Article

Periphery, Vulnerability and the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

This study explores the link between China's Belt and Road Initiative and its periphery policy and thereby demonstrates the salience of periphery in Chinese foreign policy. Contextualising the BRI in a periphery policy enables us to not only understand the rationale for China's gigantic intercontinental connectivity network but to also explain why Chinese foreign policy is emblematic of boundary reinforcing ends and territorial fetishism. In fact, China's periphery policy is rooted in vulnerability both historically as well as in the modern times. This vulnerability has shaped its current response under Xi Jinping in terms of BRI. And therefore, the BRI is intended to address the issue of insecurity and help China establish its global preponderance. This makes China inherently aggressive and belligerent.

The genesis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is traced to the speech delivered by the Chinese president Xi Jinping at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan on September 7, 2013, where the idea of the Silk Road Economic Belt was first mooted. This was followed by another speech a month later on October 3rd at the Indonesian parliament, where Xi proposed a twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The two announcements from two places of the world- one located in Central Asia through the famed ancient Silk Road had once traversed , and the other located in Southeast Asia, that constituted the tri-junction of South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Indian Ocean maritime trading zone- were hugely symbolic.[1] It sought to herald to the world China's ambitious plan to re-emerge as a nerve centre of world's trade and commerce, both on land and sea. On the heels of this official announcement of the BRI, came the conference on the Diplomatic Work

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Toward Neighbouring Countries from October 24 to 25, 2013 in Beijing. At the conference, President Xi laid out the importance of periphery strategy by stating the need to realise the two centenary goals, that of achieving a well-off society in China by 2021 and becoming a developed nation by 2049, and thereby, achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".[2] He said, China needs to "work with its neighbours to hasten interconnectivity and establish a Silk Road economic belt and a maritime Silk Road for the 21st century and thereby create a new pattern of regional economic integration."[3] Chinese foreign policy analysts soon hailed periphery policy as China's number one foreign policy. Arguably, the link between the BRI and periphery policy is not a coincidence. The significance of periphery is deeply embedded in Chinese foreign policy in general, and BRI in particular.

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Most studies on China's Belt and Road Initiative primarily trace the genesis of such a gigantic connectivity project to Beijing's grand strategic objectives.[4] Such assumptions underscore Chinese great power ambitions to gradually oust the United States and emerge as a global hegemon. Other studies mainly focus on economic rationale of the BRI and argue for a robust integrated global economy under Chinese leadership at a time when there is rising protectionism in the West.[5] Still others, focus on the domestic imperatives, rather than external factor as a major reason for the BRI.[6] This study aims to explore the link between BRI and China's periphery policy and poses the question why periphery policy has gained salience under Xi Jinping leadership? What does it tell us about Chinese foreign policy and what are its implications for the region and India-China relations, in particular? By raising these questions, this study seeks to argue that the BRI is essentially a product of Chinese vulnerability than of strength and since it is predicated on Chinese periphery policy, it represents a threat to India's territoriality. By contextualising the BRI in a periphery policy, this study not only enables to understand the rationale for such a gigantic intercontinental connectivity network, but more importantly, explains why Chinese foreign policy is emblematic of boundary reinforcing ends and territorial fetishism.

To demonstrate the link between periphery policy and the BRI, this study first explains what periphery means for China. It does so by exploring the notion of periphery in history and in the post-1949 era. Second, it looks into the discourse on periphery in China. Third, it explores the rationale for the emergence of periphery as a primary foreign policy strategy under Xi Jinping. Fourth, it explains how periphery policy is pursued under the rubric of BRI. And finally, it evaluates the implications of China's periphery policy for India.

Understanding China's Periphery Policy

Any understanding of Chinese periphery strategy is incomplete and also erroneous if not understood from the prism of history. China's historical experiences have to a very large extent shaped its post-1949 foreign policy. At the same time, Chinese state and nation building process also got intricately linked with its foreign policy concerns. In understanding foreign policy of any country, one usually requires to factor in domestic developments and historical experiences. In China's case too, it is no different. But what makes the Chinese case special and peculiar is that Chinese foreign policy is essentially an extension of domestic policy and concerns. As Yang Jiemian succinctly puts it, "diplomacy is the extension of the domestic politics or diplomacy should serve domestic politics."[7] Seen in this context, periphery policy is not simply about managing the borders and dealing with the neighbouring regions. It is embedded in the notion of territoriality which basically defines the extent and nature of Chinese power and influence, both in history and in the present.

Periphery in History

Any study of periphery or frontier brings to the mind the pioneering work of Owen Lattimore's *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, published in 1940 and *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928-1958*, published in 1962. Although he was much inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 published work *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, his work bears significant departure. Unlike Turner who dwelt on the role of frontier in defining American identity and exceptionalism, Lattimore's primary focus was on the role of frontier in shaping cross-civilizational histories. More specifically, by focusing on the interaction between the 'sown' lands of China and the 'steppe' lands of Inner Asia, he explained how human history was shaped. Certainly, his focus was to understand history from cross-civilizational perspective rather than from a methodological nationalism framework. That said, periphery is not simply a Western academic concern. In fact, periphery has had an indelible impact on Chinese state formation since the historical period. It also shaped the pattern of China's interactions with the outside world. Indeed, until the advent of the West, China had no foreign policy, but frontier policy. Rather frontiers emerged only under the process of state formation in imperial China.

