

LEGITIMACY OF INDIA'S HEGEMONIC CLAIMS IN SOUTH ASIA: A SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

*Dr. Sadia Khanum**

Abstract

The rise of regional influence in the post unipolar world has changed the orientation of world politics altogether. This paper focuses on the rise of India in this backdrop particularly with regard to its hegemonic aspirations in South Asia. India's developing domestic market with global outreach and sustainable growth over the last few decades has enabled the country to plan big and materialize the goal (of regional pre-eminence) set by its founding fathers. The traditional idea of power and use of power to create an influence among small states somehow supports the hegemonic claims of India but unconventional ideas of hegemony challenge the legitimacy of any such claims. India's growing economic and military potentials are not very helpful in maintaining or restoring peace and prosperity in the region and being considered a constant threat to regional security. India's hegemonic aspirations are not only the major source of unrest in the region but also a great threat to Pakistan's territorial integrity since India perceives Pakistan a major hurdle to attain regional supremacy. Scrutinizing Indian hegemonic claims by applying Cox's idea of a legitimate hegemon shows an evident lack of will on the part of India to contribute materially and ideologically in creating and establishing stable order in the region.

Keywords: Conflict, Economic Growth, Geo-Strategic, Hegemony, India, Pre-Eminence, Power-Politics, South Asia.

Introduction

India's regional ambitions are derived from its historical experiences and the sustainable and stable economic growth over the last few decades. India's economic growth is surely a criterion to consider it a rising power in the world, however there are some other essential parameters to judge any country's share in the system in context of distribution of power. Peace and prosperity at home and having peaceful neighborhood are the major factors contributing in securing a place among the regional and global decision makers. Any country with disturbed neighborhood would not be able to achieve the dream of stable growth at home as sharing border is much more than sharing geographic boundaries. It involves socio-political contact with the neighboring countries

*Dr. Sadia Khanum is faculty member at Department of Social Sciences, Political Science & International Relations, Istanbul University, Turkey.

and if countries in geographic proximity are lacking peace or political and economic well-being then chances are high that these conditions will impact the growth and peace of the whole region. In South Asian context, India wants rapid growth for itself for which regional connectivity and economic integration is essential. India's goals to dominate the regional market and protecting the region from any outside power's involvement in socio-economic and geostrategic matters demand high responsibility to contribute in the regional growth and peace and prosperity. Despite the rapid economic growth and strengthening of its military might, India has yet to do more to translate its power capabilities in more visible predominant character in the region. The Indian preeminence in South Asia is dependent on the other states in the region. Self-perception is significant in defining foreign policy goals of any state but whether that self-perception is based on legitimate acceptance by the other major players or assumed is more significant. This paper is an attempt to scrutinize the legitimacy of India's hegemonic claims in the region.

Theoretical Perspective

The end of the bi-polar system and the rise of new centers of power in 1990s started a new era in international politics where many regional influencers aspire to grab the status of a regional hegemon. Countries with strong economy and reliable military might compete for the preeminence in their perspective regions. The tangible sources of hegemonic aspirations have been explained in realist paradigm in terms of power and the capability to translate the power to influence.¹ Other than measurable and calculable sources of power or hegemonic capabilities, there are some more parameters to scrutinize; whether any state possesses the required amount of acceptability of her claims in the region and globally. Peace at home, economic prosperity for all the citizens of the state, having an ideology that influences the whole world or at least the proclaimed sphere of influence, self-perception and how others recognize that perception are a few parameters to judge the hegemonic claims of any state. It also includes the contribution of the state in its immediate neighborhood in terms of creating a stable economic and political environment.

Cox's neo-Gramscian explanation of hegemony helps understanding the flaws in India's hegemonic claims. Cox's utilization of some unconventional bases of comprehending hegemony includes the acceptance of ideological superiority of hegemon by other states bigger or smaller. The hegemonic claim could only be acceptable when it is based on both the material power (economic and military capabilities) and certain norms along with administrative capabilities manifested in institutions capable to govern or dictate the desired order globally.² Cox's idea of hegemony involves the use of authority through consensus, however for him, 'dominance by a powerful state may be a

necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony.³ Scrutinizing India's hegemonic claims in South Asia in the light of Cox's explanation of hegemony makes it fairly easy to calculate legitimacy of claims in the region and globally.

