

Countering China In South Asia

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1. Abstract

This paper looks closely at how Chinese bilateral trade, investment, political and military ties with the "non-nuclear five" nations have evolved and how that may affect India's ambitions in the region. Recommendations are offered for India on how they may retain their supremacy in the region despite an ambitious and resourceful China. This paper analyses how China is becoming increasingly influential beyond just trade and other economic ties with its neighbor in the South Asian region. It reviews the drivers of China's recent and rapid rise in the region as well as the themes, partners, and tools that regulate its engagement with the region. Another major goal of this paper is to analyse and review the Sino-Indian relations and their implications for the region of South Asia and the impact it has on India's foreign policy to deal with the increasing Chinese influence in South Asia.

Keywords: New Era or Third Era, Neighbourhood First Policy, Global North and Global South, QUAD, SAARC, BIMSTEC

2. Introduction

China's presence is now felt in every corner of the world, including the Global North and Global South alike. China's growing economic capabilities and interdependence are pushing it to protect and promote its expanding interests abroad through a combination of traditional and new instruments. In South Asia, China aims to expand its economic activity and enhance its strategic presence, secure overland energy routes to avoid maritime chokepoints and check India's rise through strategic encirclement. After several decades of limited engagement, China has rapidly deepened and diversified its relations with the South Asian Countries. It garners political, diplomatic, economic, and security influence over the region. China has also become increasingly entangled in various domestic processes of the South Asian democracies, from shaping public opinion to influencing policy making. China's objective in the region is twofold: to encourage policies and interests that are favourable to itself, and to pre-empt decisions that would go against its core interests.

The infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which consists of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional transport network might be the most visible aspects of China's presence, reflecting its financial might through considerable investments, development assistance, and increased trade. But there are more subtle or even hidden aspects of Chinese Influence. China's diplomats, senior Communist Party of China (CPC) officials, and its media have engaged in multiple projects to exercise soft

power, shape narratives, intervene in domestic politics, and mediate bilateral issues. The nature and scale of these efforts may vary depending on the environment of the host countries, but increasingly China is willing to get involved despite challenges, creating opportunities for itself to actively shape this geopolitical region.

Even as the Chinese influence grows globally, pushback and opposition to it have also escalated, often driven by increasingly ideological and passionate narratives. China's influence has become progressively salient politically. From Europe to Australia, Zimbabwe to the Philippines, and from Taiwan to the Solomon Islands, anti-China sentiments have become significant. Major global powers have been deploying countermeasures to thwart over and covert the Chinese influence.



[Figure 1 - China's Legacy Clout in South Asia, Mint](#)

3. China and South Asia

In recent years, there has been a rise in China's profile in South Asia. China's domestic periphery presents a significant threat to its national security. These areas are linked to its neighbouring countries of South Asia and Central Asia. The announcement by Chinese President Xi Jinping of a

'New Era' or 'Third Era' ¹in the history of the Communist Party of China (CPC) represents a China that is known for its dictum 'striving for achievement'. This is different from the second-era policy of 'keeping a low profile and biding the time' proposed by De Xiaoping. The rise of China has been analysed and debated from various perspectives. The Monroe Doctrine² has been cited by scholars to explain that China needs to focus on its neighbouring countries because they are important in the context of its rise. The leadership of Xi Jinping has attached greater importance to neighbourhood diplomacy while linking it with China's (PRC), two centenary goals, and the Chinese Dream. The relations between China and South Asia were quite traditional and focused on military and political issues. China considered South Asia important mainly for security reasons. China is rediscovering the strategic importance of South Asia. The strategic significance of South Asia in China's foreign and neighbourhood policy has increased in the New Era. The new initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping, namely, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) reinforced the strategic importance of South Asia. South Asia is not only the most volatile region around China but also the most relevant region about the rise of China. China's South Asia policy is aimed at safeguarding the security and development of China's western regions bordering South Asia. The South Asian countries share borders with the Western provinces of China such as Tibet and Xinjiang which have a significant minority population. These regions have often experienced violent riots and secessionist movements. The political and security instability of South Asian countries has palpable spill-over effects on the Western region of China in particular. As a part of the Chinese Government's Western Development Strategy, it has undertaken massive infrastructural development projects such as building highways to connect the Xinjiang region with Russia, Central Asia, and South Asia. In Tibet, the government has undertaken transport infrastructure development with neighbouring country Nepal. The situation in Afghanistan is volatile. China's strategic objective in Afghanistan is linked with a host of factors including its special relations with Pakistan, stability in Xinjiang, and the desire to play a larger regional role.

