

Asian Century Dream and Power Politics: A Study of India China Rivalry of 21st Century

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Abstract

The concept of 'Asian Century' has yet to be widely embraced among the scholars and practitioners of International Relations. If the Asian Century has indeed become 'a defining feature of the 21st century', it matters to discuss the rivalry between two super powers of Asia and its relationships with the outside the region. The current century has been signalled as the age of Asia that is marching forward, beginning of the current century has witnessed the degree of economic progress of emerging powers like China and India. It has significantly surpassing that of the United States and the European Union. The regional economic growth is likely to determine the potential of the current century as 'Asian Century'. India and China are the two most populous nations globally; geographical neighbours seek global and regional influence through economic progress and a mixed option of 'soft' and 'hard' power. Limits to India's traditional influence in South Asian regional politics have been exacerbated by China's recent expansion of trade, military, diplomatic and developmental ties with countries of South Asian, which challenge the India's hegemonic traditional influence in the South Asian region. In response, India is developing a new, proactive security policy that seeks to counter Chinese political narratives and infrastructure projects in South Asia. The rivalry between India and China has entered its sixth decade. Although the territorial disputes began in the 1950s, it has become a deep-rooted, enduring rivalry since the 1962 border warfare between the two states. Sino-Indian tensions and suspicions have remained over their disputed border, called LAC (the Line of Actual Control). This study examines the idea of 'Asian Century dream' in the context of India-China strategic rivalry. The article is structured into three main parts. The first part outlines the concept of the 'Asian century dream', while the second part analyzes the current power politics in Asia. Finally, the third part investigates how the competition between the two major Asian powers affects the realization of the Asian century dream.

1. The Concept and Reality of Asian Century Dream

The Karl Haushofer (1924), a leading proponent of geopolitics had been envisaged the notion of the 21st century in 1924 with he termed the concept 'Pacific Age' in the setting of economic progress of Asian countries such as 'Japan, China and India' at that point of time (Singh 2018). Haushofer said "A giant space is expanding. Await the dawn of the Pacific age" (Haushofer 2024). In the 1980s, the concept of the 'Asian Century' emerged as a significant topic of discussion in global politics, and the term 'Pacific Age' became an essential component of this discourse (Singh 2018). The idea of 'Asian Century' had further appeared from the meeting of political leader of China Deng Xiaoping and Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi in 1988. The main beacon of actualization of 'Asian century' highly depends on the economic prosperity and development of Asian countries, and deepening of intra-regional economic ties among the countries of Asian region. Deng anticipated as "No genuine Asian Century or Asia-Pacific century can

come until India, China and other neighboring countries are developed" (Singh 2018).

The Asia is in transforming stage from an underdevelopment status to the trajectory of fastest growing region in the world. The economic growth rate of two Asian super powers India and China is much more than that of the US and EU. With the status of fastest growing region, the 21st century has been called as the century of Asia that is marching forward (Bhambhri 2021). The world is looking at Asia much more closely than ever before. The destiny of Asian economies has always been monitored by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which are two of the most significant global financial institutions. The IMF had projected the economic growth of India and China for the first decade of 21st Century as 9.4 % and 10.5 % respectively (Bhambhri 2021). The IMF and World Bank are feeling quite optimistic and enthusiastic about the economic progress and promising prospects of Asia (Bhambhri 2021). The Asian market which heavily depended for investments and aid for trade on the Western rich countries, but now have become global player not only making investments in western

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capitalist countries but are also engaging in acquisition of Western companies (Bhambhri 2021). BMI's Cedric Chehab said in a presentation in October 2017 'by the year 2030, Asia will represent the largest share of worldwide GDP at around 40 percent. China will represent for nearly half of that, and will be roughly on par with North America and Europe' (Fensom 2017). Asian population by 2020 became equivalent to 59.76% of the total global population (Worldometer 2022). It's predicted that Asia's share of the global population will remain above 50% through 2030 with due to an additional 410 million people (Fensom 2017). Asia's continued economic gain will be aided by population growth. The process of urbanization in Asia continuing its expansion, it will also rise from around 40 percent in 2010 to above 50 percent in 2030 (Fensom 2017). The Asia's rise will certainly have the impact in global economic system; it will also have an opportunity for Asia to play a prominent role in global economy.

