

China Stumbles in South Asia: Losing Ground to India?

The proposed visit of External Affairs Minister (EAM) Jaishankar to the Maldives comes at a fascinating juncture. Relations between the island nation and China appear to have reached a point of no progression. Even after nine months of 'India Out' campaign led by the Maldivian President, China has failed to push forward its advantage. Similarly, in Bangladesh, which is suffering through a period of international isolationism led by the West, China has once again floundered, as Bangladesh once again looks towards India with renewed hope and active economic assistance.

THE MALDIVIAN EPISODE

The relationship between India and the Maldives took a noticeable downturn after President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih was succeeded by President Mohamed Muizzu, a pro-Beijing leader, in late 2023. Muizzu's actions signaled a clear shift in the Maldives' foreign policy, moving away from its traditional close ties with India. His election victory was centered around the 'India Out' campaign which sought to remove "88" Indian soldiers in the island nation that were positioned to maintain and operate three reconnaissance and rescue aircraft, donated by Delhi years ago. Another indication of this change was Muizzu's decision to make China the destination for his first official foreign visit as president, breaking with the long-standing tradition of Maldivian presidents making India their first port of call. This symbolic gesture sent a strong message about Muizzu's intentions. Chinese President Xi Jinping (left) meets Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu. (Reuters File)

During the visit, China and the Maldives inked a wide-ranging set of agreements covering areas such as tourism, disaster preparedness, and the blue economy. The agreements also aimed to accelerate projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative, including a social housing project, fisheries processing facilities and road improvements in the capital. Muizzu also sought increased Chinese collaboration in e-commerce, urban development and airport expansion. Further fueling concerns, Maldivian MPs began making public statements critical of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, using language that was derogatory. Adding to the tension, the Maldives allowed a Chinese surveillance vessel to dock at its port, despite strong objections from India. This move raised serious security concerns for India, given the vessel's capabilities and the strategic location of the Maldives. After repeated objections by India, Sri Lanka had announced earlier this year a one-year moratorium on such visits by research/survey ships that can accumulate data for both scientific and military purposes. However, China's efforts to capitalise on this apparent rift with India seem to have faltered. The Maldives' economy, heavily reliant on tourism, suffered a significant blow as Indian citizens, angered by the perceived anti-India stance, began boycotting the island nation. This economic pressure appears to have played a role in prompting a change in course. The Maldives has seen a significant drop in Indian tourists this year, a trend that coincides with the strained relations between the two countries. Tourist numbers from India, which had been the top source market for the Maldives since the pandemic, fell by 38% in the first quarter of 2024 compared to the same period last year. This decline follows the 'India Out' campaign led by Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu and a subsequent call for a boycott of the Maldives by Indian citizens. The Maldives found itself in a precarious

position. While China had initially seemed eager to provide financial assistance, the terms often came with strings attached, leaving countries like Sri Lanka burdened with debt and forced to cede control of strategic assets. The example of the Hambantota port, now under Chinese control for 99 years, served as a cautionary tale for the Maldives. Moreover, Maldives is grappling with a significant debt burden, with a large portion of its loans coming from China, approximately \$1.3 billion. Chinese projects have left the Maldives debt-laden. The IMF has warned of the Maldives' large current account deficit and elevated public debt levels. Facing these financial challenges, the Muizzu government sought to restructure its loans from China, which initially expressed reluctance. While China has reportedly agreed to defer loan repayments for five years, concerns remain about the nature of this restructuring and whether it involves new soft loans. This situation has drawn comparisons to Sri Lanka, which faced a severe debt crisis and ultimately received assistance from India after China declined to restructure its loans totalling \$4 billion. The Maldives is facing a critical juncture, with a substantial amount of Chinese loans due for repayment in 2026. India, on the other hand, offered to defer its loans to the island nation. Recognising the potential pitfalls of over-reliance on China, the Maldives began to re-evaluate its relationship with India. India, with its historical ties, geographical proximity, and more favorable lending practices, emerged as a more attractive partner. Recently, the Maldives has signaled a desire to mend ties. This shift suggests that the initial momentum China seemed to gain has dissipated, and India is once again being welcomed back into the fold after nine months of the 'India Out' campaign. From announcing that Dornier aircraft (gifted by India) will now be used for medical evacuation to having roadshows titled 'Welcome India' to woo back Indian tourists, there has been a shift in its entire narrative.

