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China's Strategic Interests and its impacts on Bangladesh

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China's Strategic Interests and its impacts on Bangladesh

Since its foundation in 1949, the People's Republic of China has made substantial moves into South Asia. Besides Pakistan, it seems that over the last years Bangladesh in particular came into the focus of Chinese strategic thinkers. There is no doubt that Beijing made far-reaching inroads into Bangladesh by taking advantage of the need for urgent development in all spheres of economic life. With its extraordinarily large cash reserves China created by its extensive trade surplus is best equipped to help out. Subsequently, Beijing's approach towards the subcontinent in general and Bangladesh in particular is mostly economic and diplomatic -including a strong military component- in nature. But China's attitude to most of the South Asian states is opportunistic, and rather aggressive with coercive elements than determined by friendship. The annexation of Tibet, the Indo-China war of 1962 and other armed skirmishes with Chinese involvement in 1967 (Chola incident) and 1987 (Sumdorong Chu Valley), the questionable takeover of Aksai Chin (Kashmir region) can be seen as a proof for that too. Also, China's current "over-assertiveness" towards Japan and South East Asian states as well as its behaviour in the South China Sea should be interpreted as an alarming trend.

However, Chinese interests in Bangladesh were only made possible through the departure of British colonial rule and the subsequent transfer of power (1947) to the newly independent states of India and Pakistan, the latter of which was divided into an Western and Eastern Wing (today known as the independent state of Bangladesh). It is often argued that the fact that China has no real contentious issues with Bangladesh helped to bolster bilateral relations. However, such statements ignore the dubious and negative role China played in the liberation struggle of the Bangladeshi people. China strongly supported Pakistan and its policy of internal colonization and exploitation of East Pakistan . Furthermore, Beijing initially refused to recognize Bangladesh as an independent state and opposed Bangladesh's entry into the United Nations. A major reason was to appease Pakistan (which was facilitating a rapprochement between the US and China at that time) by supporting its efforts to undermine each step towards secession or substantial autonomy of its eastern wing. Having this in mind, one can state that quite from the beginning Bangladesh was an element of a larger strategy of China in South Asia in order to realize its national interests. However, the concerns and well-being of the Bangladesh people that were submitted to the yoke of West Pakistan's military rule were not

necessarily part of Beijing's strategic visions. It is crucial to realize that besides some slight changes in priorities, the motivation behind China's activities in the area remain the very same since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. It is significant to point out, that the proclaimed 'shift' in China's policy towards Bangladesh in the following decades, meaning from hostility to friendship, must be seen as a misnomer. It is argued here that Beijing did not change its attitude regarding Bangladesh at all. Hence, Bangladesh is merely seen as a platform for the realization of Beijing's strategic goals in the Indian-Ocean and Pacific region. But what are the Chinese interests in Bangladesh?

First, building-up a strategic foothold in South Asia to undermine each non-regional influence, especially the Soviets/Russia and the United states. In this context, it seems obvious that China wants to establish Bangladesh (besides Pakistan) as another bridgehead for Chinese interests in South Asia.

Second, countering all hegemonic ambitions of India in the South Asian region. Therefore, to avert India's development into a major Asian power which would be in a position to challenge China's claim to be Asia's leading might. Consequently, the containment and encirclement of India is essential for Beijing's strategy towards the region. The fact that China maintains a keen interest in doing business with India is not seen as a contradiction to the above mentioned goals among Chinese political leadership, but rather as a logical outcome. If China manages to bring Bangladesh within its sphere of influence, it would definitely jeopardize India's as well as the US's 'grand South Asian strategy' of containing Beijing's geostrategic ambitions.

Third, another significant element on China's agenda, which gained increasing importance parallel to the country's growing economy and its desperate need for energy and raw materials, is the unhindered access to and exploitation of Bangladesh's natural resources.

Fourth, for the same reason, the Chinese developed a keen interest in establishing and controlling overland trade routes (e.g. Pakistan's Karakoram highway) as well as by sea (especially the Straits of Malacca and Hormuz). One of the latest examples is the project to establish the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor (BCIM). Another Chinese idea is the re-establishment of a "maritime Silk Road", which should not only help to connect South and South East Asia but also to entrench the cooperation with peninsular South East Asia.

