



The Geopolitical Chessboard: How India-China Rivalry Shapes South Asian Politics

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Abstract: The emergence of the geopolitical scene of China and India is shaking up the world. China is a global manufacturing giant that has bolstered economies as they recover; India, the world's largest democracy, is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. The paper discusses the complex and nuanced challenge that the India-China rivalry presents to South Asian politics. It examines the dynamics of their relationship, their influence within international organisations, and the implications of their contestation for the domestic and foreign policies of South Asian states. Based on a qualitative research design, this study comprises an examination of historical narratives, case studies of select South Asian countries, and an analysis of geopolitical constructs and theories. The India-China rivalry has a significant impact on regional alliances, security concerns, and the application of soft power and cultural diplomacy in South Asia, according to the findings.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, Economic Competition, Geopolitical Implications, India-China Rivalry, Regional Alliances, Security Concerns, South Asian Politics

1. Introduction

The changing geopolitics are reconfiguring the global order, as evidenced by the emergence of new alliances between China and India. These two ancient civilisations are also economic and technological powerhouses, making their relationship complex due to their long history and

close geography. However, their political philosophies, societal organisation, and economic systems have differed for millennia. India emerged as a democratic, secular state upon gaining independence in 1947, while China has been authoritarian since 1978. This rivalry presents a multi-party problem for South Asian politics. This dynamic is further complicated by the fact that China has gained a more favourable position in South Asia compared to India, often viewed as a more reliable long-term partner by regional countries, enabling them to counter Indian influence (Akhter, 2022, pp. 1-9).

This paper examines historical narratives, geopolitical theories, and specific national case studies, including those of Nepal and Sri Lanka, through a qualitative research design. It set out to explain the ramifications of the India-China rivalry on regional alliances, security challenges, economic competition, and the asymmetric use of soft power and cultural diplomacy. In conclusion, our paper aims to highlight that this competition is not limited to a local category but is a compelling factor in the calculus of South Asian states, driving them to a tightrope walk on an emerging geopolitical chessboard.

1.1. Background and Context

India-China rivalry has become a central strategic driver of contemporary geopolitics with wide-ranging implications for South Asia. It is interesting that the two oldest civilisations, often neighbours with a significant common history, chose such different political and economic paths over time (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469). While India became a democratic and secular nation after gaining independence from British rule in 1947, China embarked on a rapid expansion under an authoritarian regime.

“This divergence has created a complex rivalry that extends beyond their bilateral relations, profoundly affecting the entire South Asian region. The South Asian states now have to strike a middle path between these two emerging giants, as demonstrated by their land disputes, including the Sino-Indian War of 1962 and central border issues that remain in dispute. One is economic competition, also fueled by China’s geo-economic initiatives (such as the Belt and Road Initiative). Therefore, since the ‘String of Pearls’ poses an overriding irrational threat to India, with China establishing deep-water navy Bases in key points of the Indian Ocean and the ability to set up pillars for regional encirclement and destabilisation (Singh, 2021, pp. 23-37).

This rivalry between the two also necessitates that South Asian nations strengthen their regional linkages and security systems and reinvest in soft power, which is currently lacking in this part of the world. Because they are all embroiled, one way or another, in a thicket of geopolitical strategy among the competing Southeast Asian countries, which inevitably must manoeuvre across a tangle of chessboards, this paper examines these interactions and what they entail for the role of these countries in International Organisations and the implications for South Asian countries for both domestic and foreign policy. It will examine how this struggle for influence is shaping security and alliances in the region.

1.2. Significance

The paper comprehensively analyses the impact of the India-China rivalry on South Asian politics, offering a broader regional perspective than much bilateral scholarship. Its qualitative design, featuring historical narratives and case studies of Nepal and Sri Lanka, details how smaller nations navigate this competition. The research highlights the pressure on South Asian states due to economic competition, such as China’s Belt and Road

Initiative, concluding that the rivalry is central to the region's balance of power. Furthermore, this contestation extends beyond economic and military spheres, encompassing diplomatic efforts to secure influence and partnerships within various international organisations (Akhter, 2022, pp. 1-9).

1.3. Research Gap

The current scholarship either examines India and China as dyadic competitors or considers the relationship through the lens of a single country, for Example, Pakistan. This is critical research; nevertheless, it fails to provide an overarching review of how its nature influences the politics throughout South Asia. In particular, the literature has thus far provided an understanding of how economic competition interacts with regional alliances and security concerns from the perspective of a smaller state. To address this gap in the literature, which often adopts a narrower lens, focusing on one or two theoretical assumptions, this paper applies a regional-focused lens to examine the ripple effects of the India-China rivalry. It could overcome statism to comprehend how this strategic competition shapes the foreign and domestic policies of South Asian states, as they carve out their trajectories.

