

India's Neighbourhood Problems and Policy

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Introduction:

While considering India's neighbourhood policy there is often a tendency to discuss only bilateral issues and not analyse how much the leverage of superpowers influence South Asian reciprocal policies. Hence, I shall begin my analysis with the impact of superpowers in our region and how it affects mutual relations with our neighbourhood.

Role of superpowers in our neighbourhood policy:

In the beginning, India, along with like-minded governments in the region like Sri Lanka, wanted to keep superpowers away from South Asia following the Nehruvian non-aligned policy. In the 1960s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi started canvassing for declaring the Indian Ocean as a zone of peace since the naval deployment of US and Soviet Union in the Indian Ocean was causing regional tensions. However, it was Sri Lanka which managed to get a United Nations General Assembly Resolution (2832 XXVI) passed on 16 December 1971 which declared the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace together with the airspace above.

Following this the late R.N. Kao, founder of our external intelligence, managed to convince France to give us technical help through his personal friendship with Le Comte Alexandre de Maranches, then French external intelligence chief. He also persuaded Iran, then ruled by the Shah Pahlavi, to join the group which was named "Trilateral Group" in setting up a string of secret monitoring facilities on land and sea to keep close watch on the naval movements of superpowers which would affect our security. However, the defeat of Mrs. Indira Gandhi (1977) and overthrow of the Shah in Iran (1978) caused changes in policies and this arrangement had to be given up.

As long as the Soviet Union was actively mentoring Afghanistan till 1991, it was beneficial to India since a friendly Kabul government did not allow anti-Indian predatory activities by Pakistan using Afghan soil. This forced Pakistan, even with American strategic support, to be watchful on their Western border, which reduced their intelligence and force deployment against India.

However, this situation drastically changed with the demise of the Soviet Union, and also when India started supporting American naval presence in the renamed Indo-Pacific Ocean strategy (QUAD) to confront China, the rising superpower. Now our major concern is China's influence in South Asia and its efforts to "ring fence" India strategically by using its financial clout through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Role of China in influencing India's neighbours

From 2004 onwards American researchers have been cautioning India about China's "String of Pearls" encirclement efforts. This came true in 2013 when Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled his new global development strategy called "The Belt and Road Initiative" (The Silk Road Economic Belt of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road)

A Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) report on March 24, 2021, has said that 139 countries have joined BRI. This has brought considerable policy dilemmas for India, which is the only one in its neighbourhood not to have joined it. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, and Afghanistan attended the May 2017 Belt and Road global conference which was attended by 1500 delegates from 130 countries including 29 Heads of states.

A 38-page assessment by the Council on Foreign Relations in June 2022 has mentioned the current US limitations in South Asia:

“The United States cannot match the BRI’s investments in South Asia, but it can support South Asian countries choosing to cooperate with China, as well as India, the dominant power in the region. If the BRI delivers on its promise of providing connectivity and infrastructure in South Asian countries that sorely need both, it can contribute to domestic stability—a less volatile South Asia is in U.S. interests.”

In sum, the US has left South Asia to fend for itself just as it had abandoned Afghanistan resulting in the emergence of a vast ungoverned area in this region, threatening to be a nursery for Islamic terrorism again, as it was during Osama bin Laden’s control of that country. The question is how far China would use this financial clout in our neighbourhood to checkmate India which has pinned all its hopes on its QUAD membership for joint resistance against China. Prima facie, India with a defence budget of only US\$ 76.2 billion cannot match China with its US\$ 293 billion. Nor can India’s US\$ 2.9 trillion GDP economy take on China’s 16.8 trillion GDP.

The above CFR paper cites public perception of China in Pakistan. It says that the most recent Pew public opinion polls found that only 22% of Pakistanis trusted the United States whereas the “trust” factor in China was 82%. China has invested heavily in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with 4 schemes (road-rail network connecting Pakistan-Xinjiang, energy projects, Gwadar port and 9 Economic zones) although ethnic rivalries like the activities of Balochistan independence activists have caused setback for which both China and Pakistan continue to blame India. On June 3, 2019 “Open Democracy”, which is usually a reliable UK publication, carried a piece “India and America collude to disrupt China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” blaming R&AW and its proxies for attacks on Chinese engineers.

The real fact is that, as pointed out by the CFR paper, ethnic tensions and “Pakistan’s pervasive corruption” have brought in setbacks to the CPEC. Also, India’s protests against CPEC as it passes through the disputed territory of Kashmir have been twisted as efforts to sabotage the gigantic project.