Manifestation of India's Hegemonic Ambitions in South Asia

India has always been preoccupied with a strong desire to establish its predominance in South Asia and since its independence from British in 1947, the main objective of Indian foreign policy is to realize the goal of becoming a regional hegemon whose legitimacy would be accepted by other states in the region.⁴ Indian policy makers and leaders take the country's geographic proximity with all the nations in the region as an opportunity to turn the desire to dominate into a reality. India has an advantaged position in South Asia as it shares borders with all South Asian countries. It also possesses the 72 percent of the land in the region. Population wise India is the biggest nation and its economic output in the region is 75 percent. The more tangible calculation of power in terms of military capabilities also makes India the strongest and mighty state in the region. India's military and naval forces are continuously expanding the budget and muscles in the region as well. Hence, India considers itself a legitimate primary regional force in South Asia.⁵

Historical and Psychological Roots of India's Hegemonic Aspirations

India's desire to establish its hegemony in the region has its basis not only in tangible capabilities of the country but also the perception of its leaders that after the end of colonial rule India has been destined to regain its lost glory by filling the void of any other dominant power in South Asia. The perception that India has the inherited legitimate right to dominate the region after the end of the colonial rule and that small regional states should adopt a submissive approach vis a vis India, is very obvious in leadership and policymaker's outlook. Distinguished Indian political scientist, writer and foreign affairs commentator Bhabani Sen Gupta very explicitly explains Indian psychology, "The Indian elephant cannot transform itself into a mouse. If South Asia is to get itself out of the crippling binds of conflicts and cleavages, the six will have to accept the bigness of the seventh. And the seventh, that is India, will have to prove to the six that big can indeed be beautiful."⁶

India's geographic vastness, huge population and geopolitically attractive geographic location makes it an ambitious actor in the region and the world. It is not surprising that India's political elite have always dreamt big to acquire the status of a major regional and world power. One of the founding fathers of modern India and the first head of government Jawaharlal Nehru always preached this intention and

inspiration in his speeches and explicitly in his policies. A little less than a year before independence, while moving the objective resolution in the Constituent Assembly on December 13, 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru stated the intention to make India a major power on the pattern of glorious past. In his words, "As I stand here, sir, I feel the weight of all manner of things crowding upon me. We are at the end of an era and possibly very soon we shall embark upon a new age; and my mind goes back to the great past of India, to the 5000 years of India's history, from the very dawn of that history which might be considered almost the dawn of human history, till today. All that past crowded upon me and exhilarates me and, at the same time, oppresses me. Am I worthy of that past? When I think also of the future – the greater future I hope – standing on this sword's edge of the present between the mighty past and the mightier future."⁷

The reference of glorious past in most of the speeches of Indian leadership and emphasis on the need of building an equally glorious future for modern India, somehow is a reflection of historical grievances. On one hand, the rich ancient civilization is the matter of pride but on the other hand the Indian subcontinent had witnessed several foreign conquests and was forced to surrender in many big and small wars with outside invaders. This history of losing the power and rule to invaders has profound impact on modern day India and its leadership. The psychology to avoid the bitter past happenings/experiences by acquiring and maintaining power in the immediate neighborhood is visible in New Delhi's South Asian policies. In another speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly in a reply to the debate on the objective resolution on January 22, 1947, Nehru stated, "India is a great country, greater in her resources, great in man-power, great in her potential, in every way. I have little doubt that a free India on every plan will play a big part on the world stage, even the narrowest plane of material power."⁸

