INDIA, CHINA FLEX MUSCLE TO GAIN SUPREMACY IN POST-COVID SOUTH ASIA

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NEW DELHI: China making inroads into India's periphery is not new. Beijing's involvement in funding and construction of infrastructure in countries across the region is well documented.

The covid-19 pandemic, however, has introduced a new dimension to the strategic jostling between the two biggies in South Asia -- helping countries in the region control the pandemic and post-pandemic economic recovery measures. It also comes amid military tensions along the India-China border with troops of the two countries engaged in an eye ball-to-eye ball confrontation in Ladakh.

On Thursday, China hosted a high-level virtual meeting with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka to build up "political consensus" in containing the covid-19 pandemic and boosting economic development.

The "five-parties" meeting -- a term used by Beijing in its statement on the meeting -- followed a similar excercise in July that had seen the participation of Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan. The July meeting was hosted by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, while Thursday's meeting was convened by Chinese vice foreign minister Luo Zhaohui. Luo was China's former ambassador to India.

"To jointly defeat covid-19, protect people's life, safety and health, and accelerate economic and social recovery and development, China, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka convened a vice-ministerial-level video conference on covid-19 response on November 10," the Chinese foreign ministry statement on the meeting said.

"The five parties had in-depth exchanges on cementing the political consensus on jointly fighting covid-19, enhancing cooperation on containing the coronavirus and restoring economic development and movement of people, and achieved positive results," it said.

"The five parties reiterated their opposition to politicization and stigmatization by using covid-19. It is important to pursue science-based, professional exchanges on prevention and control of covid-19 and its evolution and growth should be judged on the basis of objectivity, impartiality and scientific evidence," the statement said, in a reference to US, among others, pointing a finger at China for allowing the covid-19 situation to spiral out of control.

Beijing has been accused of being reluctant to share information about covid-19 and the SARS-COV2 virus that causes it with the World Health Organisation as well as other countries after the first cases of covid-19 were detected in Hubei province late last year.

"The five parties agreed that the autumn and winter seasons are a crucial period for covid-19 containment and vowed to strengthen information sharing and coordination of policies and actions to cope with the impact of the second wave of the pandemic. The Chinese side is ready to step up cooperation with the other four parties in testing, diagnostics, treatment and medicine, and continue to provide them with assistance of containment supplies," the statement said.

The Chinese statement also emphasised the importance of advancing projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), President Xi Jinping's multi-billion-dollar infrastructure programme

unveiled in 2013 as a means to ensure post covid-19 economic recovery.

"Efforts will be made to facilitate the orderly resumption of major cooperation projects and keep the industrial and supply chains stable. Infrastructure connectivity under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative will be advanced at a faster pace," it added.

India has declined Chinese proposals to join the BRI, citing sovereignty issues, it is the only south Asian country which is not part of the initiative. New Delhi has also been wary of Beijing's efforts to draw countries into the region into a debt trap.

Since the pandemic, New Delhi, on its part, has convened a meeting of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders to draw up a strategy to stem the spread of covid-19. India had set up a covid-19 fund that countries in the region could contribute to and avail of to combat covid-19. New Delhi has promised to deliver vaccines to neighbouring countries as soon as they are developed and become available for use.

Earlier this month, the Serum Institute of India signed a pact with Bangladesh for the supply of 30 million doses of a potential coronavirus vaccine being developed by British drugmaker AstraZeneca. AstraZeneca's experimental vaccine is seen as one of the most advanced candidates in the race against the novel coronavirus. In October, during a visit to Myanmar by foriegn secretary Harsh Shringla and Indian army chief Manoj Mukund Naravane, India had "indicated our willingness to prioritize Myanmar for sharing vaccines as soon as they become available," Indian foriegn ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava told had reporters.

On the economic front and development partnership, New Delhi has been trying to keep up with the delivery of projects comitted to as quickly as possible.

Earlier this week, the Indian embassy in Nepal announced the inauguration of a new school building in Dhanusha District, built with the Indian government's financial assistance. The project was taken up as 'a High Impact Community Development Project under an agreement between Government of India and Government of Nepal," a statement from the Indian embassy in Nepal said.

In September, India handed over financial assistance to the tune of $ 250 million as financial assistance to the Maldives. The aid comprised the "largest financial support package announced by a bilateral partner during covid-19," Maldives Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid said.

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