In 2013 India (under UPA government) welcomed the Chinese initiative in developing the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic corridor as it was felt that our Northeast would benefit if that corridor became successful. However, India became suspicious when China merged BCIM into BRI in 2015. At the same time China has been successful in wooing Bangla Desh, Sri Lanka & Maldives. China also extracted a favourable response from Bhutan to join BRI during the visit of Chinese Vice-Minister for foreign affairs Kong Xuanyou to Thimpu on 25 July 2018 although earlier Bhutan had followed India in not attending the 2017 Belt and Road global conference. The fact that this visit took place even after the 2017 Doklam standoff between Indian and Chinese troops on Bhutanese territory at the trijunction between China-Bhutan-India was significant.

The CFR analysis says that “BRI has had the biggest success in Bangladesh, which not only perceives it positively but also has been able to manage the BRI and balance its geopolitical concerns about China and India and received investment largesse from both”. Bangladesh has been successful in building up a close military relationship with China without annoying India -CFR paper says that 17% of Chinese military exports went to Bangladesh between 2016 and 2020.

Mercator Institute for China Studies said that during the 2010-2019 period China became the top source (72%) of military imports for Bangladesh, behind only Pakistan.

This paper says that the US exported US\$ 110 million worth of arms to Bangladesh- “a meagre amount compared to US\$ 2.59 billion Bangladesh has spent on Chinese military equipment”. Interestingly, China-Bangladesh upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2016. Faced with this, the US was trying to upgrade Bangladesh military modernisation starting with Apache helicopters and missiles.

At the same time the Paris based FIDH (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme- International Federation for Human Rights) have been highlighting human rights violations in the CPEC projects as “BRI WATCH ” circulars. Its bulletin for March 2022 dealt with several violations in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. We have failed to capitalise on these allegations due to unknown reasons. Is it because our present government does not want to recognise global human rights organisations?

Specific analysis on our neighbours’ policies towards India

Among all our neighbours, the country to be closely watched is Bangladesh. This is not to say that Pakistan is less important. However, we know almost everything what Pakistan would do against India’s interests. We are now fully prepared although we were caught napping before 26/11 due to our own faulty reading of intelligence pointers. This is also not to say that we should ignore developments in Sri Lanka, Maldives and Bhutan.

I would place Bangladesh on priority because of so many reasons. Presently we have excellent relations with the Awami League led Bangladesh government. This is only because of Sheikh Hasina’s firm leadership as she is very grateful to India under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi for freeing that country from Pakistan’s control and for protecting her family at crucial times. However, it is anybody’s guess how far this goodwill will last considering the history of that country, which in the past had alternated between antipathy and friendship.

Firstly, Sheikh Hasina has managed her country skilfully resulting in amazing economic results. Quoting IMF figures, Bangladesh paper “Daily Star” claimed (October 14, 2021) that it would surge ahead of India in terms of per capita GDP in the next 5 years (till 2026). It claimed that this trend had started in 2020 due to its continuous 6% annual growth with more remittances, exports and agriculture. Bangladesh managed to grow even during the pandemic when other economies faltered. If it overtakes India, it is facile to expect Dhakka to play subservience to India.

Secondly, we should not forget that there are vast sections among the Bangladesh population who continue to be sympathetic to Pakistan only on religious grounds. Although the opposition parties including the BNP are vanquished, religious groups are getting stronger due to needless provocations from some BJP ruled states in India where Muslims are victimised. We should not forget that religious and familial bonds are stronger between Bangladesh Muslims and their brethren in the Eastern part of India than in the rest of India. Hence it is jarring for them to see their fellowmen of the same religion being called “illegals” despite them possessing Indian citizenship. This was evident with the massive protest demonstrations by Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (HIB- “safeguarding Islam in Bangladesh”) against Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Bangladesh on 26-27 March 2021.

HIB is not like other Bangladeshi opposition parties. It does not have a political charter. Yet it can mobilise thousands of unregulated Qawmi madrasas across the country as in May 2013 when they collected more than a half million activists onto the streets and literally seized Dhakka with a 13-point charter. No doubt Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s government cracked down on the rally and killed at least 50 HIB activists.

As a result, Sheikh Hasina is “the most threatened” Prime Minister in the world. According to Economic Times she had survived 19 assassination attempts in four decades. If she is removed from the scene there is no guarantee that her successor would not be an Islamist. Most probably even another Awami League leader may play footsie with ultra-Right Islamist groups on populist considerations.

