NAM, it did not maintain a 'strategic sovereignty' like India. It allowed the USA to establish a base in northern Pakistan to spy over both China and mainly Russia²⁹. However, the fact remains that Pakistan's geopolitics was and still is around its big neighbor. Pakistan went pro-west and anti-communist even after General (later Field Marshal) Ayub Khan took over the reign of Pakistan, deposing the civilian government in a

²⁹ **Famous U2 Incidence.** On 1 May 1960, a United States U-2 spy plane was shot down by the Soviet Air Defence Forces while conducting photographic aerial reconnaissance deep inside Soviet territory. The single-seat aircraft, flown by American pilot Francis Gary Powers, had taken off from Peshawar, Pakistan, and crashed near Sverdlovsk (present-day Yekaterinburg), after being hit by an S-75 Dvina (SA-2 Guideline) surface-to-air missile. Powers parachuted to the ground safely and was captured.

Initially, American authorities acknowledged the incident as the loss of a civilian weather research aircraft operated by NASA but were forced to admit the mission's true purpose a few days later after the Soviet government produced the captured pilot and parts of the U-2's surveillance equipment, including photographs of Soviet military bases.

military coup in 1958. That was the first-ever military takeover of a South Asian country.

Pakistan joined the Baghdad Pact in 1955, later known as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO)³⁰, as Pakistan had another part in the East, East Pakistan, almost separating Indian North East from mainland India, and also justifiably joined the South Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO)³¹. This was another military pact aimed at providing Southeast Asia with collective defense, almost concurrently with that of CENTO. Both these organizations were anti-communist and were designed to stop the spread of communism almost at the beginning of the Cold War and spread of communist ideology, particularly in South Eastern Asia.

Pakistan remained a bulwark of the West against the spread of communism in South Asia. Pakistan's Western-oriented geopolitics kept both the Soviet Union and China at bay, though Pakistan had an inaccessible yet disputed border with China during pre-Karakoram Highway days (KKH). China, however, never recognized Pakistan's hold on Hunza and Gilgit in the North. Therefore, China and the

³⁰ CENTO members were Iran, Iraq Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom (UK).

³¹ SEATO had Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, United Kingdom (UK) and USA.

threat of communism remained a common factor for the newly independent subcontinent.

In 1949, Indian PM Mr. Nehru offered a 'No War Pact' in a letter to the then Pakistani Prime Minister, Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan, which remained inconclusive till 1950 (Ranjan, 1964, p. 79). Even in 1959, a month after Dalai Lama fled to India, he offered a No War Pact again. Pakistan had not responded, as Mr. J. N. Dixit (2002) wrote in his book, *India-Pakistan in War and Peace*. However, Pakistan, then led by Ayub Khan, disagreed but instead continued to assist the US in operating U-2 spy planes from both wings against the Soviet Union and China.

The then CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) was continuing with clandestine operations against China in Tibet, and the US. U-2 spy missions continued regularly spying on China. At the same time, USA-trained Tibetan dissidents were regularly inducted from East Pakistan using the vintage WWII Kurmitola airfield. Later, Mustang, a remote mountain valley in Nepal, became the anti-Chinese training base of Tibetan dissidents (Knaus, 1999; Conboy and Morrison, 2002, Riedel, 2015). Though Pakistan and India did not have any pact as such, it took some time to play active and mostly passive parts in CIA operations until 1969 (Conboy and Morrison, 2002, p. 38)³². At the height of the PLA

³² The CIA Tibet program lasted from 1957 to 1969 and consisted of supplying and training Tibetans to disrupt Chinese

(People's Liberation Army) operation in Tibet, the Chinese authority detected the clandestine operation. The Chinese perceived Indian involvement and tacit approval of such a clandestine operation.

Despite the fact that India, under Mr. Nehru, had better relations with the Kennedy administration, India became inclined to use the USSR³³ for military equipment. The USA tried to persuade Mr. Nehru, but the Western offer did not match the price. The Soviet Union gave India 12 MiG-21s free as a friendly gesture. On August 17, 1962, a few months before the Sino-Indian war, the Indo-Soviet treaty was signed mainly to procure defense equipment. Nehru was trying to counter the USA's supply of F-104 Star Fighter to Pakistan (Riedel, 2015, p.116). China was not happy that the Soviet Union supplied hi-tech aircraft to a country that was not considered a friendly one to them, particularly for interfering in Tibet (op. Cit, p. 99). These were viewed by the Chinese violation of established relations through Panchsheel and the 'Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai' (India-China Brothers) pact in 1954. These events led to a fast deterioration of the relationship between the two

activities, aiding Tibetans in broadcasting their struggle to the world, and undertaking related operations.

³³ Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was a transcontinental country established in 1922 lasted 1991 when the USSR was abolished with other republics were granted independence. Russia remains the largest country in the world with a huge landmass.

Asian giants. The bitterness over Tibet, Dalai Lama, and the dispute over the borders in India's north in Ladakh and North East in NEFA (North East Frontier Agencies)³⁴ made worse enemies of countries that once held similar views of anti-imperialism.

1962 Sino³⁵-Indian War and Beyond that Changed the Geopolitics of the Subcontinent

Prelude

The leading causes for the deterioration of relations between two giant neighbors, India and China, seemed to be (1) interference in Tibet by India. Like British India, Nehru considered Tibet a buffer within the communist menace of China. In all analysis, Nehru seemed to have stepped into the British shoes of India even after 1947.

(2) The exodus of Dalai Lama to India and shelter given first at the disputed (As China claims) largest Buddhist monastery of Tawang (NEFA: now a district of Arunachal) and then to Dharamshala which brought substantial international attention to Buddhist persecution by the Communist China.

³⁴ Now Arunachal province.

³⁵ From Late Latin *Sīnae* ("the Chinese"), from Ptolemy's Ancient Greek *Σῖναι* (*Sīnai*, "the Chinese"), of uncertain etymology but probably from Sanskrit *चीन* (*Cīna*, "China"), possibly via Arabic *صين* (*Ṣīn*, "China; the Chinese") and usually held to derive from Old Chinese *秦* (**zin*, "Qin").

(3) Border dispute remains complicated, especially in Ladakh, Aksai Chin area to the south of Karakoram Range. The location was inaccessible, and India had neither an updated map nor many ideas of this high-altitude plateau unless China produced a map in which a road connection between Tibet and Xinjiang through a military road was shown on the Chinese map as China did not recognize ‘Johnson Line’³⁶ much to the Northeast Aksai Chin. China rather accepted the ‘Macartney-Macdonald Line’³⁷. India objected to the unilateral Chinese move, but China claimed that the area was shown on the map produced by the Nationalist government. This position of China in Aksai Chin and the road built thereafter was unacceptable to Nehru. He termed his stand as firm ‘not open to discussion with anybody’ (“Sino-Indian border dispute”, n.d.).

Nehru was under further pressure as China also refused to accept the ‘McMahon Line’³⁸ on the North

³⁶ The British drew three lines in Ladakh demarcation but the dispute centered around Johnson Line and Macartney-Macdonald Line. In 1846 in the Treaty of Amritsar, the British accepted the surveyor William Johnson’s demarcation and incorporated Aksai Chin within the state of Kashmir later part of independent India. This was Johnson Line.

³⁷ Once again, the British Raj drew a new line in 1899 which included Aksai Chin as part of China to settle the issue and concentrate on perceived Russian advance towards India. This line is known as Macartney-Macdonald Line.

³⁸ The McMahon Line is the boundary between Tibet and British India as agreed in the maps and notes exchanged by the respective plenipotentiaries on 24–25 March, 1914 at Delhi, as

Eastern border up to Burma (now Myanmar). In 1954, the Chinese map showed Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim, and NEFA (now Arunachal) as part of China (Menon, 2021, p. 89). Chairman Mao Zedong claimed these four areas, including Ladakh, are the five fingers of Tibet (“Five Fingers of Tibet”, n.d.). China still maintains that stand, whereas it deals with both Bhutan and Nepal as sovereign countries³⁹.

(4) Last but not least, earlier, China offered to settle the border dispute amicably by trading Aksai Chin against China, recognizing the McMahon Line. The Indian government of Mr. Nehru ruled out such a compromise rather quietly implemented a forward policy (Menon, 2021, p. 94; Riedel, 2015, p. 105). Thus, both countries that were once friends now chose to settle through war.

(5) The Forward Policy⁴⁰ of Nehru was based on setting up military posts behind Chinese lines in disputed territory, to gather intelligence and compel China with a show of force. The Indian troops were of no match in terms of armed forces equipped with insufficient appropriate weapons, equipment for

part of the 1914 Shimla Convention. China refused because Tibet was never an independent sovereign country to sign a treaty conceding territories.

³⁹ China recognized and established diplomatic ties with Nepal on 1 August 1955 and having adjusted the border in favor of China in 1961 signed a peace and tranquility agreement with Bhutan in 1998.

⁴⁰ Named by the Indian Defence Ministry

snowline warfare, and unclear orders (Riedel, 2015, pp. 99-100; Noorani, 1970, pp. 136-141; Jensen, 2012, pp. 55-70).

