

China and the revision of the existing world order

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A few examples in this context include China's criticisms of sanctions against Russia, Russian statements on how China and Russia withstand the West's efforts to sow discord, Russia seeking Chinese military equipment, even though China denies it, and China's vote against the resolution at the UN General Assembly on suspending Moscow from the UN Human Rights Council.(REUTERS)

ByHindustan Times

Russia's war in Ukraine has raged on for almost a year, and various countries, based on their own national security interests have explicitly or implicitly chosen a side. The two sides in the ongoing war are those of peace or further fuelling of conflict. In this context, several countries including the US and Russia have benefited from the war machinery in different ways, and the contest for not losing face along with not losing the battle continues! When the war broke out last year in February, both India and China came under criticism from several segments of the West for abstaining on votes on Russian aggression at the United Nations (UN). Fears also arose that there could be a Russia-India-China trilateral seeking to offset the existing world order. What was comfortably ignored in such assessments was the fact that India is the world's largest democracy and an international system not based on the principles of democracy does not augur well for

India. However, over the period of the last one year, such voices have gradually died down, as India has made it clear at several multilateral forums as to how it chooses the side of peace and refuses to fuel further conflict.

The case of China in this context also becomes an interesting one. Just preceding the Russian onslaught in Ukraine, Beijing and Moscow had declared a friendship without limits. Beijing, like Moscow had expected the war to be a swift and decisive one. Even though Beijing publicly claims to maintain neutrality, its actions clearly show which side it is on. A few examples in this context include China's criticisms of sanctions against Russia, Russian statements on how China and Russia withstand the West's efforts to sow discord, Russia seeking Chinese military equipment, even though China denies it, and China's vote against the resolution at the UN General Assembly on suspending Moscow from the UN Human Rights Council. Before this China had abstained on votes on Russia, but on this one, it voted against the resolution.

In March last year, the International Court of Justice also asked Russia to suspend its invasion of Ukraine. Vice-President Kirill Gevorgian of Russia and judge Xue Hanqin of China dissented against the order. Examples such as these showing where China stands on the crisis are myriad. A more recent example is from January this year, when the U.S. Treasury sanctioned a Chinese company- Changsha Tianyi Space Science and Technology Research Institute Co. Ltd for providing satellite imagery of Ukraine to support the Kremlin-linked mercenary Wagner Group's combat operations for Russia. As per the White House, Wagner has about 50,000 fighters in Ukraine, with 80% of them being drawn from prisons.

Another example from January this year is that of Chinese companies' provision of non-lethal assistance to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine. The non-lethal military assistance and economic support stops short of wholesale sanctions evasion. In June last year, the department of commerce of the United States (US) amended the Entity List and added 36 entities which acted contrary to the foreign policy interests of the US in addition to supplying Russian sanctioned entities. A lot of these 36 entities came from the People's Republic of China.

The question which arises is what does China seek to gain out of the situation? China has long aspired to be the leader of the international system. Deng Xiaoping's dictum of 'hiding one's power and biding one's time' was done away with full clarity by Xi Jinping, who in his 19th Party Congress speech of 2017, stated that developing countries should consider following China's model. This made it clear that China was now willing to take on the role of a leader offering an alternate model of governance of the international system. China's aggression be it military or economic or in the sphere of disinformation and surveillance, since then has increased manifold, and the latest effort in supplanting American leadership through any, and all means possible is in the form of a Chinese high-altitude surveillance balloon spotted over continental US. Not too far back in time, in December last year, Chinese spy ship Yuan Wang 5 fitted with several tracking and surveillance devices had entered the Indian Ocean region ahead of India's plan for a test firing of a long-range ballistic missile in the Bay of Bengal.

China is willing to take over the reins of control of the international system by all means possible, as it believes its time has come. The Chinese view of the existing multilateral world order is vertical instead of being horizontal. A horizontal distribution of power sees different poles or countries in the international system exerting varying levels of influence on the system, whereas a vertical distribution sees one country at the top commanding all other countries beneath it. A revision of the existing multilateral system does not augur well for any country of the world, be it the oldest democracy or the largest democracy and a clearer understanding of China's revisionist plans through notes sharing is urgent.

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Changing profile of ports in the Bay of Bengal

international affairs

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To fill up the gap, India has planned to build an international transshipment terminal at the Galathea Bay in Great Nicobar Island.

By Hindustan Times

Imagine it is late 2030. Bangladesh is trying desperately to gain additional markets for its garments, pharmaceuticals, processed foods and steel products. Just a few years ago, the country had lost a huge stable market due to its elevation to the developing world. Bangladesh has realised that without a faster and efficient seaport, it is difficult to gain competitiveness in goods when competition is severe and tough. This does not look like an impossible scenario.

The year 2030 is not too far. By 2030, most of the old ports in Bay Bengal, particularly Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and West Bengal state of India will turn into inland ports due to rising siltation and navigational constraints.

In such a challenging time, Bangladesh has dual mandates: First, to set up a deep sea port in support of national infrastructure requirement so that not only the elevation to the developing world becomes smooth and sustainable but also trade picks up new markets for new products; and second, to build a deep sea- port in order to keep the economy growing at a faster pace.