¹New Era or Third Era refers to the regime of Xi Jinping in China from 2013. It is an ideological doctrine created during General Secretary Xi Jinping's leadership of the Chinese Communist Party that combines Chinese Marxism and national rejuvenation.

² The Monroe Doctrine is a United States foreign policy position that opposes European colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. It holds that any intervention in the political affairs of the Americas by foreign powers is a potentially hostile act against the United States.



[Figure 3 - China and Its Neighbours in South Asia](#)

China's policy towards South Asia is linked to its focus on unifying its territories and consolidating its boundaries guided by its notion of history. In the early 1960s, Chinese foreign policy in general was engaged in resolving border issues. China settled the boundary issue with Myanmar recognizing the McMahon Line in 1960. While dealing with India, China did not recognize the McMahon Line, and India–the China border dispute as well as Bhutan–The Bhutan-China border dispute is still to be resolved. India, China, and Bangladesh have disputes regarding the water sharing of the river Brahmaputra which is still to be solved.

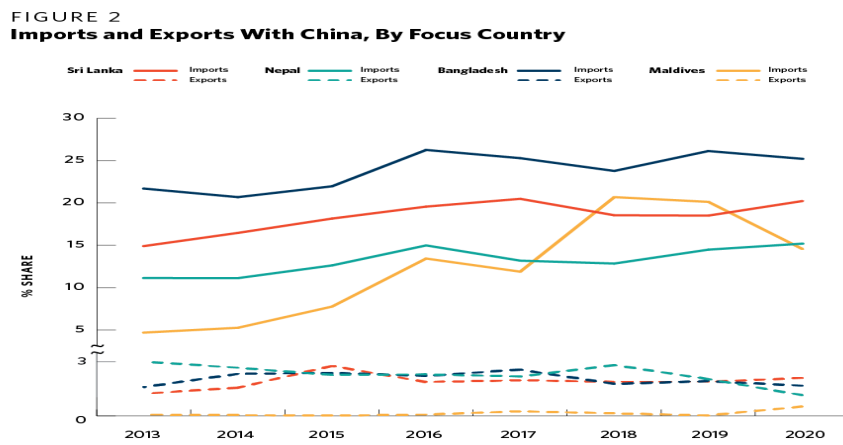
China is the second-largest economy and the world's largest exporter³. China is actively engaging in economic diplomacy through a wide range of means including bilateral trade agreements and various investment projects in the South Asian countries. India with its fast has become China's strongest economic partner in South Asia. Bilateral India–China trade crossed US\$84 billion in 2017 compared with US\$20.08 billion for Sino-Pakistan, 16.04 billion for Sino-Bangladesh, and US\$ 4.39 billion for Sino-Sri Lanka in the same period.⁴ China is now the largest overseas investor in the Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Chinese penetration is the highest in the

³ China exported nearly \$3.59 trillion worth of goods in 2022. According to the World Bank, China's \$18 trillion economy accounts for just under 18 percent of global GDP, making it the world's second-largest economy after the United States, which accounts for about 25 percent.

⁴ Brookings India Sambandh Regional Connectivity Initiative Policy Brief - India's Limited Connectivity in South Asia by Riya Sinha, Nia Sareen, May 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Trade-Policy-Brief.pdf>

economy of Pakistan. The Chinese model of investment may lead to a debt trap for the recipient country. In the past few years, China gave Sri Lanka big loans to build infrastructure. However, Sri Lanka was unable to repay these loans. Resultantly, a state-run Chinese company got a 99-year lease of the Hambantota Port and about 15,000 acres of land for building an industrial zone.

China has tried to strengthen and deepen relations with the small countries in South Asia. China is a major investor in Bangladesh and upgraded its bilateral ties to a strategic partnership in recent times. China has also been successful in significantly expanding its foothold in countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. The relationship is also extended to the defense and security domain. Since 2015, the PRC has been building 3 villages in Bhutan's sovereign territory.