The politics of emerging states have seen a shift in both directions of democracy and authoritarianism, e.g. Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka and somehow in India. The Chinese political system remains undemocratic with highly centralized system of governance. The GDP per capita levels of emerging markets remain low compare to their advanced rivals. The emerging states face serious domestic challenges of the eradication of massive poverty. The countries not only India and China, but also other Asian countries such as Thailand, Pakistan, Myanmar, and Nepal et al are troubled with domestic social challenges; social unrest has spread to an extent that the political authority of the state is under siege (Bhambhri 2021). The along with domestic challenges, the countries face external security challenges as well, the mutual agreement signed between India and China in 1954 talked about the idea of peaceful co-existence and mutual cooperation, which was abandoned by the both countries after Sino-India war. The high level of mutual distrust exists among the both nuclearized neighbouring countries, even complete lack of confidence (Bhambhri 2021). The reality is that both China and India are rivalling against one another for extending their regional and global influence. The Asia is confronted with a serious security challenge from the politically divided nuclear weapon states like China, India, Pakistan and North Korea (Bhambhri 2021). The true spirit of Asian century dream cannot be achieved unless it resolve the political disputes between major countries of the region and come up with mutual understanding.

The Asian region is highly diverse, complex and uneven, which believed to further complicate the emergence of an Asian Century. The Asian countries do not experience uniform economic growth and development; hundreds of million population in the region still live with poverty today (Pan 2013). The discussion on Asian century dream cannot be restricted the rise of China and India alone, The Asian region as a whole is more than the combined size of China and India (Pan 2013). Unlike Europe and North America, Asia region is least politically and economically integrated region. Political, economic and social diversity can be the main reason for making the regional economic integration a difficult task for Asian countries. Asia has no common market, although the East Asian countries of Japan, China and Korea have signed a 'Free Trade Agreement' (FTA) with ASEAN. However, Asia remains a

very volatile region, the actualization of Asian century dream largely depend on economic progress of Asian countries (Pan 2013). Furthermore, the variety of security issues make Asian region as sensitive world's most intractable hot spots such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Middle East conflicts, Iran nuclear stalemate, terrorism, India-Pakistan rivalry, the North Korean nuclear crisis, instability in Central Asia, India- China boarder issue, the territorial disputes in South China sea, as well as the Taiwan Strait (Pan 2013). It is quite obvious that the Asian face complex and varieties of security challenges, it is doubtful that the region would be ready for an 'Asian Century'. The greater regional economic cooperation and an effort for the more regional integration could be a possible options to resolve intensified political and security issues. The economic booming alone in Asia cannot be necessarily meant that its security challenges and political disputes will easily go away.

2. The Two Asian Super Powers: China and India.

The Chinese economy underwent a transformation that resulted from a shift away from a closed, centrally planned economic model to becoming a hub for manufacturing and exporting. Three decades after 1978 reforms, China experienced world biggest economic booms. Since the reforms, the average annual GDP growth rate has hovered around 10% with minor fluctuations in recent times. China has risen to become an Asian region economic giant. Currently, economy of the China is standing at US\$ 17.72 trillion. Other Asian nations, such as Japan, have exhibited stronger economic growth. Japan at 4.94 trillion, India at \$3.17 trillion and South Korea at \$1.81 trillion (World Bank 2021). During the medieval age, both India and China had remarkable economic profiles and jointly accounted for a significant portion of the global economy. India's contribution to the global GDP was 33%, while China's contribution was 26%. This trend persisted until 1820, during the same period, Western Europe and the US held relatively small portions of the global economy, accounting for just 24% and 2% respectively (Singh 2018). The economic achievements of both India and China suffered a significant decline due to the damaging colonial policies and regulations, resulting in India's contribution to world GDP falling to 3% and China's contribution falling to 5% of world GDP respectively (Singh 2018).