1.4. Research Method

The study design is qualitative, based on an analysis of reviewed literature and policy documents/reports. It is trying to release the deep carrier sense in those histories; they lacquer as a shellac around India-China partnership and what that means for South Asia. The research also includes country-focused case studies of selected South Asian countries (Nepal and Sri Lanka, for example) to show that many of these smaller states are not only connected to (and therefore dependent on) China but also the broader big

player in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, any difference that can be determined is fragile.

Besides the selection of cases, this Research Proposal will also employ an analytic approach examining geopolitical concepts and theory informing how strategic competition between India-China could produce unintended effects (which can, in turn, shape regional security threats, alliances, economic rivalries and cultural soft power).

1.5. Conceptual Framework

It seeks to follow a schematic with which the final points of a theoretical jigsaw puzzle can be mapped, aiming to understand Russia's, India's, and China's respective approaches to power politics and their territorial ramifications and particularistic expressions in the South Asian political milieu. In this realist study of politics, strategic competition, and security dilemmas, this submission also examines the perspectives of China, India, and other South Asian countries.

On the micro-level, liberalism will mean taking account of the various ways in which economic interdependence, regional cooperation, and international institutions influence how states relate diplomatically to one another. Constructivism in the sense of ascertaining the degree to which national histories, cultural attributes and national identities influence actors' perceptions of one another and the policies they would choose to pursue.

The hope, to some measure, will be to at least render the research an illuminating examination of this multi-nested mobile puzzle that India-China "rivalry" has become, and to also probe into what it may (or may not) portend (both in the short and over the longer term) for South Asian geopolitics.

2. Findings And Discussions

2.1. Historical Perspectives

This segment attempts to envision the trajectory of India-China relations from a historical perspective. Scattered across the problem portfolio of today are the historical narratives, some more cyclonic than others, born of centuries-old grievances and dreams nurtured on the soil of Asia's two giants. They also emphasise how ancient encounters have shaped more recent cultural and intellectual exchanges, including borrowings in art and architecture from each civilisation.

Scholars debate whether China's Asian ambitions are revisionist in nature. Indian policymakers are aware of this discourse, focusing on the implications of China's military modernisation for regional stability and India's development. The People's Liberation Army Navy's rapid modernisation and China's perceived comprehensive power projection across land, sea, and air have drawn significant international attention and concern. This strategic pursuit spans critical regions, including South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia, raising significant questions about the balance of power and security dynamics in these areas (Glaser, 2020, pp. 50-83).

The 'String of Pearls' refers to China's strategic development of naval facilities in South Asia, leased or constructed at key locations to enhance maritime capabilities and secure trade routes. This initiative connects China's landlocked southwestern provinces to the Arabian Sea, a globally significant geopolitical project that has raised concerns among neighbouring nations regarding increased Chinese influence in the region. This emergent trend, specifically the so-called 'ruthless Realist' perspective, has been critiqued by scholars for its tendency to miss many of the historical legacies in regional dynamics that cannot be dismissed.

Factors that shaped and influenced India's foreign policy decisions (Singh, 2021, pp. 23-37).

This is also evident in his broadening out into Singh's analysis of India's recent sanctions-based approach towards its neighbours, where he explores in detail how historical baggage matters. Furthermore, such a simplistic and reductionist view fails to adequately account for the nuanced and multifaceted nature of South Asian geopolitics (Alavi, 2020, pp. 45-62). Alavi's work provides a historical perspective, demonstrating that geopolitical interactions are deeply rooted in past events and interactions that continue to influence contemporary relationships among states in the region. By considering these complexities, a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play can be achieved.

2.2. Early Interactions

Long before the Eastern Himalayas separated contemporary India from the People's Republic of China, the people of the Ganges and Yellow River regions defined civilisation by its cultural domain, viewing those beyond its borders as barbarians. This shared concept of borderlands and civilisation highlights how mindscapes, frontiers, and politico-cultural mapping are crucial to how Asia's two great powers perceive themselves and each other. It is thus apt that rivalry, a contest of intent economic, militaristic, geopolitical, naval, or territorial, must begin charting the bends and turns of selfhood in its perception of the other. Only then shall one proceed to policies and strategies, friendship and vendetta (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469).