Although the recent researches on origins of Chinese civilizational state contest the notion of a single point of origin on the Yellow River valley Central Plain, nonetheless, the clear beginnings of state formation in China can be traced from the Zhou conquest of the Central Plain.[8] Under the Zhou, the territory was divided into five concentric circles or domains. The innermost circle comprised the royal capital, which was then surrounded by a

royal domain comprising members from the royal family, which in turn, was surrounded by a domain of nobles who were distant relatives and finally a domain of non-relatives. Beyond this lay a region of wilderness which was dominated by the 'barbarians'. What appears thus, is that with increase in distance from the central region, political control over the periphery too diminished. From this territorial conceptualisation emerged the notion of periphery. This periphery could be divided into two groups.[9] To the North and West lay the nomadic societies that lived on the Steppe grasslands. To the South and Southeast were the regions that were progressively settled by the Chinese emigrants. It was the nomadic tribes of the north and northwest that posed a formidable challenge to the Chinese sedentary culture. Not only that a different standard of civilizational precepts differentiated the `barbarians' from the Chinese but also that different legitimating processes too segregated the two groups. While the legitimacy of the nomadic societies depended upon "raiding, success in the battle, distribution of booty among its subordinate chiefs,"[10] the legitimacy of the Chinese power was effected through the Zhou advocacy of the Mandate of Heaven principle, which at a later time came to be based upon Confucian notion of ethics and morality.

Given different civilizational standards, the relationship between the two societies were not harmonious. Rather conflict was a common feature. Brantly Womack provides a very interesting insight into the ever-acrimonious relationship between the two societies. He argues that unlike the West that had a 'liquid centre- the Mediterranean- around which there was rise and fall of states, China had been "Asia's solid centre" with rich resource base, population and productivity.[11] Inevitably, he argues, this attracted the invaders from the north and north-west and this led to the rise and fall of dynasties, not states, in the same geographic space. Thus, Womack said, "China's problematic centrality in Asia is even more basic to its external relations than its preponderance of power."[12] In other words, China throughout history had been vulnerable to external threats, and therefore, crafting a security strategy was prerequisite to meet such threats. For instance, the first centralised empire, the Qin dynasty, undertook a systematic construction of the Great Wall purportedly both for defensive and offensive purposes. The Wall also served as a civilizational marker to prevent the nomads from contaminating the Chinese 'core'. Similarly, following the Qin, the Han dynasty devised a model of frontier development. Zhou Zo's text written in this period provides a comprehensive blueprint of periphery strategy, the core of which was defence through development.[13] Besides, when the Chinese were weak, they adopted *heqin* principle or policy of accommodation, in which gold, grain and silk were sent to the nomadic tribes in exchange for peace. One such instance was in 162 BCE when a treaty was signed between the Xiongnu tribes and the Han rulers that demarcated the north of the Great Wall, a realm of the nomads and the south, a realm of the Chinese.[14] This was a decisive

step, as suggested by Mark Edward Lewis. He said, "it posited the fundamental unity of a single Chinese civilization defined by what was not nomadic."[15] . It was in the process of the Han Chinese dealing with the non-Han nomadic tribes that the notion of periphery first germinated. It is equally important to remember that the so called nomadic tribes have constituted the ruling dynasties in China. John K. Fairbank, pointing to the significance of the non-Hans in Chinese history, mentioned that among the ten major dynasties that have ruled China, half of them were the so called nomadic or non-Han dynasties.[16] This indicates that the 'barbarians' were integral part of Chinese dynastic history, it also tells us that the 'barbarian' impact left deep impressions on Chinese psyche. In fact, the 'barbarian' control of north China from 400 CE onwards caused a blurring of distinction between the Chinese and non-Chinese frontiers.[17] In the subsequent post-Tang era, under a fresh nomadic incursion into China's Central Plain, the Song dynasty was pushed down to the south of the Yangzi River Valley. This ignited a major transformation in Chinese history that not only caused a shift of China's centre of gravity permanently to the south but more importantly, led to the crystallization of Chinese identity and the persistent call for recovering the Central Plains from the hands of the northern tribes. Tellingly, China's experience with the northern nomadic tribes engendered a psyche of vulnerability and insecurity.

This historical vulnerability did not cease with the conquest of the northwest and provincialisation of Xinjiang by the last non-Han Manchu dynasty. Rather a new kind of 'barbarian' threat emerged, this time from the sea, with the advent of Western forces in the 19th century that resulted in the First Opium War of 1842. The defeat of the Manchus led to signing of a series of unequal treaties between the Qing dynasty and the West that resulted in ceding of extraterritorial rights to the foreigners which eventually turned China into a semi-colony under foreign powers. This fateful development is captured in the oft-mentioned phrase 'cutting of the Chinese melon'. Moreover, this loss of territory was accompanied with a loss of centrality when China was defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1895. This defeat by the Japanese forces that stripped Taiwan off from China and caused Korea to become independent brought about a final collapse of the Chinese order. This sparked off shrill nationalist cries of a 'death of the state' (*Wangguo*) and this formed the basis of a 'century of humiliation' narrative which reverberates till today in Chinese politics and society.