Nehru's objectives vis-à-vis Asia were not limited to have mere friendly economic and diplomatic relations but the aim from very start was to become a major power with good amount of authority. Nehru was well aware that there was hardly any country as big as India and it provides her with an opportunity to maintain the dominance after the exit of British from South Asia particularly. His foreign policy objective towards Asia was well defined and the main objective was to make India a country with central position in Asian politics. His statements giving an impression that he was taking it like a divine responsibility on India to lead Asia and play a central role in the region. "When we talk of Asia, remember that India, not because of any ambition of hers, but because of the force of circumstances, because of geography, because of history and because of so many other things, inevitably has to play a very important part in Asia. And not only that, India becomes a meeting ground for various trends and forces and a meeting ground between what might roughly be called the East and the West. Look at

the map. If you have to consider any question affecting the Middle East, India inevitably comes into the picture. If you have to consider any question, India inevitably comes into the picture. If you have to consider any question concerning South-East Asia, you cannot do so without India. So also, the Far East. While the Middle East may not be directly connected with South-East Asia, both are connected with India. Even if you think in terms of regional organizations in Asia, you have to keep in touch with other regions. And whatever regions you may have in mind, the importance of India cannot be ignored.”⁹ This speech leaves no ambiguity to understand Indian leadership’s ambitions in Asia.

The secular leadership of India was also promoting a soft image of the country, a great civilization, and believers of non-violence and supporters of diplomatic negotiations to resolve the problems. They were emphasizing the idealistic policies of cooperation and connectivity to achieve the goal of making India a great power in the region and in the world. Gandhi’s non-violence philosophy and Nehru’s Panchsheel (five virtues) principals of non-interferences and peaceful coexistence give an image of peaceful and tolerant India which has the potential of bearing responsibility. But on the other hand, there are many radical Hindu organizations and groups preaching and promoting aggressive policies to achieve the lost past glory of India and Nehru and his followers had never tried to counter the violent means of achieving hegemonic goals propagated by the radical Hindu forces. The absence of any state level initiatives to shun violence against minorities at home and against neighboring countries depicts Nehru and his followers silent support to forward the agenda of preeminence in South Asia.

The rise of right-wing Hindutva (radical Hinduism) in the start of twentieth century and its political aspiration to regain the lost prestige by replacing British colonial masters in the subcontinent led to the partition of India. The minorities (especially Muslims) were scared of radical militant approach of Hindutva forces to eliminate other religious ideologies and making India exclusively a Hindu state.¹⁰ Religious and cultural extremist Hindutva forces soon after independence challenged and threatened the secular and tolerant Hindu leadership. The murder of Gandhi by a member of extremist Hindu organization RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), a group that advocates Hindu nationalism and Hindu India, depicts the psychology of right-wing Hindu groups. The quest to make India a Hindu state is inseparable from the idea of greater India or a Hindu empire. The psychological effect of historical oppression of the nation, a subjugated majority in its own homeland ruled by foreign powers, is evident from Hindutva ideology of regaining power for Hindu majority and India.¹¹ The work of two prominent advocates of Hindutva, Vinayak Damodhar Savarkar (1883-1966) and Narendranath Datta (1863-1902), is primarily focused on the greatness of Hindu civilization and need of its revival by making Hindu India a major power not only in

South Asia but in the world.¹² Savarkar's book, *Six Glorious Epochs of Indian History*, is a detailed account of ancient Hindu history and he attempted to give an alternative narrative by glorifying the Hindu age in India starting from Emperor Chandragupta Maurya till the occupation by the British Empire. Such kind of narratives attempt to make Hindu population realize the magnificent past and create a victim psychology among the masses to ignite them against the "others" and regaining their legitimate rule and authority in modern world is very much part of agenda of "Akhand Bharat" or Greater United India. The main protagonist of Akhand Bharat/Hindustan, Kanaiyalal Maneklal Munshi states in his speech at the Akhand Hindustan Conference in February 1942, "let us fix our gaze steadfastly on our past, which was great, and the future, which is glorious, and above all, live in the present as men.... Let us, therefore, hold fast to (the) integrity (of Hindustan), and to the culture which is its splendors [sic] heritage."¹³

