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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



China-South Asia Strategic Engagements - 1 China's Strategic-Security Interests in South Asia¹

Ma Jiali²

South Asia is attracting more and more concerns in the international political arena, and it is China's close neighbour in the southwest. International political observers generally agree that South Asia is not only the subcontinent closely adjacent to China but also the wrestling field full of geopolitical competitions, while it is also more of a breeding ground for terrorism in recent years. It goes without saying that China has huge strategic interests and security concerns in this region indeed. Therefore, China needs an approach to properly handle the relationship between it and South Asian countries (as a whole) in order to ensure its own strategic and security interests.

The first gist of this approach is to handle relations with contiguous countries, maintain peace and tranquillity along the borders, and strive to resolve the outstanding border dispute as soon as possible. Border issues are directly related to a country's territory and sovereignty and to the core interests of a country or at least very important interests. In today's world, people's nationalist sentiments in all countries have generally increased, while the border and territorial issues are often directly linked to national security and easily lead to sensitive national sentiment and political issues. Based on this understanding, the Chinese government is bound to take a prudent policy on the border issues. Among the 8 countries of the South Asian Association for Regional

¹ The paper by Dr Ma Jiali is the first in a series of five Working Papers on China's security relations with some South Asian countries. These papers are being published by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore.

² Dr Ma Jiali is Deputy Director of China Reform Forum, Beijing. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

Cooperation (SAARC), the ones directly bordering with China are India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. As for China, the remaining three countries, namely Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives are more geographically apart, with no territorial disputes.

Among the border disputes, the most controversial one is between China and India. Due to the British colonial policy of aggression, Sino-Indian boundary has never been officially delineated, but the Chinese believed that there was a "traditional customary line," while India insisted on an "actual control line" which was essentially the same as "McMahon Line". In 1962, a brief war occurred between China and India in their border region. In the current situation, the Indian side controls most of controversial areas in the eastern border, and the disputed area China controls in the western border is Aksai Chin, while the two sides have disputes in the middle of the border region, which is approximately 2000 square km. Since 1980s, China and India have had eight rounds of official talks on border disputes. Entering the new century, the "special representatives on border issues" of the two sides have carried out 14 rounds of negotiations (as at the beginning of 2012). Now, the basic idea of the Chinese side on border issues was to further explore a framework for solving the border issues and to search for a fair and reasonable solution acceptable to both sides, based "on the political guiding principles on solving border issues" reached in 2005. And before the final settlement, it would strive to ensure peace and tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control. On the border disputes between China and Bhutan, China's basic position is also one of reaching a fair and reasonable settlement through the principle of mutual understanding and mutual accommodation.

The second gist of this approach is to properly handle the relationship with the major powers in South Asia, to try to exclude or weaken the intervention efforts of the extra-territorial powers, to promote regional cooperation and benign interaction, and to promote the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation to play a substantive role. The main focus of China's diplomacy in South Asia is to handle its relationship with India and Pakistan, and of course, it also strives to handle the relationship with other countries, including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan. Although China has not established diplomatic relations with Bhutan, it is still trying to explore and develop the relationship with Bhutan.

India is China's neighbour, which is also a populous and rapidly emerging country with a major role in the multilateral arena. The several features it has are entirely consistent with the four pillars of China's foreign policy, that is, China's diplomacy attaches special emphasis on strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries, big powers, developing countries and key players on the multilateral stage. In diplomatic practice, China attaches great importance to cooperation with India, and is working through necessary means to further improve and develop relations with India. Pakistan is also an important country in the region, and to continue developing comprehensive cooperative relations with Pakistan -- to properly handle new

problems the bilateral relations are facing under the new situation and to carry forward this traditional friendly relations -- is the current problem that needs addressing.

In addition, China has had a positive attitude towards the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, and has hoped that all South Asian countries would gradually change the face of poverty and backwardness of the region and promote regional security, stability and development through collective efforts. China is willing to make whatever contribution to promoting China-SAARC cooperation in various aspects. China has become the observer of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

The third gist of this approach is to deal with challenges of separatism and terrorism firmly, strengthen cooperation and coordination with relevant countries, and make efforts to eliminate the soil terrorism was born from, so as to ensure security and stability in the northwest and southwest region of China.