Source: See Appendix 9.

[Figure 4 - China's Influence in South Asia: Vulnerabilities and Resilience in Four Countries - Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#)

3.1. Analysing a major infrastructural project of China in South Asia -

3.1.1 Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

BRI is a strategic project of China to acquire a dominant global status through the implementation of economic, energy, and connectivity-related projects in Asia, Africa, and Europe. BRI 'adheres closely to China's regional development strategy, new urbanization strategy and opening up strategy and will provide a strong boost to China's all-dimensional opening up'. Therefore, the benefit to China's domestic economy remains a major driver for BRI. Moreover, BRI offers opportunities for

China's economic restructuring, industrial upgradation as well as 'going global' strategy. The idea is to create new markets and get economic benefits by building infrastructure and industrial corridors as well as transportation and communication networks in the region.



[Figure 5 - A Critical Look at China's One Belt One Road Initiative](#)

3.1.2 China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

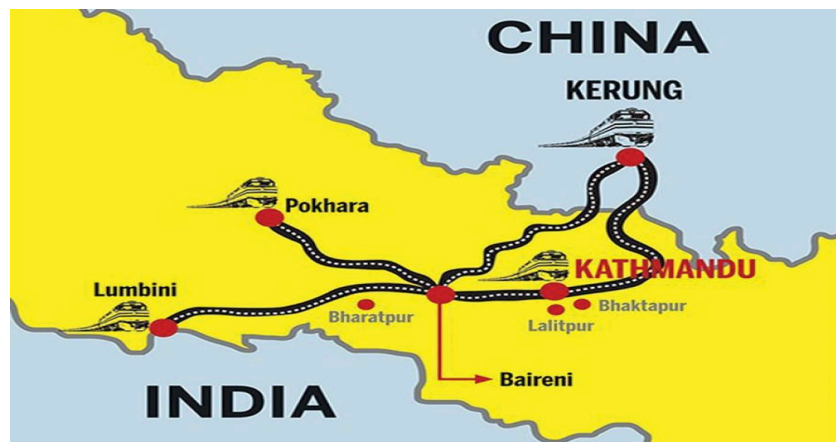
The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor is a massive bilateral project to improve infrastructure with Pakistan for better trade with China and to further integrate the countries of South Asia. It is a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to improve connectivity, trade, communication, and cooperation between the countries of Eurasia announced by China in 2013.



[Figure 6 - Target China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\)](#)

3.1.3 Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network

The Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network is an economic corridor between Nepal and China and part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a global development initiative that develops connectivity, especially across Eurasia. The construction of this network was appreciated by the Chinese President as switching Nepal “from a landlocked country to a land-linked country”. The network comprises multiple transportation infrastructure projects, one such project being the “China–Nepal railway”.



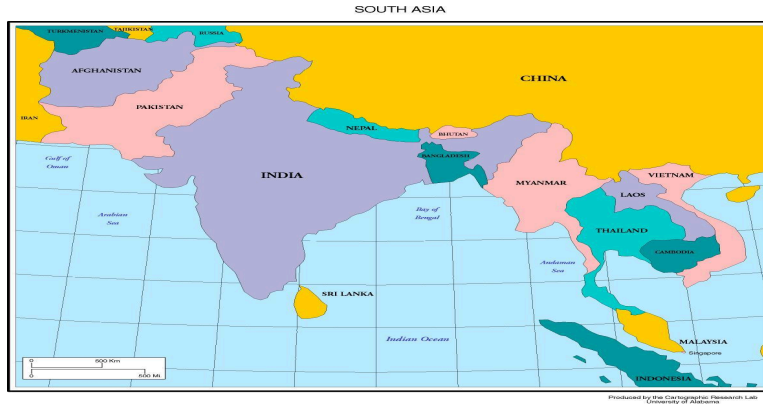
[Figure 7 - Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network](#)

4. India and South Asia

India's relationship with its neighbors in South Asia and other international actors has always been influenced by domestic politics. India needs to adopt the stance of a Vishwamitra on the global stage. India's vision of regional economic integration in South Asia is based on enhanced intra-regional trade, investment flows, and regional transport and communication links in South Asia. South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and India's Neighbourhood First Policy are the two vehicles in this process. One of the major reasons behind the failure of the SAARC was the continuous hostile relations between India and Pakistan.