All these and other geopolitical factors became the primary reason for the 1962 Sino–Indian war, which changed the geopolitics of the region in particular and Asia in general. On November 20, 1962, the Chinese declared a unilateral ceasefire. Researchers like Nevil Maxwell⁴¹ and Prem Shanker Jha⁴² opine that it was the disastrous forward policy of Mr. Nehru that gave reasons to counterattack India.

In that short war, India lost with a humiliating defeat. Having learned a lesson, India could not maintain regular surveillance of Chinese moves from November 1962, and created the Tibet refugee-based Special Frontier Force (SFF)⁴³ (Shukla, 2020) which is enlarged at present and used to monitor behind the Line of Actual Control (LAC)⁴⁴.

⁴¹ In an interview Parakram Rautela interviewed Nevil Maxwell published in Times of India on April 2, 2024.

⁴² Jha, Prem Shankar (5 June 2020). “*Why It Is Imperative That Indians Come to Know What Happened in 1962*”. The Wire. Retrieved 27 July 2023.

⁴³ The Special Frontier Force (SFF) is an Indian special operations unit created on 14 November 1962 to conduct covert operations behind Chinese lines in the event of another Sino-Indian War. Although it mainly comprised Tibetan refugees living in India, it has now increased in size and scope of operations.

⁴⁴ The Line of Actual Control (LAC), in the context of the Sino-Indian border dispute, is a notional line that separates Indian-controlled territory from Chinese-controlled territory. The

The effect of the 1962 war and its disastrous consequences became the psyche of the Indian nation and policymakers. The geopolitics of India, South Asia, Asia, and the world have since shifted due to the Sino-Indian War of 1962.

Two major events factored in changes in policies affecting South Asia to an extent: the assassination of Kennedy in November 1963, followed by the death of Nehru on May 27, 1964. After Kennedy, India drifted away from the USA's strategic partnership to counter China as the Johnson administration was busy with internal consolidation (Paul, 2013, p. 280-84). However, the Nehru government still depended on US military support against China. The other event that polarized South Asia was the Indo-Pak War in 1965.

concept was introduced by Chinese premier Zhou Enlai in a 1959 letter to Jawaharlal Nehru as the "line up to which each side exercises actual control", but rejected by Nehru as being incoherent. Subsequently, the term came to refer to the line formed after the 1962 Sino-Indian War.

Role of Super Powers During the 1962 Sino-Indian War

The war had put the superpowers, the USSR and the USA, in a psychological and geopolitical game during the South Asian crisis.

The USSR. China could convince the USSR that India had aggressed as a tool of reactionaries to the communist world; as a result, the USSR suspended the MiG-21 deal that was made earlier (Menon, 2021, p. 98; Riedel, 2015, p. 136). Secondly, the USSR was facing a threat from the USA over the Cuban Missile Crisis. Thus, the USSR morally supported Chinese military action against India, and Moscow was convinced that India was the aggressor. (Menon, 2021, p. 98). Yet India did not sever any diplomatic or military ties with the USSR to date. Interestingly, the USSR withdrew the suspension of the MiG-21 supply the following year amidst the Sino-Indian psychological war (Knaus; *ibid*).

The USA and the UK. By the end of October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis was over, and the Kenedy administration could pay attention to the subcontinent. By then, China was threatening both Bhutan and Sikkim and cut the Siliguri corridor linking up the North of East Pakistan. An appeal

from the Bhutanese Prime Minister was made to the USA, followed by Mr. Nehru's appeal for help.

Though Nehru had declined any military alliance with the USA such as SEATO and continued the non-alignment policy, the USA, along with the UK and Canada, responded by dispatching military hardware and US aircraft carriers⁴⁵ to the Bay of Bengal. (Menon, *opcit*, p. 98; MacMilan, 1973, p. 229; John, 2001, p. 96; Riedel, 2015, p. 138). Simultaneously, London consulted with other Commonwealth countries apart from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, China declared a unilateral ceasefire only to withdraw its forces from the East Tawang region of NEFA.

Nevertheless, the Sino-Indian war brought the USA to the door of the Indian Ocean, particularly in subcontinental geopolitics. The US had found that the event had 'forged a new American posture in Asia', as Chester Bowels⁴⁶ wrote in his memoir (Chester, 1971, p. 457).

Be it as it may, the Tibet uprising of 1959, the escape of the Dalai Lama, and the Sino-Indian war brought a twist in the subsequent geopolitics of South Asia. In mid-November 1962, the CIA estimated that

⁴⁵ During the Sino-Indian war, it was the US that came to India's rescue and it announced its intent to send the 'USS Kitty Hawk' aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal to support India against a possible Chinese invasion (As did in 1971).

⁴⁶ He was US ambassador from 1963 to 1969 and succeeded John Kenneth Galbraith (1961 to 1963)

China would be capable of rushing through the Siliguri corridor to Bengal, and India would be unable to defend itself without US military help⁴⁷. While approving military aid to India, the USA set three goals to achieve (Knaus, *op. cit.*, p. 264):

- a) to get Indian military aid, it needed to defend itself against China,
- b) to address Pakistan's concern about American military aid to India, with movement on the Kashmir issue
- c) to prevent Pakistan from tilting completely towards China and to secure Indian support for Tibetan clandestine operations.

⁴⁷ Even Months after the brief but bloody Sino-Indian border war of 1962, American intelligence (CIA) were worried about the possibility of further strikes by Chinese troops through Tibet, Myanmar and even Nepal and Bhutan. That also makes Pakistan's position along Siliguri corridor would be very critical to Indian defense.

Effects of the 1962 Sino-Indian War on South Asian Geopolitics

Pakistan. In 1960-61, Pakistan became the closest ally of the USA in South Asia and allowed its soil to be used for spying on the Soviet Union and China. But by September 1962, Pakistan, during Ayub's second visit to the USA, realized that the Kennedy administration was getting closer to India. Ayub later remained non-committal when the USA requested Pakistan not to take advantage of the Sino-Indian war (Reidel, 2015, p. 104). Pakistan was running into problems with landlocked Afghanistan over the Durand Line and Pakhtunistan issue, and several times closed access to the sea, pushing King Zahir Shah closer to Russia.

To the USA and India, it was clear that to secure recognition of China on the integration of Gilgit and Baltistan in North Pakistan was to advocate Chinese inclusion in the UN and UNSC in place of Taiwan. Pakistan started having a rough ride with the USA (Kux, 2001, p. 126) but remained neutral during the Sino-Indian war. As per Indian secret service reports, China wanted Pakistan to settle the Kashmir issue by joining the war.

On the other hand, the Shah of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi, requested Ayub to join India against China (Nayar, 2021, p. 127); instead, he strengthened the East Pakistan border against any possible Indian

troops to cross. Interestingly, Riedel (2015, p. 143) quotes in his book from Katherine Frank (2001, p. 226) that there was a rumor by senior Congress leader (Later Prime Minister) Indira Gandhi that the Chinese had a plan to take over Assam and handover to Pakistan to be integrated with East Pakistan. Rumour or not, India strengthened to stop the Chinese drive up to the 'Chicken Neck' or Siliguri Corridor. However, the report made by Indira was not confirmed by the US Ambassador in India (Riedel, 2015).

That Pakistan, at that time, was not capable of absorbing Assam was true but Tezpur evacuation and the Indian troop retreat was a difficult exercise as the Siliguri corridor was crowded and under the Chinese threat, a passage through Northern East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) was desirable had Pakistan gone against China in 1962.

Nevertheless, it was the pressure from the USA that Pakistan remained neutral to a great extent (Riedel, 2015, p. 130). However, by 1963, Pakistan settled the border issue by handing over the most strategic 'Shaksgam Valley' to connect with Xinjiang. In 1962, the Karakoram Highway⁴⁸, the most strategic

⁴⁸ The Karakoram Highway, also known as the Friendship Highway in China, was built by the governments of Pakistan and China. Construction of 1300 km long mountainous highway started in 1962 and was completed and opened to the public in 1978 connecting Abbottabad Pakistan, to Khunjerab

connection between China and Pakistan was initiated and opened by 1978⁴⁹.

In 1965, after the Indo-Pakistan war, Pakistan was in the complete arc of China in terms of geopolitics and strategic relations. The effect of the war was a total deterioration of relations between India and Pakistan. As an effect of that war, Pakistan was temporarily alienated from the West, yet Pakistan had on-and-off relations with the USA and the West.

Nepal. A smaller, basically mountainous Himalayan land-locked country sandwiched between two giant neighbors. On many occasions, India had sealed its border, thus putting Nepal seeking logistic help from Pakistan and, to some extent, China. When the People's Republic of China was established, Mao Tse Tung included Nepal as one of the fingers of Tibet. That was the period when Nepal's ruler, King Tribhuvan, was almost in the protection of India, but the situation changed when King Tribhuvan was replaced by his son Mahendra.

Pass (height 15,466 ft) to Kashgar China. Part of it also known as New Silk Route.