We must study that country's history from 1977 when Gen. Zia ur-Rahman, who was once Mujibur Rahman's follower, had dropped "secularism" from the Bangladesh constitution. The same was followed by Gen. Ershad in 1982 and Begum Khalida Zia from 1990.

It will be advisable for Indian policy makers to read the masterly treatises "The Rise of Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh" written by Dr. Sumit Ganguly for the United States Institute of Peace in 2006 and Bertil Lintner's "Religious Extremism and Nationalism in Bangladesh" to understand how deep rooted such extremists are in that country. It was Gen. Zia who opened the doors for the dormant Islamists and "collaborators" (with Pakistan) to come to the mainstream after he seized power. In 1988 Ershad amended the constitution and made Islam as the state religion. From then on, their intelligence service DGFI actively aided the return of hard-core Islamists who were hiding in Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Harkat-ul-Jihad-al Islami and other extremist groups rose during that period. DGFI also aided our Northeast militants like ULFA, Muslim Liberation Tigers etc to launch operations against India by giving them sanctuaries. A seminar conducted by the Institute of Peace & Conflict Studies on 17 September 2007 had confirmed this threat.

There is yet another reason why India should closely watch developments in Bangladesh. MERICS (Mercator Institute for China Studies) analysis dated 8 August 2022 has quoted that in 2014, the Pew research survey had found 77 percent of Bangladeshis viewing China positively, the highest positive rating for all countries while only 43% preferred USA as an ally. India was seen as a potential threat. It also found that Bangladesh's military and business leaders were the strongest advocates of deeper Bangladesh-China relations.

BD Military planners see a convergence with China in strategic calculations as India "engulfs Bangladesh on three sides" and hostile Myanmar shares the only other land border. In 2015, China replaced India as Bangladesh's top trading partner, while India held that position for 40 years. Imports from China represented 34 percent of Bangladesh's total imports in 2019.

To conclude, we need to closely watch growing Chinese influence in our neighbourhood which could threaten our national security and trade interests.

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St. Martin's Island: The Geopolitical and Maritime Jewel Amid Controversy

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Once viewed by the U.S. as an "international basket case," Bangladesh is now emerging as a strategic partner, exemplified by the growing geopolitical significance of St. Martin's Island in the Bay of Bengal. St. Martin's Island, a small yet strategically significant landmass in the northeastern Bay of Bengal, has recently found itself at the center of a major political and diplomatic controversy in Bangladesh. Known for its stunning natural beauty, coral reefs, and as a sanctuary for sea turtles, the island has long been a popular tourist destination. However, a recent dispute has spotlighted its broader maritime and geopolitical significance, transforming it into a focal point of national and international interest. The controversy erupted when an allegedly fabricated statement, attributed to former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, suggested that she could have remained in power if she had agreed to lease out St. Martin's Island.

While her son, Sajeeb Wazed, has strongly denied the authenticity of this statement, the issue has ignited a debate about the island's strategic importance and the potential consequences for Bangladesh's sovereignty, particularly in light of the Bay of Bengal's maritime boundaries and the involvement of global superpowers like the United States.

Spanning just 7.3 kilometers in length and rising only 3.6 meters above sea level, St. Martin's Island is Bangladesh's only coral island. Despite its modest size, the island holds immense significance due to its location in the Bay of Bengal, an area abundant in marine resources and critical maritime routes. The island's coral reefs, extending 10-15 kilometers to the west-northwest, are ecologically crucial and contribute to the island's role as a key player in Bangladesh's maritime economy. The Bay of Bengal, bordered by Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar, is one of the world's most resource-rich regions, with vast reserves of natural gas and other marine resources. For Bangladesh, St. Martin's Island is a vital asset in asserting its claims over a significant portion of the Bay's maritime zone, including the rights to explore and exploit these resources. As a result, the island is not only a tourist attraction but also a critical component of the country's economic and strategic ambitions.