Hindutva leaders and their followers see the future prestige and power of India in its rich past which was under assault for a few hundred years and now it's their responsibility to earn that glory back for India. Same as in the case of most of the religious and ultranationalist movements happens, the Hindutva movement also reached to the conclusion of saving its primordial ideology that is purely based on territorial ambitions and superiority of an ancient race by declaring war on an assumed enemy to purify the homeland. The existence of Muslims and Christians in India was considered a memory of subjugation by the foreign invaders. Savarkar and his fellows' admiration for Adolf Hitler and Nazism is somehow not a coincidence.¹⁴ The making of Pakistan and the partition of India was seen by radical Hindus as a betrayal to their ideology of 'United India' and a major setback to their ambitions of regaining and reclaiming the lost glorious past.

After independence, this psychology of victimhood was translated into modern nationalism and nation building process. In the presence of Nehruvianism (Jawaharlal Nehru, basically advocates a prestigious global status for India and respect for its unique civilization and making India powerful enough to be independent of other states or major powers)¹⁵ the aggressive Hindutva brigade was more active in social training of the masses and promoting the ideals of greater India but with the decline of Nehru dynasty and the Congress party, Hindu radical groups openly came out in mainstream politics and started promoting the idea of Indian-ness and making India a major power in the region and the world. The very psychology of not letting India to become a subordinate country and protecting its geographical integrity provides the basis for high ambitions of Indian leadership and masses to make India a big power in South Asia and the world.

Indian Hegemonic Aspirations: A Threat to Peace and Prosperity in South Asia

Throughout the Cold War, India was trying to maintain its preeminence in the region but at that time the bipolar system was a hurdle in New Delhi's ambitions as all the big and small states were somehow affiliated with one or another super power of the time. The Cold War balance of power politics was not favoring India to maintain its authority over other states as small as Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Pakistan was taking the benefit of American dependence on it in handling Afghanistan matters post-Soviet invasion and was receiving the US' financial and military support. China and the United States interference was the source of neutralization of Indian authority in South Asia.¹⁶ The idea of formulation of strategic consensus in subcontinent wasn't getting materialized as other states were reluctant to obey Indian wishes on matters of political and geostrategic importance despite that India had tried to terrify them by using hard power against almost all of its neighbors.¹⁷

The end of the Cold War provided India with an opportunity to try its luck as the end of bipolar rivalries apparently decreased the chances of any external (power's) meddling in South Asia. The sole superpower of the time was more supportive of India in the new geostrategic environment in early 1990s. India's growing economy and defense capabilities after adopting the capitalist LPG (liberalization, privatization and globalization) model qualified it to build close ties with the US. Eventually US found India a more trustworthy candidate of protecting its interests in the region and started considering India as a security manager or guard of its interests in the region.¹⁸ In changing international and consequently regional dynamics, India could have utilized the opportunity to make better foreign policy vis a vis its immediate neighbors and materialize its leadership goals as well by resolving its disputes and conflicts and by helping other regional fellows in getting rid of violence and political turmoil, but India preferred to keep its obsession of ruling the region using its mean tactics to create turbulence in neighboring states.

In diverse and very dynamic politics of South Asia, India prioritizes bilateral solution of all the disputes whether it is Kashmir dispute or water sharing disputes with Bangladesh while its neighbors favour multilateral approach to resolve the issues. The logic of stressing on multilateral approach is obvious; smaller states know they do not have the leverage or bargaining capabilities vis a vis India and if they go for multilateral approach only then efforts could be result oriented. But India considers any multilateral regional parameter to solve the tensions as a threat to its geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the region.¹⁹ Neighboring states consider India's emphasis on bilateralism a tool of its coercive foreign policy. Multilateralism in South Asia is not favorable to Indian interests in the region; even the working of SAARC has been hijacked in quest of

securing Indian national interests. The neighboring states see India as a powerful manipulator that is using its economic and military superiority as a tool to achieve its economic, political and geostrategic interests in the region.