The two rival nations in the South Asian region - India and Pakistan have a complicated relationship. Both countries often find themselves at loggerheads over the territorial dispute of Kashmir. The Pakistani Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar stated Pakistan's interest in

restoring cordial ties with India including the trade ties. India has been maintaining that it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan while insisting that the onus is on Islamabad to create an environment that is free of terror and hostility for such an engagement. However, India would not compromise on national security matters and will take robust and decisive action to counter all attempts to undermine India's security and territorial integrity. India is no India and Sri Lanka has a long history of intellectual, cultural, religious, and linguistic contact spanning over 2,500 years. The India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISFTA) was signed in 1998 and came into effect in March 2000. India extended multi-pronged assistance of US \$4 Billion to Sri Lanka during its debt crisis in 2022 through multiple credit lines and currency support, in line with India's Neighbourhood First Policy. India and Sri Lanka also signed the Cultural Cooperation Agreement on November 29, 1977, in New Delhi to further deepen the ties between the two nations. India and Bhutan have a unique and long-standing bilateral relationship marked by mutual trust, friendship, and understanding. Testament to this is the Treaty of Friendship signed by Bhutan in 1949. India has always provided aid to Bhutan's socio-economic growth. The core area of India-Bhutan relations is based on cooperation and assistance on the hydropower projects. In 1965, India was among the first countries to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with Maldives after its independence. Relations have been friendly and close in strategic, economic, and military cooperation. However, there has been a serious decline in the India-Maldives relation in recent times with the advocacy of campaigns like "India Out" and the order of the Maldivian Government directing the Indian Authority to withdraw their troops despite India's continuous military and financial support, especially by assisting Maldives to boost and develop their tourism industry. If we talk about Bangladesh as a nation of India, both countries share bonds of history, language, culture, and a multitude of other commonalities. India and Bangladesh are close strategic partners in counter-terrorism. They are also the largest trading partner in South Asia. Bangladesh's geographical location as India's eastern neighbour gives it strategic importance. It provides India with access to the Bay of Bengal and an important route for trade and connectivity with Southeast Asia.



[Figure 8 - South Asia Political Map](#)

5. Analysing India's Foreign Policy in South Asia and its Relation with China

As the India-China competition for influence in South Asia has increasingly become fierce, Indian policymakers are recalculating the effectiveness of its past South Asian foreign policy. China's presence is certainly pushing back India's influence in some South Asian countries quietly but effectively. Some small countries are tending to lean towards China seriously challenging India's security and position. It can be argued that competition for influence with China in South Asia has led to India's adjustments in foreign policy. For India, China was an important factor whereas for China, India hardly seemed to occupy their thinking while crafting a new approach. Successive Indian governments worked two tracks: building a strategic relationship with the United States and developing the modalities for engagement with China. After 1999, the Indian leadership made sincere efforts to reduce the salience of the boundary question through a joint process of clarifying the LAC. Despite setbacks, the successor government of Shri Manmohan Singh persisted in engaging with China and agreed on the Political Parameters and the Guiding Principles for the settlement of the India-China boundary question in 2005. India's willingness to engage with China did not mean that India was not aware of the challenges in this relationship. Instead, there was an underlying awareness that India may be engaged in a long-term rivalry with China, but such rivalry would not preclude significant elements of cooperation.