The ongoing controversy surrounding St. Martin's Island must be viewed within the broader geopolitical context, particularly the role of the United States in the Indian Ocean region. The U.S. has long maintained a strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, primarily through its military base on Diego Garcia, a British Indian Ocean Territory located about 1,600 kilometers south of India. Diego Garcia serves as a pivotal military hub for the U.S., enabling power projection across the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. This military presence is a key part of a broader U.S. strategy to maintain influence in a region that is increasingly contested by other global powers, particularly China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), led by China, has involved substantial investments in ports and infrastructure across the Indian Ocean, raising concerns in Washington about Beijing's expanding influence. In this context, small but strategically located islands like St. Martin's become highly valuable as potential military outposts or logistical hubs. Bangladesh's maritime boundary, determined after prolonged disputes with India and Myanmar, encompasses a significant portion of the Bay of Bengal, now recognized as part of the country's Special Economic Zone (SEZ). This SEZ grants Bangladesh exclusive rights to explore and exploit marine resources within the zone, including oil, gas, and minerals, and to regulate fishing and other economic activities. St. Martin's Island, situated within this SEZ, is crucial for Bangladesh's claims over these resources. Any decision to lease or relinquish control of the island to a foreign power would have profound implications for the country's sovereignty and economic future. The alleged statement attributed to Sheikh Hasina, regardless of its veracity, underscores the immense pressure Bangladesh faces as it navigates its relationships with global powers, particularly the United States.

Adding to the complexity is the island's proximity to Myanmar. Disputes over maritime boundaries in the Bay of Bengal have been a source of tension between Bangladesh and Myanmar, and the two countries have had to resolve these issues through international courts. St. Martin's Island, as a forward position in this contested area, is not just a scenic destination but a strategic asset in Bangladesh's maritime defense. The United States has a longstanding history of involvement in South Asia, often playing a balancing act between competing powers in the region. While the U.S. has traditionally maintained close ties with India, it has also sought to cultivate relationships with other countries in the region, including Bangladesh. The U.S. views Bangladesh as a key player in its Indo-Pacific strategy, which aims to counter China's growing influence in the region. However, American involvement in Bangladesh has not been without controversy. The U.S. has faced criticism for its perceived interference in Bangladesh's domestic politics, particularly during times of political instability.

The controversy surrounding the alleged statement about leasing St. Martin's Island has fuelled speculation that the U.S. might be seeking to expand its military presence in the region, possibly by gaining access to strategically important locations like St. Martin's.

Although the U.S. has denied any involvement in attempts to undermine Sheikh Hasina's government, as suggested in the controversial statement, the incident highlights the delicate balance that Bangladesh must maintain in its foreign relations. On one hand, Bangladesh depends on the U.S. for economic and military support; on the other, it must safeguard its sovereignty and avoid becoming a pawn in the broader geopolitical games played by global powers. The situation in St. Martin's Island inevitably draws comparisons to Diego Garcia, another small island with significant geopolitical importance. Diego Garcia, part of the Chagos Archipelago, was leased to the United States by the United Kingdom in the 1960s. Since then, it has evolved into a major military base, playing a crucial role in U.S. military operations across the Middle East and South Asia. The controversy surrounding Diego Garcia, particularly the displacement of the island's native population and the ongoing legal battles over its sovereignty, serves as a cautionary tale for Bangladesh. While there are differences between the two islands, the possibility of St. Martin's being transformed into a similar military outpost raises concerns about the future of the island and its residents.

For Bangladesh, the challenge is to navigate these waters carefully, ensuring that St. Martin's Island remains under its control while avoiding the pitfalls of becoming overly reliant on foreign powers. The lessons from Diego Garcia are clear: once an island is leased or ceded to a global superpower, it can be extremely difficult to regain control, both politically and diplomatically. As Bangladesh faces growing pressure from global powers like the United States, the future of St. Martin's Island remains uncertain. The island's strategic location within Bangladesh's Special Economic Zone makes it a valuable asset that the country cannot afford to lose. At the same time, the controversy surrounding the alleged statement attributed to Sheikh Hasina underscores the complex and often tense nature of international relations in the Indian Ocean region. The story of St. Martin's Island is not just about a piece of land in the ocean; it is about a nation's struggle to assert its rights in a world where the stakes are increasingly high. As the global contest for influence in the Indian Ocean intensifies, the fate of St. Martin's Island underscores the enduring truth: those who control the sea control the world.

Caste Questions for Rahul Gandhi

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A public culture where invocation of caste becomes a substitute for serious thinking will not serve the cause of social justice or healthy institutions.

It is an obvious fact that caste is still the oppressive social reality of India. Despite far-reaching changes in our economy, politics and society, caste identity structures opportunity, licenses discrimination and sanctions violence to a degree that ought to be unconscionable for any democracy. Caste also mutilates our sense of self, sets limits to our empathy, allows us to tolerate too many practices that still degrade human beings. It creates barriers to common citizenship, common institutions and inclusive economic life.