The above historical overview establishes the significance of periphery in Chinese history in two broad ways. One is the role of 'barbarians' in defining the Chinese state. And two, is the historical memory of the perceived loss of imperial territory and loss of centrality in the Qing period and China turning into a semi-colony under the impact of Western invasions. The former has strong reverberations in defining the present contours of

Chinese nation underscored in the People's Republic of China's policy towards its minority nationalities. The latter has repercussion on Chinese foreign policy making in the post-1949 era and resurrection of nationalism discourse in the post-Cold War era. It is noteworthy that while periphery bears deep linkages with present day domestic and foreign policies, it also suggests that China's periphery policy is essentially rooted in its sense of vulnerability. Rather the factor of vulnerability has shaped the Chinese state and its foreign policy. In other words, both the Chinese state and foreign policy are not a product of strength but of insecurity. This insecurity continues to haunt the present Chinese state under the rule of Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Periphery and Foreign Policy Post-1949 China

In terms of foreign policy, the period after the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, was full of insecurity and uncertainty. This was a period of Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. China, which had just 'stood up' was vulnerable to Cold War power-politics. Therefore, for China, external environment was more critical in the making of the Chinese foreign policy. The overwhelming foreign policy concern for China under Mao Zedong leadership had thus been how to securitise the periphery. The answer was found in engaging with power politics and allying with the Soviet Union that culminated in the signing of the February 14, 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. This concern about periphery security also resulted in the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet in October 1950, which was hitherto an independent country after the 13th Dalai Lama had revoked the 'priest-patron relationship' with the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1913. Further, to legitimise its illegal claim and occupation of Tibet, China signed the 1954 Trade Agreement on Tibet with India.

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Further, in its domestic sphere, the PRC had to establish itself as the true inheritor of the Qing dynasty.[18] This brought it at loggerheads with the Republic of China (ROC) which also claimed itself as representing true China. But PRC's position was precarious because it was not recognised by the world and remained outside the United Nations till 1971. This not only made its internal security vulnerable, but more importantly, it shaped the PRC's narrative on retrieving 'lost territories' to prove itself as the "legitimate successor of the Qing."[19] As Itty Abraham contends "seeking to restore Qing boundaries as China's new

borders created territorial loss as a foundational condition of modern statehood."[20]

With the end of the Cold War, intense power politics and great power rivalry declined. For China, this meant a reduction of its external security vulnerability. Internal factors however, became more salient in the making of Chinese foreign policy. Deng Xiaoping's mantra of reform and opening up that had replaced Maoist political radicalism and class struggle gained momentum in the 1990s as China embraced globalization. This meant deeper economic integration with the global economy. The 1990s decade, also coincided with the aftermath of the violent suppression of the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy movement and Western sanctions on China. But China urgently needed to reinvigorate its economic development. This forced the Chinese leadership to turn towards its south-eastern periphery

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where the ASEAN states were more than eager to engage with China. A decisive turn towards the south-eastern periphery came with the 1997 East Asian financial crisis when China seized the moment to project itself as a benign and responsible power. This ushered in a whole new process of regional trade and multilateralism to grow and China embarked upon creating regional mechanisms all along its periphery to propel economic growth and stabilise its periphery.[21] Paradoxically, the era of globalization also witnessed a rise of ethnic nationalism and separatism in China's periphery regions, particularly Xinjiang. The Chinese leadership rationalised the reason for separatist outbreaks to the lack of development in the periphery regions.[22] China thus launched the Great Western Development Programme (Xibu Da Kaifa) to uplift the backward minority regions, and thereby, mitigate separatism. A closer view of the GWDP, makes it quite apparent that it was a programme crafted to address vulnerability rather than inequality and poverty of China's underdeveloped Western regions. It may be noted that the five main pillars of this programme – Hanization, resource extraction, infrastructure development, military deployment and repression- were all security driven strategies. Under Xi Jinping today, the WDP has a sixth pillar, that is, surveillance. To address the issue of periphery vulnerability, it also created a ring of regional institutions all along its periphery. Thus, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) came up in its vulnerable north-western periphery, the Six Party Talks began in its north-eastern periphery, the ASEAN plus One and ASEAN—China FTA mechanisms envisaged in its south-eastern periphery, and finally, China's entry into the SAARC as an observer member and the Kunming process of sub-regionalism were undertaken in its southern periphery.[23]

The post-2008 financial crisis yet again saw a shift in the factors driving Chinese foreign policy. In this phase, which by the time Xi Jinping rose to power, internal security became equally as decisive as external security. China was in the throes of economic slowdown and it urgently needed a robust external economic environment to support its growth. But rising protectionism and de-globalisation in the West threatened to frustrate Chinese developmental goals. It is in this context, that the periphery acquires a prominent position in Chinese foreign policy discourse, which basically implies the conflation of external and internal realms and the importance of both the realms for China's security and development.

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The Discourse of Periphery in China