India wants to control the markets of its neighbors but doesn't give them chance to have an open access to its domestic market. For instance, if we see Indo-Bangladesh trade statistics, India exported some USD 2.3 billion worth of goods to Bangladesh in 2007 but Bangladesh's exports to India were only half a billion USD.²⁰ The trade deficit is huge and discouraging for Bangladesh's producers as Indian products are replacing the local production. There is a legitimate fear that if trade deficit persists then the local market will only be relying on a few exports while Indian monopoly would cause de-industrialization and unemployment in the country. Economic instability in turn contributes to political chaos. Tariff barriers are in favour of Indian economy and damaging Bangladesh's exports. India has the condition of mandatory testing of imports like agricultural, textile and leather from its neighbors and testing process takes a lot of time.

Another problem that neighboring countries face in exporting to India is the acquiring of licenses to meet the criteria of India's standard of imports. For example, Pakistan is the main cement supplier to India but Pakistani cement first goes for quality examination and after approval India allows the transfer of goods and it takes significant time, hence discourages producers in Pakistan to engage in any export activity with India. India had also increased tariffs on Pakistani products to protect the local market while demanding from Pakistan to give it the status of Most Favorite Nation (MFN) to minimize the tariffs for its exports to Pakistan.²¹ Meanwhile India has done nothing to liberalize the process of imports from neighboring states to facilitate their struggling markets and neither is making any arrangement to setup testing laboratories for the exports of South Asian countries closer to the border area to save time. This attitude exhibits how India prioritizes own economic interests while damaging the neighboring economy. It is a hurdle in the way of regional economic integration and the overall prosperity.

In case of Nepal, India initially signed an agreement giving free access to all agricultural and industrial products but revoked it in 2006 and imposed Customs Value Duty (CVD) which subsequently raised the cost of export from Nepal. Nepal has also complaints regarding quality assurance tests of its products as these tests raise the costs as well as devalue the product in presence of Indian products.²² This one-way free trade in favour of India is disturbing the tiny market of Nepal. Totally dependent on India but still isolated and deprived of any financial cooperation from the giant neighbor creates anger in public.²³ Sri Lanka is the only country which is getting benefits of Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India that was signed in 1998 and came into effect in 2000.²⁴ This

FTA was also the result of India's political concern, saving Sri Lanka from going into China and Pakistan orbit.

Apart from the countable trade deficit imposed on small neighboring states, India's interference in internal matters of these states is also a cause of serious concern for their sovereignty and stability. India's role in changing ruling authorities in Nepal is one of the reasons of deep-rooted distrust that exists in Nepal against India. India apparently helped King Tribhuvan of the Shah dynasty against the Maoist rebels in 1950 and in forming a consensus-based government of National Congress, both the Shahs and the Ranas, but since then India is continuously dictating its terms to Nepal government in all politically and geo-strategically significant matters.²⁵

The China factor is changing geostrategic game in the region. The emergence of China as a main power player in the region with its infrastructure and economic projects to offer to almost all the South Asian states is the real challenge for Indian predominance in the region. India's ambitions to play the sole hegemon in the region are under threat and now it has little margin to take benefit of small regional economies. It has huge concerns vis-à-vis China's increasing diplomatic and strategic ties with countries in South Asia. Earlier it was only Pakistan, enjoying full economic and military support of China in a bid for competing India's hegemonic desires, but post 1990s, China has started developing cordial ties with other states of the region. China has emerged as an alternative power for the small countries earlier dependent on India because of their geographic weaknesses, tiny economies (depended on Indian market) and small size.²⁶

China and India rely on foreign resources of energy as domestic resources are not enough to fulfill the needs of growing economies. China imports forty percent of its energy needs while Indian dependence on external sources is seventy percent.²⁷ India, China energy competition is reflected in their struggle to establish the influence in major energy exporting countries as well as in the energy transport routes. The naval power buildup by India in the Malacca Straits²⁸ and Chinese' strategy of encircling India by creating a "String of Pearls," developing ports in South Asian states are the illustration of energy power game in the region. China is building strategic ports in Vietnam, Burma, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to protect sea lanes and to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies.²⁹ This strategy to reach the destination for energy resources and protection of energy routes by building strategic infrastructure across South and Southeast Asia to Africa is worrisome for India. It has been taken as Chinese strategy to undermine Indian economic and strategic interests in the region. China's growing interest in the region is a big source of concern for India because of its potential to undermine India's hegemonic bids in the region.