THE BANGLADESHI ANGST

The relationship between India, China, and Bangladesh is complex in its history, economics, and geopolitics. While India and Bangladesh share a long and intertwined history, marked by cultural ties and a shared struggle for independence, China has been steadily increasing its presence in the region,



seeking to expand its influence. Bangladesh, strategically located between India and Southeast Asia, has been walking a tightrope, attempting to balance its relationships with both giants. While Dhaka has traditionally leaned towards India, recognizing the deep historical and cultural connections, it has also been pragmatic in seeking economic opportunities from China. This balancing act was evident in a statement made by a Bangladeshi minister in 2023, who described India as a "political friend" and China as a "friend for attaining development". This subtle distinction highlighted Bangladesh's desire to leverage China's economic clout, while maintaining its close political ties with India. The discrepancy between the initially promised \$5 billion loan and the paltry \$100 million actually offered during Hasina's visit speaks volumes. It suggests a lack of genuine commitment from China and a failure to understand Bangladesh's pressing economic needs. Furthermore, the brevity of Hasina's meeting with Xi Jinping, the absence of a call from Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and the muted coverage in Chinese state media all point towards a lack of enthusiasm and priority given to Bangladesh. This stands in stark contrast to the warm reception and generous pledges often extended to other countries seeking Chinese investment. Chinese President Xi Jinping, second from left, and his delegation attend a meeting with Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, fourth from right, at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, on July 10. (Reuters File)

Hasina's decision to cut her trip short, despite the diplomatic niceties, sends a clear message: Bangladesh is not willing to settle for crumbs. Dhaka is acutely aware of its strategic value and is not afraid to leverage its position to secure the best possible deals. While Beijing may possess significant economic clout, its ability to translate that power into meaningful partnerships is hampered by a lack of genuine engagement, a tendency towards transactional relationships, and a failure to fully understand the nuances of local politics and priorities.

This is a major setback to China's hopes of increasing influence in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh which at the moment is extremely vulnerable. The violent protests have led to backlash from the west, especially the US and UK. It also led to it being isolated at international forums, leaving China the perfect opportunity to get closer. However, it certainly has failed to do so, even after a rush of India out movement in Bangladesh led by the opposition parties in Bangladesh after Hasina was reelected.

The good news for India is Sheikh Hasina has been a powerful ally and was one of the key figures in exhausting the flames of the India-out protests in Dhaka, led by the BNP opposition. Hasina, whose monopoly of power and close ties with India triggered the campaign, broke her silence after a BNP leader flung his Kashmiri shawl into a bonfire of Indian products in Dhaka. She declared that if BNP leaders are serious, they should also burn their wives' saris bought in India! Making light of the movement, she challenged BNP leaders to cook food without Indian onions, garlic, ginger and spices. Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina along with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during her ceremonial reception at the Forecourt of India's Rashtrapati Bhavan Presidential Palace in New Delhi, on June 22. (Reuters File)

China's attempts to capitalise on perceived rifts between India and its neighbours have ultimately fallen short. Both the Maldives and Bangladesh, while initially appearing receptive to China's overtures, ultimately reasserted their ties with India. While China possesses economic clout, its approach to diplomacy lacks the nuance and understanding required to build lasting partnerships in South Asia. Despite Xi Jinping's calls for strengthening ties with "partners" in the Indian ocean, these "partners" have been left feeling short changed with Beijing's aggressive lending techniques and exploiting potential partners for its gain, rather than helping them in their time of need as a friend and ally. India, with its historical ties and more favorable engagement, has proven to be a more reliable partner. This highlights a broader trend: China's struggles to translate economic power into genuine influence in South Asia. While China may have hoped to exploit regional tensions, it has ultimately found itself losing ground to India.

Eastern Command BSF ADG reviews security measures along Indo-Bangladesh border

Shillong (Meghalaya) [India] : Additional Director General, BSF (Eastern Command), Kolkata, Ravi Gandhi, on his visit to BSF Frontier Meghalaya, reviewed and assessed the various operational and administrative-related issues along the Indo-Bangladesh border. On August 3, the ADG went to the East Khasi Hills bordering areas to assess the operational and technical issues. He stressed the fact that BSF is managing the Indo-Bangladesh border in a very professional and dynamic manner despite its myriad area-specific issues. The state of Meghalaya is known for its seven-month monsoon season, when it rains insistently. But notwithstanding all these adversaries, border men are valiantly performing their duties. On August 4, ADG chaired a joint meeting with civil administration and police officers of

