Interests of Leading Players Align in Bangladesh

In May of this year, a certain event in Bangladesh resulted in yet another mini-crisis in the relationship between a number of leading nations. In fact, Bangladesh is among the majority of countries within the international community that are rarely mentioned in reports dedicated to the Global Chess Game.

The state of this game is influenced by several leading players whose actions and policies, at times, affect “outsider” nations that can, on occasion, be of use to the former.

In this particular case, the story concerns a densely populated country (with almost 170 million inhabitants in an area equal in size to approximately 3 Moscow regions) bordering the Bay of Bengal, whose population is among the poorest in the world. It is also worth noting that, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), more than 700,000 Rohingya have fled to this far from rich country since Autumn 2017 from neighboring Myanmar.

Both India and Bangladesh flank the Bay of Bengal that together with seas in China’s vicinity and the Persian Gulf have recently been growing in strategic importance in the political game being played in the Indo-Pacific region. And leading global players, such as China, India, the United States and Japan, are in one way or another involved in it.

The latter three countries together with Australia are part of the Quad, a not fully formed organization that the
United States, a global power, quite obviously wishes to transform into an Asian NATO.

At this point, the author would like to once again express his doubts about the likelihood of such a political and military alliance, with its obligatory anti-China stance, being established in the region unless, of course, the PRC leadership make some serious mistakes in its policy towards India, a key member of the Quad.

In fact, there is no reason to believe that such errors will be committed. After all, in recent months, China and India have seemingly been striving towards not only a resolution of a conflict in Ladakh (the latest border flare-up was viewed as particularly destabilizing) but also improvements in their bilateral relations, in general.

It is thus not surprising that any signs (real or otherwise) pointing to a possible expansion of the Quad have elicited concern among China’s leaders. And Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s efforts towards the end of Donald Trump’s presidency focused on just such a goal. At the same time, any pushback from the PRC towards its key geopolitical rival’s actions aimed at achieving this objective has been met with an equally negative reaction from the US.

In fact, we saw this scenario play out at the beginning of May 2021, when Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh, during a meeting with journalists, warned Dhaka against joining the Quad and said that doing so would “substantially damage” bilateral relations between Bangladesh and the PRC. He also referred to this organization as “a military alliance aimed against China’s resurgence” in South Asia. It remains unclear what prompted the diplomat to make such remarks.

In response, Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Abul Kalam Abdul Momen issued a fairly measured statement. He told reporters that “as a sovereign country”, Bangladesh would “determine the course of its foreign policy in the interest of its people” and “urged foreign envoys in Dhaka to maintain decency and decorum while speaking in public”.

US administration’s official reaction to the aforementioned remarks made by Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh came on May 11, during the Spokesperson’s for the US Department of State press conference that focused primarily on the rising tensions in the Middle East. A journalist asked Ned Price whether the US was moving to expand the Quad and what his views on the statement coming out of China were.

In answer to the first part of the question, the official said that the Quad was an “informal, essential, multilateral mechanism” that, at present, convened “likeminded democracies”. In response to the second one, he said that the United States enjoyed “an incredibly strong relationship with Bangladesh” and respected the latter’s sovereignty as well as its “right to make foreign policy decisions for itself”.

The following day, China’s Foreign Ministry issued an official statement concerning issues that arose as a result of the remarks made by the ambassador of the PRC to Bangladesh via its Spokesperson Hua Chunying who limited her comments to two key points. Firstly, she said that the PRC and Bangladesh were very friendly neighbors whose ties grew closer “on the basis of the five principles of peaceful coexistence”. Secondly, the official expressed China’s opposition to certain countries’ efforts “to form an exclusive clique, portray China as a challenge, and sow discord between regional countries and” the PRC.

Some political observers opined that the spokesperson aimed to soften the overly harsh tone taken by the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh.

Raja Mohan, an Indian expert foreign policy analyst, wrote an informative article on the aforementioned incident involving Bangladesh (a country whose affairs India has concerned itself with since the former gained its independence in 1971, ). His views were seemingly influenced by two serious conflicts that occurred in the mountainous border region between India and the PRC: in Doklam, in 2017 and in Ladakh more recently (the latest flare-up was referred to earlier in the article and is yet to be fully resolved). An outlook for the entire region, expressed by C. Raja Mohan in his article, was quite pessimistic if not completely bleak.

In the meantime, tensions in the area of the latest flare-up as well as between China’s and India’s governments have been on the decrease recently, which is a welcome change. For instance, during an interview with news agency PTI on May 19, 2021, Chief of Army Staff General Manoj Mukund Naravane said that the Indian Army was “keeping a constant eye on activities by the Chinese military” in the region, and that there “were no violations by either side since the implementation of the disengagement in Pangong lake areas”.

The author sincerely hopes that relations on all fronts between the two Asian giants could be restored to the level prior to the start of the latest tensions. And the Chinese government is indeed making efforts in this direction. According to the Global Times, China was “among the first handful of countries that offered medical support to India” and “provided the largest air cargo capacity for” the latter, accounting for 60% of such flights into the country.
The article also stated that in the opinion of some analysts, “the lack of a manufacturing capacity” made “India a key beneficiary of China’s manufacturing power”.

However, the trauma experienced by the two sides during the latest conflict cannot be dealt with overnight. It seems that some India’s officials and foreign policy experts (as exemplified by an article cited earlier) are treating their neighbor with caution, which cannot but affect the economic relationship between the two nations. For instance, India’s Ministry of Communications and Information Technology “left out Chinese equipment makers Huawei and ZTE from its 5G trials”.

Incidentally, during the aforementioned press conference with Ned Price, the Spokesperson for the US Department of State, a journalist asked him whether the United States would continue to insist that its friends and allies, such as India, not let Chinese companies be part of the 5G trials. The response was fairly vague. The US official said it was up to the sovereign Indian government to make such a decision. He also stated the United States administration was still “deeply concerned about the dangers of installing networks with equipment” that could “be manipulated, disrupted, or potentially controlled by the PRC”.

All in all, the effect that the recent remarks by the Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh had on the geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific has turned out to be quite informative in the context of the Global Chess Game and its key regional aspects.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that its main participants are trying to be careful about what they say officially, which is very important in view of the concerning lack of certainty on the global chess board.

And any seemingly impromptu statements (perhaps delivered with a purpose) are being clarified in one way or another. In fact, this is exactly what happened after China’s ambassador to Bangladesh made the comments that are the subject of this article.

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