India's Hegemonic Quest: Security Threat to Pakistan

India and Pakistan's nuclear capabilities have increased the security threats for South Asia many folds. The acquisition of nuclear assets enables both the countries to avoid war by using them as deterrence but the rivalry and distrust among them have given birth to an unending arms race. Pakistan with its limited resources and struggling economy is paying a huge cost for this arms race initiated by India. India considers Pakistan a major hurdle in its way that's why most of its security strategies and policy formulation are Pakistan centric³⁰ and it does not miss any chance to destabilize the country in every possible way. Indo-US nuclear deal has created many doubts for Pakistan as the deal is meant to escalate India's efforts to push the country in a corner. The rise of Hindutva or Hindu chauvinism in India has further aggravated the security threats for Pakistan's sovereignty. Modi-led BJP's anti-Pakistan rhetoric to win elections³¹ is the proof of deep-rooted hostility and hatred against the country. BJP under Narendra Modi could not fulfill its promises made to the supporters to win elections hence, the most convenient strategy to counter internal distress and disappointment is to divert attention to external front and this is what Modi did on February 26, 2019 by launching the so called preemptive strikes on Balakot after the false flag attack on a convoy of vehicles carrying security personnel in Indian occupied Kashmir, killing 40 and accusing Pakistan. Such an act of blatant assault on a country's territorial sovereignty is the manifestation of India's aggressive plans against Pakistan.

There are plenty more occasions when India shows its hostile intentions towards Pakistan to harm country's economic and geo-strategic interests in the region and globally. The way India lobbied and propagated the issue of Pakistan being added to the FTFA (Financial Action Task Force) grey list exhibits India's ill-intentions to deprive Pakistan of financial benefits,³² as being on grey list will create difficulties for Pakistan, banking sector will suffer financial setbacks because of additional restrictions and scrutiny from international financial system. Furthermore, Pakistan will lose access to international lending on doubts that money may be used for terrorism purposes.³³

These two examples suffice to demonstrate India's ill-intentions towards Pakistan and how it uses its power capabilities (soft and hard) against the territorial, geostrategic and economic interests of the country in order to gain its own regional interest. India's regional hegemony would further deteriorate the situation for Pakistan especially in current scenario where the regional affairs seem in transition and difficult to predict in context of changes in political and geostrategic outlook of Iran and Afghanistan.

Missing Legitimacy of Indian Claims of Hegemony in South Asia

India's sustainable and stable economic growth is the main source of its regional and global ambitions. Stable and rapid growth demands better law and order at home. Peaceful domestic environment also needs peaceful and stable neighborhood. Any country with disturbed neighborhood would not be able to achieve the dream of stable growth at home.

In South Asian context, India wants rapid growth for itself and for that regional connectivity and economic integration is essential. India's goals to dominate the regional market and protect the region from any outside power's involvement in socio-economic and geostrategic matters demand high responsibility to contribute in the regional growth and peace and prosperity. The role of stabilizer India wants to play in the region has its costs.³⁴

India's claims of regional hegemony need to be scrutinized on the basis of prevailing instability in the region since it is one of the factors that exhibit how sincere India is to do its part in bringing peace and stability in the region and prove its custodianship. In South Asia where India is situated almost in the middle, the facts and figures are not very encouraging when it comes to political and economic stability. South Asia is the most violent region after Middle East. The conflict-ridden Afghanistan is the most disturbed country in the region and the other north-western neighbor of India, Pakistan, is having security and economic instability problems. Sri Lanka and Nepal have also gone through and are still facing long running violence. Political instability and lack of political culture can also be seen in Bangladesh. These conflicts and instable political situations are causing destruction of social and economic cohesion as well as losses of human lives. And it all has been happening in the backyard of India.