Garo Hills Districts, including DIG Police, DC and SP Tura along with BSF officers. The discussions included increasing mutual trust and the synergy level between BSF and Police. He also inspected the electronic surveillance grid being used to augment border dominance and operations. Further, he stressed the utility of installing the latest surveillance equipment to ensure effective border management. He comprehensively reviewed the matters related to the illegal activities, infiltration and smuggling. Furthermore, the ADG emphasised that the people of Meghalaya are peace-loving and friendly towards security forces. In regards to this, local population does not accept infiltrators who later become a burden on the economy. Expressing his determination to stop infiltration, he provided clear direction



and valuable tips. He briefed them to remain extra vigilant and emphasised that security along the Indo-Bangladesh border has been bolstered to prevent any infiltration or illegal entry. He also appreciated the efforts being made by the field commanders and border men to curb attempts of infiltration and other trans-border crimes despite working in adverse climatic conditions and the tough terrain of the state. He stated that, the BSF remains committed in maintaining the integrity and security of the nation's borders.

Waqf Board Amendment Row: Waqf Must Dump Touch-Me-Not Syndrome, Says BJP's Naqvi



Waqf Board Amendment Row: Senior BJP leader Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi Sunday backed the proposed amendments to Waqf Act, asserting that the Waqf system need to let go of the "touch-me-not" syndrome, adding that a "communal attack on inclusive reforms" is not right. "The Waqf system will have to come out of the madness of 'touch-me-not' syndrome-politics. A communal attack on inclusive reforms is not right," the former minority affairs minister said in a post on X in Hindi. Naqvi's remarks came amidst the backdrop of reports stating that the BJP-led Central government is set to bring a Bill in Parliament to amend the 1995 law governing Waqf boards to ensure more accountability and transparency in their functioning and the mandatory inclusion of women in these bodies. Sources claimed that the amendment Bill, which will make it mandatory for Waqf boards to register their properties with district collectors to ensure their actual valuation, has been brought following demands from within the Muslim community. Meanwhile, the proposed amendments in the Wakf Act have been opposed by several Muslim organisations and clerics, with the All India Muslim Personal Law Board saying that any interference with the legal status and the powers of Waqf boards will not be tolerated. All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) chief Asaduddin Owaisi alleged that the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre wants to take away the autonomy of Waqf Boards. The Hyderabad MP called the move another attempt by the Narendra Modi-led BJP government to take away the autonomous nature of the Waqf Board, which he claimed was an attack on the freedom of religion. "Firstly, when Parliament is in session, the central government is acting against parliamentary supremacy and privileges and informing the media and not informing Parliament. I can say that whatever has been written in the media about this proposed amendment shows that the Modi government wants to take away the autonomy of the Waqf Board and it wants to interfere. This itself is against the freedom of religion," Owaisi told reporters at a presser in Hyderabad. Owaisi claimed the BJP has been against Waqf boards and Waqf properties "from the very beginning" and it has made attempts to finish these as per its "Hindutva agenda".

DMK govt ordered Rs 1,200 cr under RTE to schools: Udhayanidhi Stalin

Chennai: Sports and Youth Welfare Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin on Sunday said the 'Dravidian model' government is providing great importance to education and ordered release of Rs 1,200 crore to schools under the Right to Education Act. In his address at a school education department function, Udhayanidhi Stalin said Tamil Nadu is the leading state in implementing the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, which provides 25 per cent reservation for poor in schools. Though the government has to pay private schools the fee of students admitted under the RTE, this amount was delayed to them during the tenure of previous (AIADMK) regime. "However, after the Dravidian model government (DMK) took over (in 2021), Government Order was issued for release of about Rs 1,200 crore to schools and work in this regard is ongoing." Chief Minister M K Stalin has ordered release of fee to schools under the RTE in the same year, Udhayanidhi said and added that the government supported the private schools as well. "A request once again to teachers," the Minister said and appealed to them to not use periods specifically earmarked for sports-physical

education to teach Math and Science for students. Games and physical exercises are equally important as education. A child, good at games would have good health and shall do well in studies, he said and referred to Tamil Nadu finishing second at the Khelo India Youth Games (sixth edition) held in the state early this year. The Dravidian movement had all along given great importance to education and reformist leader Periyar EV Ramasamy (1879-1973) was excited to see girl children going to school, he said adding everyone belonging to the Dravidian movement experience similar joy when seeing children getting educated. Outlining the initiatives of Chief Minister Stalin and late CM M Karunanidhi, he said all students completing school education should go to higher education, pursue professional courses and scale great heights and this is Stalin's goal. The government is taking special steps to encourage both studies and sports he said and cited the Kalaignar Centenary Library at Madurai (also coming up in Coimbatore and Tiruchirappalli) and the TN Champions Foundation initiative which has so far, this year alone provided Rs 10 crore incentives to support sports/sportspersons. Udhayanidhi, who also