As we all know, the Tibetan separatist forces with the Dalai Lama as their representative has long been engaged in movements against the [Chinese] central government, in India and Nepal. India has taken measures of double-dealing on the Tibet issue. On one hand, it claims that Tibet is part of China and forbids Tibetans in exile from using the Indian territory to carry out anti-China political activities, but on the other hand, it allows and secretly supports separatist activities of the government in exile based in Dharamsala. On 14 March 2008, violent terrorist incidents occurred in Tibet which attracted wide public concerns. According to China's official materials, criminals suspected of violence and terrorist activities were from a clear background of the Tibetan separatist forces outside. India has long been a base camp for Tibetans in exile, secretly harbouring and supporting the activities of the Tibetan government in exile. Indian leaders and senior officials, regardless of China's frequent representations, repeatedly met the Dalai Lama, and cheered up for the exiled Tibetans' separatist activities. In 1980s-1990s, with the Sino-Indian relations thawing and heating, India adjusted its policies that were pursued in the 1960-1980s years to some extent, and began to limit the activities of Tibetans in exile through certain restrictions, which eased China's strategic concerns towards Tibet. But in recent years, India's policy appeared to reflect a reversal, and India has begun to explicitly seek the Dalai clique as a major tool for strategic interests, trying to get final benefits for themselves in the Sino-Indian border dispute. For example, the Dalai Lama, in connivance of India, went to the disputed area of Tawang for preaching sermons, and said the disputed areas belonged to India. This has caused serious concern to China.

In addition, there is evidence that the "East Turkistan independence" and extremist religious forces that have emerged in Xinjiang in recent years have repeatedly received training in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The "7 • 5 incident" that occurred in Urumqi of Xinjiang in 2009

posed a very serious problem to the security and stability of northwest China. In the violent terrorist incidents that occurred in Hotan and Kashgar in July 2011, taking part have been staff trained in Pakistan. China has made representations with the relevant authorities in Pakistan and hoped that through joint efforts, the two sides could crack down on terrorist criminals and make a thorough investigation of Pakistan's terrorist training camps in tribal areas so as to prevent Islamic terrorists from leaving Pakistan and undermining the stability of Xinjiang in China.

China's Perception of Regional Security in South Asia

Seen from the viewpoint of security, China and India have disputes on larger territories, and there are bad feelings towards each other on the Tibet issue, and because war occurred once between China and India in the border region, the two sides have not really solved the problem of strategic mutual trust. Although the two governments have released joint statements or declarations, security doubts still exist deep down both sides, or you may say some security concerns exist at least.

The relationship between China and Pakistan is built on the basis of common interests. Frankly speaking, this relationship has had some implications against India during the Cold War. This kind of implication can be seen from China's attitude towards India-Pakistan wars in 1965 and 1971, when China took measures of a strategic containment against India. But since the mid-1990s, the relationship has undergone a certain kind of essential transformation. Especially with the continuous improvement of Sino-Indian relations, a credibly new triangle has been formed, even though it is still influenced by the old model. That is, although no significant changes have occurred in the relations between China and Pakistan, China and India have transferred from former opponents to "semi-opponents", namely "partners with profound contradictions". China-India relations and China-Pakistan relations are becoming more and more parallel in China's diplomacy, while the relevance of the two relationships is greatly diminished. China's position during the period of India-Pakistan Kargil conflict and later should be seen as a watershed shift in China's policy in South Asia.

China sincerely hopes that India and Pakistan are able to properly solve the existing problems between them in a peaceful way, to avoid the deterioration of security situation in South Asia, especially the turbulence of India-Pakistan relations. On the eve of the conflict in Kargil, Pakistan Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Pervez Musharraf visited China, when Fu Quanyou, member of China's Central Military Commission and Chief of General Staff, met him and reiterated the significance of Sino-Pakistani military cooperation, and expressed the hope that Pakistan and India would achieve a peaceful settlement of disputes through patient and serious dialogues. Premier Li Peng also said to Aziz, the former Pakistan Foreign Minister who

