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## CHINA OUTMANOEUVRES INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN SOUTH ASIA

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*“Furthermore, contemporary Chinese perceptions of other states are strongly colored by China’s interpretation of their assumed cultural proclivities. These cultural images of other countries, particularly the images of strategic cultures of other countries are influential as China assesses threats and potential threats in the international environment”-----Dr Arthur Scobell, American noted specialist on China’s strategic culture.*

India has achieved a fair measure of foreign policy successes as far as South East Asia and East Asia are concerned and could be said to be following a well calibrated strategy in these regions with long term gains in mind.

Regrettably, in South Asia right under its nose, where Indian foreign policy successes are most needed, India seems to have been totally outmanoeuvred by China’s grand strategy and diplomatic moves.

India as the most predominant power in South Asia in virtually all dimensions of the word should in the sixth decade after its independence have been in a powerful position to re-order its South Asia neighbourhood in consonance with its national security interests.

India’s national attributes of power abundantly bestowed on it should have facilitated India to create enough political, economic and strategic leverages to back up its diplomacy in South Asia. The picture however is otherwise.

The obvious question that then emerges is that if India could well manage its relationships with major powers, excepting China, and achieves some measure of success in East Asia and South East Asia, what factors bedevil and limit India's foreign policy successes in South Asia.

The answer revolves around China as the 'spoiler state' in Asian security and Chinese foreign policy strategy of employing in turn proxy 'spoiler states' in its regional power-play on its peripheries e.g. North Korea against Japan in East Asia and Pakistan against India in South Asia.

Significantly, China's use of regional 'spoiler states' is directed primarily at the two states that can checkmate China's hegemonic control over the Asian security landscape.

In pursuance of its overall regional spoiler states strategy, China has outclassed and outmanoeuvred India's foreign policy in South Asia. India cannot bemoan that but for the Chinese intrusive strategic presence in South Asia facilitated by Pakistan's unremitting military hostility towards India, the picture could have been otherwise. India cannot argue that but for China and its proxy use of Pakistan, India would have achieved the same measure of foreign policy successes in South Asia.

Conceding that India stands strategically and diplomatically limited in South Asia by China and Pakistan, what has impeded Indian diplomacy in succeeding with Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives? Why has India failed to resort to assertive counter-moves to ensure that the 'Chin-Pakistan Radiation' does not singe India's strategic interests in these smaller countries?

Why has the Indian policy establishment failed on the South Asian chessboard where its national attributes of power could have come into play more intensely due to geographical proximity? Is it because the Indian policy establishment has a better 'farsight reading' and its 'nearsight reading' capability is limited? Do they need better bi-focals? The answer is obviously 'yes'

China and Pakistan as military adversaries of India have resorted to only the bare modicum of diplomatic niceties with India. Their emphasis has not been on investing in long-term good-neighbourly relations with South Asia's pre-eminent power but in adopting strategies to undercut and under-mine India's relationships with India's other smaller South Asian neighbours. The overall aim of both these adversarial nations has been to diminish India's strategic stature in the region, in Asia and globally.

Putting it more bluntly, it can be asserted that China has been able to out-manoeuvre Indian foreign policy in South Asia primarily because China's main thrust in South Asian policy formulations is to give primacy to the 'strategic component' as opposed to India's over-reliance on pure diplomacy heavily relying on peace dialogues, unilateral peaceful initiatives and peace symbolism and thereby utterly devoid of the strategic component befitting its geostrategic and geopolitical significance in the regional and global power-play.

China's main thrust on the South Asian chess-board is to adopt a dual strategy comprising application of 'strategic pressure-points' against India on all of India's peripheries and buttressed by maintaining the India-Chinese Occupied Tibet border in the high Himalayas under constant tension and over-militarisation of Occupied Tibet.

This arises from an accurate reading by China of India's strategic culture or better put the lack of strategic culture in India's political and civil bureaucratic hierarchy which stands severely disadvantaged by deliberately keeping out Indian Armed Forces military hierarchy from "inclusive" and direct participation in India's higher strategic decision-making.

China has been successful in outmanoeuvring Indian foreign policy in South Asia because the Indian policy establishment does not take pains to study and understand China's centuries- old uninterrupted strategic culture and its more subtle signalling in contemporary times. This deficiency stands brought out by India's former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran in a recent lecture.

