



**‘CHINA: CONFERENCE ON PERIPHERAL DIPLOMACY’**

by JAYADEVA RANADE

China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC)’s International Department (ID) together with the Yunnan University jointly hosted a conference on Peripheral Diplomacy on May 8, 2020. In addition to the Collaborative Innovation Center of MoFA, the Contemporary World Research Center of the CCP CC’s International Department and the Peripheral Diplomacy Research Center of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University, there was participation by six other Universities and Institutes. The theme of the conference was ‘Diplomacy around China in the context of the Coronavirus’.

2. Virtually all speakers at the Conference highlighted that the coronavirus pandemic had impacted geopolitics and suggested ways by which China could utilise that to consolidate relations with its neighbours and at the same time project itself as a responsible major power. Doubts were expressed about whether the pandemic has had an adverse effect on globalisation. Interestingly, there was only one reference to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and none to China’s flagship ‘One Belt, One Road’ or ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (BRI).

3. There are noticeable differences among China’s academics and experts regarding the CPEC and BRI. Xie Fuzhan, CASS President and also a member of the 19<sup>th</sup> CCP CC, had said in his ‘Report on the International situation’ of May 9, that “COVID-19’s sudden outbreak has interfered greatly in Belt and Road (B&R) construction”, though he added it still shows strong resilience. An open letter addressed to Deputies of China’s National People’s Congress (NPC) and posted in late May had criticised the BRI and asked “Now this program is about to be aborted. Who should bear the responsibility?”.

4. Assessments appeared to differ on India’s capacity to deal with the pandemic, with one expert stating that the resumption of production by enterprises in the midst of the pandemic had been better than expected. Interesting is that none of the participants referred to the tension on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between China and India though the conference was held on May 8 – three days after the heightening of tensions. In fact, Zhang Jiadong claimed that both countries had taken each other’s sensitivities into account and not deviated from following neutral policies throughout the epidemic.

5. A detailed note on the Conference is appended for convenient reference.

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(The author is a former Additional Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat, Government of India and is presently President of the Centre for China Analysis and Strategy.)



**CCAS**

**Centre for China Analysis & Strategy**

**中国分析及策略中心**

20 July 2020

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In addition to the Collaborative Innovation Center of MoFA, the Contemporary World Research Center of the CCP CC's International Department and the Peripheral Diplomacy Research Center of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University, other centres participating in the conference on 'Diplomacy around China in the context of the Coronavirus' included: Fudan University's Institute of International Studies; Jinan University's School of International Relations; Xiamen University's Chinese Overseas Chinese Research Institute; Nanyang Research Institute's School of International Relations; The Diplomatic Institute's Asian Institute; and Lanzhou University's School of International Relations.

2. The first and keynote session entitled 'Challenges and opportunities facing China' was chaired by Lu Guangsheng, Dean of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University. The speakers were: Li Dingxin, Director of the Center for Contemporary World Studies of the CCP CC's Central Liaison Department, Wu Chongbo, Vice Dean of the School of International Relations, Xiamen University, and Li Chenyang, Vice President of Yunnan University.

3. Li Dingxin assessed that the spread of the pandemic around the world may affect China's relations with some neighbouring countries and cause pressure on China's peripheral diplomacy. However, he believes that the challenge is short-lived. He suggested that the concept of a "shared destiny for mankind" will become more popular after the epidemic, and that there will be greater acceptability and "respect" for the concept of socialism. He recommended that in future, China should cooperate with neighbouring countries in the post-epidemic era through the promotion of think tank cooperation and local forums.

4. Wu Chongbo said that the outbreak had caused global trade to stagnate, the international supply chain was interrupted, and the tourism and financial sectors were hit hard, causing economic losses that will exceed those of the financial crises of 1998 and 2008. Under these circumstances, he recommended that China should promote the "East Asian Model" to the world and actively help some countries in Southeast Asia to fight against the epidemic.

5. Yunnan University Vice President Li Chenyang said that the borderless nature of the virus contributes to the enhancement of the awareness of the "Common Destiny" and the awareness of cooperation, the enhancement of interdependence between neighbouring countries and China, and enhancement of the public health mechanism between China and neighbouring countries. He advised that under such circumstances, China should adopt a country-by-country approach to provide assistance in epidemic prevention to neighbouring countries in order to wean them away from western influence. Stating that China had correctly controlled and guided domestic opinion and the public opinion of neighbouring countries, he said a comprehensive plan for the 'community of common destiny' between China and neighbouring countries should now be fully designed.

6. The first session of the Conference titled 'Southeast Asia and China's surrounding diplomacy under the new crown epidemic' was chaired by Yang Yang, Deputy Dean of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University. Speakers included Lu Guangsheng, Zhang Chun, Professor at the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University, and Li Yuqing, Assistant Researcher at the International and Regional Institute of Tsinghua University.

7. Lu Guangsheng spoke on "The Peripheral Diplomacy under the Epidemic Situation-Taking the Mekong Subregion as an example". He said that the new problems facing China's surrounding areas mainly include the epidemic situation which may trigger other non-traditional security issues. He said the risk of economic crisis has increased and that public opinion in China's neighbourhood has deteriorated. He recommended that China should consider undertaking high-level peripheral diplomacy, establishing a joint defence and joint control mechanism for the epidemic situation, and initiate regional health diplomacy.

8. Zhang Chun spoke on "Adjustment of Thoughts on the Interconnection between China and the Peripherals under the Impact of the Epidemic Situation". He emphasised the need for China to connect virtually with states on its periphery, especially during an epidemic. Asserting that for this digital interconnectivity is particularly important, he said that when building a public health control system in Southeast Asia, for example, data interconnectivity should be at the forefront.

