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EXPANDING BRI AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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TALK BY GP CAPT RS MEHTA (RETD), GENERAL SECRETARY, IIRF
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The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China is changing the geographical realities of the globe in a very profound manner. South Asia is greatly impacted by it. By making factors like distances and geographical barriers redundant, BRI is attempting to change the very paradigm in which geoeconomics and geopolitics work. In South Asia, BRI is trying to overcome the natural obstacle of the Himalayan barrier that kept South Asia insulated from East China. By neutralising geographical factors through technology and connectivity, China is causing slow integration of South Asia into the Sino-sphere. Events on the surface in the form of BRI projects in South Asia are manifestations of the above phenomena. In his talk, the speaker argued that the study of the phenomena of BRI in South Asia through strategic lenses alone cannot explain it adequately. A historical perspective was also needed.

The speaker gave a brief account of the global nature of the complex project of BRI. He compared BRI with previous infrastructure projects executed by the West and highlighted the striking difference in cost, scope and complexity. After elucidating some important features of BRI, the speaker narrowed down his talk to BRI's activities in South Asia that directly impacted India. Major ongoing BRI projects in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Afghanistan were discussed in detail and their geopolitical and strategic implications for India were highlighted.

Thereafter, the conceptual and macro dimensions of the issue were explained. The phenomenon of "the death of distance" and how tinkering with geographical features impacted international relations in geopolitics were discussed. Parallels to BRI connectivity projects in South Asia were compared with the profound impact that the discovery of a new sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope in 1498 and the construction of Trans-Siberian Railways in 1897 had on Asia and Europe.

Some technological and economic trends triggered by BRI were discussed in detail next. In this section, the speaker explained China's controversial lending practices, contract management practices, failure to generate significant local employment, economic instability and debt traps being caused by commercially unviable mega projects executed in fragile host countries were discussed with examples and statistics.

The speaker brought out that more than the export of Chinese goods and services, the export of Chinese technology and standards through BRI was the most noteworthy trend of BRI.

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High-speed rails, super-highways, gas pipelines, transmission grids, ports, powerplants and communication equipment were using exclusive Chinese technology and Chinese standards. Their spares and maintenance were creating long-term Chinese dependencies. Therefore, the creation of a Chinese global value chain and supply chain was also the prime geo-economic trend of BRI. The speaker also stressed that India must pay more attention to the implications of the Digital Silk Road and counter it effectively in its neighbourhood. As per him “Much will be lost if the digital battle is lost.

The speaker concluded by stressing the point that BRI in South Asia was a logical consequence of a historical process that was not likely to stop due to short-term economic, political, or strategic setbacks. He felt BRI was going to stay in South Asia. Its negative impact on India’s strategic equation with its neighbours was permanent. India must adapt to this new reality and recalibrate its diplomacy towards neighbours. A long-term perspective in its relation with China has to be evolved taking all the above factors into consideration.