In the academic literature and policy research studies, the discourse on periphery began to emerge only in the 1980s. Prior to the 1980s, China did not have any integrated regional strategy towards its neighbours as internally ultra-left radicalization prevailed and externally, China, as did most countries, operated under a Cold War framework where in Beijing assessed its security in global than in regional terms. In other words, till the 1970s ideology and the Cold War played decisive roles in Chinese diplomacy. But with the end of the Cold War, national interest was redefined by the reformists and 'peace and development' became the primary determinant instead of Maoist 'class struggle'. As Zhang Chun has brilliantly summarized, "China has gradually shifted its top-diplomatic priority from serving its domestic political needs to serving its national economic development."[24] And this shift, according to him, precipitated China's guiding principle for diplomacy to change from "a rather passive pursuit of peaceful-coexistence to a more active pursuit of peaceful development and mutual benefit."[25] Thus, 'peace and development' became the basic foundation of Chinese foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping. To attain the objective of peace and development, Chinese leadership adopted three strategic steps to reshape its policy towards the neighbourhood.[26] One, it stopped export of revolution in Asia. Two, it stopped the practice of distinguishing countries on the basis of their postures towards the Soviet Union or the US. And three, in a major step to resolve conflict with the neighbouring countries on territorial issues, Deng Xiaoping put forward the proposition: 'set aside dispute and pursue joint development'. This was spelt out officially for the first time in June 1979 with regard to the dispute between China and Japan on the Diaoyutai or Senkaku Islands. The same principle was applied when China reached out to the Southeast Asian countries on the South China Seas dispute, and with India. These three strategic measures underlined the basis of Deng Xiaoping's diplomacy of 'good neighbourliness' or *mulin zhengce*. In fact,

at this juncture, good neighbourliness rather than periphery policy was commonly used in Chinese foreign policy discourse.

Under Jiang Zemin, good neighbourly policy continued to acquire a priori place in the foreign policy as his leadership saw a major foreign policy innovation in terms of advocating multilateralism and building partnerships. At the same time, he also put forward the concept of 'Great Power Diplomacy', which essentially meant that China would play a major role in international affairs. This foreign policy innovation laid the basis for the formulation of 'Going out' strategy in 1999. This strategy mainly involved encouraging Chinese investments and business abroad. After its accession to the WTO in December 2001, China was transformed "from a major exporter of goods into a major exporter of capital."[27] This precipitated a new thrust on engaging the periphery. It broadened the spatial conceptualisation of periphery to include areas not only contiguous to China but also areas that impinged on its economic and security interests.

In this backdrop, several articles on periphery policy began to proliferate, particularly from the post-Sixteenth Party Congress of 2002. In fact, the General Secretary's Report itself gave a fresh impetus to the significance of periphery in Chinese foreign policy. It stated: "We will continue to cement our friendly ties with our neighbours, and persist in building good-neighbourly relationships and partnerships with them. We will step up regional cooperation, and raise our exchanges and cooperation with our surrounding countries to a new height."[28] Taking a cue from the Sixteenth Party Report, *Foreign Affairs Journal* carried a thought-provoking article in its March 2003 issue.[29] Interesting part of the article is the mention of the US, which though far from China maintains military presence near it with security implications for China's peripheral diplomacy. In the December issue of the same journal, an article by Fu Ying highlights the importance of the periphery in China's developmental goals. It states,

"China's period of strategic opportunity can find direct and full embodiment in its periphery. We must seize the current favourable conditions, promote the good-neighbourly relationship and partnerships to develop in new width and depth so that the periphery will truly become China's political background, security shield, economic markets and cooperation partners."[30]

In the subsequent period, discourse on periphery further gained importance with the publication of a special issue in January 2005 titled as 'On Greater Periphery and China, the US and Neighbours' by the China Institutes of Contemporary International relations (CICIR), a premier think tank under the State Council's Ministry of State Security.[31] It was published in a discussion format with deliberations on the 'greater periphery' concept. It

clarified that the concept goes beyond geography to include geopolitical and geo-economic underpinnings. It then delineated China's 'periphery' to include "Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Russia and Mongolia, and the United States."[32] What is most striking is the emphasis on the US and how it impinges on Chinese peripheral security. It said, "In China's concept of diplomacy, periphery is put at the foremost position and China's periphery is in a sense the US' strategic front."[33] In a similar vein, a 2006 article in *Liaowang* calls upon the Chinese leadership to draw up a 'new greater periphery strategy'.[34] Linking China's periphery with regionalism, the author pinpoints greater periphery as having three distinct aspects. First, it is the main arena for safeguarding its national security, upholding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Second, it is crucially related to the sustainable development of China's economy and it is a provider of its much-needed energy and other resources. Finally, this greater periphery is linked to China's ultimate growth as a major power. Cautioning yet again about the nature of threat that China confronts in its periphery, the same author in 2010 in an article in *China Daily* stated, "…the presence of western military forces around China had squeezed its geopolitical support base and restricted its 'going out' strategy towards its neighbours." This development, the author says, sets new challenges and can put pressure on its principle of "non-interference in other' internal affairs."[35] In fact, the author boldly says that China would intervene into other countries' affairs if the security of its periphery is at stake.

On October 19, 2013, the CICIR published select papers of a symposium on 'Current situation in China's Surrounding Areas and its Periphery Strategy'. Apparently, this was published right after the launch of the BRI, thus, providing fresh critical insights into the notion of periphery under Xi Jinping's leadership. In one of the articles, Chu Shulong and Tao Shasha have pointed out that in the context of current challenges that China confronts, the threat from the ocean or maritime frontier is most critical. This is because, according to them, Japan is "determined to become a 'normal country," Indonesia is striving to become the leader of the ASEAN, Australia to emerge "as a linkage point in the Asia-Pacific region," India "to turn the Indian Ocean into India's Ocean" and "Russia, following its east-flying double-headed eagle program with the Eurasian Union, to be the bastion."[36] As for the US, through its rebalancing strategy to Asia, it is fomenting conflict in the Asia-Pacific and "has built up 'flying geese security pattern' to encircle Beijing step by step."[37] In the same issue, Yuan Peng notes that China's influence and interests have expanded from Asia to encompass the whole world. As such, Beijing needs to look at the neighbours "in a different way." He said,[38]

> China should not simply think of the world in terms of neighbouring countries, East
> Asia, Asia-Pacific, and so on but instead look at the world with China at the core and

nations as a pan-periphery of three rings. The inner ring contains the 14 countries and share a land border with China. Because of their geographical significance and because of historical reasons, this ring is very important. The middle ring contains China's sea neighbours extending from the inner ring. This includes some parts of Central Asia and Russia ranging from the West Pacific, the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. The outer ring extends outward to Africa, Europe, America and the Polar regions. The significance of the pan in pan-peripheral is in looking at its neighbours from a global perspective and seeing the situation with its neighbours as the same as a global issue.