The significant regional economic transition in Asia is expected to continue until 2050, and both the countries India and China are predicted to reclaim their previous economic dominance and prosperity. China is expected to maintain its leading place, with an economy of \$61 trillion, followed by India with \$42 trillion, the United States with \$41 trillion, and other states such as Indonesia, Brazil, and Russia ranking fourth, fifth, and eighth, respectively, among the world's top economies. These predictions also place Japan in a significant position among the top 10 economies in the world (Singh 2018). What is interesting about the term "Asian century" is that it does not identify a specific leader; unlike the 19th century, which is known as the British Century, or the 20th century, which is known as the American Century. In terms of material capability, China is a far ahead of the other leading countries of Asian region. But it cannot be equated Asian century as 'Chinese Century' due to several reasons. India is an emerging economy and one of the fastest growing countries of the world. It is ranked Asia's third largest economy and the ranked world's second largest

exporter of software and agriculture products. And also a member of the International organizations and grouping such as United Nations, the BRICS, the G20 and QUAD etc. India is playing an increasingly important role in global and regional politics. Despite the existence of significant political disputes, India-China economic relations have made notable advancements in the 21st century as both countries are leading states in the region. China has become one of India's most prominent trading partners.

India-China economic relations have been somewhat positive, with trade volumes steadily increasing since the 1990s. The trade volume between the two countries reached \$1.83 billion in 2000, which then grew to surpass the \$100 billion mark in 2021 (Economic Times 2021). The economic interdependence intensified by economic globalization which also helps India and China to forget their bilateral tensions. The strong economic interdependence and mutual trade might have the reason for reducing the incentives for war. India and China is the member of number of global governance initiatives such as G-20 forum, the BRICS association, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and the BRICS New Development Bank have opened up avenues for multilateral engagement and cooperation (Paul 2018). Recent political tensions and disputes have led to a decline in the scope of bilateral and multilateral relations between the two major powers in the region. After the 1962 war, it took almost three decades for India and China to resume their diplomatic and trade exchanges. An official visit by Premier Zhou Enlai of China to India took place in 1956, while it was almost 32 years before Prime Minister of India Rajiv Gandhi visited China in 1988. Since the resuming of diplomatic and trade relations, it has witnessed the significant growth and progress, and it has also several visits by heads of government or state, as well as by ministers. However, the trust built in the India China 2.0 relations was significantly declined after Doklam standoff and Galwan Valley clash.

3. The Asian Century Dream and India- China Rivalry

The serious political issues between India and China make the Asian century dream at risk. Instead of bringing Asian countries together for Asian prosperity and development, the major countries have started finding alternative with outside powers in a situation of rivalry existing inside the region. Dhanajay Tripathi argues that 'the dream of the Asian Century is being thwarted by the first concrete step taken in the Quad Summit', a vision about a more united Asia dominating the global politics and the global cultural sphere in the 21st century (Qiang 2021). The historical and intensified political disputes exist among the countries of the Asian region. Along with historical India Pakistan rivalry, now it has opened a new challenge of regional security as a consequence of rivalry between two Asian super powers. India- China rivalry make region as high security sensitive zone. Even the smaller military confrontation between Asian countries would have strong negative effects. The peaceful and stable region can be a prerequisite for the making the Asian century dream as successful and positive one. The core countries of Asia such as China, India, Japan and South Korea should come up for mutual cooperation and coordination for making the Asian

century as practical and real. The more aggressive language and behavior make things hard to achieve.

The concept of the 'Asian Century' over the last 20 years has been shaped by the rise of China and, to some extent, the emergence of India as a global economic power. This period was characterized by cooperation between China and India in both bilateral and multilateral forums (Saran 2019). Both India and China had previously shared common ground on global trade and climate change issues in the international arena, but in the second decade of the 21st century, the friendly atmosphere dissipated as both countries began to pursue a more influential role on the global stage. Samir Saran pointed out that "India, as a self-described leading power was the first to vocalize discontent with the BRI and set the template for the other critics that have emerged since" (Saran 2019). He argued that a new conceptualization for Asia emerged and termed as 'Indo-Pacific' in reply to Chinese geopolitical ambitions. Indo-Pacific as an American construct, but India is somehow accepted on the basis of a new geopolitical reality. The new political geography of Asia ended up with serious engagement of countries such as India, Japan, United States and Australia through QUAD. Samir saran further argues that "the framing of this political geography is different from the imagination of the Asian century; this construct is driven not by cooperation, but by contest, conflict and competition" (Saran 2019). The political issues between China and other Asian countries caused to seek alliance with countries of outside region, e.g. Indo-Pacific alliance can be criticized as it can leads to a new forms of subjugation by western powers.

