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Issue Brief

The Geopolitics of Power Configuration in South Asia: Understanding Chinese Defence Minister's Visit to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

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June 2, 2021

S*ummary*

China aims to prevent the eventuality of either Bangladesh or Sri Lanka joining the QUAD, in spite of the grouping's repeated reiteration that it is not a military alliance. Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe's visit to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka highlights Beijing's deepening security engagement with South Asian countries, in the backdrop of its increasingly tense geo-strategic tussle with the US.

In an event organised by the Diplomatic Correspondents' Association of Bangladesh (DCAB), the Ambassador of China to Bangladesh, Li Jiming, advised Bangladesh not to join the 'QUAD', and warned that the country's relations with China will "substantially be damaged" if it did so.¹ The statement, coming soon after the Chinese State Councillor and Defence Minister Wei Fenghe's brief visit to Dhaka, shows the trend of China's thinking and engagement with the countries of the South Asian region.

Bangladesh's Foreign Minister, Abdul Momen, reacting to the Chinese Ambassador's statement, made it clear that "as a sovereign country, Bangladesh will determine the course of its foreign policy in the interest of its people" and "urged foreign envoys in Dhaka to maintain decency and decorum while speaking in public".² The Chinese Ambassador's comments have drawn media attention and views by the strategic community in Bangladesh.³ Some have defended the statement as a view expressed by the Ambassador and cannot be considered as interference in domestic affairs.⁴

The Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hua Chunying, meanwhile, defended the statement, and insisted that China opposed "efforts to form an exclusive clique, portray China as a challenge, and sow discord between regional countries and China."⁵ Responding to the Press Trust of India (PTI) correspondent, Hua insisted China always treated other countries "as equals, especially small and medium ones. ... In South Asia, it is definitely not China that is interfering in other countries' domestic affairs." The Spokesperson further stated that remarks expressing opposition to the QUAD were "not about interference but about rejecting small cliques and bloc politics. They also reflect the aspiration for maintaining regional peace and stability."⁶ The reference to 'maintain regional peace and stability' also found mention in the Joint Statements issued during Wei Fenghe's visit.

The Brief brings to attention key aspects of South Asia's rapidly evolving geostrategic context, including Bangladesh and Sri Lanka's interaction with the United States and India, in the light of the visit of the Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe to Dhaka and Colombo and China's rising apprehensions about the QUAD.

Wei's Visit: Key Takeaways

A key aim of Minister Wei's visit to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka was to advance defence cooperation with the two countries. Bangladesh is the second largest buyer of Chinese weapons. Wei stated that Bangladesh and China "should make joint efforts against powers outside the region setting up military alliance in South Asia and

¹ United News Bangladesh, "[Relations with China will be damaged if Bangladesh joins US-led 'Quad' envoy](#)", May 10, 2021.

² Ananth Krishnan, "[Bangladesh rebuffs China on Quad warning](#)", *The Hindu*, May 12, 2021.

³ Kamal Ahmed, "[চীন কেন বাংলাদেশ নিয়ে ভাবছে?](#)" ([Why is China Thinking about Bangladesh](#)), *Prothom Alo*, May 17, 2021.

⁴ Humayun Kabir, "[To me, it is not interference in a pure sense](#)", *The Business Standard*, May 11, 2021.

⁵ "[Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on May 12, 2021](#)," Foreign Ministry of the Peoples Republic of China, May 12, 2021.

⁶ Ibid.

practicing hegemonism ... and jointly maintain regional peace and stability”.⁷ Wei met the Chief of Army Staff, General Aziz Ahmed, as well as the President of Bangladesh. China also extended its support to Bangladesh in resolving the Rohingya refugee crisis.

In Sri Lanka, Wei appreciated the country’s independent and non-aligned policy and said it will make joint efforts with Sri Lanka to strengthen coordination and safeguard regional peace and tranquillity. President Gotabaya Rajapakse assured the visiting Defence Minister that his country “will never bend to pressure from major powers outside the region as well as never forge an alliance with any country.”⁸

In his meeting with Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary, Kamal Gunaratne, Wei pledged to “enhance practical cooperation”.⁹ The website of the Chinese National Defence University Alumni Association of Sri Lanka was launched, and the two countries signed a military assistance protocol. Gunaratne appreciated China’s support to Colombo when the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a resolution against Sri Lanka in March 2021.

The Chinese Defence Minister also expressed his appreciation for Sri Lanka’s “position on issues relating to China's Taiwan, Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and will as always support Sri Lanka's stance over issues relating to human rights and national reconciliation”.¹⁰

China’s Growing Footprint in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

China has been trying to strengthen its foothold in South Asia since 2000, in an effort to counter-balance India’s regional pre-eminence. It has partnered with regimes that are either apprehensive of India’s emerging power status or are not India-friendly. China has been opposed to the growing Indo-US relationship, since the conclusion of the civil nuclear deal in 2008. The QUAD is seen as a progression of India’s relationship with the US.