Fifth, China also sees an opportunity to have an additional option to extend its relations with the Muslim world, which is already promoted via Pakistan. This was made possible

especially due to the increasing trend of Islamisation and attempts to undermine the secular foundation of the state by the past military rulers (Major General Ziaur Rahman 1975-81 and under Lieutenant General Hussain M. Ershad 1982-90) in Bangladesh.

Sixth, rebalancing China's relations with South East Asian states is also an element of Beijing's strategic objectives. After a series of disputes about territory and resources in South East Asia and an increasing tensed relationship with Japan, it seems that Chinese foreign policy thinkers are trying to regain more leverage in the South Eastern sphere of Asia. Apparently China's objection in this direction is to win over as many of the littoral states in South and South East Asia as possible under its umbrella. This is done not only to undermine China's claims in the Indian and Pacific Ocean but also to support its goal to tighten control over maritime routes. Due to its geographical location, Bangladesh could gain an important role in the Chinese attempt to establish and consolidate partnerships, especially in mainland South East Asia. Therefore, one can state that Dhaka has a less-known but eminent role in Beijing's regional rebalancing efforts.

Seventh, in order to maintain its huge trade surplus China depends heavily on trade of its export goods and resources. Therefore, it is essential for Beijing to enter and ensure Bangladesh as market for its products.

Taking all these interests into account, the territory of Bangladesh fits perfectly into the puzzle of Chinese interests of its South Asian policy. However, many observers believe that Dhaka is just seen as one piece in the so called "string of pearls" helping to manifest China's bid for regional primacy in the Southern Asian region. In sum, Beijing's agenda towards independent Bangladesh (as well as former East Pakistan), as in all other areas in which China is active, is strictly guided by its strategic interests. This is of course not an unknown phenomenon and illegitimate behavior of states in international politics. However, Dhaka should be aware of the fact that Beijing's priorities in South Asia are not necessarily in line with the national interests and an optimal socio-economic and political development of Bangladesh. There are severe indications, that China's endeavors to implement its goals are often accompanied with negative impacts of the domestic developments in affected areas. It is important to understand that Bangladesh will not constitute an exception regarding this phenomenon. Several observations are in support of this assessment.

First, Chinese development projects primarily serve the exploitation of a country or to build up a market for cheap Chinese products. In many cases this has led to a destruction of the

local economy and the expulsion of the traditional local industry. In this context, it is necessary to elaborate more on China's economic and development strategies and their impact on Bangladesh's economy. Basically, Bangladesh possess theoretically an extraordinary potential to grow, the county is blocked or paralyzed by a deconstructive polarization between the leading (civilian) political forces, endemic corruption, lack of infrastructure among many other things. However, a major challenge is the country's undiversified economy. Two examples should be pointed out here. First, agriculture remains one of the most significant sectors which persistently haves to face natural disasters. Second, the garment industry, which is the most crucial sector for exports and to counterbalance the tremendous trade imbalance of Bangladesh, is in a bad condition. Most noteworthy is that the garment industries suffers from slowing exports to Europe (end of the decade-old Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA) which granted Bangladesh and other developing states certain guaranteed export quotas) and to the US. The end of the MFA has cut down privileges for Dhaka because of worrying conditions of the rights and safety of workers, especially because of the alarming situation in the country's garment industries, among other reasons. The loss of trade advantages is gaining more significance because China is emerging as a major competitor for Bangladesh's garment industries, despite the much cheaper Bangladeshi labor.

Second, long-term sustainable success of Chinese development projects are hampered by a lack of local ownership. Infrastructure projects, like the port in Chittagong (the economic hub of Bangladesh) or the China-Bangladesh highway, carried out by Beijing support the Chinese interests in logistical terms rather than the build-up of a coherent infrastructure in the respective countries. In order to achieve this and to avoid any potential regional resistance, China prefers to work with central authorities to implement projects through a top-down approach. As a result, there is regularly a noteworthy lack of local ownership, meaning that the population living in the areas of development projects is mostly not included in the decision and implementation process of such projects as in Pakistan's Baluchistan or Gilgit-Baltistan. Subsequently, in many cases projects are lacking significantly sustainability. Furthermore, due to the elite-centric approach, Chinese development projects will not take Bangladesh state and society out of social-economic stagnation and poverty or its political deadlock. Rather, it will lead to a further entrenchment of the culture of patron-clientelism and will worsen corruption.