It is also true that one mode of dealing with this reality amongst the privileged is avoidance: A refusal to see the degree to which caste still matters and often, worse, a propensity to make a source of accumulated caste advantage into a source of entitlement.

Recently, there are even more strains of caste apologetics floating around, as if some varnished varna system would make the historical realities of caste less oppressive.

It is also natural, therefore, that caste will be an axis of political mobilisation. In part, it has to be, because its reality has to be recognised and taken into account, if it is to be overcome. There is also no doubt that Indian society needs extensive affirmative action to make our economy and society more inclusive, though how these should be designed can be debated. It is also natural that politicians ought to try and find ways of drawing attention to caste injustice or shake us out of a syndrome that makes caste invisible. Sometimes contradictions have to be sharpened before progress can be made. It is an open question what rhetorical strategies and occasions work best to draw attention to this reality.

Even if one acknowledges the force of this context, there was something disconcerting about the way in which caste was invoked in Parliament by Rahul Gandhi in his speech on the budget, waving a photograph of the ministers and officers, who had prepared the budget, ritually cooking the halwa, and asking how many Dalits and OBCs were in the picture, as if suggesting it is the caste identity of those who made the budget that determines its validity. In the larger context of caste oppression, this might seem like a minor transgression. But it's the kind of rhetorical performance that has itself become a diversion: Invoking caste in a way that is at best a cheap rhetorical trick. The way in which it is named represents as much a diversion from social justice under the guise of drawing attention to it.

It is true that as a matter of sociological fact in contemporary India, no one can claim to be "above caste" as it were — that claim can also disguise a privilege. The general argument that professions need to be more inclusive goes without saying. But what does it mean to create a public culture where every individual civil servant, every individual judge, every individual teacher, every individual journalist's caste is called out no matter what the occasion, as Rahul Gandhi is almost on the verge of doing? One of the greatest corruptions of intellectual life we have seen in this country is an increasing culture in Indian universities where the prefix "savarna" before a professor or a book is meant to somehow exhaust a full consideration of what is being said. The collapse of reason and identity that is authorised in the name of social justice does far more damage to the cause of social justice than its proponents realise. In the name of social justice, this calling out of identity each time enacts, be it for different purposes, the same insidious logic of caste it is trying to displace. People can only be their caste, nothing else; the most salient feature about them is their caste, and their standing on any subject will be a function of their caste. I get the argument that we might want to signal that the budget serves the cause of the privileged. But that argument would be true irrespective of who made it, as if a bad budget might be legitimised if backward castes made it (as it often was, in many states).

But this is a diversionary tactic for other reasons. It cannot be sincerely meant. If the caste of sincere civil servants is suggestively used to impugn the budget, then what of the leader of the Opposition himself? If one wants to play the caste game this way, it will have to be said that there is something deeply insincere about a savarna calling out the caste of individual civil servants or ministers to signal his own virtue on this score. This kind of calling out of individuals' caste uses a ploy that logically ought to undermine the standing of those who use it. That suspicion is reinforced by the rhetorical conflation in the invocations of caste. Again, there was the breezy conflation of Dalit and OBC histories, making the complexity of caste invisible even in the guise of naming it.

Yes, the project of building an inclusive society has to take caste into account, and sometimes it might be prudent politics. But it is also equally true that caste has become an overdetermined, lazy catch-all explanation for everything, and frankly, increasingly a cover for a range of bad decisions. If it is true, that many privileged avoid confronting the realities of caste.

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Hasina's Ouster: America's Plot, China's Gain?

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No matter which way Bangladesh seeks out – whether it seeks an extension for repayment or seeks to declare a debt default -- it has to negotiate with Beijing. Therefore, even if the interim government is composed of multiple political factions in Bangladesh, they have to unite and actively maintain relations with China.

Sheikh Hasina, now India's guest, has accused the United States of being the 'foreign hand' behind her ouster in what's ostensibly a 'student revolution'. She has enough reason to believe so, given the US pressure on her over the years, and especially over its alleged plans to acquire Bangladesh's St Martin's Island (SMI), and an even more intriguing plan to carve out an East Timor-like 'Christian' nation out of parts of Bangladesh and Myanmar. That Mohammad Yunus, seen as being close to America since at least the Clintons, has taken charge in Dhaka in an interim administration, is seen as further proof of US handiwork. But it's China, ironically, that might gain big in Bangladesh, given the latter's \$6 billion Chinese debt, which provides Beijing enormous leverage over any government in Dhaka.