⁴⁹ India claims that the area is disputed as part of Ladakh of Kashmir illegally occupied by Pakistan in 1947. Therefore, terms exchange of Shaksgam valley with China is also illegal. In 2019 Union Home Minister of India vowed to take back 'Pakistan-occupied Kashmir' including Gilgit Baltistan and Aksai Chin back from Pakistan and China in a Lok Sabha speech.

The political scenario in Nepal changed, and so did its geopolitical thoughts. After many calculations, Nepal first recognized the position of Tibet vis-à-vis China and signed a treaty with China. This was a treaty under which Nepal officially settled the so far disputed border issue and an official settlement was signed between the governments on 28 April 1960. However, geopolitical analysts like Gerry Von Tronder argued with this treaty, China displayed to the South Asian Countries that China is a “powerful but essentially benevolent leader in Asia” even after the bloody settlement of the Tibet uprising in 1959 (Von, 2018).

This was the time when Nepal came out of the Indian Bubble and became a member of the United Nations and a temporary member of the UN Security Council. Nepal signed the Nepal-China Boundary Treaty of 1961 and adjusted the border.

Nepal strictly maintained ‘overt neutrality’, which did not go well with India, but the government managed to keep India satisfied⁵⁰ to a great extent (Adhikari, 2012). Recently, a row erupted when India claimed the Nepali land used during the 1962

⁵⁰ Although *Article I* and *Article II* of the 1960 treaty only applied to direct relations between Nepal and China, it is unclear in exactly what ways they might have applied to Nepal during the Sino-Indian War, with Nepal overtly remaining neutral throughout the war and deliberately offered little or no help to either side.

Sino-Indian war, which was counter-claimed and shown on the new Nepali map (Alok, 2019)⁵¹.

Bhutan remained a protectorate of India till 1949, while Sikkim was a protectorate of India till 1975 (Sikkim has been a state of India since 1975).

Bhutan has a 477 km border with China on the North and North West and a 478 km border with India. The People's Republic of China (PRC) still considers Bhutan a part of Tibet, though, since 1984, the two countries have been conducting border talks. Bhutan and China's relationship has been affected by the asylum provided to Dali Lama's followers and as a protectorate of India. To date, in only seven countries, out of three, including the USA, Bhutan opened its consulate, and the rest four have embassies.

In 1949, Bhutan signed the Treaty of Friendship with India and agreed that India should 'guide' defence

⁵¹ In 2019 Nepal published its revised map in May after India inaugurated an 80 km (50 miles) road connecting its northern Uttarakhand state with Lipulekh on the border with Tibet that passes through the land Nepal says belongs to it. There is other historical evidence that shows that India entered into that area only after the India-China War of 1962. India was granted permission by the then-Nepalese government to set up checkposts to guard its border. while covertly Nepalese government acquiesced to Indian PM Nehru's request to station some Indian troops in "Nepal's northern part" including Nepal's Kalapani area, which was a reflection of Nepal's 1950 Treaty with India.

and foreign policy. In 1962, Bhutan along with India, sought US help for effective defence against China. (Kelegama, 2016, p. 203).

Sikkim was a semi-independent country as a protectorate of India. The Indian state now has two important strategic passes, *Nathu La* (at 4,310 meters) and *Cho La* (5,420 meters), with direct access to Tibet. These two passes and regions were not much in conflict in 1962. On September 11 to 14, 1967, a serious Sino-Indian border clash took place followed by a separate clash in Cho La pass on the 1st October 1967. An independent analyst suggests that India had strengthened and raised mountain divisions to fight (Dalvi, 1969, p. 63). The clash was over the control of the disputed *Chumbi Valley*.

The 1967 border clash had to be integrated into the interior logistics of India. Thus, in 1975, Sikkim was taken over by India as one of the states ending the status of Sikkim as a semi-sovereign country. Sikkim facilitates the shortest distance for China (Tibet border) to the most vulnerable strategic Indian Siliguri Corridor.

Sri Lanka (Old Ceylon) achieved independence from British rule in 1948 but remained a British Dominion under the Commonwealth till 1972.

Sri Lanka is strategically located at the northern tip of the Indian Ocean and southwest of the Bay of

Bengal. It is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation like other South Asian countries. As a British Dominion, the country stayed neutral during the complicated geopolitical issues of the subcontinent in 1962. Strategically located in the North Eastern port of Trincomalee, the region is predominantly inhabited by the ethnic Tamils and remained as a base for the British Royal Navy till 1956.

Sri Lanka pursued an independent foreign policy. However, Sri Lanka's neutrality during the Indo-Chinese War of 1962 did not go well with India. A row cropped up when Sirimavo Bandaranaike⁵² tried to lease Trincomalee, with a well-developed Naval facility,⁵³ to China in 1963⁵⁴. Since then, Sri Lankan relations with China have not been consistent due to internal political friction and the changing

⁵² Sirimavo Bandaranaike was a Sri Lankan politician. She was the world's first female prime minister when she became Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (then the Dominion of Ceylon) in 1960. Her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga commonly referred to by her initials CBK, was fifth and first female President of Sri Lanka, from 12 November 1994 to 19 November 2005.

⁵³ Trincomalee Harbour is a seaport in *Trincomalee Bay* or *Koddiyar Bay*, the fourth largest natural harbour in the world and situated on the northeastern coast of Sri Lanka. Located by Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, in the heart of the Indian Ocean, its strategic importance has shaped its history. There have been many sea battles to control the harbour. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and the British have each held it in turn. In 1942, the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked Trincomalee harbour and sank three British warships anchored there.

⁵⁴ Diplomatic ties with China were established in 1957.

geopolitical scenario. Both India and China, to date, are hotly contesting to include Sri Lanka in their sphere of influence. Indian defense parameters have always included Sri Lanka, like Bangladesh.

However, there are voices within Sri Lanka who would bargain for China rather than India. As one of the Sri Lankan scholars, Werake (1990, p. 65), puts it, “From the point of view of small states of South Asia, a stronger presence of China as a countervailing force is a desirable phenomenon given the growing and unquestionable supremacy of India in the region.”

Many South Asian researchers concluded that the Tamil revolt was a product of the Indian intelligence agencies for ‘Tamil Eelam’ to limit access to Trincomalee naval facilities in the northeast. Since 1962, Indian geopoliticians have believed that China’s geopolitical concept around the Indian Ocean encirclement of India and Sri Lanka is in the loop, more so after the development of the Southern deep-water port of Hambantota⁵⁵, which was leased to China for 99 years. Currently, Sri Lanka’s geopolitics is oscillating between China-India rivalry in the Indian Ocean.

⁵⁵ The Hambantota International Port is a deep water port in South Sri Lanka, which has been built and leased to China on a 99-year lease. Opened in 2010, it is Sri Lanka’s second largest port, after Colombo.

Conclusion

In 1947, the subcontinent was partitioned by the British Raj into two countries, India and Pakistan. Pakistan, divided into the West and the East, occupied strategic grounds. West Pakistan's location denied India direct access to the Middle East and Central Asia, and on the other hand, then East Pakistan acted as a wedge between the Indian North East and the rest of India, with access only through the Siliguri corridor.

Nevertheless, throughout the first decade of the independence of the subcontinent, particularly, the India-Pakistan conflict over the Kashmir dispute and Tibet, contiguous on the Indian Himalayan border as the PLA (Peoples' Liberation Army) took over China and the communist regime was firmly in power. China then occupied, so to say, 'self-administered Tibet,' converting the Tibet border into a Communist China border, breathing on India's neck. Conversely, Indo-Pak relations were rocking as an after-effect of a short war between the two over Kashmir in 1948. This fact also further created geopolitical difficulties for Indian policymakers.

Both the newly independent countries had essentially anti-communist regimes. India was led by Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru, who was trying to help countries that were still independent through a couple of neutral organizations to keep away from contesting superpowers, such as the USA and the USSR.

Mr. Nehru established himself as a champion of anti-colonialism, first through the Bandung conference and then through the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Yet, Mr. Nehru was engulfed by the emerging scenario across the Himalayas in the North, particularly in Tibet, as China 'forced' to integrate the autonomous region of Tibet within the mainland based on the old historical claim. Soon, India fell into a territorial dispute with China.

The USA evaluated the Chinese move in Tibet as a challenge and continued clandestine operations with the help of Pakistan. With the emerging China-Tibet CIA (USA) Tangle, the entire geopolitical scenario for India and South Asia changed, particularly after 1959 when Tibet's ruler and spiritual leader, Dalai Lama, fled with his diehard followers to India through NEFA. The Chinese were infuriated as India, and Mr. Nehru gave a rousing reception to the Dalai Lama to demonstrate to the world the Chinese brutality against the Tibetans and the Buddhist followers of the Dalai Lama.

Dalai Lama's welcome and asylum in India added to the consternation and Sino-Indian disagreement over colonial border demarcations of the Johnson Line in the west and the McMahon Line in the northeast. It was in October 1962 when both countries fought a short but bloody war in which India suffered an inglorious defeat, losing a large part of the land in Aksai Chin. China gained what it aimed for, declared

a unilateral ceasefire, and withdrew from all occupied land of NEFA in the East. By the unilateral ceasefire and withdrawal from NEFA, China wanted to be recognized as a benevolent rising Asian power. The 1962 Sino-Indian War brought India close to the USA. Having failed to persuade the US administration to mediate on the Kashmir issue, Pakistan's strongman Field Marshal Muhammad Ayub Khan, who had seized power in a military coup, inclined towards China and settled the border dispute of the Northern area.