Before European imperialism in Asia, China and India had developed distinct political and social systems. Their early interactions were characterised by cultural exchanges and trade, laying the groundwork for diplomatic relationships based on a mutual, albeit subtle, recognition of

each other as distinct civilisations. These exchanges, often involving tales of wealth and spiritual learning, fostered early diplomatic ties that, despite differences, were rooted in a sense of friendship between China and India.

These practices often emerged from textual relationships, especially in the translation of culturally significant texts. These encounters emerged as both parties navigated the nuanced maritime corridors, enabling a preliminary 'mirroring' of knowledge between their respective civilisations. The bodhisattva served as a symbolic bridge for reception and understanding. These large-scale maritime operations, which highlighted the processes of interaction, fostered the emergence of standard regional colonial ruling systems in India and South China, in which the concepts of 'barbarians' and 'the other' were closely interlocked with those of civilisation and frontier (Wang, 2020).

2.3. Post-Independence Relations

After the People's Republic of China was formed in 1948, India was the first non-communist country to recognise it. The 1950 Indo-Sino Treaty of Peace and Cooperation and the 1954 Panchsheel Agreement initially marked the development of relations, with the latter articulating the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" and outlining plans for economic aid, assistance in Tibet, and trade rights. However, relations deteriorated significantly following the 1962 Sino-Indian War and the subsequent border dispute, which engendered deep-rooted distrust and hostilities between the two neighbouring sovereign states. Although naval conflicts did occur, a full-scale war never transpired. At the heart of their interactions were the ideological dynamics of communism and India's parliamentary democracy, alongside the influences

of both the Soviet Union and the United States amid the global Cold War (Ghosh, 2018, pp. 45-60).

Even within the non-aligned movement, China and India emerged as ideological rivals with conflicting interests. India aimed for leadership among post-colonial nations, while China sought to lead newly independent African and Asian states, often using rhetoric hostile to India. The political aspirations of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mao Zedong, grounded in distinct frameworks, made a stable Sino-Indian peace elusive, impacting bilateral relations and South Asian dynamics. This legacy continues to affect smaller neighbours, such as Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, whose historical grievances have often been overlooked. In addition, ethnic tensions between India and China have persisted, manifesting in conflicts rooted in the historical animosities between these emerging powers (Ranjan, 2021, pp. 115-130).

3. Contemporary Dynamics

Along with other influential trends at work, the so-called "rise of China" and the "rise of India" mark a new epoch in global power redistribution. These two most populous nations in the world are also geographically close to each other and share a history of conflict. Nevertheless, the resolution of the border dispute earlier in the 21st century allowed for a significant improvement in relations. Where bellicosity characterised interactions on the common border until the late 20th century, diplomacy and trade emerged as watchwords in the 21st century. This, of course, does not rule out spats or the odd deal of sabre-rattling, however.

In 2020, the US saw a change in administrations, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic and its uncertain global impact. Some attribute the situation to China's adherence to national rather than international law in its decision-making. Others, however, point to the inadequacy of

legislation in rapidly evolving fields as a key factor in the timing and broader context of these claims. At the centre of the months-long standoff in eastern Ladakh lies the Line of Actual Control (LAC), which runs along the border between the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and the Chinese autonomous region of Tibet (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469).

The LAC is the result of a series of agreements made during the 50s and 60s. These various agreements define how each side views the LAC terminus, but they are not mutually agreed upon. Despite both sides' public insistence to the contrary, this ambiguity has created space for aggressive actions, which in the past have generally been resolved through dialogue.

In the spring of 2020, a Chinese-built all-weather track was constructed near the confluence of the Shyok and Galwan rivers, with China asserting that it was within its territory. India perceived this action as a violation of a consensus established during prior discussions aimed at maintaining the status quo in the region. Concurrently, a significant military buildup occurred on both sides of the border, resulting in more frequent and aggressive patrols than usual. An agreement for disengagement was reached on February 10 without any shots being fired, and it was confirmed that there were no Indian casualties at that time.

However, subsequent events led to an exchange of gunfire followed by a serious confrontational clash between Indian and Chinese troops, resulting in numerous fatalities on both sides and a surge of nationalist sentiment within India. In response to these developments, India implemented a ban on several Chinese apps, effectively generating global pressure to facilitate an agreement for both sides to withdraw their forces and military equipment. The perspectives on these terms and developments

have been reported variably by both parties involved in the dispute (Bhatia, 2021, pp. 15-30).