On August 9, China's foreign ministry welcomed the formation of the interim government with Chief Adviser Yunus and 16 other advisers. China's diplomats were invited for the swearing-in ceremony, but Chinese observers expect that the interim government may not last. They prefer Khaleda Zia, at once seen to be pro-US as well as pro-China, to take the helm quickly.

Hasina visited China as Prime Minister as recently as July, expecting Beijing to provide \$5 billion in aid to help with payments toward the \$6 billion debt Dhaka already owes China. After days of discussions, China promised \$137 million, which too was withheld when Bangladesh descended into chaos. Beijing will use the debt repayment issue as leverage with the interim government now.

No matter which way Bangladesh seeks out – whether it seeks an extension for repayment or seeks to declare a debt default -- it has to negotiate with Beijing. Therefore, even if the interim government is composed of multiple political factions in Bangladesh, they have to unite and actively maintain relations with China. This situation is akin to what Sri Lanka faced, when it owed 52 per cent of its total national debt of \$47 billion to China and crashed in May 2022. Then President Rajapaksa had taken flight, now it was Hasina's turn – a subtle way of effecting regime change?

Bangladesh's dependence on China increased under Hasina's 15-year rule. China has been Bangladesh's largest trading partner for over a decade, with the trade balance overwhelmingly in China's favour. For instance, Bangladesh lost more than \$25 billion in trade to China last year, even as over 700 Chinese companies invested nearly \$26 billion in Bangladesh between 2016 and 2022. Western aircraft (SIPRI).

On July 10, during Hasina's visit to Beijing, the two countries signed 21 agreements and announced another seven projects, with two major projects for Huawei Technologies to develop a next-gen digital financial platform and a capital markets digital transformation project. China was also to be involved in a new textile plant at Mongla and an industrial zone. Not only on economic issues but also in the strategic telecommunications and finance areas, Bangladesh's dependence on China has been increasing.

Another area where China's stranglehold on Dhaka has extended is in the textile sector that had put Bangladesh on the global map. Today, over 70% of Bangladesh's imported raw materials for human-made fibre clothing comes from China. Beijing could exert considerable pressure on Dhaka in this sector, too.

A “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership” between China and Bangladesh has also resulted in Dhaka becoming the second-largest importer of Chinese arms (about 17%) -- after Pakistan. In fact, over 73% of Dhaka’s recent arms buys, worth some \$3 billion, have been from China.

Bangladesh’s strategic location in the Bay of Bengal could provide China access to the Indian Ocean, a crucial maritime trade route. This is also one way for Beijing to keep an eye on the Quad’s Malabar exercises in the region. No wonder Beijing transferred two submarines to Bangladesh, to be docked at ‘BNS Sheikh Hasina’ in Cox’s Bazaar.

As in the “India Out” campaign in Maldives, it is reported that China had a hand in Bangladesh’s “India Out” campaign, too, orchestrated by pro-China parties in Bangladesh. Specifically, Jamaat-e-Islami’s student wing Islami Chhatra Shibir (ICS), which played a major role in fomenting protests at four universities, allegedly received Chinese funds through Pakistan. Many of the more than 12,000 Bangladeshi students registered at Chinese educational institutions returned to their country to participate in the protests.

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India is Proud of: Brig Sant Singh, MVC & Bar (1921-2015)



The two-star General was an angry and worried man. The Hill was still with the Pakistani Army. To add salt to injury the officer who had led the assault was dead and his body lay where he was hit by machine gun fire. General Harbaksh Singh, Army Commander Western Command known for eating two-star Generals for his snacks had growled, “Get that Hill back, Amreek. Get the bloody Hill back.” Amreek Singh was the General Officer Commanding 25 Infantry Division in the 1965 war. The war had ended in the third week of September, but the Pakistani Army had surreptitiously occupied a dominating feature known as Chui Nar on the Line of Control in Rajouri Sector.