holds the Special Programme Implementation portfolio flagged off and launched the services of 100 new and refurbished buses (at a cost of Rs 66.15 crore) under a state-run transport corporation here. He also travelled in a bus as part of an inspection to assess the quality. The school education department function was held at the Nehru Stadium here. It was to felicitate students and schools for the academic year 2023-24. Students felicitated were those who won medals in sporting events at international, national and state levels. Schools in private sector that showed 100 per cent pass rate in Class 10 and 12 public examinations were given commendation certificates.

Implement reservation in fourth-class jobs in private sector: Anupriya Patel



Union Minister Anupriya Patel on Sunday reiterated her demand of implementing reservation in fourth-class jobs in the private sector. "Reservation is not followed in appointments done in fourth-class posts via outsourcing in the private sector. The people of deprived sections used to get fourth-class jobs. When recruitment on these posts are done through

outsourcing, no reservation law is followed," Patel said while talking to reporters. "Our party wants reservation should be followed in all the appointments in fourth-class jobs through outsourcing in the private sector," she said. On Uttar Pradesh Nazul Property (Management and use of public purposes) Bill, 2024 presented by the state government, Patel said it was "unnecessary". "It has already been sent to the Select Committee by the Upper House. The committee will look into it and give its recommendation. Our party feels it is unnecessary and against public sentiments," she said. Bias against OBC, SC/ST candidates in UP govt jobs must end; stop declaring them not suitable. Nazul land refers to government-owned land that was originally

acquired during the colonial period for specific purposes such as public utilities, administrative functions or for the settlement of displaced individuals. On the issue of Ayodhya rape incident, Patel said criminals did not have any religion. "Whosoever is guilty of crime against women should be punished. Strict action should be taken," she said. On by-polls in the state on 10 seats, she said the NDA would contest all the seats. She also reiterated her party's demand of caste census. "Without count of the castes, we cannot proceed to ensure benefits to those it is intended for," she said. Except for the headline, this story has not been edited by The Telegraph Online staff and has been published from a syndicated feed.

Indian Railway Successfully Concluded Trial Run of Vande Metro, Check Details

After introducing the high-speed Vande Bharat train for comfortable long journeys nationwide, the Indian Railway has successfully concluded the trial run for the Vande Metro in the country. The task was conducted on August 3 between Villivakkam and Walajah Road by the Chief Commissioner of Railway Safety (CCRS). It is done in the presence of top officials from the Southern Railway along with senior officers of ICF and RDSO.

Total Coaches and Average Speed

It has been reported that the Vande Metro will consist of 12 fully air-conditioned coaches, which will offer a seamless transport facility to the passengers on board. It has been designed for intercity travel of 150-200 kms at an average speed of 110 kmph.

Features : The train is developed using cutting-edge technology, offering some top-notch features to the



passengers on board. The list includes automatic doors, comfortable seating arrangements, infotainment, hand holders for standees, and CCTV cameras for better security among others. It has been reported that the train will have double leaf doors, offering easy boarding and de-boarding facilities. The report also suggested that it will be filled with impressive acceleration and deceleration, allowing it to cover more stops in less time.

Vande Bharat Train Network : Meanwhile, Vande Bharat train services are operational on the entire In-

dian Railway network, covering multiple routes. The list includes New Delhi - Shri Mata Vaishno Devi Katra, Varanasi - New Delhi, New Delhi - Amb Andaura, Mumbai Central - Gandhinagar Capital, Bilaspur - Nagpur, MGR Chennai Central - Mysuru, Visakhapatnam - Secunderabad, Howrah - New Jalpaiguri, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus - Solapur, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus - Sainagar Shirdi, MGR Chennai Central - Coimbatore, Rani Kamalapati - Hazrat Nizamuddin, Ajmer - Chandigarh, Secunderabad - Tirupati, Howrah - Puri, Mangalore Central - Thiruvananthapuram Central, New Jalpaiguri - Guwahati, Anand Vihar (T) - Dehradun, Indore - Nagpur, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (T) - Madgaon, Kasargod - Thiruvananthapuram Central, Ahmedabad - Okha, Chennai Egmore - Tirunelveli, and the list goes on.