However, the Sino-Indian War of 1962 established China as a major player in the South Asian and Indian Ocean region. Still, the defeat has been ingrained in the national psyche of India to date. As Riedel (2015, p. 168) puts it, "The events of autumn of 1962 created a balance of power, the alliance structure, and the arms race that still prevails today in Asia". Nevertheless, South Asia, despite the environment of the Cold War, was subsumed in Sino-Indian complex relations and polarized regional countries. As the decade passed, the changed geopolitics around Sino-Indian rivalry further accentuated and subsumed the countries of the region with lingering effects.

South Asia – 1962 to 1972

As was evident that the geopolitics of the subcontinent changed drastically after the Sino-Indian War of 1962 which has the lingering shadow of complicated geopolitics even in recent years.

With Mr. Nehru's death in 1964, Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri became the Prime Minister of India and leaned towards the USSR for re-equipping the Indian Armed Forces. Meanwhile, Pakistan had mended its fences with China by settling the border issue and handing over strategic northern Saksham valley in 1963. Ayub Khan also planned a Sino-Pak joint venture and laid the plan to connect China through the Karakoram Highway through the Karakoram Mountain ranges.

In the 1960s, the entire Asia was going through a rapid geopolitical whirlwind as the USA was engulfed heavily in Indochina (Vietnam War) in March 1965 (Tucker, 2011). But the USA had committed earlier, as with the withdrawal from Vietnam after its defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the UN-sponsored division of Vietnam into the North and the South. After the death of Kennedy, President Johnson continued his anti-communist drive in Indo-China that took the attention away from the subcontinent. Vietnam, throughout its conflict, remained a battlefield of the bipolar world.

1965 Indo-Pak War. Amidst the US war in Vietnam and the ongoing Cold War, the subcontinent was facing a serious situation between Pakistan and India. That was the time when Sino-Pak relations were warming, particularly after Ayub Khan visited Beijing, where the issue of the resolution of Kashmir came up (Khan, 2013, p. 42). Ayub had planned to invade Kashmir in two stages, initially with irregular forces followed by regular forces, analogous to the border, subdued border war in the Sind-Gujarat border over Raan of Kutch in April 1965.

Pakistan attacked Indian Kashmir in September 1965, but Johnson's administration suspended all military supplies to both countries and tried to broker a ceasefire. And so did the USSR. Ayub Khan still hoped for Chinese intervention. China did not take the side but gathered troops along the Sikkim border with the intention, as CIA estimated, to roll down through Chicken Neck had India attacked the then East Pakistan, but India did not plan any military operation in the eastern part (Ridel, 2015, p. 166; Graver, 2001, p. 202). Not attacking East Pakistan was also a strategy adopted by India to indicate that India did not quarrel with the Bengalis.

However, the Indo-Pak war, at best, was a draw. A ceasefire agreement was signed by both the countries in Tashkent, then the USSR in the presence of Ayub Khan of Pakistan, Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Prime Minister of India, and Aleksey N Kosygin, the USSR

premier as the mediator on 10 January 1966. The following night, the Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri died of a heart attack, and he was replaced by the daughter of Nehru, Ms. Indira Gandhi.

In the aftermath of the 1965 war, the USA stopped armed supplies to both Pakistan and India, forcing a geopolitical shift in the subcontinent. India became closer to the USSR and Pakistan to China mainly for military supplies. The war of 1965 also weakened Pakistan's economy and political dynamics. This event gave rise to the Bengali nationalism.

1971 A Year of Upheaval: Geopolitical Shift in Subcontinent and South Asia.

Birth of Bangladesh and Geopolitics of the Region

1970-1971 was one of the most geopolitically stormy years that permanently changed Asia's geopolitics. The birth of Bangladesh against the Pakistani military junta, and its killing machine to suppress the legitimate demand of the elected government and the preponderance of the Bengali majority party. The bloody birth of Bangladesh was a significant geostrategic change in the region since WWII. The nine-month freedom fight ended with 90,000 Pakistani troops and civilians surrendering to the Indian commander, who was the head of the combined forces.

The independence of Bangladesh acted as a catalyst in changing the geopolitics of the region, as Raghavan says, "All in all, by creating large and populous Bangladesh from East Pakistan, the 1971 war was a most significant geopolitical event in the subcontinent since partition in 1947 and tilted the balance of power between India and Pakistan in India's favour" (Raghavan, 2013, p. 8). India became the sole powerful country in the region and Asia, and it also resolved the strategic handicap that resulted from the partition of India. India had taken a hard lesson from the 1962 Sino-Indian war of its

geostrategic constraints about the logistical criticality of North East India.

It was during the Bangladesh Liberation War that India went close to the then-Soviet Union. India, on August 12, 1971, signed a 'peace and friendship treaty' for 25 years, which was more towards mutual security as the Sino-US support of Pakistan might pose a more significant threat toward India over Bangladesh. In this regard, Dixit writes, "Indo-Soviet agreement on peace and friendship and cooperation that contained most importantly security cooperation of any threat to (*sic*) each other (Dixit, 1999, p. 52-53). It is said that India wanted a 'similar treaty with China but later disregarded.'⁵⁶ Point to note that on March 19, 1972, the newly independent Bangladesh signed a similar treaty with India known as the 'Indo-Bangla Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace' also known as the Indira-Mujib Treaty⁵⁷.

Almost at the same time, the Indo-Soviet treaty was being contemplated when the Sino-US rapprochement was about to cement. Dr. Henry Kissinger's journey through Pakistan was a historic event before the Sino-US summit in July 1971. This was one of the main reasons the US could not actively support the

⁵⁶ Ramesh Jairam interview lives: PN Haksar and Indira Gandhi (Simon and Schuster; 2018; p222)

⁵⁷ Two of the clauses (viiI) and (ix) were regarded as the most significant. It expired in 1997 but the Bangladesh government declined to renew the same.

Bangladesh movement, as he (Kissinger) admits, ‘We were profoundly grateful for Pakistan’s role as the channel to China’ (Kissinger, 1979, p. 848).

However, centering the liberation war of Bangladesh, the polarization of geopolitics of the region made a tectonic shift. For the first time, the Indo-Soviet treaty on one hand and the Sino-US reproachment on the other brought a cold war in this region. It also changed Indian policy from non-alignment to alignment with Cold War warriors. As Menon puts it, the Sino-US reproach affected India’s conduct in the Bangladesh crisis and subcontinental geopolitics. As Shekhar Gupta, a geopolitical freelance expert of India, puts it, ‘There was no surprise, then, that the Non-Aligned Movement that Nehru founded had a distinctly anti-Western (American) slant. If any *pretense* of NAM being truly non-aligned remained, Indira Gandhi finished it with not only a more pronounced pro-Soviet slant but also by signing the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation with Moscow’.⁵⁸

Then, with India and Cuba as its leading lights, NAM was almost entirely a proxy for the Soviet Bloc. It also changed the nature of the Cold War and affected the broader geopolitics of Asia’ (Menon, 2021, p. 137). It was during this year in November when

⁵⁸ **SHEKHAR GUPTA** Modi has exhumed Nehru’s Global South. Which fails the test of geography, geopolitics, and economics, The Print, 23 August 2023

China replaced Taiwan as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto power. Unfortunately, because of its closeness with Pakistan, China refrained from supporting Bangladesh's liberation movement. On the other hand, China first used veto power to prevent Bangladesh's entry into the UN until 1974. Ultimately, the same year, on September 17, 1974, Bangladesh was admitted as a full member of UNGA.

Soon after its independence on December 16, 1971, the first country that recognized Bangladesh was Bhutan on December 6, 1971, followed by India on the same day. By January 1972, most of the Soviet bloc countries, East Europe, and a few Latin American countries recognized Bangladesh. Iraq, amongst the Arabs and known to be an important Muslim country, accorded recognition. The Soviet Union recognized Bangladesh on 25 January 1972. Although the USA did not support the full independence of Bangladesh, as stated earlier, 'perhaps as moral support to the Pakistani troops who by then were in the jaws of defeat,' it did not go well with the people of Bangladesh, though the government of the founder father Sk. Mujibur Rahman welcomed the recognition of the USA in a few months on April 4, 1972.

Foreign Policy of Bangladesh (1971-1975)

Bangabandhu Sk. Mujibur Rahman formulated the foreign policy 'Friendship to All Malice to None,' which was known as a mantra to non-aligned countries, and had active participation in the movement, which had some credence during the height of the Cold War. Yet Dixit (1999) writes that a twist in foreign policy came after 1973, when Bangladesh joined the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) with Pakistani recognition in 1974 and attended the conference in Lahore, Pakistan. This singular event opened the gate to enhancing relations with Muslim countries, thus distancing them from India (Dixit, 1999, p. 173-174). He further opines, "Sk. Mujibur Rahman failed to fashion Bangladeshi foreign policy in a manner that would ensure a positive equation with India" (Dixit, 1999, p. 179).

