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SADF COMMENT

China's Membership in SAARC: An Anxiety For India

With the dawn of the twenty-first century, the South Asian strategic landscape has witnessed significant shifts. The space has been predominantly shaped by the competitive rivalry between India and Pakistan, which is now witnessing a paradigmatic shift with the increasing Chinese influence in the region. Of which, the most noteworthy is that of the changing balance of power in South Asia. That is, China's increasing economic and political clout is counter-balancing India's longstanding supremacy. This is causing instability in the South Asian geostrategic environment. With this systemic power shift at play, India suffers an anxiety over China's growing influence in its strategic backyard. The exemplary to India's concern is evident in India's strong resistance to grant China a full membership in SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation).

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In applying the logic of regional institutionalism, SAARC, unlike South-East Asia's ASEAN, has failed to build a strong regional network in South Asia. Wherein, India-Pakistan strategic rivalry has acted as the main de-stabilizing factor in building the regional institutional nexus. In this matrix of power politics in SAARC, one of the promising cases is that of China's entry into SAARC- a turning point in South Asia's regional archetype. This has been a significant concern for India, as it perceives China's entry into SAARC as a gateway to South Asia; most importantly, a countervailing force against India's regional supremacy.

Having its own security and strategic concerns at stake, India acts as a strong resistance force to China's ambitions in SAARC. When China had become an observer to SAARC at the Dacca summit meeting in 2005, pushed forward by Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh the initiative was strongly opposed by India, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives. Since then China has been pitching for full-fledged membership citing its geographical proximity, trade ties, political interactions and historical and civilisational linkages to the region. China's strong push for membership has stimulated India's strategic concerns. India's concerns lie in the fact that China plays its political card by its cooperative links with other South Asian countries. This was witnessed in the 18th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu 2014, where China's quest for full-fledged membership overshadowed the main regional deliberations. China's aggressive push to become a full member was commanded by Nepali diplomats and media, reinforced further by Pakistan's policy statement arguing in favour of elevating the status of observers in SAARC. Flagging its strong resistance, India blocked Beijing's ambition by calling for observers to support common development projects in the region in order to become dialogue partners. Thereby, calling observers as "peripheral", India countered Pakistan's logic of elevation by adding the quotient of 'dialogue partners'. What India fears is that China's entry will block the consensus driven approach of SAARC's operational structure, thereby, blocking its future initiatives.

In this context, it is important to note that India and China are engaged in a duel in SAARC. The push-pull factor impacts the institutional status quo. It is clear that India's reluctance

towards China though a strong opposing force, is not a guaranteed factor that has the potential of stopping China in its endeavour. Despite India's strong resistance, China succeeded in entering the region with its active diplomacy with other South Asian countries. For China's strategy of using proxies, starting with Pakistan and later joined by other states in the region, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, have succeeded in making China's case much stronger. What makes China a better choice over India is the economic archetype, wherein India's protectionist tendencies have made way for China's economic leadership in South Asia.

Given these political dynamics, what is interesting to note is that, contrary to India's resistance to China's SAARC membership, China's quest for full membership is strongly gaining acceptance amongst other South Asian countries. In this parallel, the query lies in: "how long can India withstand the opposition to China's full membership of SAARC?". Given the increasing Chinese influence in the region, India's resistance seems to be short-lived due to the importance of trade ties playing a very vital role in China's South Asia engagement. For China is the largest trading partner in the region with India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and second largest to Sri Lanka and Nepal. It has a free trade agreement with its "all-weather" friend Pakistan and is negotiating a similar treaty with Sri Lanka and Maldives. And since 2001, it has had a preferential regional trade arrangement with India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh under the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA) for some goods. China's trade with South Asia has increased substantially from \$5.7 billion in 2000 to \$93 billion in 2012, with China's imports from the region increasing from \$ 1.9 billion in 2000 to \$ 22.6 billion in 2012. What is important to note, is China's increasing financial flows in the form of loans and aid to the region since the mid-2000s. Mostly associated with large infrastructure projects such as ports, highways, bridges and power plants, China has overtaken traditional donors to South Asian countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It has also surpassed India as a major financier of projects in most small South Asian countries. These factors have significantly contributed to an emerging Chinese economic order in South Asia- posing a challenge for India.

In this perspective, India-China's competitive existence in SAARC adds a new optic to South Asia's regional matrix. The most interesting phase of this push and pull between the two countries will be witnessed in the 19th SAARC Summit, to be hosted by Pakistan in 2016. For having its "all-weather friend" as its prime advocate in SAARC, Beijing's quest for full membership will be the watch of the hour. Given India's own fragile relations with Pakistan, 2016 will showcase a new power struggle. First, a defiant Pakistan will negate India's interest and rather push harder for its strongest ally- China to become part of the regional structure. While for India, bandwagoning with other South Asian powers remains uncertain given the rising tensions, such as the recent India-Nepal political divide. Therefore, how long India can obstruct China remains an uncertain query.

Biography of the author:

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