Yuan Peng's 'pan-periphery' notion resonates with the earlier notion of 'greater periphery', wherein the US was regarded as part of China's strategic periphery. But what is new in his perception is to look at the world not from the post-War Western lenses that segregated the world into East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, or Asia-Pacific, but to view it in Chinese historical framework of *Tianxia* where periphery was regarded as forming one organic whole to the Chinese Central Kingdom (*Zhong Guo*). Thus, he said, "even big powers are China's neighbours with the US' 'pivot to Asia', Russia's southward migration, and India's move eastwards. Even Australia is inching north, and Europe is casting sidelong glances at Asia. In this regard, neighbour and big power diplomacies should be viewed together."[39] Clearly, this means a conflation of external and internal realm in China's foreign policy conceptualisation. This conflation is evident in Xi Jinping's BRI, where domestic requirement and external factors have both become equally critical for its success. In other words, for sustenance of economic growth today, China not only requires a stable neighbourhood but a neighbourhood that supports Chinese economic globalization. It is little wonder, therefore, that to meet the domestic growth targets, and to ensure continuity of globalisation externally, Xi Jinping was vociferously batting for globalisation and free trade principles during his speech at the World Economic Forum at Davos on January 17, 2017. His speech, which reflected Beijing's desperation to uphold globalisation and prevent the rising tide of protectionism in the West, also sought to project itself as a responsible country adhering to the path of globalisation and upholding global good.[40] More importantly, his speech ended by hailing the BRI as the lynchpin of China's model of globalisation. For China, globalisation is a prerequisite for its export dependent economic growth and party legitimacy. The retreat of globalisation in the West, is therefore, a matter of concern for the Chinese leadership. In fact, when Xi Jinping became the President in 2012, he was confronted with political and economic vulnerabilities, which presumably explains his anxiety over the success of the BRI and the seeming desperation for upholding globalisation.

Rationale for Periphery Policy under Xi Jinping

It is pertinent to recall that geographically, periphery surrounds the Chinese core in almost a crescent-like shape and represents 63.7 % of China's land mass. This periphery has been under the minority domination that constitutes only 8.49 % of population of China. In the post-1949, the autonomous regions of Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Guangxi have all been constituted on the basis of historical dominance of the minorities in these regions. The enormity of minority dominated geographical space coupled with their underdevelopment and lack of ethnic affiliation with the core naturally constituted a challenge for the central leadership. This challenge became particularly formidable with the transformation of international system in the post-War, and then again, in the post-Cold War era. Under Xi Jinping, three kinds of vulnerability- geopolitical, economic and historical- could be noted that catapulted the periphery policy as number one foreign policy strategy.

Geopolitical Vulnerability

Geopolitically, China's periphery became vulnerable with the US President Barrack Obama's 'rebalance to Asia' strategy in 2011. This strategy implied a more active US policy towards East Asia and stronger military presence after almost a decade involvement in the War on Terror in South-West Asia. The roots of Obama's strategy could, however, be traced further back to the tensions in 2010 in the South China Sea when US interests clashed with China's. Obama had realised the folly of US absence in East Asia and hence conceptualised the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2016, a trade agreement among eight countries, that kept China out. Alongside, it also strengthened its traditional alliances with Australia, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. It joined the East Asia Summit and established a permanent resident ambassador to the ASEAN and held regular ministerial dialogues with the latter. The Chinese analysts, however, regarded this as a US strategy to contain China. After Obama when Donald Trump became the President, the perceived geopolitical challenges for China further intensified. Trump's call for an 'America First' policy and rising protectionism posed a grave challenge to China's own economic rebalancing policy. The dual threat of America's 'Rebalance to Asia' and 'America First' policy precipitated the Chinese leadership to reassess the periphery policy and threat perceptions. In this regard, Wang Jisi, a renowned scholar at Peking University, posited that in order to meet the challenge of US' rebalancing strategy,

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China should avoid getting locked into zero-sum games with US in East Asia. Rather it should create "a pivot of its own: a grand strategic proposal to shift its attention from East Asia and rebalance its geographical priority westward to Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East."[41] Thus, he conceptualised the 'March West' policy that most likely became the basis for Xi Jinping's BRI.