visited China later that Pakistan and India should exercise restraint and use peaceful means to resolve their disputes, to avoid further deterioration of the situation. (International edition of "People's Daily", 12 June 1999) Nawaz Sharif, who was Prime Minister of Pakistan, then paid a visit to China at the end of June that year, trying to persuade China to accept the position of Pakistan and hoped that China would support Pakistan's determination and its final plan to resolve the Kashmir issue with India. Chinese leaders Jiang Zemin, Li Peng and Zhu Rongji met with Sharif respectively, and made it clear that Pakistan and India should resolve the Kashmir dispute through consultation, and the tensions in Kashmir were fundamentally incompatible with the interests of the people of the region, and both of them should endeavour to promote regional peace and prosperity. India also learned China's position from its own channels. India's influential strategist Raja Mohan once pointed out in "The Hindu" (The Hindu, 14 June 1999) that China was committed to the normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan. Subsequently, China invited Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh to visit Beijing, sending signals to the relevant parties that China would adjust its existing policies in South Asia, as Alcatel Eqia, one scholar of Nehru University in India, stated in his article of "Sino-Indian Relations Review" that, "China shows fair neutrality in Kargil conflict " ("Peacock and Dragon: China-India Relations in the 21st century", edited by K Bajpai and A Mattoo, New Delhi, 2000, p. 168-198).

After the terrorist attacks in Mumbai of India in 2008, India-Pakistan relations fell into sudden tensions, and the fourth India-Pakistan war may break out at any moment. In the case of high tension, China paid great attention to the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the region, and sent a special envoy to mediate between India and Pakistan for the first time. China carried out urgent consultations with other related countries, taking a lot of positive diplomatic actions. Using a stereotyped Chinese saying, the policy China adopted is called "promoting peace and facilitating talks". Regardless of the effectiveness of this policy, China's basic attitude is like that, even if Pakistan criticises this policy and India does not fully accept that. Since it is in line with China's overall diplomatic strategy and China's strategic interests in South Asia, so as time goes on, China would continue to stick to this policy.

Changes in China's Policy towards South Asia

In the new historical period, China's overall security concept has undergone significant changes. Known as the so-called "new security concept", China's current idea of its foreign policy is to follow the spirit of mutual trust, mutual benefit, and equality, and pursue perimeter security and regional security through mutually beneficial cooperation. This has completely exceeded the traditional concept of security, that is, the scope of unilateral security, emphasising mutually

beneficial cooperation for common security. (On 31 July 2002, the Chinese delegation formally proposed that, when attending the meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers).

Needless to say, in the past few decades, China did give a lot of economic and military aid to Pakistan. During the Cold War, the Sino-Indian relations were in a tense state. Coupled with the indifference in Sino-Soviet relations, the strategic relationship between China and Pakistan included meanings against India. China hoped to provide necessary help to Pakistan and other South Asian countries, which harboured serious resentment towards India, to reduce the security pressure along the Sino-Indian border. It should be said that China took that security policy under certain historical conditions of that time, and it had to do this to deal with the special security relationship between India and the Soviet Union. If you carefully study the actual situation of history and international politics at that time, you can undoubtedly understand the essence of the relationship between China and the major South Asian countries.

It should be said that, entering the new century, China has adopted more stringent restrictions in this respect, providing Pakistan with some defensive weapons, and its motivation is to enable Pakistan in the military balance compared to India. China believes that the military imbalance between Pakistan and India is not conducive to maintaining strategic stability in South Asia and to their development. Moreover, due to the continuous breeding of domestic terrorism in Pakistan, Pakistan's own confusion will bring extremely serious consequences and even disastrous effects to the India-Pakistan relations. Of course, India is dissatisfied with that, thinking that China continues to use Pakistan as the "black hand" and "balancer" against India. According to some Indian strategists' points of view, they still believe that China is always supporting Pakistan against India and has a bias towards Pakistan on terrorism.

At present, China is helping Pakistan, which is in an extremely difficult situation, as much as it could out of a profound consideration. Pakistan did make big contributions, and also paid a heavy price in the international fight against terrorism. It is currently subject to serious security challenges, and is increasingly becoming the target of terrorist attacks. In addition, because of the unstable domestic situation, coupled with floods and other natural disasters, its economic development is also getting worse, facing serious difficulties. This kind of difficulty for the less developed country is really unbearable. If Pakistan cannot get rid of the current difficulties with the support of the international community and if it falls into a "failed state", it would undoubtedly bring to South Asia and its neighbouring countries some extremely dangerous security problems.