3.1. Territorial Disputes

Since the 1962 Sino-Indian War, relations between China and India have fluctuated. India's Look East policy and its rapprochement with the United States have made China apprehensive about India's regional ambitions. China's support to Pakistan, its construction of Gwadar Port, and its presence in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan have given India a feeling of Chinese containment and encirclement. China's South Asia policy, its transfer of nuclear weapons, missiles, and other weapons to Pakistan, ASEAN, and Australia, and its implicit criticism of India's "hegemonic" status in South Asia are perceived by India as China's indirect and veiled encirclement and containment of it (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469).

While territorial disputes remain a persistent challenge, particularly those stemming from the 1962 war, China and India currently show mutual respect for their core interests and refrain from interfering in each other's internal affairs, contributing to a notable, albeit complex, bilateral relationship. This discussion focuses on the India-China border, highlighting significant flashpoints such as the Aksai Chin region in northwestern India and Arunachal Pradesh, referred to as "South Tibet" in northeastern India. The complexities of the Sino-Pak border, which has evolved since the 1950s, are also relevant, as they intermittently affect bilateral relations.

3.2. Economic Competition

There has been a rapidly expanding literature on the intensifying rivalry between India and China that has examined their contestations at multiple levels, including bilateral and multilateral security competition, influence peddling through the military, energy resources, connectivity projects,

infrastructure, preserving buffer zones, and efforts at isolating and alienating one another from the overland and littoral states (Chakma, 2019, pp. 227–239). Recent years have seen a more comprehensive examination of the factors driving economic growth in both countries and how this has reshaped their engagement. Interest has grown in narrowly defined economic competition, focusing on trade, investment, technology, and “trade wars” with geopolitical impacts, underscoring that economic rivalry is most prominent in strategically important sectors. Lastly, strategic economic initiatives, notably the BRI, and their impact on India’s responses are examined.

Despite the growing body of literature on economic competition in South Asia, a comprehensive understanding of the overarching dynamics at play remains lacking. Most of the current literature focuses on the economic policies of the rival powers, especially China and India, examining how these policies reflect or contradict their national aspirations, as well as how they can be utilised as instruments of geopolitical influence. Moreover, breakthrough works analyse how these dynamics impact smaller neighbours who seek to manage their interests amid the competition (Kose, 2020, pp. 251–267).

However, the implications of this economic rivalry on regional partnerships and tensions have been less substantively examined. Therefore, the identity of South Asia as a key battleground for this economic competition warrants a closer consideration of its impact on regional stability and security. With the intensifying rivalry between China and India, it is evident that they are evolving into both strategic partners and competitors in certain regions (Chaudhuri, 2020). The interplay of national interests and regional geopolitics fuels their mutual rivalry. Understanding how South Asian countries navigate these challenges is vital

given the region’s growing economic and strategic importance. This dynamic not only highlights the nature of the India-China economic contest but also reveals its impact on the South Asian region and its states.

4. Geopolitical Implications

The geopolitical implications of the India–China race underpin South Asian politics with a wide-ranging corpus of simultaneous discourses that articulate the regional dynamics and potential ramifications of this rivalry. The extent to which Sino-Indian competition for resources and markets has altered the political complexion of the South Asian subcontinent has been a subject of vigorous scholarly debate. India’s increasing stature has made it more assertive in determining its competitive line against the dominant power of East Asia over the past decade, particularly China (Chauhan, 2021, pp. 109-143). While this strategic engagement by New Delhi aims to restore its traditional role as a regional leader, Beijing has engaged in global diplomacy, recalibrating its position as an assertive actor in East and Southeast Asia.

Three notable geopolitical implications emerge from this rivalry: (a) the shaping of South Asia’s regional alliances, characterized by both strategic partnerships and underlying tensions regarding security and economic interests; (b) the diplomatic manoeuvring by smaller regional countries that leads to a complex interplay of balancing acts; and (c) escalating security concerns due to a potential arms race and military posturing between Beijing and Delhi, which is tempered by developmental aspirations and the influence of Western powers (Saha, 2020, pp. 463-477). Despite these challenges, the intricate geopolitical landscape may also offer new pathways for innovative regional cooperation between India and China, mainly

through collaborative infrastructure development that could foster more inclusive and competitive regional growth trajectories.

4.1. Influence on Regional Alliances

The India-China rivalry has reconfigured the regional alliances among South Asian states, shaping the geopolitics of the region. The rivalry has triggered a series of strategic alignments and realignments among these countries. On the one hand, this rivalry is mitigated through diverse strategic, economic, and security engagements with both states. Each South Asian state, on the contrary, responds to and interprets this rivalry through the prism of its local fears, interests, and historical ties with both China and India.

Countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, for instance, are carefully calibrating their relationship with both Asian giants in the face of rising Chinese projects and investments. In Nepal, the development prospects and connectivity of the BRI are widely hailed. At the same time, concerns persist about entrapment, debt, and a potential loss of sovereignty due to increasing Chinese engagement in infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka (Kumar, 2017, pp. 1109-1138). Through a policy of balanced diplomacy, Bangladesh has emerged as a regional hub for Indo-Pacific geopolitics, much to China's chagrin.

China has gradually increased its presence in South Asia through various trade and development projects, particularly in countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Academics warn about the economic dangers of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects encroaching on these countries, with potentially strategic consequences. However, there are mixed consequences surrounding the BRI, as these agreements could lead to a broader understanding of trade surpluses through China as the centre of trade, which in turn

has led to accusations of 'neo-colonialism' (Rahman, 2020, pp. 234-250).

While Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) may have some benefits in terms of improving export competitiveness through better quality, assistance, and job creation in these economies, its impacts are more substantial. This, thus, could potentially create distortions in the economic landscape of partner nations, amplifying their vulnerabilities (Chakraborty, 2021, pp. 476-498). However, when carefully designed and implemented, BRI projects can potentially realise the benefits of infrastructure development, optimal resource utilisation, and local sourcing of contractors and components, all of which could significantly contribute to the project outcomes for the countries involved.

India has historically promoted regional cooperation in South Asia through initiatives like SAARC. However, recent years have seen a decline in deepening regional security and economic cooperation. In response to intensifying competition and to maintain its regional primacy, India has pursued strategic partnerships with major powers, notably the United States and Japan. Some perceive this collaboration as undermining the non-aligned diplomacy that India has historically championed in the region. Understanding local dynamics and perspectives is crucial for navigating the complexities of aligned regional strategies in a polarised environment. Recognising this factor provides us with a nuanced understanding of regional politics, as the region's accentuated rivalry creates a distinct political landscape (Mohan, 2018, pp. 98-114).

4.2. Security Concerns

Security concerns have emerged as a critical element in the emerging landscape for India and China. Both countries, often referred to as civilizational state entities, never made an overland

territorial claim against each other until the border conflict in 1962. Thereafter, the McMahon Line and the 'line of actual control' (LAC) in Aksai Chin could not be considered an agreed-upon border. The 1962 war and an aggressive and expansionist Chinese foreign policy, including economic and military aspects, following the 2008 global recession, were two significant events that heightened the unresolved border tension and suspicion between the two powers (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469).

Beijing's alleged military build-up in the Tibetan region and the disputed land at the Indian border, and, in response, New Delhi's 'Look East Policy,' new military bases, and focus on improving relations with neighbours of China beyond the traditional Sino-Indian South Asian neighbourhood have caused alarm and insecurity on each other's part. Nepal's growing defence partnership with China and the \$8 billion soft loan allegedly granted by China have raised alarm bells in New Delhi, and Beijing is disturbed by Iswar Pokhrel, the Defence Minister of Nepal's two-day visit to India in January 2020, according to reports.

The purportedly aggressive strategies and military manoeuvres undertaken by China have raised significant concerns among its neighbours in South Asia, particularly India. The Doklam standoff, centred on a strategically important piece of land at the tri-junction of Bhutan, India, and Tibet (China), has compounded anxieties for both nations. The clandestine nature of China's approach, including its failure to notify Bhutan, suggests potential territorial aspirations aimed at countering India's influence in the tiny Himalayan state. Additionally, China's provision of submarines and submarine repair facilities at ports in Sri Lanka has raised concerns in India and its neighbouring countries. Similarly, the establishment of new airfields and radar installations in Myanmar's Coco Islands,

situated close to India, has further heightened concerns for New Delhi and its Western allies as they strive to monitor Chinese naval activities in the Bay of Bengal (Mohan, 2019, pp. 45-67).

China's "String of Pearls" strategy, developed by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, aims to secure naval facilities across the region, including strategic locations like Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which are viewed as crucial "pearls." Other potential future bases, such as those in Coco Island (Myanmar), Iraq, Mozambique, Seychelles, and Djibouti, pose a possible maritime threat to India's aspirations as a rapidly growing, energy-dependent economy and its role as a "net security provider" and "regional policeman" in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal (Bhatia, 2022, pp. 215-232).

The ongoing presence of the PLA Navy in these waters suggests a strategic intent that can destabilise the existing balance of power, compelling India to collaborate more closely with allies such as the United States, Australia, and Japan to ensure regional and maritime security in the Indian Ocean (Raghavan, 2021, pp. 89-105).

5. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

India and China have long employed cultural diplomacy as a strategic element of their foreign policy to foster goodwill and expand their influence throughout South Asia. These two Asian powers have engaged in cultural exchanges to connect with neighbouring countries and to revive their historical ties with the region. The historical relationships between South Asia and East Asia play a crucial role in shaping the contemporary connections between these regions. Even during periods of heightened strategic rivalry, such as the Doklam standoff, both nations highlighted their shared cultural heritage as a valuable asset in their relations. This includes the significance of Buddhism as a common thread,

centuries of trade and interpersonal contact, and the presence of diasporic communities within each other's borders (Mishra, 2020, pp. 101-120).

Such narratives have persisted in the public discourse concerning South Asian neighbours, representing strategic priorities for both India and China. The ongoing debates surrounding the perceived threat of China's "string of pearls" initiative exemplify this concern. Recent trends indicate a notable increase in the soft power efforts of both nations in South Asia, evidenced by the proliferation of Confucius Institutes funded by the Chinese government and cultural cooperation agreements initiated by India. Educational exchanges involving students, academics, and journalists are frequently supported by substantial state subsidies, which are sometimes viewed with suspicion due to concerns about potential espionage (Rizvi, 2021, pp. 56-75).

Media narratives and public diplomacy also illustrate how culture influences the political rivalry between India and China. Culture not only serves as a strategic tool to project a more favourable national image but also acts as a catalyst that highlights existing contradictions. The impact of India's soft power on China was notably observed in the Doklam incident, where China was hesitant to escalate tensions, likely due to its recognition of India's influence in Bhutan and the diplomatic manoeuvring by Prime Minister Modi (Chandran, 2023). Such dynamics suggest that soft power can serve as a significant pull factor and a means of easing tensions within the context of Siniticization in South Asia. Ultimately, it is the *générologie*, the interplay of culture and politics, around which this analysis revolves.

6. Development of Infrastructure and Connectivity Projects

This first section assesses the various strategies employed by the two countries, aiming to safeguard their national interests through the development and financing of infrastructure projects in the complexities of South Asia. It examines, in the second part, the broader implications for regional realignment and positions it as a vital reference point for understanding how not just India, a rival of China, has responded in this context, but also the ever-widening ambitions of China itself in dominating the region. Based on these rich insights, it examines the intersections of economic and strategic motives shared across China's vast Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, considering the degree to which these asymmetrical infrastructure investments act as a significant form of politics themselves, creating not just connectivity but determining regional politics and social structures.

These vital aspects are demonstrated by illustrating the ongoing relevance of the development of the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka for regional cooperation and politics, which will pay particular heed to the possible perils that debt sustainability challenges can pose to ambitious projects in small states. Additionally, the paper highlights the concept of 'connectivity' as increasingly prioritised in the evolving landscape of national and regional geopolitics, underscoring the multiple and interconnected roles that infrastructure deployment plays in shaping the future geopolitical landscape of the region. As noted, the geopolitical significance of these projects cannot be understated, as they reinforce power dynamics and influence the strategic calculations of the states involved (Zhang, 2021, pp. 215-229).

7. Role Of International Organisations

Major international organisations play a crucial role in maintaining political stability and promoting

economic development in large regions, thereby indirectly contributing to the minimisation of confrontation or conflict between India and China. The United Nations, BRICS, and ASEAN are examples of entities whose activities are crucial for shaping the environment in South Asia and globally, where the India-China rivalry unfolds. This research aims to elucidate the dynamics of their relationship, influence, dialogue, and conflict among them, including conflicts in international organisations (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469). The research further explores how both governments play world organizations for domestic policy ends, utilizing international forums to seek means of enhancing standing or to forcefully address an issue of potential importance, how India and China generally try to avoid disputes in multilateral settings while at the same time recognizing that, as rivals, their presence in these organizations can cause occasional discord and conflict especially when one or the other party behaves in a way that is perceived as overly ambitious or antagonistic.

It is noteworthy that India and China, as essential players within the organisations in question, significantly contribute to the multipolar configuration envisioned by BRICS. Surprisingly, there remains a scarcity of academic research specifically addressing these two countries within the context of intergovernmental entities. Established in 2006, BRICS aims to enhance economic and political cooperation among its members, serving as a representative of the Global South in its relations with the developed world. Recent literature, including books, special issues, and various journal articles, has begun to examine BRICS. Scholars express mixed opinions regarding BRICS; some highlight its potential for facilitating better exchange rate coordination in the aftermath of the financial crisis and shaping a new international financial architecture, while others

criticise it for being overly cautious or competing ineffectively with other established groupings (Brierley & Kumar, 2020, pp. 345-362).