Though Bangabandhu had a preponderance of relations with the Soviet bloc and Soviet Russia, he showed his inclination toward the right wing. He visited the US for the first time to attend the UNGA in September 1974, but he was appointed to visit the White House to meet President Gerald Ford in the first week of October 1974. These were perhaps the first signs of a shift in Bangladesh's geopolitics, getting closer to the other superpower. The founding stone that Bangabandhu laid was much to be independent since his participation in OIC. In this

regard, Dixit (1999) states that Mujib was trying to project Bangladesh as a Muslim country “to enhance the quality and quantity of economic assistance to Bangladesh from Muslim countries” of the Middle East and normalize relations with China (pp. 224-225).

Yet, a drastic shift in Bangladesh’s initial geopolitics came about after the tragic event of August 1975 and thereafter when General Ziaur Rahman took power after the bloody counter-coup on 7th November 1975. It was during Zia’s time that Bangladeshi geopolitics started shaping ‘away from India’. ‘He structured a closer relationship with China⁵⁹ and US, and cultivated relations with Islamic countries though his approach with Pakistan was reserved and cautious” (Dixit, 1999, p. 240). Though no strategic relations with China were developed, the Soviet influence dwindled to a great extent. Zia developed a very close affinity with the Islamic world so much that Bangladesh was taken as one of the members of the Al Quds committee to mediate between Iraq and Iran. Till his assassination, Zia was one of the three members of the Islamic peace committee⁶⁰ appointed by the OIC. This gave Bangladesh a wide acceptance in the Islamic world.

⁵⁹ China recognized Bangladesh on August 31, 1975

⁶⁰ Islamic peace committee with eight members 1980, prominent among Ziaur Rahman president of Bangladesh, Zia ul Haque President of Pakistan, and Ahmed Sekou Toure president of Guinea.

Ziaur Rahman's concept of the South Asian Association for Cooperation (SAARC) was initially put forward to seven South Asian countries to form an association mainly for economic and other cooperation, a unique foreign policy initiative. The concept was proposed to all South Asian countries from December 1980 to January 1981. Then the Indian Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi suspected that countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan may gang up opposing Indian policy in the region (ibid, p. 242). The concept took almost 5 years to bring it to life. But by then, Bangladesh and India had leadership changes to General HM Ershad and Mr. Rajiv Gandhi in India. SAARC was one of the best concepts to collectively deal with economic and other cooperative ventures within and outside the region. But it died because of India-Pakistan animosity both in geopolitics and strategic level.

South Asia in Turmoil.

The events in Asia and elsewhere globally between 1975 and the next three decades caused the world to face new geopolitical challenges. These challenges affected South Asia immensely. The decades of the Non-Aligned Movement were dying their natural death as pioneering countries lost interest in the dying era of the Cold War. US withdrawal in 1973-1975 from Vietnam gave the Soviet Union in particular and China to cast their influence and

dominance in central and Southeast Asia in particular. But peace was yet to come in the Indo-Chinese region. Both Russia and China were busy extending their influence in a vacuum.

Afghan War and Turmoil in South Asia.

Afghanistan (now a member of SAARC), historically a land link between Central and South Asia, was going through political turmoil. The political chaos plunged this landlocked country after the overthrow of King Zahir Shah in 1973. A large number of refugees and resistance fighters took refuge in neighboring Pakistan. Soon, Afghanistan was plunged into a fight with pro-Soviet parties. It was a geopolitical nightmare for South Asia, particularly the subcontinental countries. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the new Pakistani leader after 1972, took the opportunity of the Afghan chaos to reset its geopolitical setback, losing the eastern half. Pakistan aimed to regain the impetus it lost in 1971 about the Kashmir issue (Cooley, 1999, p 2).

Ultimately, to settle the internal socialist party squabble, the Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan on December 25, 1979. It was an earthquake in South Asian geopolitics.

Bhutto was deposed, and Pakistan came under the martial law of General Zia-ul-Haq. After the Vietnam debacle, the USA got an opportunity to return to South Asian geopolitics. It mastered most

of the Islamic countries with a cry of 'Jihad'. The struggle ended after 10 years in 1989, leaving non-Afghan Jihadists to fashion respective countries' internal crises with acts of terrorism to establish Puritan Islam. The crisis was not yet over, and it was the CIA and ISI of Pakistan that created another monster known as *Taliban 1*.

By the time the Soviets had to withdraw from Afghanistan in 1989, it marked the end of the Soviet Union. This was also the period when China began to emerge in Afro-Asian geopolitics.

However, the Afghan crisis was not over yet. In September 2001, the New York Twin Tower was allegedly attacked by an organization, a by-product of Afghan Jihad, Al Qaida. The USA tested its strategic defeat in Afghanistan, and the Taliban were back in the rule of Afghanistan. The current situation and sudden withdrawal of the USA have put both Pakistan and India in geopolitical complexity. For China, a new opportunity arose to cast its influence along with Pakistan and a new challenge for India (Abbas, 2023,4 p. 7)

Nuclearisation of Subcontinent

It was India that saw the immense potentiality of the peaceful use of nuclear as a source of energy soon after the first-ever nuclear explosion in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Mr. Homi J. Bhabha, a young scientist from India, convinced Mr. Nehru, much before the independence in 1947, of the potentiality of nuclear in its peaceful application. India established its nuclear research center soon after independence (Menon, 2021, pp. 116-117). Whereas Nehru was never inclined to turn India into a nuclear power, he did not close the door to developing nuclear arms.

The scenario started changing as soon as the aftermath of the Sino-India War of 1962, increased hostility with Pakistan, and the detection by the USA that China was developing nuclear weapons for a test (Riedel, 2015, p. 168). Ultimately, when China tested its nuclear weapon on 16th October 1964, Mr. Nehru's appeal to the world, including the UN, failed with no heed (Graver, 2001, p. 117). After the Chinese explosion, Mr. Nehru came under internal pressure to resort to nuclear weapons, but Mr. Nehru did not budge from his decisions (Dixit, 1998, p. 95). Upon Mr. Nehru's death in 1964, his successor, Mr. Lal Bahadur Shastri, sought umbrella protection from nuclearized big powers, particularly the USA, USSR, and UK, for non-nuclear countries in defence

but with no positive response yet he did not budge from Nehruvian policy.

It was after 1965 that PM Indira Gandhi, who had refused to sign the NPT, decided to go nuclear and ultimately exploded the weapon in a test on May 18, 1974 (Riedel, 2015, p. 170).

Soon, Pakistan tested its weapon on May 28, 1998, a week after India's second test⁶¹. Being a nuclear power country and as a result of the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, India grew into the 'rising power status' in regional and Asian geopolitics.

However, unlike India, Pakistan's nuclear weapon test was not received by the more prominent countries of the world. The Chagai-I tests were condemned by the European Union (EU), the United States, Japan, and the OIC countries. The United Nations condemned Ganges' water for Bangladesh and signed two memoranda of understanding on water sharing in 1982 and 1985 (Partha, 1982, p. 7). However, Ershad's relationship with the Soviet Union was not as close as that of Zia's regime.

One of the biggest achievements of Ershad in the international arena was supporting Western efforts to lend support to Kuwait in 1990. He responded by sending troops under the United Nations to Kuwait for rebuilding after an invasion of Iraq. That event opened the gate for Bangladesh forces in the UN

⁶¹ From, *Pakistan nuclear weapon*; Archived, 20-02-2007 as retrieved on 22-02-2022

peacekeeping around the world, including sending in a UN observer mission in the Balkans followed by a peace mission⁶². It was a big foreign policy success for Bangladesh and enhanced its geopolitical status.

Restoration of Democracy in 1991

Khaleda Zia, the wife of the slain president Zia, came to power through democratic elections. But by then, the world witnessed the most significant geopolitical shift, the dissolution of the Soviet Union on September 26, 1991. This single event shook the entire world, including South Asia.

‘The Soviet Collapse and US preoccupation at home and in the Middle East left field open for steady growth of Chinese influence in Southeast Asia and Indo-China’ (Menon, 2019, p. 189).

In Bangladesh, a political change occurred as Ershad had fallen to a mass demonstration to restore democracy. It was Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), set up by late President Zia, who came to power through a popular vote. Khaleda Zia almost maintained the policy of Zia, and to some extent of Ershad, as far as relations with the Middle

⁶² The Daily Star, 2 May 1992 Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/bangladesh-un-contingent-peacekeeping-mission-bosnia-herzegovina-1539982><https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/bangladesh-un-contingent-peacekeeping-mission-bosnia-herzegovina-1539982> as on 12 December 2023

East, the USA, and the West were concerned. She maintained a steady relationship with the USA, which was established during the rule of Zia and followed by Ershad's regime.

“At home, the Khaleda Zia government strengthened its power base in collusion and cooperation with the religious, political elements who had a clear anti-people role in 1971 and who up to 1977 had been banned from politics”.⁶³ Begum Zia's regime had an anti-Indian stance in comparison to Ershad's policy, as India would look at it. However, in her regime, the policy leaned more towards the West and China to increase economic cooperation. Gradually, China became one of the strong tactical partners. It was during her regime that bilateral relations came under strain due to violent reactions in Bangladesh as repercussions of the Ayodhya incident of December 6, 1992'⁶⁴.