Economic Vulnerability

With regard to economic vulnerability, two things happened when Xi became the President. One, in the post-Hu Jintao era, the deepening globalization brought in its spate severe economic inequality that coupled with corruption to produce a grave challenge to the legitimacy of the party. This led the Chinese leadership to realise that economic prosperity is no longer a guarantee for party legitimacy.[42] Two, China was faced with economic slowdown. For instance, Chinese steel industry was hit by the slowdown. China was producing almost half of the world's steel. But in 2014, steel consumption declined for the first time in 20 years.[43] With demand contracting at home, China had to look outside to solve the problem of overcapacity. The twin economic woes precipitated the need for a new model of economic growth, underscored in Xi's 'new normal' philosophy.[44] This actually meant a shift from export led to consumption driven economy, from sole focus on manufacturing to combining it with a service driven economy and from an economy driven by low-quality exports and public investments to production of quality goods. But as soon as Xi embarked upon economic rebalancing strategy at home, he was confronted with de-globalisation and protectionism in the West. This was sure to derail his economic revival plans when China was in need for deeper globalisation. This appears to have propelled him to create a robust integration policy with the periphery to offset the US' 'Rebalance to Asia' challenge.

Historical Vulnerability

Arguably, both geo-political and economic vulnerabilities posed a threat to the legitimacy and stability of the CCP. As past records of the Chinese leadership have shown, whenever there were external challenges to the CCP, it adopted the tool of nationalism to deflect attention of the Chinese people from internal crisis as well as to mobilise Chinese public opinion to the service of the state. Thus, as soon as Xi became the President, the first thing he did was to visit the National History Museum from where he gave his much-famed speech 'the Road to Rejuvenation'. It was from this platform that the slogan of 'China Dream' was first given. His China Dream slogan, in reality, underscored the nationalist determination to restore the perceived twin historical losses: the loss of territory and loss of

leadership in East Asia.[45] In both these cases, the salience of the periphery is predominant.

With regard to the loss of territories, it may be noted that even after China had replaced Taiwan in the UN and established itself as the true inheritor of the Qing dynasty, it still remained a divided territory and an incomplete nation in the eyes of the Communist Party. Therefore, unifying Taiwan is integral to the fulfilment of the China Dream. Not only Taiwan, but the restive minority regions of Tibet and Xinjiang have to be tamed so that they are completely assimilated with the Han dominated state. It is for this reason we find that when Xi Jinping embarked upon BRI, he at the same time also began tightening his grip on Xinjiang. There are many reports now, out in the open, about Chinese government's arbitrary imprisonment of more than a million Uighur Muslim people in the internment camps basically to brainwash them into accepting Chinese, meaning Han, way of life.[46] Though the Chinese claim these as vocational training centres, these, in reality, are indoctrination camps primarily to erase Muslim identity and Islamic culture. In addition, the Chinese government has adopted a massive high-tech surveillance programme to monitor and subdue the minorities.

With regard to the perceived loss of centrality, it may be noted that the Qing dynasty's defeat against the Japanese in the first Sino-Japanese War of 1895 brought an end to the whatever remained of the Chinese tributary order. This sparked Chinese nationalism that coalesced around regaining its glorious past. But even after the defeat of Japan in the Second World War, China could not restore its lost glory. Rather East Asia came under the control of the US in the post-War era with its creation of hub and spoke order. Not only did this preclude China from re-gaining its historical leadership in the region, but also frustrated Beijing's attempt to unify Taiwan, which was under the US' security umbrella. Further, in the post-Cold War era, when China began to rise economically, some in the West began to regard it as a threat. Chinese writings of the period indicate that a huge bogey of China threat theory was built up to demonise it.[47] A CICIR article written in 2011 contends that a rapid promotion of China's power, in stark contrast to the depression in the Western economy, has aggravated suspicion of the Western powers towards rising China."[48] All this boiled down to one singular belief that China's periphery is vulnerable to the US presence as a resident power in Asia, and that China needs an innovative foreign policy strategy to marginalise the US.[49]

Thus, out of the triple vulnerability, China under Xi Jinping crafted the BRI which was essentially to stabilise its restive periphery and regain its centrality by marginalising the US preponderance in international system.

BRI as Periphery Policy

It is pertinent to understand at this juncture what BRI is and how it is related to the periphery policy. Simply put, BRI is a tactical tool to implement the periphery policy. If one studies the five characteristics of the BRI, as spelt out by the Chinese government, it comprises of first, communication among nations on economic development strategies; two, road connectivity; three, trade facilitation, fourth, enhancement of monetary circulation and fifth people-to people exchanges. Clearly, these features underscores not only economic cooperation but also economic integration through increased investment and cooperation in transportation, energy, manufacturing, services, agriculture, and other areas. More importantly, it aims at financially integrating the countries along the route. This means a firm step towards internationalization of the renminbi, the creation of an off-shore yuan bond market, and the spread of the Chinese banking system. This massive trade and infrastructure project involve mainly Chinese capital, Chinese companies, Chinese labour and Chinese materials. Simply then the five features boil down to one phenomenon—that of creating a Chinese-engineered Asian connectivity project.

The immense size and scope of the BRI suggests the expansion of Chinese power and influence world-wide. Hence, Indian mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik – drawing from the Ramayana and Mahabharata- aptly called the BRI as the 'Chinese version of the ashwamedha', that is wherever the BRI horse goes, is Chinese territory.[50] In the ultimate sense, BRI is a Chinese foreign policy strategy to expand its global role and influence, and thereby, marginalise the US preponderance in global politics and materialise the 'China Dream'. This could be gleaned from Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong's assessment of the Silk Route initiative. Speaking in an interview in 2014, he averred that it is a new foreign policy initiative comprising two significant shifts.[51] First, from the earlier foreign policy strategy of ascribing top priority to China's relations with the USA, the new strategy emphasizes on giving first priority to China's relations with the neighbouring countries. Second, from the earlier emphasis on Deng Xiaoping's *Tao Guang Yang Hui* (keeping a low profile), China under Xi Jinping talks about *Fen Fa You Wei* (striving for achievement). An analysis of Xi Jinping's speech at the *Conference on the Diplomatic Work with Neighbouring Countries*, suggests how the neighbouring regions have become central to fulfilment of foreign policy goals. He said, "When thinking about and dealing with the diplomacy with neighbouring countries, China should have a three-dimensional, multi-element perspective going beyond time and space." This quite resonates with the imperial Tributary system which developed in its full form during the last two dynasties and which placed China at the centre of the East Asian world. Apparently then, the BRI is also aimed at restoring a Chinese centered order.