China has been apprehensive about the Indo-Pacific strategy of the QUAD countries, despite assurances by QUAD leaders that the grouping is not directed against any country. This was explicitly stated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his speech at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018.¹¹ Yet, China considers it an alliance.

Over the past many years, both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have been close to China and have benefitted from Chinese investment in infrastructure development. Moreover, while Bangladesh remains an important cog in China’s Bay of Bengal strategy, Sri Lanka is Beijing’s Indian Ocean maritime strategy partner.

Both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are China’s strategic partners and are part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2014, Sri Lanka became part of China’s Twenty-

⁷ [“Bangladesh, China agree to increase military cooperation”](#), *Xinhua*, April 28, 2021.

⁸ [“Sri Lanka, China vow to enhance pragmatic cooperation in all sectors”](#), *Xinhua*, April 26, 2021.

⁹ [“China-SL bilateral discussion concludes successfully”](#), Ministry of Defence, Sri Lanka, April 28, 2021.

¹⁰ [“Sri Lanka, China vow to enhance pragmatic cooperation in all sectors”](#), *Xinhua*, April 29, 2021.

¹¹ [“Prime Minister’s Keynote Address at Shangri La Dialogue”](#), *Ministry of External Affairs*, June 1, 2018.

first Century Maritime Silk Route proposal, when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Sri Lanka.¹² In Bangladesh, China had pledged \$24 billion during Xi's visit in 2016.¹³

In Sri Lanka, China is seen as a shield against India and the US in the context of ethnic politics. This has mostly manifested in the two countries position at the UNHRC. The US is keen on ensuring accountability of the Sri Lanka government and security forces responsible for alleged human rights violation that killed 40,000 unarmed civilians in the last phase of the war in 2009. China has consistently supported Sri Lanka and voted against the Resolution. India, which supported Sri Lanka during the passage of the first Resolution in 2010 but voted against Sri Lanka in 2012, has subsequently abstained.

China has emerged as one of the country's key security partner.¹⁴ It has not been able to expand its defence cooperation since India had objected to the berthing of nuclear submarines. China's decision to supply J-7 fighter aircraft, as of now, been shelved. In 2019, Beijing supplied Sri Lanka a re-fitted Frigate but its plan to set up an aircraft repair factory was subsequently dropped following India's objection.

However, China's economic footprints are now entrenched in Sri Lanka. While the projects that India was interested to invest in, along with Japan, are being shelved, Chinese projects are coming up in a planned manner even though there were some initial hiccups. Domestically, China is seen as a partner who supported Sri Lanka during the war by providing military equipment and financial support for post-war reconstruction, including a \$6 billion package to build infrastructure, ports and other facilities.¹⁵

Some of the Chinese projects in the country have indeed faced political opposition. These include the allotment of 15,000 acres of land in Hambantota for an industrial zone controlled by China's Merchants Port Holdings and the controversy over the environmental clearance accorded to Port City. The government, however, has managed to rescue the Chinese projects. Politically orchestrated protests meanwhile, spearheaded by Sri Lankan port workers against Indian investment in the Eastern Container Terminal, led to the cancellation of the agreement.

This does indicate that investments from India and the US are rather intensely scrutinized and rejected, to protect 'sovereignty and national interest'. In the words of a Sri Lankan analyst, "Unfortunately, India – like Japan, which also still provides us with much financial and other support – is still not very good at publicizing its

¹² James Crabtree, "[Sri Lanka sees benefits of China's 'maritime silk road' plan](#)", *Financial Times*, September 17, 2014.

¹³ Ruma Paul and Ben Blandchard, "[China to sign some \\$24 billion in loans to Bangladesh as Xi visits](#)", *Reuters*, October 14, 2016.

¹⁴ Chulanee Attanayake, "[Chinese Defence Minister's Visit to Sri Lanka: A New Dynamic to Bilateral Ties](#)", ISAS Brief, May 18, 2021.

¹⁵ Patrick Mendis, "The Colombo-Centric New Silk Road", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47(49), December 8, 2012, p.72.

support, whereas the bigger Chinese projects, which are primarily through loans, are showpieces that government inaugurates with much fanfare.”¹⁶

The US Factor

Suspicion and mistrust for India is a recurring theme in the security narratives of both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The two countries also nurture similar suspicion against the United States. It is equally true that the two countries do not want the balance of power in the region to tilt towards either India or the United States for historical reasons.¹⁷ They do not wish to annoy China which has brought in large-scale investments in the infrastructure sector.