Nevertheless, it was also during Begum Khaleda Zia's regime that the first ever large-scale violent extremists surfaced through simultaneous bombing in 63 of 64 districts, claimed by 'Jagroto Muslim Janata' (JMB) followed by a suicidal attack against

⁶³ The banned parties were, the Council Muslim League, Convention Muslim League, and Jamaat-e-Islam. For more details, see Barun De and R. Samander *Ed. State Development and Political Culture: Bangladesh and India*. 1997. South Asian Publishers; New Delhi. pp. 82-83.

⁶⁴ Annual Report, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. 1992-93. p. 17

courts in Gazipur district. The rise of such violent extremists put Bangladesh's geopolitical standing under strain.

One of the most damaging incidents occurred when, in 2004, almost 10 truckloads of armament were hauled while unloading allegedly under government patronage which was brought by Indian North East separatist insurgents of the state of Assam. The government of Khaleda Zia was accused of aiding and supporting Indian insurgents. This single event seriously damaged and deteriorated the relations between Bangladesh with India.

The rise of violent extremists culminated after the gruesome event of the Holey Artisan Bakery attack by the followers of the Islamic State. The terrorist organization killed 29 people in July 2016, including 20 hostages, out of which 17 were foreigners. The period was during the second term of the government of Sk. Hasina.

The Awami League, under Sheikh Hasina, first came to power in 1975 through the 1996 elections. Her tenure was marked by strengthening relations with neighboring India. One of the remarkable achievements of the Hasina government was the historic peace agreement with Shanti Bahini, with India's positive help. This officially terminated insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts for more than three decades. The Awami League government's foreign policy was much tilted

towards India, yet Bangladesh maintained a steady relationship with Russia and with the West. However, China had a special relationship with Bangladesh that was similar to previous regimes under the maxim of ‘friendship to all, malice to none’.

Skeikh Hasina came to power for the second time in the 2008 election and continued to rule to date through several questionable elections. Hasina’s regime continued to focus on Indo-centric foreign policy and cooperated with India to relieve her (India) geostrategic constraints of connecting the Northeast with the rest of India.

However, Bangladesh did not pay much attention to the East, especially its only neighbor, Myanmar. Bangladesh did not take notice of Myanmar’s geopolitical importance in South and Southeast Asia. It is not only the Awami League (AL) but Bangladesh’s external policy was also west-oriented except for Japan in the East and later China in the North. However, Myanmar’s (Burma) geopolitical importance and relevance to Bangladesh’s geopolitics were not considered much until August 2017. Around 1.1 million Rohingyas of Myanmar were evicted from their homes and took refuge in southeastern Bangladesh near Cox’s Bazar district. They were subject to merciless persecution and were victims of the worst genocide of the 21st century. Bangladesh was caught unawares and gave

humanitarian shelter to the Rohingyas in anticipation of settled repatriation.

The repatriation of Myanmar refugees is turning into a geopolitical nightmare, particularly after announcing the Burma Act (2021-2022), which supports the National Unity Government fighting to establish democracy in Myanmar against the military junta. Since then, Myanmar pro-democratic organizations under the banner of the People's Defense Force (PDF) fighting the junta army along with old insurgent organizations have been promised to be helped through the Burma Act by the USA.

Currently, in the backyard of Bangladesh in Rakhine state, Buthidaung, Mangadu, and Rathedaung, the Arakan Army (AA), a prime insurgency group, is fighting the government troops. These events and the Sino-Indian rivalry in the Rakhine state along the eastern coast complicate Bangladesh's regional geopolitics. The emerging geostrategic complexity around the neighboring Rakhine State involving China, India, and the USA has put Bangladesh, in particular, and South Asia, in general, into the changing geopolitical quagmire for the future.

South Asia/Indian Subcontinent - Attempted Cooperation

The subcontinent, because of its historical burden of colonialism, division on a religious basis, and post-colonial perennial animosity, did not allow the region to be one single geopolitical entity. Due to the intra-state complex relationship, Indo-Pak conflict and Sino-Indian rivalry compound with security issues, and 'Indian hegemonic' policies did not allow any cooperative organization to function in South Asia. The SAARC was established in 1985, and aimed at promoting regional cooperation and integration. However, it is defunct or dysfunctional now after India withdrew its participation in the summit of 2016 as a result of alleged Pakistani involvement in an attack on an Indian army camp in Kashmir.

The revival of SAARC would benefit the smaller countries of South Asia by relieving geopolitical tensions. In this regard, Liladhar Upadhyaya of the Nepalese daily 'The Rising Nepal' says, 'Once the regional forums are revitalized, the countries face little geopolitical pressure. They can work together to reduce poverty through investment in trade, energy, water resources, and tourism. They can benefit from railway connectivity, and landlocked nations like Nepal should strive to have access to the

sea'⁶⁵ Even alternatively, BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar Economic Corridor) has gone quiescent for the deteriorating Sino-Indian border issues. Similarly, BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar) motor connectivity did not materialize, as India and Nepal did not sign. In simple terms, security issues and distrust have jeopardized a regional geopolitical approach to other issues.

India considers China to be a rival to its global ambition to cast influence in Afro-Asian countries. One such example is asking India to remove its naval facilities from the Maldives after the regime change after the elections of 2023 in that country. In fact, analysts suggest that India has lost ground in that strategically important archipelago.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ The Rising Nepal, Tuesday, 19 December 2023

⁶⁶ Anjana Paricha: *India Loses Ground in Maldives*: retrieved from <https://www.voanews.com/a/india-loses-ground-in-maldives/7366971.html>, dated 22 December 2023

China in South Asia

As China challenged India, it changed its equation with the USA and the West since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this respect, Menon (2019) explains, “India’s biggest strategic challenge today is managing its relationship with China and dealing with the consequences of the Chinese rise. The former has to be done with China; the latter must include other powers that share India’s interest” (p. 333).

However, India feels that China is trying to encircle India as China is seen to challenge India’s rise in South Asia and is trying to dominate the Indian Ocean by strengthening its naval power to a Blue Water Navy, according to Manvik Raj⁶⁷. According to Manvik, China increased its presence and strengthened its strategy through the CPEC and projects Gwadar, Hambantota, Kyaukpyu, Malacca, Penang, and Djibouti with massive investment.

China and Nepal share huge northern borders. China has recently been involved in constructing considerable dams to meet Nepal’s rising electricity demands and surplus to export. Renowned Indian strategic expert Brahma Chellaney analyzed this issue in-depth, ‘Between China and Nepal, in 2021, the deal to develop hydropower projects on the

⁶⁷ Dr. Manvik Raj: *Challenges in South Asia; Can India Ride the Tide?* Indian Defence Review; 17 December 2023

Marsyangdi River was set in vogue. China has always tried to bolster the communist bloc in Nepal through two communist parties. However, various issues like the Tibet refugee movement have factored into the incline with China. Nevertheless, India has been working with various governments in Nepal since the '1950s (under the Treaty of Peace and Friendship)'. While the Nepal policy is a constant work in progress, for the Indian government, its worry about the Chinese on the road to Nepal makes India uneasy, especially when the Nepalese communist parties are in power.

Nepal is steadily and seemingly getting closer to China, even though India abhors such a geopolitical shift of a geostrategically important country. Yet, in 2017, Nepal signed China's BRI framework agreement. China, in keeping with the framework, in 2019 planned the Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, which includes a cross-border railway. The project is still in feasibility study stage⁶⁸. Meanwhile, two mini-projects have been penned in the outcome of 'the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), which concluded on October 18 in Beijing'. This means that Nepal has been taken as

⁶⁸ Retrieved from <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/10/29/two-projects-of-nepal-listed-as-belt-and-road-outcome>; as on 29 December 2023

an important South Himalayan sovereign country since late Mao's claim of one of the five 'fingers of China'.

Pakistan's relationship, as is evident, has grown stronger since 1963 and the laying and opening of the most strategic Karakoram Highway. As China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is further facilitated with a rail link to Gwadar, also planned to link Afghanistan. CPEC is also viewed as part of China's Belt Road Initiative (BRI) launched in March 2013 with a vision of a global community shared future of China. It is said that China would spend \$160 billion each year. South, South Asia, and the subcontinent, particularly countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, joined the BRI with flagship projects. Pakistan is the bulwark of Chinese strategic ambition and the pillar of BRI. BRI is planned to incorporate Afghanistan, extending CPEC.

Bhutan remains one of India's closest neighbors to China. China's relations with Bhutan are much in the realm of the Sino-Indian strategic contest in South Asia. In October 2021, the Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister and Bhutanese Foreign Minister signed a 'Memorandum of Understanding on the "Three-Step Roadmap" for accelerating the Sino-Bhutan border negotiations by video in Beijing and Thimphu, respectively in 2017, after the *Doklam* stand-off,

Bhutan was drawn into an untimely disposition with China⁶⁹. However, Bhutan remains the country with ‘special relations’ with India,⁷⁰ much like a historical treaty with the British Raj. “Bhutan-China relations are constrained also by Bhutan’s close relationship with India. Nonetheless, relations with China have improved following China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Generally, Bhutan seeks balance with its larger neighbors China and India to avoid dependency on either country”⁷¹.