With reports of participant countries coming under the BRI debt trap, as evidenced in the case of the Sri Lanka, where China has acquired a 99 year lease of the Hambantota port, it tellingly suggests how BRI is ensnaring the countries in debt trap and creating a ring of complaint states around its periphery. Besides, a critical element of this project is also about linking China's peripheral minority regions with the neighbouring countries. The Action Plan of March 2015 categorises peripheral and underdeveloped regions of China into four regions—north-eastern, north-western, south-western, and inland— and identifies their comparative advantage in order to integrate them with the economies of the surrounding countries. Thus, Xinjiang would serve as the Westward opening up with Central, South, and West Asia; Inner Mongolia would build on its links with Russia and Mongolia; Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning would deepen their connections with Russia's Far East; and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region would build ties with the ASEAN countries. By linking periphery with the economies of contiguous countries, the Chinese government aimed to building up an economic cum security network all along its periphery.

In assessing the BRI, it is clear that it is predicated on the periphery strategy aimed at creating a 'friendly' security network around China. Its notion of periphery increasingly encompasses areas well beyond China's territorial limits. This expansive definition of national interest and foreign policy goals naturally means China's periphery policy often pits it against the national interests and foreign policy goals of its neighbouring countries.

What Periphery policy/ BRI means for India

As noted above, the BRI is predicated on Chinese periphery policy. And periphery policy, in turn, is the product of the Communist Party's persistent sense of vulnerability, both internally and externally. At the domestic front, it has led to the continuing effort to annihilate the ethnic non-Han identities by assimilating them within the larger notion of Han nationalism. Externally, it has resulted in militarization of the frontiers and large build-up of its land, air, cyber and maritime forces so that perceived adversaries, especially the United States, can be countered and the periphery secured. Basically then, the policy is a tool to expand Chinese power and influence at home and outside. This expanded notion of power leads to an expanded sense of territoriality. But since Chinese territoriality is founded on overcoming vulnerability, this has bred mistrust and insecurity in its dealings with the neighbouring countries. This insecurity, in turn, has ironically engendered a belligerent turn to its foreign policy.

A brief examination of two examples- the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China-Nepal Corridor (CNP)-- to understand the implications of BRI for India. A careful glance at the CPEC, which is the linchpin of China's BRI, would tell us how a vulnerable periphery has defined Chinese foreign policy strategy towards Pakistan. CPEC was officially launched in April 2015 when Xi Jinping visited Pakistan. But CPEC, on the ground, is not the result of the 2015 Chinese policy decision. In May 2010, the Xinjiang Work Conference unveiled a 'new Xinjiang policy, that focused on "leap frog development "and "long term stability".[52] An integral part of the Work Report was creation of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Kashgar. Located in the South of Xinjiang, Kashgar is the centre of Uighur nationalism. Also, since it is next to Pakistan and Afghanistan where terrorism is a major issue, Beijing has been alert to the possibilities of Islamic militants cooperating with the Uighurs. To bring the region within the ambit of the central policies and check separatism, the Kashgar SEZ was conceptualised. In 2015, Kashgar was connected with the Gwadar deep-sea port in Baluchistan province of Pakistan that China had helped build since 2002. With regard to the Gwadar port, it was in 1993, that Pakistan unveiled the proposal for construction of the Gwadar port but due to shortage of funds the project had failed to take off. Only in 2001, following the visit of the Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji that the construction of the port was undertaken and the first phase of the project was inaugurated in March 2007. Till 2012, the management of the port was in the hands of a Singaporean company after which it was taken over by a Chinese company. Further, in late 2015, Gwadar SEZ was formed and it was leased out to China for 43 years, until 2059. Notably, the phase two of the project that started in 2007 became a part of the CPEC under Xi Jinping. In effect, the CPEC is not a novel creation. Rather it was simply crafted by joining the two dots. Undoubtedly, it is a strategic cum geo-economic move by the Chinese leadership. It is important to note as well that the primary reason was not to box India in but to curb separatism in Xinjiang and to overcome what China calls the 'Malacca dilemma'. Nonetheless, the CPEC constitutes a three-pronged threat to India which can be seen as a consequence, not a factor of BRI. One, as the CPEC passes through the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), it is a direct violation of India's sovereignty over Kashmir and Ladakh. Two, the presence of Chinese "security personnel" deployed to protect the projects along the CPEC poses a military threat to India.[53] And third, since it links Xinjiang by road to the Gwadar port controlled and operated by China, it constitutes a potential maritime threat.