Bangladesh is wary of overtly taking sides, in the geopolitical struggle between the US and China. It has cautiously engaged with the United States. The government has denied any proposal relating to a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the US. The US policies vis-à-vis West Asia are stacked against any US attempt to forge close ties with Bangladesh.

Despite this, Bangladesh’s relations with the US have improved significantly. The US has proposed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and the Acquisition Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), which are yet to be formalised. Under the ACSA, the US trains Bangladeshi peacekeepers and conducts counter-terrorism exercises. In 2018, the US provided \$5.3 million for the purchase of five Metal Shark boats to support the maritime security objectives of the Bangladesh Navy.¹⁸

Since the visit of US Deputy Secretary of State Stephen Biegun in 2020, the US is trying to repair its relations with Bangladesh, which had suffered due to the US position on Mohammad Yunus and its approach to the 2014 elections. Bangladesh is supportive of a free and open Indo-Pacific, and welcomes US investment in the country’s infrastructural development.¹⁹

Though the QUAD remains confined to the four maritime democracies, the US considers South Asia as an integral part of its Indo-Pacific strategy. US officials note that “maritime and regional security in South Asia are critical to ensuring a free, open, peaceful, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region for the benefit of all its nations ...”²⁰

¹⁶ Rajiv Wijesinha, “[The World Today: China, India And The United States As Seen From Sri Lanka](#)”, *Colombo Telegraph*, October 31, 2013.

¹⁷ The US role during Sheikh Mujib’s assassination has remained a sore point with the current Awami League regime. The US has also flagged the rise of religious radicalism in Bangladesh. In Sri Lanka, meanwhile, the position of US and India on the resolution of the ethnic conflict is not to the liking of the current government. Close cooperation between US and India is looked at with apprehension.

¹⁸ “[US wants 2 defence deals with Bangladesh](#)”, *The Daily Star*, October 18, 2019.

¹⁹ A.K.Abdul Momen, “[New horizon in US-Bangladesh ties visible with Biden administration](#)”, *Daily Star*, February 10, 2021.

²⁰ A.Z.M. Anas, “[US uses defense diplomacy to woo Bangladesh away from China](#)”, *Nikkei Asia*, September 22, 2020.

The US also supports Bangladesh on the Rohingya issue. Dhaka believes that the Chinese have influence over the Myanmar junta and is in a position to help ease the Rohingya refugee crisis. Bangladesh and China, meanwhile, share an excellent military-to-military relationship.

Sri Lanka's ACSA was renewed in 2017 without the consent of the Cabinet. This gave rise to domestic opposition against US intentions.²¹ The proposed SOFA, or the Visiting Force agreement (VFA), has also run into trouble.²² This was one of the reasons for the rift between President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe which led to the latter's sacking as Prime Minister in October 2019. However, Wikramasinghe clarified in Parliament that both SOFA and ACSA were signed by his predecessors.²³ The US continues to sponsor resolutions against Sri Lanka at the UNHRC, since 2009. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), through which the US proposed to invest in Sri Lanka, was also opposed in Sri Lanka.

The present Sri Lankan government has its own reservations against engagement with the US. Sri Lanka emphasizes its non-aligned foreign policy and lately has been trying to revive the Indian Ocean Zone of Peace proposal, ostensibly to protect its interests. It does not want to get caught in the power politics in the Indian Ocean but feels vulnerable in the emerging contest between the US and China.

Sri Lanka also perceives India's QUAD activities as essentially directed against China. If China loses its edge in the geopolitical competition, then it fears the country will be subjected to US-India 'hegemony'. Sri Lanka has been trying to sweep under the carpet the war crimes allegedly committed during the last phase of the war against the LTTE. Colombo continues to be reluctant to devolve power to the Tamil ethnic minority.

Conclusion

China has taken advantage of the perceived security needs of South Asian countries like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and has emerged as their key defence partner. As a permanent member of the Security Council, Beijing's help is also seen as crucial by Sri Lanka, for instance, to deflect international efforts to make Colombo accountable for human rights violation over the 2009 war.

Apart from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, China has expanded its presence in Nepal and Maldives as well. China aims to prevent the eventuality of either Bangladesh or Sri Lanka joining the QUAD, in spite of the grouping's repeated reiteration that it is not a military alliance. Wei Fenghe's visit highlights China's deepening security engagement with South Asian countries, in the backdrop of Beijing's increasingly tense geo-strategic tussle with the US.

²¹ Sudha Ramachandran, "[Sri Lankans Up in Arms Over US Military Pacts](#)", *The Diplomat*, August 15, 2019.

²² "[Sri Lanka's sovereignty and the US](#)", *The Sunday Times*, June 30, 2019.

²³ "[US Troops Already Enjoy Diplomatic Immunity as per SOFA Signed During CBK's Tenure: PM](#)", *Colombo Telegraph*, July 10, 2019.

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