

Chinese interest in Teesta project has India uneasy

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Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra recently visited Bangladesh and met with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This is the first top-level visit to Bangladesh after the re-election of Hasina, and the formation of the government in January. The recent talks focussed on security, water, neighbourhood, connectivity, energy, power, and co-operation. The visit was to underscore the closeness between the two countries and reassert New Delhi's 'neighbourhood-first' policy — and Dhaka's centrality to its success.

However, given the developments in the last few months, it is becoming quite apparent that India is again trying to react and manage the growing Chinese inroads in Bangladesh and South Asia. Given the reactionary nature of India's overtures, the question remains if these are too little too late. Dhaka has managed to maintain a good balance between India and China, and has played the regional power politics to its benefit. However, one needs to ponder how long will it be able to continue with this policy. A lot is being speculated over whether Hasina will visit India or China first. She has invitations from both neighbours.

One of the major areas of concern for New Delhi is the growing debt challenge in the South Asian region. Bangladesh has many outstanding loans to Beijing, and recently it has again extended a request for a soft loan of \$3 billion from Beijing 'to help businesses import raw materials and also for budget support'. The discussion regarding the rates and mode of payment is pending. Dhaka owes around \$6 billion in external debt to China. In April, Hasina even urged that Dhaka needs Beijing's help in developing the southern region. Bangladesh is also a signatory to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

China has also shown its interest in developing the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration project. This will be a \$1 billion project. The challenge for India here is that the project will be too close to the India's 'chicken's neck' in the Northeastern region. Though Beijing has submitted a formal project, New Delhi expressed its interest and has conveyed its security concerns if the project is awarded to Beijing.

China's interest in gaining access to ports in South Asia will also be a major concern vis-à-vis the Teesta project. This can further exaggerate China's geopolitical footprint in South Asia, and provide the Chinese navy with a foothold in the Indian Ocean Region.

On the security front, China and Bangladesh have been growing closer. Both announced they would conduct the first-ever bilateral military exercises this month. The announcement was made by China's Ministry of National Defense. It said, "that such activity is conducive to enhancing mutual understanding and friendship between the two militaries and deepening practical exchanges and cooperation".

Last year Bangladesh inaugurated BNS Sheikh Hasina, at Pekua in Cox's Bazar, a submarine base built by China at the cost of \$1.2 billion. China has also been one of the largest arms suppliers to Bangladesh. In 2016, Bangladesh bought two Type 035G submarines from China for \$203 million to upgrade the navy to a 'three-dimensional force'. Beijing also provided training to Bangladesh's navy.

This indicates the growing closeness between Beijing and Dhaka, and points towards the regional and geopolitical challenges for New Delhi. China is proving to be a good collaborator for Bangladesh on almost all the parameters.

Beijing's inroads in South Asia are also a challenge for the United States. No surprise then that the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu is visiting India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh between May 10 and 15.

For China, South Asia is essential for its global geopolitical aspirations. Most of the countries today seem to be leaning towards Beijing. In addition to Pakistan, countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal seem to have developed close economic and political ties with China. With such inroads, Beijing has consistently argued against the idea that South Asia is New Delhi's natural sphere of influence. All these countries are also struggling with major debt trap challenges.

The growing Bangladesh-China ties should prompt India to relook its diplomatic positioning and regional politics. There is a need for more proactive and consistent efforts to challenge China's access to the region. However, the question remains: can India counter the intensity of Chinese presence in the region? India has been working towards improving its relations and has extended help to its neighbours.

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