Overlooking Mendhar- Balnoi road in the Rajouri Sector Pakistanis sniped and carried out artillery fire making daytime movement impossible. A second attack was planned and a young Infantry battalion, 5 SIKH LIGHT INFANTRY was tasked to capture the feature. Gen Amreek Singh was visiting the battalion before it went for assault. Lt Col Sant Singh, Commanding Officer received General Amreek Singh. Satisfied with the plans General gave a pep talk to the men. A rambunctious Junior Commissioned Officer had the temerity to indulge the visiting General with an assurance bordering arrogance. He said, “**तूसी परवा ना करो साब. सवेर तक अस्सी कब्ज़ा कर लेना है ते दुशमन नू भजा देना है**” (Don’t you worry sir. By morning we will have the objective and send enemy packing.)

General's frayed nerves exploded, and he told JCO, “दुश्मन कोई मिठाई ले के नहीं बैठा है वहाँ जो आप को लड्डू देगा ” (Enemy is not sitting there to welcome you with sweets.) The Commanding Officer signaled JCO to keep quiet and the matter settled for the time being.

Buoyed with their earlier success Pakistan Army reinforced the feature with additional troops and weapons. Thickly wooded hills with murderous interlocking machine gun fire and mines laid made it a death trap. Pakistani Army kept a vigil waiting to unleash its fire and decimate anyone attempting.

On 02 November 1965, 500 men gave the finishing touch to their preparations. By the time the sun sank, they had their water bottles topped up, magazines filled, and bayonets fixed. The troops moved stealthily for about two hours traversing the thick jungle. It was a pitch-dark night and close to midnight when the shrill note of trumpets reverberated in the hills. Making any noise in the enemy territory was against the military teaching. But the Battalion seemed to be defiant and spoiling for a fight. Pakistanis turned day into night by firing illumination rounds. Dark silhouettes of men moving through the jungle were visible. Machine guns spat the fire, artillery shells exploded sending hot metal shrapnel cutting through human flesh. For a moment assault seemed to be faltering. Unknown to the enemy half the force had infiltrated behind the feature and trudged its way through a steep climb which was considered impossible to climb. Pakistani realised the presence of Indian troops only when they heard the battle cry of the Unit. The enemy realised that a new threat had developed. For the next eight hours men yelled, cursed, shrieked in pain, shot, threw grenades and bayoneted. By the crack of dawn, the Hill was in Indian hands. Lieutenant Colonel Sant Singh, Commanding Officer was in front leading the assault.

A success signal was sent to the headquarters. By afternoon Maj Gen Amreek Singh was on the objective congratulating the battalion. The same Junior Commissioned Officer who had faced the General's ire came to greet him. He was carrying two sacks in both his hands. He emptied the sacks and about two dozen hand grenades and half a dozen personal weapons of Pakistani soldiers spilled out. Innocently he told the General., “ मैं भाला लबया साब । कोई लड्डू नई लभे। पर तवादे वास्ते ए लड्डू लाया हँ ” (I searched a great deal but could not find any sweets. But I have brought these sweets for you.) Gen Amreek Singh had a hearty laugh and hugged the Junior Commissioned Officer. The Unit was awarded the Battle Honour “OP HILL” Lieutenant Colonel Sant Singh was decorated with Maha Vir Chakra, India's second-highest gallantry award.

The pride and recognition came at the cost of 38 dead and more than 100 injured in the battle. Lieutenant Colonel Sant Singh became a legend when he was awarded Maha Vir Chakra again in the 1971 war.

Time flew and the Unit did stints in the jungles of Mizoram, and the icy peaks of Kashmir. After 23 years, the unit reached back where it had earned its spurs in the 1965 war. It was a hot and live LC where both sides indulged in sniping, machine gun fire and occasional mortar duel. In 1990 the unit was celebrating its silver jubilee of battle of OP HILL. Brigadier Sant Singh, an old man with a grey beard decided to visit the battalion and pay homage to fallen comrades. The feature which had claimed 38 brave soldiers was connected to a dirt trail and no vehicle could move to the feature. The finest horse from the area was brought to carry Brigadier Sant Singh to the OP HILL feature. The commanding officer of the unit politely told Brigadier Sant Singh to mount the horse. With a smile and a twinkle in his eyes, Brigadier Sant Singh said, “OP HILL पे तो संत सिंह अपने पैरों से ही चल के जायेगा ”r For next thirty minutes the old man put a steady pace occasionally stopping to look at the feature. He reached the top where a tricolour was flying. He looked at the flag, brought his old frame to attention and raised his right hand to salute the flag. The warrior had returned last time to pay respects to his fallen comrades. Brigadier Sant Singh passed away in 2015 at the ripe age of 94.

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