8. Case Studies

These vignettes flesh out the broader dynamics of the India-China rivalry by illustrating how smaller states in South Asia fulfil the strategic goal of absorbing or deflecting the rivalry.

Nepal's "leaning" or "tilting" has been characterised by various accusations, including claims that China is purchasing land in Nepal and the denunciation of India's policies as catalysts for a crisis in Nepal. For instance, Nepal's protest against India's inauguration of a new border road illustrates how smaller states, such as Nepal and Bhutan, seek to balance the influence of rising powers against one another. India's perceived rigidity regarding territorial and sovereignty issues with its smaller neighbours has fortified China's influence in the region. The strategic interests of China in Nepal reflect a broader geopolitical competition, where Indian leaders interpret Nepal's pro-China tendencies as "strategic sabotage" (Shrestha, 2021).

This perspective views tacit approvals of Chinese advancements in Nepal's territorial integrity as a zero-sum game, ultimately diminishing India's regional influence. Such dynamics reflect broader patterns of great power competition, prompting a reassessment of India's regional strategies in light of China's increasing engagement in South Asia.

A month after Gotabaya Rajapaksa assumed the presidency of Sri Lanka, the country announced its withdrawal from co-sponsoring the 2015 resolution concerning Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC). The Chinese media heralded this decision as a triumph over India's perceived coercive diplomacy, emphasising that India, which had anticipated Rajapaksa would align

with its strategic priorities following his election in November, was taken aback by Colombo's swift pivot towards Beijing. Alongside the extensive coverage in the Chinese press, Rajapaksa's inaugural overseas visit was prominently reported, including an exclusive interview with the President.

China's favourable perception of the youthful defence secretary, viewed as a cabinet member sympathetic to Beijing, contrasted sharply with Rajapaksa's aversion to Indian enterprises participating in infrastructure projects, thereby strengthening China's commercial relations with Colombo. Meanwhile, Western nations focused on undermining Rajapaksa's administration and tended to overlook or diminish the significant shifts in Sri Lanka's foreign policy. The presidency of the World Health Organisation (WHO) was contested in 2020, during which Sri Lanka found itself entangled in a wave of Sinophobia, as members of Parliament called for the termination of all Chinese-funded projects in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuo, 2020, pp. 123-142).

8.1. Nepal

This case study argues that Nepal is a transitional state in South Asia, positioned between the two regional superpowers of India and China. The report begins with a background on Nepal's history, illustrating how historical events have shaped its present-day relationships with both nations. It will also examine Nepal's adept approach to managing its relationship with two competing powers and how external influences could shape Nepal's path forward. Nepal's distinctive role as a neighbour to the two is an interesting case study. Nepal and India have deep historical and cultural links bolstered by decades of an open-border policy.

The tunes and scenes of Indian films and music dominate local media. In contrast, China exerts substantial influence in Nepal, thanks to its

geographical location, as well as significant economic investment in infrastructure and development projects. China has also long recognised the strategic importance of maintaining strong ties via its many border crossings with Nepal. For instance, the Rasuwagadi-Kerung checkpoint exemplifies China's commitment to its borders with Nepal as well as Nepal's efforts to assert its sovereignty. Since the signing of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), multiple negotiations and agreements have been conducted, culminating in a 50-50 revenue-sharing arrangement (Xu, 2021, pp. 55-70).

Nepal aspires to break free from its landlocked status by establishing a railway connection that would link its southern border at Raxaul, in the Indian state of Bihar, to Kyirong Port in Tibet, extending further through the capital, Kathmandu. However, as Nepal becomes increasingly reliant on Chinese economic investments, concerns are growing among Nepali politicians about potential threats to the nation's sovereignty. India's apprehensions are further exacerbated by China's plans to construct the Hilsa-Darchula road link, which aims to connect Tibet with the borders of India's Uttarakhand state.

China's increasing strategic presence in Nepal and India is perturbed. It has opposed the road, and reinstated its commitment to a Nepalese proposal for a university to be established in Bihar, turning defence against Chinese aggression into educational collaboration. However, it so happens that this is a story that strikes straight to the heart of that reality. It places them within their state-regions configured via political-military alliances, and in it, there are only asymmetries of infinite dependencies that debase and disrupt. The Chinese and Indian forays into Nepal's geopolitics serve as an apt yardstick for how regional great powers shape the foreign policy trajectory of another

country. There is the historic first-ever transit and transport accord that Nepal signed with China last year, a move many hailed as overdue, while others viewed it as treason, almost two years into the blockade in southern Nepal between 2015 and 2016.