The Doklam Standoff caused sharpest decline in bilateral relations between the two Asian powers in over four decades. The stand-off will be remembered as an end of effort to build trust between two Asian powers after 1962 Sino- India war. It has marked as China's aggressive attempts to redraw political maps which led to end the trust building process (Saran 2019). It further intensified with Galwan valley clash between Indian and Chinese army. China- India skirmishes weakened the bilateral relations, and India sought to become more close to United States through bilateral and multilateral relations. As an outcome, China has been attempted to choke India's options at International level, e.g. it refused to allow Masood Azhar's listing as a global terrorist, and also refused to accept India into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (Saran 2019). China has been endeavoring to enlarge its control over the South China Sea conflict area and the Indian Ocean through augmenting its naval force and constructing ports in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan. The increased presence of China in the South Asian region has pushed India towards the United States to counter China's growing military impact (Paul 2018). In response to China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean area, Indian navy vessels frequently visit the Southeast Asian waters. India has also sought closer strategic relations with countries such as Australia, Japan and Vietnam. Two key Asian countries came up with the idea of Asia-Africa Growth Corridor in 2017, which parallel to China's Belt and Road Initiative, previously called as the 'One Belt One Road project' (Pual 2018). Such efforts are assumed as a new and larger dimension of economic and strategic contest between the two Asian giants. The

India- China rivalry entered in a new phase when the both countries aspired becomes a more influential global player.

The territorial disputes are a major source of tensions between China and India. China has claimed Arunachal Pradesh as a part of its territory, leading to a long-standing dispute between the two countries. In addition, there have been several border incidents between the two countries in recent years, including a prolonged standoff in the Doklam region in 2017. These territorial disputes have led to increased military build-up and tensions along the border, raising concerns about the possibility for a military conflict. Another major driver of tensions between China and India is their economic competition. Both countries are rapidly developing economies and are seeking to expand their trade and investment ties with other countries in the region. Though, there is a growing perception in India that China is using its economic power to gain strategic advantages in the region, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India's growing trade imbalance with China has raised concerns for the former, along with territorial conflicts and economic competition. Another area of competition between the two countries is their pursuit of influence in the region, which is based on their ideological differences. India is a democratic state with a history of non-alignment, while China is a one-party state with a more assertive foreign policy. These differences have led to increased competition for regional leadership and have taken a number of diplomatic and strategic initiatives aimed at countering China's growing influence in the region.

The increasing competition and tensions between two Asian super powers have important implications for the Asian century dream. The rise of both countries is seen as a positive development for the region, as it has the potentiality to lead to increased economic progress and development through growth. Though, the increasing competition and tensions between the two super powers of the region could also lead to increased instability and conflict in the region, undermining the potential benefits of the Asian century. It is important for both countries to find ways to manage their differences and to work together to accomplish the common objective of a peaceful and prosperous Asia.

4. Conclusion

The Asian continent faces various political and security challenges, making regional integration precarious. Despite being in the developmental stage, many Asian countries are striving for prosperity amidst poverty and economic struggles, as well as regional and bilateral tensions, hindering the realization of the Asian century (Singh 2018). If the on-going strategic competition between China and India turns into a prolonged regional conflict, it could lead to the establishment of a bipolar order in the Asian region. One of the major challenges for 21st century Asia would be the reducing the intensity of rivalry between India and China. It decides whether the Asian century the age of conflict or cooperation, the aggressive languages and actions make the task difficult to accomplish. The broken trust between China and India may effects the mutual trade relations as well in future. The trust building requires

the countries to avoid the actions which deepen the conflict situations. Peaceful resolution of the conflicts is necessary to avoid the military confrontation. The India China rivalry may undermine the increasing importance of collective efforts to address the global and regional problems. As a rising global powers, both the countries have responsible role to promote International peace, stability, and development. The Sino-Indian relationship has multi-layer such as cultural and civilizational linkage, strategic and security dimensions, political resonance and robust economic content as well (Das 2011). The nature of Asian Century is heavily depending on India China relations. To sum up, the rivalry between India and China in the present era is motivated by various factors such as territorial conflicts, economic competition, and ideological disparities. These disputes carry significant consequences for the Asian century aspiration as they may escalate the instability and confrontations in the region. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the relationship between the two nations is not inevitably one of zero-sum competition and that there is potential for cooperation and collaboration between the two nations.

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