Third, efficient exploitation of resources regularly results in significant environmental damage or loss of cultural heritage. A serious example thereof is the likelihood of the destruction of Mes Aynak in Afghanistan, an ancient Buddhist city which is the most important archaeological discovery but threatened by Chinese resource exploitation. Until now, there is no comprehensive and coherent concept in sight to avoid large scale environmental damage or loss of cultural heritage in the wake of China's development of infrastructure and resource exploitation.

Fourth, Chinese activities are leading to a narrowed focus on security paradigm to the disadvantage of constructive and sustainable regional cooperation. In this context one must state, that China's activities in South Asia in general and Bangladesh in particular do not help to stabilize the region especially nor to promote a rapprochement between conflicting parties in the numerous conflicts in South Asia over water, resources, territory etc. Instead of strengthening mediation and negotiation, Chinese activities in South Asia seems to encourage certain states to follow a policy of strength and deterrence. Dhaka should be aware that its relations with Beijing add much to the already high level of mistrust in India-China relations as well as enhancing insecurity, trepidation and skepticism among the smaller South Asian states. The massive increase of China's military presence in South Asia, the growing number of naval & maritime facilities in the Indian Ocean region, and Chinese support for the armament of South Asian armies - like the ones of Bangladesh and Pakistan - added tremendously to the militarization of South Asia. For example, New Delhi is extremely worried about the safety of its Siliguri corridor, also known as the 'chicken neck', which is a thin strip of land connecting mainland India with its north-eastern states. It is apparent that the deepening and extending military partnership between Beijing and Dhaka is perceived as a crucial threat to the stability of India's north-eastern flank. This would function as an additional burden in the Dhaka-New Delhi ties and further complicate unsolved issues between both countries. As such, it keeps the attention of the political decision makers on security driven by geopolitical and strategic interests to the disadvantage of sustainable development. Instead of investing as much as possible in non-security related development, China's role in South Asia is drawing the region into an arms race, which is going far beyond the financial limitations of the respective individual states. In consequence, the classical security dilemma remains the central feature of South Asia's security architecture.

Fifth, there is an indirect contribution to growing Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh. It was obviously well-perceived by China that Bangladesh was opening up to the Muslim world. In order to do so, Bangladesh military rule introduced an increasing policy of Islamisation. This policy turned out over the years to be one of the most dangerous threats towards the Bangladeshi state and society. The fact that Bangladesh was perceived as one of the world's new hubs of international terrorism and militant Islamism under the last BNP government can be seen as a strong indication thereof. The massive militant disturbance of the whole 2014 general election process by supporters of the BNP and Islamist Jamaat party is one of the most recent outcomes of an unfortunate political trajectory catalyzed by China's support of military rulers and the last BNP-Jamaat government. Therefore the halfhearted appeal of the Chinese authorities to stop the violence between the different political forces was rather symbolic in nature than a determined intervention. In sum, it seems that the growing influence of the Islamic fundamentalists in Bangladesh is not worrying the respective political quarters in Beijing in order to reassess their foreign policy priorities regarding South Asia. The fact that China was able to maintain a traditional, 'relatively normalized relationship' with the Afghan Taliban corroborates the above mentioned statement.

Sixth, there are negative impacts on the processes of democratic transition and consolidation. China's role in Bangladesh marks also a severe intrusion into the country's political-administrative structure challenging indirectly the quality of democracy. For example, Chinese activities in Bangladesh have severe implications for the latter's civil-military relations. In the first years after independence under the presidency of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, there were no doubts that civil-military relations in Bangladesh were tensed. This was mainly due to the president's robust strategies to gain leverage over the country's armed forces (e.g. build-up of countervailing forces under civilian command and strict control over the military budget) as well as the extraordinary negative experience during the rule of West Pakistan's military. However, under Mujibur Rahman there were strong indications that civilians were trying to reclaim decision-making power in all policy fields, which had traditionally been dominated by the West Pakistan soldiers and a compliant bureaucracy. However, since the military started to take over power directly, the Chinese started to establish diplomatic relations and supported the military. It is interesting to recall here that China did not recognize the newly independent state before. What is more, it undermined the independence movement due to its close ties with Pakistan.