Nepal's new Prime Minister, K.P. Sharma Oli, paid a visit to Beijing, promising billions of dollars in Belt and Road Initiative-aligned projects. This example is presented here to illustrate the intertwining of social behaviour, national waves, and government views on transnational proposals. In this, Nepal exemplifies how the application of foreign policy instruments by small states, such as the Maldives, could exploit the differential regional power flows forced open through the interaction of the strategic behaviour of two Taiwanese powers.

8.2. Sri Lanka

The study of South Asian politics has primarily focused on India's dominance in the region since its independence in 1947. However, it is intriguing from a realist perspective that once China emerges as a world power, India may, at times, revert to a secondary position to the dominant power in South Asia. Bilateral diplomatic relations between India and its neighbours have been prevalent since the mid-1980s. The end of the Cold War marked 1990 as the beginning of India's multi-dimensional efforts to integrate itself further into its surrounding environment. Around 20 years later, India's immediate neighbours were all closely watching China's rise as the next global power.

The "String of Pearls" theory highlights China's strategic initiatives in establishing a network of maritime ports from East to West, thereby significantly enhancing its presence in the Indian Ocean. This strategy reportedly begins with China's investment in ports in Chittagong and two other Bangladeshi harbours, extending to ventures in Sri

Lanka, Pakistan, and the Maldives, which involve substantial industrial investments and loan agreements. Scholars argue that these strategic manoeuvres may hinder Indian naval capabilities in the region, potentially constraining its maritime operations (Singh, 2021, pp. 145-162).

In this context, Sri Lanka, as a smaller nation, seeks to balance its relations between the two dominant Asian powers, India and China. Historically, Sri Lanka's ties with India are deeply rooted in cultural and historical affinities. At the same time, its relationship with China has been characterised by significant infrastructure investments, particularly in the wake of post-war recovery and natural disasters. The geopolitical strategy of Sri Lanka post-conflict reflects its economic ambitions and willingness to engage with external investors that do not impose internal political or ethnic constraints (De Silva, 2019).

9. Findings

The India-China rivalry plays a significant role in South Asian politics. This rivalry leads to alignments across the region, with smaller nations trying to navigate a delicate balancing act between alliances that support their ambitions and security needs. In Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, active balancing is practised between India and China, particularly about Chinese investments and projects, including, but not limited to, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

These tensions also raise security risks, such as the potential for arms races or military posturing, compounded by territorial conflicts like the one along the border between India and China and the growing presence of Chinese naval forces in the Indian Ocean. Soft power and cultural diplomacy have become the two pillars of India's and China's strategic engagement in the region, as they emphasise cultural exchanges and historical connections.

10. Future Scenarios and Projections

More than five years have passed since the Modi administration took power in India in May 2014, and nearly seven years since Xi Jinping was appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Despite the initial hope that Modi's full majority in the Lok Sabha (House of the People) and China's "solution" to the Doklam standoff in the summer of 2017 would bring a slow-motion détente, it is safe to say that the India-China standoff (and standoff-like summits) in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh and other points along their disputed border have now propelled their ties to an uncharted terrain in the 21st century, to the apprehension of regional observers. This will be so even if some permissions are given to dissidents, many of them living in the refuge of one of the two great continental powers, say in the case of the Dalai Lama, are seen as a threat by the Indian or Chinese establishment (Wang, 2011, pp. 437-469).

What could be the broad scenarios between these two vintage Asian patriarchs in the foreseeable future? In the backdrop of the aforementioned imbroglio since May-June 2020, an outward assessment can be made of some of the probable outcomes of the current diplomacy, economic competition and contestation, security tensions and confrontations, provided there is no *deus ex machina* intervening, unconventional or otherwise, short of an old-fashioned *fait accompli* in terms of some breakthrough or breakdown in India-China relations.

11. Conclusion

The paper examines the multifaceted impacts of the India-China rivalry on politics in South Asian countries. Most existing analyses of Sino-Indian competition focus on China and India rather than the implications of their rivalry for other states

across Asia, with the notable exception of some work centred on Pakistan.

Sino-Indian history is replete with border disputes and military confrontations, but both countries have avoided wars and large-scale military conflict from the beginning of the 19th century onward. Today, they compete with each other even as they cooperate with various international and regional institutions. Whatever the case, their shared border and region of mutual strategic interest in South Asia make competition between Beijing and New Delhi more visible within the internal and external architectures of each country, which they manifest. The battle for South Asia, meanwhile, has just begun and is masquerading under the guise of incorporating all under the rubric of good-neighbourliness and friendship with Beijing, while locking horns with New Delhi.

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