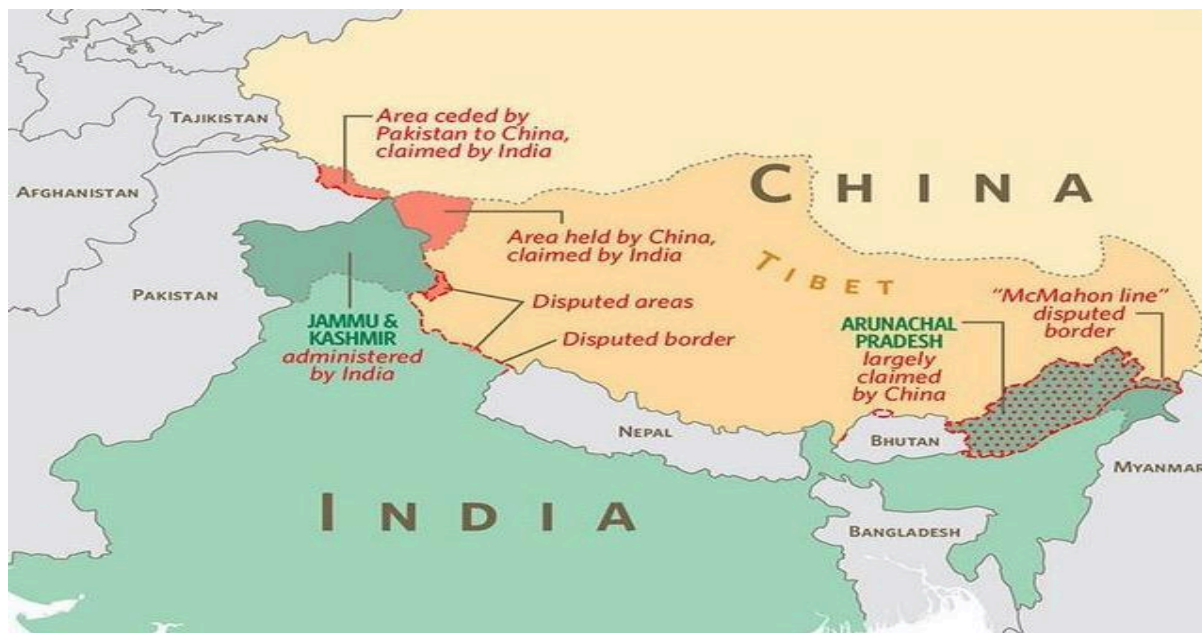
It is observed during the NDA regime that the present government has abandoned the previous policy of the UPA government and aligned with the United States to counter China in the region. Beijing did not show sensitivity to India's core concerns. Reclassifying the region of Arunachal Pradesh as a part of South Tibet within a year of the 2005 agreement was provocative. China has also blocked multilateral lending for development projects in Arunachal Pradesh. It introduced

stapled visas for the residents of Jammu and Kashmir, China seemed to show scant regard for India's claims. Months after the 2009 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, China's blocked the listing of terrorists in the United Nations Security Council displayed a high degree of insensitivity on a matter of public importance. China's growing footprint in South Asia was also viewed negatively by many. There is a growing asymmetry in terms of how India and China matter to each other's broader foreign policy goals. The feeling in India is that China's actions and policies are always contradictory to India's interests on an intentional basis. China's foreign policy initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or its push into the Indian Ocean have directly impinged on India's interests. China appears, from India's perspective, to be taking actions that impede India's interests. India's reaction has been, correspondingly, to push back against China on matters of its core interests like the BRI or the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific. Narendra Modi's government has placed India's neighbourhood as its top foreign policy priority.

The priority of the neighbourhood for Modi is clear. Unlike previous leaders, he is eager to use foreign policy as a means to generate inward investment, business, and technology for domestic growth and development. As a pragmatist, he is aware that this will be facilitated by enhancing regional cooperation and stability in South Asia. But it will be a difficult and complex task, especially given India's two powerful nuclear-armed neighbours, Pakistan and China, whose relations with India are marked by tensions and political and military standoffs. Modi's policy towards both countries has undergone significant shifts during his tenure in office. For India, China poses a great strategic challenge rather than a threat. India is primarily concerned by China's assertiveness in the border dispute, by its growing trade and defence relationships with India's South Asian neighbours, and by the expansion of Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean, the latter of which India fears as possible encirclement. All this has hardened New Delhi's perspective towards Beijing. But, at the same time, China is India's largest trading partner. Although Modi seeks stronger trade and investment links with China, he has also been tough on his powerful neighbour. In his electoral campaign, he criticised China's "mindset of expansion". In June 2015, India declared that the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project was "not acceptable", as it would use infrastructure in disputed Kashmir territory.