Political-diplomatic back-up for the West Pakistani military crackdown in Bangladesh/East Pakistan and delivering of training and support to the West Pakistani armed forces were some elements of China's ambiguous role in Bangladesh's liberation struggle. However, as in the case of Pakistan, one must state that the Chinese support for military regimes apparently helped them to stabilise their governments, boost their image, provided resources via development projects, which at the end enhanced the entrenchment of a role of the soldiers in Bangladesh's political arena. In consequence, this is challenging the notion of civilian control of the military which is a necessary ingredient for liberal democracy and its consolidation.

Seventh, China's support for Bangladesh's military is leading to a growing dependence on Beijing. It should be worrisome for Bangladesh (especially for the civilian) security circles that the country relies on China as major supplier for military procurement. Of course this might have some logistical and technical advantages for the military administration but in economic and political terms such a narrow supply chain obviously creates dependencies and risks. The phenomenon that besides complaints over the quality of Chinese equipment the Bangladesh Armed Forces is keeping cooperation with China in high esteem should be carefully observed. The fact that major Chinese weapon systems are cheap and unconditionally available (at least regarding human rights situation and status of democratic consolidation) might be important reasons but not the core argument to rely solely on them. It seems clear that political reasons are important determinants for ignoring a broader diversification of military supply. Furthermore, like in Pakistan there is the imminent threat that the increasing military-to-military cooperation between Bangladesh and China is developing its own dynamic - not appropriately recognized by civilian oversight mechanism. In result, Chinese support for the Bangladesh Armed Forces inherit not only the peril of challenging the country's national sovereignty but also limiting civilian decision-making power.

Finally, China is obviously trying to limit Bangladesh's room to manoeuvre in international relations. In other words, Beijing spends substantial efforts to convince Dhaka to toe the line of China's foreign policy parameters quite from the beginning. Here, Bangladesh's relations with South East Asian states offer two remarkable examples thereof: Dhaka's attempt to establish relations with Vietnam in 1978 and the so called 'Taiwan Office Affair' in Dhaka in 2004. Regarding Vietnam, after offering an opening up for deeper relations,

Bangladesh foreign policy circles had to back-pedal by condemning Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia. In the context of Taiwan, Dhaka was forced to undermine everything which was identified as a challenge towards Beijing's 'One-China-Policy'. More concretely, the Bangladesh authorities had to make unequivocally clear that the Taiwanese office is not permitted at all to offer any consular services. In both cases, one has to state that autonomous political decision making in Bangladesh foreign policy was undermined with negative impacts on the country's relation to South East Asia. Today, Dhaka should also not forget the larger picture in Southeast and East Asia, especially its relations with Japan and South Korea. Bangladesh maintained traditionally good relations with Tokyo as well as with Seoul and the country benefitted enormously from bilateral trade and economic cooperation. Furthermore, Japan is an extraordinary, significant donor for Bangladesh. However, the rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific regions between China and Japan and other regional states might force Bangladesh to take a position, most likely on Chinese lines. In other words, that the relation with China is not only derogating ties with India but also with countries which proved to be trustworthy partners. This would be fatal if one takes into account, Bangladesh strong dependence on foreign aid and assistance.

In sum, Dhaka has to remember that the Chinese projects are highly costly and Beijing knows very well that the opportunities of reaping the benefits of its development endeavors are always challenged, especially in a country's affected by extremely volatile political and security related conditions. Therefore, it does not come by surprise that China wants to be confident that it is able to have the political situation and the decision-making processes in its client state always under control. Consequently, Bangladesh's political leadership should not fall into the trap of trying to attract economic and military assistance from China by all means.