Strategically located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, **Sri Lanka** has remained a geostrategically important island nation. This island country is undoubtedly embedded with India’s Indian Ocean strategy. According to Indian geopolitical analysts, Sri Lanka is very much within the sphere of India’s maritime security. As the country grew stronger ties

⁶⁹ Dr. Manvik Raj: Opcit

⁷⁰ The Indian government constrains Bhutan and needs India’s approval when developing diplomatic relations with other countries. Bhutan has no diplomatic relations with any of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. It is the only UN member state worldwide that has not established diplomatic relations with either the People’s Republic of China or the Republic of China. It is the only country of the PRC’s bordering neighbors that does not have diplomatic relations with them.

⁷¹ Alfred, Gerstl (2023). “China in its Immediate Neighborhood”. In Kironka, Kristina; Turscanyi, Richard Q. (eds.). *Contemporary China: a New Superpower?* Routledge. ISBN 978-1-03-239508-

with China, it was seen as inimical to India's security and the USA's 'Indo-Pacific Strategy.' However, in recent decades, because of anti-Indian sentiment and politics, China emerged as a major partner for Sri Lanka's infrastructure projects with the BRI initiative. The country is said to have fallen into a debt trap leasing the southernmost newly built deep-sea port of Hambantota with Chinese assistance. However, the new government started to lessen its dependence on China. Yet a joint statement issued in Beijing by Wickremesinghe in October 2023 while attending the third Belt and Road Initiative Forum International Cooperation said, "Sri Lanka reiterated it will continue to actively participate in the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China".

Meanwhile, the USA entered Sri Lanka with the announcement of a \$553 million project to build a deep-water container terminal in the Port of Colombo, competing with China. Even though Sri Lanka would like to increase security and strategic and economic ties with the USA, it has not yet endorsed fully the entire concept of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, as the US and India want.

However, Sri Lanka's economic woe has been in the process of immediate easing with loans from neighboring countries including Bangladesh. The international financial institutions had to rescue the new government from an unprecedented economic disaster in the country's history. The economic crisis

apparently cropped up due to the Chinese ‘debt crisis’ and its economic woe shifting the geopolitics of Sri Lanka.

Maldives, an Indian Ocean archipelago in the South of the Arabian Sea, is strategically located among the small states of South Asia. It has, however, enhanced its geostrategic status as it entered the Maritime Silk Route of BRI in September 2014⁷². The two countries signed MOUs on tourism, energy, and marine cooperation, but China went into infrastructural development. China’s flagship development was rebuilding Velana International Airport, a world-class international airport, once detached from the capital, Male, by sea and connected with a 1.39 km long Sinamale bridge (known as China-Maldives Friendship Bridge)⁷³ at the cost of US \$210 million.

India, a counterweight to Chinese incursion in the very vital area of the Indian Ocean and the Laccadive Sea, was not happy with the situation. So did Australia and Japan’s allyship with the USA. It

⁷² Retrieved from;

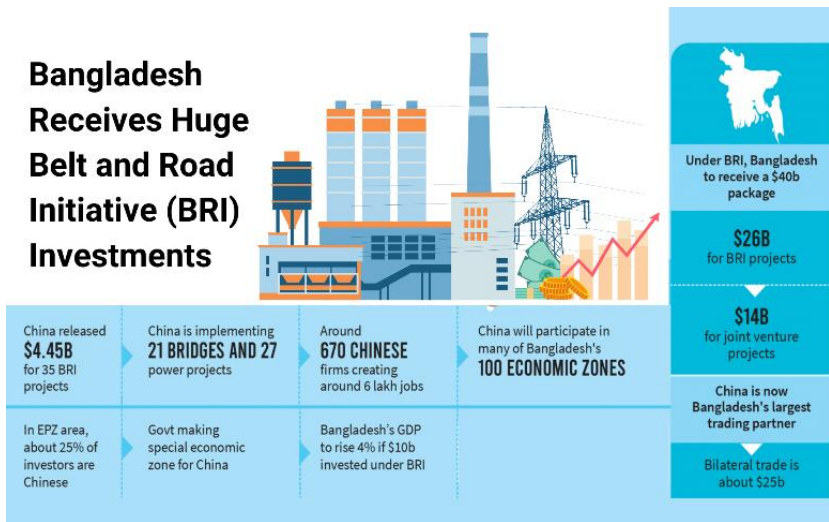
https://briwatch.info/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/NEwnl-maldives_59128382.pdf; as on 01 January 2024

⁷³ China and Maldives: Partners in Building 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Together. Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Maldives, Retrieved from http://mv.chinaembassy.gov.cn/eng/mytz/201501/t20150116_1623741.html; as on 01 January 2024

seems that Maldivians were torn between the Sino-Indian jostle, but the presence of small Indian troops around Delhi-sponsored aircraft surveillance radar stations to help Indian ships at the EEZ of Maldives became a bone of contention. President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of the Maldivian Democratic Party brought the country closer to India than China. Hundreds of various treaties, including a few on security issues, were signed over the period and would come under scrutiny by the current government. On the contrary, whenever the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) and its allies ruled, the country came closer to China. When Mr. Mohamed Muizzu was selected for the presidency in 2023, his first act was to request India to withdraw its troops from the soil of Maldives. Nevertheless, the geopolitics of Maldives may revolve around Sino-India domination through domestic politics.

Bangladesh was the first South Asian country to join the initiative formally. Since then, the Belt and Road Initiative has injected impetus into Bangladesh's economic growth, improved the infrastructure, and improved the livelihood of Bangladeshi people. China has promised \$26 billion for a BRI project and \$14 billion for a joint venture, a total of \$40 billion. Already, \$4.45 billion was spent on infrastructural

projects⁷⁴. Currently, Bangladesh’s foreign policy is heavily inclined towards China, though it seems that geopolitically, Bangladesh is trying to balance its relationship with China and its rival India.



Source: The Business Standard⁷⁵

China has also built a submarine base near Chittagong with complete Chinese cooperation at the cost of US\$1.21 billion. The base can accommodate a total of six submarines and eight warships at a

⁷⁴ Retrieved from [http://bd.chinaembassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202309/t20230922_1148266.htm#:~:text=Bangladesh%20is%20the%20first%20country,the%20livelihood%20of%20Bangladeshi%20people;as on 23 December 2023](http://bd.chinaembassy.gov.cn/eng/dshd/202309/t20230922_1148266.htm#:~:text=Bangladesh%20is%20the%20first%20country,the%20livelihood%20of%20Bangladeshi%20people;as%20on%2023%20December%202023)

⁷⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/how-chinas-belt-and-road-changing-bangladeshs-infrastructures-709826>

time. It will allow for safe and swift movement of the submarines in case of emergency, as the base is located at the Bay of Bengal⁷⁶.

It is Myanmar that provides China BRI connections with the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) and the deep-sea multi-purpose port at Kyaukphyu. The port is a vital BRI project with a multi-modal communication system connecting Kunming, China. Sino-Myanmar relations have risen at the geopolitical level since Myanmar's (BURMA) pre-independence period. Currently, Myanmar is going through a heightened civil war that involves the Rakhine state, having a small but crucial common border with Bangladesh. The anti-junta rebel group in Myanmar supported by the pro-democracy People's Defence Force (PDF) has put China in a strategic quagmire in North and West Myanmar. It is anticipated that Bangladesh will become geopolitically more important to the USA and the West to counter China and BRI. India is a bulwark in IPS (Indo-Pacific Strategy) and QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), led by the USA and the members of Australia, India, and Japan,

⁷⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/glorious-chapter-starts-bangladeshs-first-submarine-base-pm-hasina-602586>; dated as on 20 March 2023

essentially an anti-China group. India is the other powerful country besides the USA.

Bangladesh Relations with the Rest of the World.

Bangladesh had continued relations with the Soviet Union since the recognition of Bangladesh in 1972 and continued to have closer ties with India. Interestingly, India and Bangladesh had a 25-year-old friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. Though relations with the Soviet Union became cooler after 1975, trade relations with Russia have improved and continued. Within its current regime, Russia had sold the first ever two nuclear power plants and went under construction in collaboration with Russia's state-owned atomic company Rosatom in a \$12.65 billion project. This project gave Russia an entry into the field of Bangladesh's geopolitics. The very fact that Bangladesh did not condemn in strong words the Russian invasion of Ukraine and prolonged war.

China Factor in Bangladesh's Geopolitics

External policies of Bangladesh became more pro-West. Relations with China became warmer and relations with the Middle East became more vibrant. Relations with the USA grew more assertive at the political level and with the cooperative 'Military Diplomacy' under which relations between the two Armed Forces grew more potent against the

backdrop of the first official visit by the Bangladeshi President, late Ziaur Rahman, in 1980⁷⁷.