If China-Nepal Corridor is studied, it shows a similar attempt to overcome vulnerability that China confronts on its southern periphery. From Chinese security perspective, Nepal is important because of two reasons. One, it shares border with restive

Tibet and two, it houses some 20,000 Tibetan refugees (the second largest Tibetan refugee community in the world). To rein in the Tibetans in Nepal, China of late has jettisoned its stated principle of non-interference and instead has started to intervene proactively in Nepal. This is visibly evident from the time of the State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan's official visit to Nepal in March 2006. China hitherto regarded the 2005 Royal takeover of Nepal as the latter's internal affair. But after the 2006 People's Movement, China stated that "key to resolution of crisis in Nepal lies in conciliation among the constitutional forces"... and urged the King to "reach out to the political parties to restore democracy and peace in the country."[54] During Tang Jiaxuan visit to Nepal, China pledged to expand its cooperation with Nepal in different fields. . To this effect, the Chinese Embassy in Nepal outlined in its website, in September 2007, that " China-Nepal relations have become a model of friendly cooperation for countries of different social systems and neighbouring countries to live in friendship and harmony."[55] Arguably, China's rising interference in Nepal almost paralleled with rising tensions within Tibet. The 2008 Tibetan uprising coupled with the spate of self-immolation of the Tibetans from 2009 through 2011-12 clearly posed a serious challenge to China. Therefore, security of its southern periphery, particularly the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) became a primary element in China's Nepal policy. And this demanded a need to curb the activities of the Tibetan refugees in Nepal. A predominant concern for China in recent years has been how to handle the post-Dalai Lama scenario. It is therefore preparing for all possible scenarios including a potential radicalisation of the Tibetan movement... Besides, China is unlikely to have forgotten the US' role in Nepal between 1961 and 1969 when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) allegedly supplied weapons and financial support to a Tibetan base at Mustang in Nepal. In the post-Cold War era, Chinese leaders contend that under the changing international environment, the US objective shifted from fighting Communism to building strong ties with China and countering terrorism. In Nepal, the US government was primarily concerned about Nepal becoming a safe haven for terrorists. With US-China relations becoming uncertain, Chinese interference in Nepal under Xi Jinping has a new purpose and a covert approach. After the Nepalese government under Prime Minister Oli agreed to participate in the BRI, China is basically using geo-economic means to control it. Arguably, with its acceptance of BRI, Nepal has now become an important constituent of the new Chinese periphery. This could mean that after the loss of Tibet as a buffer in 1950, India may now even lose Nepal as a buffer against China.

China is spreading its BRI tentacles all around India's borders, be it in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and has started to send feelers to explore its extension to even Bhutan with which it still does not share diplomatic relations. Since BRI is predicated on an expansive notion of periphery, India under no circumstances could endorse it. In fact,

endorsing the BRI would lead to legitimization of Pakistan's illegal occupation of Kashmir, and in turn, would legitimize Beijing's control over the Shaksgam valley that Pakistan had bartered away to China in 1963. Endorsing BRI would also mean making the same mistake that Prime Minister Nehru had made in 1954, which legitimised Chinese occupation of Tibet without reciprocal recognition of India's border claims. India's acceptance of the BRI would also lead to inevitable Chinese hegemonism in South Asia and the Indian Ocean.

China's expansive notion of periphery is an obstacle to any peaceful resolution of the vexed India-China border dispute. It is pertinent to note that by signing the 1954 Agreement with India, China did not intend to resolve the border dispute with the latter but to settle the Tibet question and to stabilise its southern periphery. The political and security vulnerability in Tibet was the principal reason behind the construction of an all-weather road in the Aksai Chin region linking Tibet with Xinjiang, which turned out to be the principal factor triggering the 1962 War. More importantly, post-1962, there has been a stiffening of Chinese position on the border issue because of the Dalai Lama's flight to India and the presence of large number of exiled Tibetans living all across the globe who refuse to accept the Chinese version of nationalism that is predicated on recognising Tibet as historically part of China. A resolution of the territorial issues with China is not likely under the present leadership of Xi Jinping whose very legitimacy is drawn upon the success of BRI, i.e., the success of periphery policy, and, therefore, of Chinese nationalism.

> China's expansive notion of periphery is an obstacle to any peaceful resolution of the vexed India-China border dispute.

Inference

In conclusion, few inferences can be drawn. First, the BRI is integral to Chinese periphery policy. This has been envisaged primarily to overcome China's economic and geo-political vulnerabilities. By firming up its periphery, the Chinese leadership has sought to create a security ring that would enable it to achieve domestic stability and at the same time, help spread its influence and regain its centrality in global politics. Thus, periphery policy has emerged as the principal means to achieve power and global preponderance.

Second, in foreign policy terms, this has meant a step further from Hu Jintao's relatively defensive peaceful rise theory. Under Xi Jinping, Chinese foreign policy is no more about only managing its rise, but to proactively shape its security environment to basically dislodge US and replace itself as a global superpower. Hence, periphery policy has become an integral part of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping.

Third, the notion of periphery has increasingly encompassed not only areas contiguous to China's territorial limits but also those areas that directly impinge on its security and national interests. This at once has engendered an expansive definition of periphery. This expansive notion of periphery pits China against its neighbouring countries as evidenced in the South China Sea dispute. While China vehemently guards its claimed sovereign rights on the disputed South China Seas islands, it brushes aside India's sovereign rights on Kashmir and Ladakh. Clearly then, BRI which is conceptualised to overcome Chinese vulnerability is paradoxically spawning instability and insecurity in regional and global politics. Therefore, instead of building bridges with India, it has put India and China at loggerheads. Clearly then, the BRI does not augur well either for regional and global security or for India-China relations.

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