Bangladesh and other Bay of Bengal countries continue to face climate issues, either rising sea levels or natural disasters. Trade among the Bay of Bengal countries will slow down if they fail to set up a deep seaport, hurting the growth and development. So, an abundance of caution must be in order.

Today, Bangladesh is setting up a deep seaport at a place called Matarbari between Cox's Bazar and Chattogram. This port is going to add over 10 million tonne port capacity by 2030, starting with a container terminal in 2026, the year by when Bangladesh elevates to the developing world, leaving aside the baggage of LDC. Japan has come forward to help Bangladesh in developing the deep sea port and related infrastructures. Not only the

development of the port, Japan and Bangladesh together are also building two coal-fired thermal power plants at Matarbari, which are likely to become operational by 2024. A 14-km wide navigational channel has been erected between the port terminals and deep water pockets in the Bay of Bengal, which provide a draft of 18.5m at the jetty on a continuous basis. Besides, two breakwaters have been constructed to protect the ports against tides, siltation, and storm surges. An economic zone centring the deep seaport is coming up very fast in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has three more ports, namely, Chattogram, Pyra and Mongla, and these are smaller tidal ports. By 2030, they may function as inland ports, feeding several smaller inland terminals in the region (see the Map).

On the other hand, ports in West Bengal, namely, Kolkata and Haldia, which were built as impounded docks, have been struggling for cargo. Bhutan and Nepal might shift to the ports in Bangladesh for their third country trade. West Bengal government's plan to set up a port at Tajpur is still uncertain. The design of Tajpur port is quite similar to that of Matarbari: construct a 18-km long navigational channel between jetties and deep water pockets in Bay of Bengal and breakwaters. But, Tajpur port will continue to face navigational constraints. It presently aims for an 8m draft at the jetty side and requires expensive capital dredging from time to time. While Matarbari port is well connected and strategically located in Bay of Bengal, Tajpur is in a disadvantageous position. It would be quicker to bring cargoes from Singapore or Colombo to Matrabari because of its locational advantage. To compete with nearby ports like Dhamra, investments in inland connectivity are essential, however. Tajpur may not be able to handle bigger vessels (say, containers), either.

What next? To fill up the gap, India has planned to build an international transshipment terminal at the Galathea Bay in Great Nicobar Island. It offers several major benefits: First, located only 40 nautical miles from the international shipping corridor; second, availability of natural water depth of over 20m at berth; third, transshipment for international shipping lines. Development of a full-fledged port there may cause huge environmental risks and damages. Environmental costs may appear to be higher than navigational benefits. To replace Colombo or Singapore or Port Klang, Galathea Bay has to be developed as a sustainable smart city. Simply looking at the savings of transshipment costs does not make sense. Instead, it may generate many diplomatic costs and the loss of friends. The requirements of India and Bangladesh in the port sector are two different mutually exclusive events. For India, what is needed is drastic port reforms and improvement of port performance. To sustain the Galathea container terminal, India has to generate enough cargoes for having direct calls. However, it is not to deny that it has potential to replace the Colombo port as a transshipment terminal for India. Once Thailand has decided to cancel the Kra Canal project, the economic relevance for the Galathea Bay terminal is not so strong.

Thailand has reactivated the capacity enhancement of Ranong port in the container handling segment. Bangkok port is almost converted into an inland port. Myanmar has planned to develop Myeik and Dawei as deep sea ports. Although these two ports have

high potential, given the current political situation, adding new port capacity in Myanmar is impossible. However, there is hope that Myanmar with the help of Chinese assistance will be able to complete the construction of the Kyaukpyu deep sea port by 2024. Kyaukpyu deep seaport is going to have 14m draft at the jetty with less capital dredging requirement. India has assisted Myanmar in redeveloping Sittwe port in Rakhine state, but it remains as a tidal port with low draft.

Fast-forward once again to late 2030. Most river-based ports in the Bay of Bengal will become inland ports to handle smaller vessels and cargoes, and these are not beyond our imagination: Kolkata, Chattogram, Haldia, Yangon, Bangkok, Sittwe, Pyra and Mongla. If there are no deep seaports in the Bay of Bengal region, growth will be severely hampered. In other words, disappearing deep sea ports is a real headwind.

Matarbari deep seaport is going to be a game changer. If it is developed in time connected with super efficient logistics networks, cargoes from India's East and Northeast, Nepal and Bhutan may eventually move to Matarbari. Without a major port in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh's rise as a developing nation may not sustain in the long-run. Here, the only country which is endowed with natural deep water port assets is Sri Lanka. The country is busy in rescuing the economy from the current economic crisis, but its absolute advantage may disappear if Sri Lanka fails to transform the port sector as a true regional hub port by dismantling the oligopolistic cartel of shipping lines and investing in South Asian ports and shipping sector.

There are lessons for Bay of Bengal countries from this port framework. Given that ports take a long time to build, these countries may consider a regional framework for maritime cooperation so that trade moves seamlessly. Here, Japan comes as an honest partner, a country that has grown with best performing ports, high speed vessels and abundance of technology and capital. There is a lesson from India as well. The Indian economy did not do well in the first decade of the liberalisation since the country was not having faster and efficient ports. India changed the port profile with drastic reforms and higher TFP, and the country started gaining from the growth. Bangladesh may follow suit.

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