9. Acknowledging the geopolitical situation, Zhang Chun said China's digital interconnectivity needs to take into account the needs of a developing China. The public health prevention and control system should be further improved during the epidemic. After the epidemic, China can focus more on how to increase exchanges and cooperation on poverty alleviation with neighbouring countries. Pointing out that China will win the battle against poverty and achieve the goal of building a well-off society in 2020, he said China's experience will benefit poverty alleviation in neighbouring countries. It is also in line with the elimination of some forms of poverty in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. He said China has already launched cooperation projects on poverty alleviation with many neighbouring

countries but, in the future, it is necessary to strengthen data monitoring and data analysis in order to target poverty alleviation more effectively.

10. Li Yuqing spoke on "Public Opinion in the Post-Cold War Era with Sino-Thai Relations after the Coronavirus". Examining the assessments of online public opinion by the Chinese and US Embassies in Thailand, as well as opinions expressed by Thai netizens during the epidemic, she concluded that although the United States has been trying to influence Thailand's attitude toward China, most of the Thai media have till now stayed neutral. She recommended that China should step up use of multi-level diplomacy and multi-dimensional discourse for shaping global public opinion.

11. The Conference's second session on 'South Asia and China's surrounding diplomacy under the new crown epidemic' was chaired by Hu Xiaowen, Associate Researcher of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University. The speakers were Zhang Jiadong, Director of the South Asian Research Center of Fudan University, Wang Shida, Deputy Director of the South Asian Institute of the China Institute of Modern International Relations and Liu Shu, Deputy Director of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University.

12. Zhang Jiadong spoke on "Sino-Indian Relations under the Epidemic Situation". He said that the globalization process will not stop because of the epidemic and that globalisation and regionalisation will proceed in parallel. China and India have not deviated from the basic principles of following neutral policies in their respective areas of concern throughout the epidemic. According to him, both China and India have considered each other's sensitivities on issues of concern. He suggested that China should provide humanitarian assistance within its capacity to relevant countries, including India.

13. Wang Shida's speech was titled "The New Challenge of the Epidemic Situation to China's Diplomacy in South Asia". His analysis touched on India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He assessed that India's economy will be sluggish, and inadequate and that its outdated public health infrastructure will pose serious challenges for India. He recommended that China provides appropriate humanitarian assistance to India. He observed that Pakistan will face a severe financial crisis and that the normal development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor during the epidemic will also face severe challenges. He believed that China should help Pakistan promote the Health Silk Road and cooperate in building its health infrastructure. Wang Shida anticipated that in Afghanistan, the epidemic will accelerate the US withdrawal and the war will come to an end. He anticipated that a stable Afghanistan will help China promote its plan for a Silk Road corridor. He said that the development of China-Afghanistan relations will be a test for China to demonstrate that it can be a responsible major power.

14. Liu Shu spoke on "The impact of the epidemic on Sino-Indian relations. Can the supply chain be cut?" He expressed the view that Indian companies had resumed work and resumed

production better than expected. He said that after the epidemic, global dependence on India's supply chain may be reduced, but it will be impossible to cut. He suggested it would be beneficial for China to transfer some industries, including raw materials, to India and Myanmar. He assessed that reducing excessive dependence on China's supply chain will not affect Sino-Indian relations.

15. The Conference's third session on 'Diplomacy around China in the post-epidemic era' was chaired by Li Tao, Deputy Dean of the Institute of International Relations of Yunnan University. The speakers were Zhang Zhenjiang, Guo Yanjun and Chen Xiaoding.

16. Speaking on the "New Epidemic Situation and New Opportunities for China's External Relations", Zhang Zhenjiang said China has achieved positive results in the fight against the epidemic and set a good example for the world. After controlling the epidemic, China has also actively participated in the international rescue and carried out active diplomatic actions. Stating that the epidemic has made people realise the ill effects of globalisation, he said China must now focus on regional blocs. He said this focus on a periphery strategy will be a breakthrough for China's diplomacy in the future. He added that since Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia agree more with China's anti-epidemic methods, they could become the starting point for China's future diplomacy.

17. Guo Yanjun spoke on "International Order in the Post-epidemic Times and East Asian Cooperation'. He assessed that the epidemic situation will have a very far-reaching impact on the international order, especially at the institutional and regulatory levels and that the war between the big powers may further intensify. Stating that the East Asian region can shape the international order, he said a lot, however, depends on how China can handle this region. Saying that only successful handling will determine whether China can shape the international order or not, he urged China to establish people-centred diplomacy, promote multilateralism, and focus on building regional organisations.

18. Speaking on "The Trend of Regional Development in Peripheral Relations in the Post-epidemic Times", Chen Xiaoding believed that while the pandemic has not changed the basic role of peripheral relations in China's diplomacy, the complexity of peripheral relations will increase greatly. He said that in the post-epidemic era, China should promote regionalism and supply goods to build a more effective strategy.

19. The experts and scholars at this conference examined China's peripheral diplomacy in the context of the global spread of the epidemic and suggested ways for China's peripheral diplomacy to move forward in the post-epidemic era. There was consensus at the Conference that by strengthening cooperation with neighbouring countries in the fight against the epidemic, China could project itself as a responsible power. They also suggested that to

overcome the differences in political systems and the diverse cultural concepts of neighbouring countries, China should encourage more people to people contact.

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