Resulting from the above is the total lack of Indian ripostes against China and Pakistan of counter-strategic pressure points as India is not devoid of any number of options in its armoury to be so used. This reluctance arises from political timidity in decision-making.

India has shirked from using the 'Tibet Card' more directly against China and by extension even the 'Xinjiang Card' to stop China in its tracks of its India's strategic diminution strategy. India has shirked heavily against using the 'Balochistan Card' and the 'Northern Areas Card' against Pakistan even after Mumbai 26/11 when shirking from using hard power. India could have at least played the above cards against Pakistan to tame its propensities of terrorist attacks in India's heartland.

South Asia consequently today rightly presents a grave-yard of India's foreign policies in all the four corners of the Indian Sub-Continent and does not lend any optimism that the Indian foreign policy establishment is applying course-corrections to overcome its past failings. A quick survey would be in order.

China and Pakistan are the prime obsessions of India's foreign policy not in terms of bold adoption of strategically discomfiting these two notable Indian military adversaries but significantly standing out in terms of Indian foreign policy planning timidly seeking "thaws" where none exist. China and Pakistan accurately divining this Indian timidity spasmodically keep throwing these "thaws" at India which is avidly lapped-up by the Indian policy establishment and even the Indian media. In the process India's foreign policy gets distorted by these spasmodic and

temporary “thaws”

India’s propensity to desperately cringe for China’s and Pakistan “thaws” does not go unnoticed in the rest of India’s South Asian neighbourhood. To India’s strategic and political disadvantage the smaller South Asian countries start employing their ‘China Card’ and their ‘Pakistan Card’ against India.

China’s strategic dragnet and economic allurements have weaned away Nepal as the only Hindu kingdom in the world; China is in the process of weaning away Bhutan from India’s fold; Bangladesh which was not recognised by China following the rest of the world, now has a Strategic Partnership with Bangladesh for a number of years; Sri Lanka disgusted with India’s inability to prevent domestic Tamilnadu politics distorting a meaningful relationship with India has opted for countervailing relations with China and even Pakistan; Indian diplomatic ineptness has resulted in our losing control over the Maldives.

Structural and institutional shortcomings do stymie India’s lack of foreign policy successes in South Asia. But then the same yardstick should be operative in cases of East Asia and South East Asia where successes have been achieved

In my assessment while India’s political leaders leave foreign policy formulations in other regions to career diplomats and the institutionalised foreign policy processes and hence the successes, in case of South Asia, Indian political leaders have a propensity to “personalise” India’s foreign policy in accordance with their own inclinations and obsessions. Resultantly, the ‘political component’ begins to outweigh the strategic and diplomatic component in India’s foreign policies in South Asia.

Concluding, it needs to be stressed that India must arrest the on-going trend of China being able to outmanoeuvre India’s foreign policy in South Asia. India thus gets strategically diminished on the global stage and disrespected in its own neighbourhood. Some observations from the foregoing discussion that need to be stressed in conclusion are as follows:

- China and Pakistan will continue as military adversaries of India for decades to come and this should be the prism through which India’s foreign policy formulations should take place and the bedrock on which India’s South Asia foreign policy options are devised.
- India’s propensity to “cringe” for “thaws” spasmodically thrown at it by China and Pakistan must be restrained. This is the propensity of feeble nations and does not befit India’s national attributes of power and her strategic potential.
- Maintaining the minimum modicum of diplomatic niceties with China and Pakistan, the strategic component in Indian foreign policy

formulations should be the dominant strand.

- In the rest of South Asia, Indian foreign policy formulations the conventional diplomatic, economic and cultural strands should be pursued.
- With China and Pakistan being strategically and militarily pervasive in South Asia, India's foreign policy formulations in South Asia should no longer be politicised and dominated by the personal inclinations and obsessions of its apex political leadership
- China- checkmating by India from making strategic inroads in South Asia at India's expense demands that India too should apply counter-strategic pressure points on China's peripheries and its outlying regions, more specifically Tibet. Like Chinese acupuncture India's needles should be applied further afield in Afghanistan, Myanmar. Vietnam and Mongolia.
- India has a natural ally in Japan and this relationship should be strategically intensified.

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