After the Cold War, with the steady improvement of Sino-Indian relations, especially during the decade after Rajiv Gandhi visited China, the Sino-Indian relations have witnessed remarkable progress. Especially as China continued to promote reforms, China's diplomacy has become

more mature, and China's leaders have dealt with India more actively. In 1993, the Chinese government invited India's Prime Minister Narasimha Rao to visit China, and the two sides signed "the Agreement on Maintaining Peace and Tranquillity long the Line of Actual Control on Sino-Indian Border", which is effectively improving the atmosphere of bilateral relations. During November-December of 1996, Chinese President Jiang Zemin was invited to visit India, when the two sides signed "the Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control on Sino-Indian Border", which is lifting the bilateral relations to a new level. Entering the new century, China and India have reached a clear understanding on the concept of security, reaffirming that they will not hold out threats to each other and will, instead, adopt a variety of ways to take "confidence-building measures" (CBMs). During May-June of 2000, India's President Narayanan visited China, when the two sides reiterated that they would not pose threats to each other. In 2001, China's Premier Zhu Rongji visited to India, giving a strong impetus to the development of bilateral economic and trade relations, which further laid a solid material foundation to improve their political and security relations. In 2003, India's Prime Minister Vajpayee visited China, when the two leaders signed "Sino-Indian Relations' Principles and Comprehensive Cooperation Declaration". In April of 2005, China's Premier Wen Jiabao visited India, and the two sides decided to establish "the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity", signing "the political guiding principles about solving the border issue" and other important documents. In 2006, when China's President Hu Jintao visited India, the two countries proposed the "ten strategies" for developing and enriching the China-India strategic partnership, including enhancing defence cooperation. In January of 2008, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited China, and the document of "A Shared Vision for the 21st Century" was issued jointly with China. This has important international significance. Subsequently, too, Prime Minister Singh and Premier Wen Jiabao visited each other. The two countries' leaders also met on many international occasions, creating the closest record of high-level contacts in the history of contemporary international relations.

In fact, after the post-Cold War, the military-security relationship between China and India has undergone unimaginable changes. Since the two governments signed "the Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures in the Military Field along the Line of Actual Control on Sino-Indian Border" in 1996, frontier guards of the two countries have implemented a series of confidence-building measures. Entering the new century, the defence ministers of the two countries have conducted a number of visits, while military exchanges at other levels have also been carried out. For example, when SARS was raging in 2003, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes visited China, and because of China's work, he changed his attitude by 180 degrees; in the same year, China's Deputy Chief Staff and two other military delegations visited India and in November, the navies of China and India launched joint maritime search and rescue exercises in China's East Sea; in 2004, Defence Minister Cao Gangchuan paid a return visit to India, Indian Army Chief visited China, the Military Academy delegation and the National Defence

University delegation visited India and the border guards of the two countries also conducted joint mountaineering exercises; in May of 2005, China's Central Military Commission member, Chief of Staff Liang Guanglie visited India, meeting the leaders of India's army, and the two countries held joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean in December; in May of 2006, Indian Defence Minister Mukherjee visited China, paying a visit to China's Aerospace Command and Control Centre, and after talks with Cao Gangchuan, they signed "the Memorandum of Understanding on Enhancing Exchanges and Cooperation in the Field of Defence", proposing some plans to standardise and enlarge cooperation in military training, military exercises and personnel exchanges. In 2007, their armies made a joint anti-terror drill in Yunnan; then the two countries conducted joint anti-terrorism training in India. Early in November of 2008, Wu Shengli, CMC member, Navy Commander, visited India, and in December, Deputy Chief Ma Xiaotian visited India and held second defence-security consultation with India. In 2011, after executing scheduled tasks, China's convoy to Somalia also visited India. Thanks to the role of political leaders of both countries, though Sino-Indian military contacts encountered some short-term setbacks, the military-security relations of the two countries started to recover.

I think that we must value the positive changes of China's policies towards India, and not be rigidly focussed on some problems in history. Only when you see and acknowledge these changes can you properly deal with the changes in the new situation by using a rational attitude and by truly grasping the new opportunities of historical development to achieve ultimate "win-win" or "win-win-win" objectives. Otherwise, if we are blindly entangled in history and cannot handle the relationship in tune with the times and if we continue to treat and handle the situation by using the traditional mindset, it will not be conducive to the improvement of mutual relations and it will harm our own interests, resulting in a "zero-sum game" situation. At present, some new and major changes are appearing in the security situation of South Asia, while the concepts of "quasi-alliance" and "soft containment" are rising. The countries directly related to the South Asian security framework should know that they must establish the concept of mutual and common security, promote "confidence-building measures" and strengthen mutual trust and cooperation, so that they can contribute to the region's peace and security, and fundamentally ensure their own security.

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