India shares its border with ten countries, land border with six countries (Pakistan, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar) and has maritime borders with seven countries as well. (Pakistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia). Except Myanmar and Bhutan, India has the history of border dispute of some kind with almost all its neighbors. It has fought four major wars with Pakistan and China over border disputes and disputes are yet to be resolved after decades of tensions. To build up its legitimate and acceptable position in South Asia, India needs to resolve its conflict with its neighbors including the long pending dispute of Kashmir. Most recently Indo-Chinese militaries' standoff in Galwan Valley at LAC (Line of Actual Control involving the disputed territories of Ladakh and Aksai Chin) left 20 Indian soldiers dead and many more injured. India was unable to respond to Chinese aggression effectively on military and diplomatic fronts. This incident could have long lasting geostrategic impact for India as it enjoys many favors for its supposed role to

contain rising China and if it is unable to keep its own interests protected than chances to lose its reliability and trust are high.

Meanwhile Nepal, in another serious setback to India, approved a new map of the country claiming areas under Indian control. The move of Nepal's parliament is the result of Indian inauguration of an 80-km (50-mile) road crossing through the disputed area of Lipulekh on the border with the Tibet region of China. Nepal condemned the road building which has resulted in triggering tensions between the two neighbors and has revived the long-standing territorial dispute again. Nepal's authorities and masses have not forgotten India's hostile act of imposing a blockade on the country in 2015 in a time when it was struggling to cope with the disastrous aftermath of an earthquake. India's blockade on one hand added to the miseries of government and people of Nepal but on the other hand provided it with an alternative in form of China and they started looking to Beijing for financial and strategic assistance to come out of Indian orbit and dependency.³⁵

Post-Cold War period is the time when the world is moving towards more connectivity and almost all the major regional disputes are being reconciled, Indo-Pak rivalries are still persistent and ruining any chance of prosperity in South Asia. In this situation, Indian claims of hegemony and preeminence in South Asia sound more like a mere rhetoric and utopianism. China's rise and its willingness to build a more inclusive economic partnership with South Asian countries has changed the regional game of power. India's regional aspirations in this context seem hollow dreams.

Recommendations

China and Pakistan's strategic partnership is crucial in countering India's aggressive designs to attain the regional hegemony. Their partnership should be based on economic and political plans for the growth and stability in the region by reaching out to all the South Asian countries. Pakistan could counter India's hegemonic ambitions only if it has strong economic capabilities which could be translated in military capabilities. Diplomatic connectivity with friends and allies should be enhanced and efforts should be escalated to materialize the friendship into solid economic cooperation by increasing bilateral and multilateral trade especially with Turkey, China and Malaysia. Pakistan can utilize China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to reshape its economic and defense connectivity with the like-minded countries in the region and beyond to isolate India. Another very crucial thing to do is to launch a robust diplomatic campaign exposing the growing fascist extremist tendencies in India under the Hindutva banner and patronage of none other than PM Modi himself, fully capable of risking the peace and stability not only in India but in the region. India's hegemonic aspiration could be

countered by more cooperation, connectivity and awareness campaign among friends and allies.

Conclusion

India's quest to dominate the region and maintain the hegemonic preeminence is questionable in many ways. Theoretically, the existent material capabilities like economic and military power in abundance does not necessarily guarantee hegemonic status to any regional or global power seeker, especially in a situation where client states or states who are supposed to be under the influence are not ready to approve the legitimacy of hegemony of the major power holder. Empirical evidence suggests that India's self-proclaimed authority in South Asia has been controversial especially in post 1990s era, despite India's phenomenal economic growth and military development. China's rise and growing hold on South Asia is providing much required balance of power in the region. China factor, though, doesn't diminish Indian influence in the region altogether but plays a significant role in changing India's small neighbors' policy orientations.

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