But since 2008, the relationship started cooling down because of China's strong financial and military diplomatic support to the current Awami League (AL) regime. According to an estimate by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), a US think tank, 'the total investment from China in Bangladesh is \$7.07 billion'. In addition, Chinese companies have received construction contracts worth \$22.94 billion in different sectors. AEI further adds, 'from road to rail to seaport and airport, under-river tunnel to elevated expressway, water utility to e-governance, coal to solar energy, China makes its presence felt everywhere in Bangladesh with funds, technology, and expertise'⁷⁸.

Chinese footprint in Bangladesh is being carefully watched by not only the USA but also India, the friendliest neighbor, as Indian security is concerned about the sensitive area adjacent to the Siliguri Corridor or 'chicken neck'. That is the prime reason

⁷⁷ Retrieved from

<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/meeting-with-president-ziaur-rahman-bangladesh-remarks-following-the-meeting> as on 26 December 2023

⁷⁸ Abbas Uddin Noyon, Business Standard (October 1, 2023) How China's Belt and Road changing Bangladesh's economy and infrastructures; Retrieved from, <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/how-chinas-belt-and-road-changing-bangladeshs-infrastructures-709826> as on 27 Dec 2023

that the Chinese mega proposal of the Teesta project in North Bangladesh, within 100 km of the so-called ‘Chicken Neck’, is stuck. However, the report says that after the 2024 elections, the government may reconsider the issue as ‘China is (also) hopeful about starting the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project after the national elections’, said Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Yao Wen.

Neither the USA nor India approve of the Sino-Bangla economic cooperation to that extent. China, like other countries in South Asia, has a strong influence on the geostrategically important sub-Himalayan country, which puts India in a geostrategic nightmare. Indian policymakers took cognizance of Chinese strategic intentions and the ‘string of pearl’ theory.

Since US-led QUAD, known as Eastern NATO, is a military and political response to China’s South China Sea and Taiwan policy, many countries of South and South Asia, besides India did not respond to support. Therefore, the USA launched the concept of ‘The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS). Bangladesh was coaxed to join, which it did in early 2023 but declared its vision of IPS as the ‘Indo-Pacific Outlook’ (IPO) with the main theme of open Indo-Pacific waters instead of ‘Strategy’, which sounds aggressive. IPO did not satisfy the expectations of both India and the USA. The Indo-US geostrategy

and the geopolitical thrust of the region and beyond are very clear, with countries endorsing IPS/IPO to gang up against the rise of China as a military power in the Indo-Pacific region. While addressing this question, Professor Shahab Enam opines, ‘By no means IPO tend to fall into the trap of the myopic strategic calculus of power politics.’

During the current democratic party government of President Biden, the relations started souring while putting ‘sanctions on the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) in 2021. The US already declared a selective ‘visa policy’ or visa restriction on personnel found to be responsible for shrinking the liberal democratic process or found complicit in undermining the democratic process in Bangladesh ahead of the 2024 national polls.

The US intended policies for Bangladesh aim at the geopolitical equation rather than the issues mentioned above. It is more on reducing ever-increasing Chinese influence in one of the important Bay of Bengal littorals. Bangladesh also has to watch the rapid internal development in Myanmar, particularly in Myanmar’s Rakhine state, home of Rohingya ‘refugees’ now sheltered in the east of Bangladesh adjacent to the Rakhine state.

It seems that Bangladesh is within the complicated emerging South Asian geopolitical tangle between Sino-US and Sino-Indian. Though Bangladesh seems to have chartered through a seemingly

balanced path so far, its internal political dimension may create several hurdles in Bangladesh's declared foreign policy and increase the security interests of both India and the USA. In his article on Aljazeera, Sourabh Sen, a political analyst, opined that, during the AL government, "since 2010 China's influence has been growing....". As he continues, Beijing has strong strategic compulsions to turn Bangladesh into a state heavily dependent on it, like Myanmar and Cambodia". Ultimately, as he (Sen) further opines, "... Dhaka might struggle to balance India-China ties."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Retrieved from;
<http://www.ajjazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/4/bangladesh-elections-mark-a-pro-china-tipping-point-in-south-asia> as on January 5, 2024

Conclusion/Analysis

The geopolitics of the subcontinent, particularly South Asia, as analyzed and found by the study, has been shifting since the post-colonial era. India aspires not only to be an Afro-Asian power to reckon with but to be considered a global power. Its strategic positioning around the Indian Ocean and beyond gives it impetus to stride through.

Looking at the history of the region, India had to reckon with its geostrategic handicap both in the East and the West flanks. The war with Pakistan in 1948 and the loss of one-third of the disputed territory of Kashmir with the most strategic areas of Gilgit-Baltistan had put an odd equation with the Northern giant neighbor, China. The 1962 war with China over Tibet and disputed borders had shown India its weakness in establishing as a minimum a middle and regional power. The opportunity came to re-establish a bit of loss of glory and a chance to emerge as a dominant power in the South Asian region in 1971, helping create Bangladesh out of East Pakistan. The neighboring South Asian nations, including Pakistan and newly emerged Bangladesh to readjust their strategic and geopolitical thinking, keeping in view on one hand the rise of India and its conflict with emerging Asian Giant China on the other.

India became the regional hegemonic power ever since it acquired nuclear power to match China.

India's geopolitics in South Asia influenced all other nations. After the Soviet fall, South Asian orientation took a different turn mainly subsumed by the unipolar world under the USA.

Indo-Pakistan and Sino-Indian competitions and conflicts remained hurdles against any regional cooperative mechanism like SAARC. Sino-Indian strategic competition has yet to become a factor hindering the growth of another subregional cooperative mechanism like BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar) economic corridor and small organization of connectivity BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal), the connectivity is yet to see the light. Almost all the South Asian countries, barring India, have become part of BRI not only to find China as a developing partner but also as a counterweight to India's overture to domination.

India finds itself encircled by the so-called 'String of Pearls' in perceptive geopolitical structure, as Indian strategic analysts put it. Because of that fear, India joined and espoused the Indo-Pacific Strategy and joined QUAD⁸⁰ (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) initiated by the USA, particularly against Chinese domination of Indo-Pacific regions.

⁸⁰ Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) is an informal strategic forum consisting of the United States, India, Australia, and Japan. It serves as a platform for these countries to discuss regional security issues, defence cooperation, and common challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

Sino-Indian rivalry not only influenced South Asian countries to ally mostly with China but also the availability of Chinese funds they needed to develop. On the other hand, the mismatched consequences also affect the internal politics of small South Asian countries in one way or another; the recent election results and aftermath in Maldives are a case in perspective. The situation in South Asia calls for the entrance of ‘extra-regional powers’ other than China to enter the fray, such as an invitation to join the anti-China IPS and QUAD against China.

The Sino-Indian consternation is affecting internal politics, and in larger terms, recent elections in Bangladesh may bring closer, apart from India, China, and Russia, which may create friction with the USA and the West as IPO (Indo-Pacific Outlook). Not only internal politics but endorsing too much needed China-funded ‘Teesta River Water Management Project,’ a lifeline for economic growth of the Northern part of the country, may create a strategic and geopolitical complication with India and its strategic security concern. China is keen to wait for a green signal from the renewed Bangladesh government in 2024. If a decision is made to involve China in the project, Bangladesh has to consider Indian security concerns without any reservation.

Bangladesh’s relationship with the USA and the West is more economic, particularly the country’s RMG sector, the primary foreign currency earner,

dependent on the Western market. On the other hand, remittance earnings include mainly the Middle East, the US, and some European countries. Dhaka has yet to agree to and rule out the chance of signing the GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) and ACSA⁸¹ (Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement)⁸² vessels for a formal agreement of cooperation between the two forces.

For other South Asian nations, the Chinese BRI is seen as a counterweight to Indian domination, notwithstanding systemic Sino-US competition in the Indo-Pacific region, including South Asia. Nevertheless, the government of Pakistan's geopolitics would remain influenced by Indo-Pak constraints, China's CPEC, and US strategic concerns in Central Asia, though Pak-Afghan relations are at less than desired levels.

To conclude, for so long India has been a big influencing factor in shaping the geopolitics of other small South Asian countries, but China's economic rise combined with its increasing capacity to increase its sphere of influence through its foreign and

⁸¹ Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreements (ACSA) are negotiated bilaterally between the United States and its NATO allies or coalition partners that allow US forces to exchange the most common types of support, including food, fuel, transportation, ammunition, and equipment.

⁸² Retrieved from: <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/us-wants-2-defence-deals-bangladesh-1815466> as on 05 January 2024

economic policy and BRI provides a stronger alternative. Reportedly, China has committed to BRI over an estimated USD 150 billion.

It seems the Sino-India-US triangle has and will affect foreign policy and the formation of geopolitics in small South Asian nations, and non-aligned policies may go into obsolescence. In such circumstances, the external policies would remain uncertain with the emergence of a multi-polar power center. The policies of smaller countries would oscillate with the shift of power base in and outside the region. Though non-aligned policy may still be desired, in the uncertain future, internal and external policies of smaller states may be decided with the conflicting relations of regional and extra-regional powers.

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