In a significant departure from the previous government, India under the NDA leadership is willing to form a combined front with the United States on Asia-Pacific security to counter China. The importance of safeguarding maritime security and ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight throughout the region, especially in the South China Sea was considered significant. This was understood to imply that the two parties had reached a consensus on the need to counter Beijing's assertive handling of conflicting regional territorial claims. The annual India–US Malabar

naval exercise has been expanded to include Japan. India is also seeking to bolster defence and naval cooperation with Vietnam. Joint India–US vision recognises the complementary nature of India’s new “Act East” policy, focusing on Japan and Australia, and the Obama administration’s “pivot”, or “rebalancing”, towards Asia. However, there are limits as to how far the combined front between India, the US, and other democracies in the region such as Australia and Japan, can go. For example, the quadrilateral naval exercise between Australia, India, Japan, and the US has not been repeated in the last seven years after a stiff Chinese *démarche* followed the first one. The bottom line is that while there is an emerging bilateral consensus between India and the US on security in the Asia-Pacific, neither wants a confrontational relationship with China.



[Figure 9 - Is India Losing Under the Weight of China in South Asia by R Chowdhury, Aequitas Review](#)

6. India’s Strategy to Counter China in South Asia

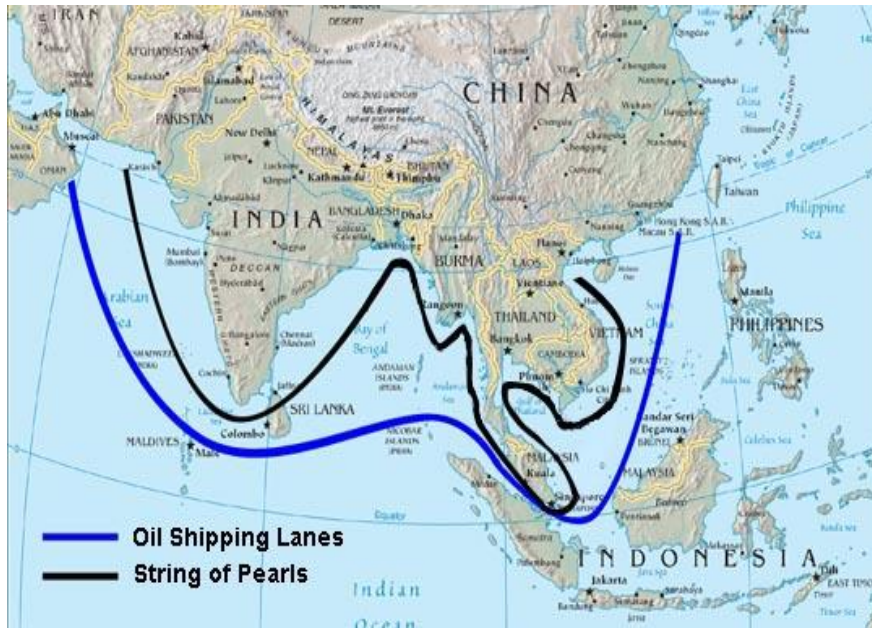
Some of the proactive measures that India has taken in recent times in South Asia to pose a counter challenge to the increasing Chinese dominance in the region -

1. India’s Neighbourhood First Policy (2014) - Over the last three decades, India faced threats, tension, and the possibility of terrorist and militant attacks from its immediate neighbour. Challenges of illegal immigration and smuggling of weapons and drugs require improved security infrastructure at borders. Contentious issues have plagued India’s bilateral relations with China and Pakistan. Terrorism emanating from Pakistan

is a core concern. India should actively engage with regional and multilateral organisations to sensitise them to the role of Pakistan in fostering terrorism. Efforts should be made to establish a common platform for countering terrorism under the Neighbourhood First Policy. For engagement with India's neighbours, connectivity infrastructure such as cross-border roads, railways, and inland waterways and ports need improvement. Defence cooperation is key to India's bilateral relationship with its neighbouring countries. Joint military exercises are conducted with various countries such as Maldives, Myanmar, and Nepal. The Ministry should take initiatives to enhance maritime domain awareness in India's extended neighbourhood. Since 2020, India has been the largest source of tourist arrivals to Maldives. A large number of visitors come to India from Bangladesh for medical treatment. Many Indians also visit Nepal for religious tourism.

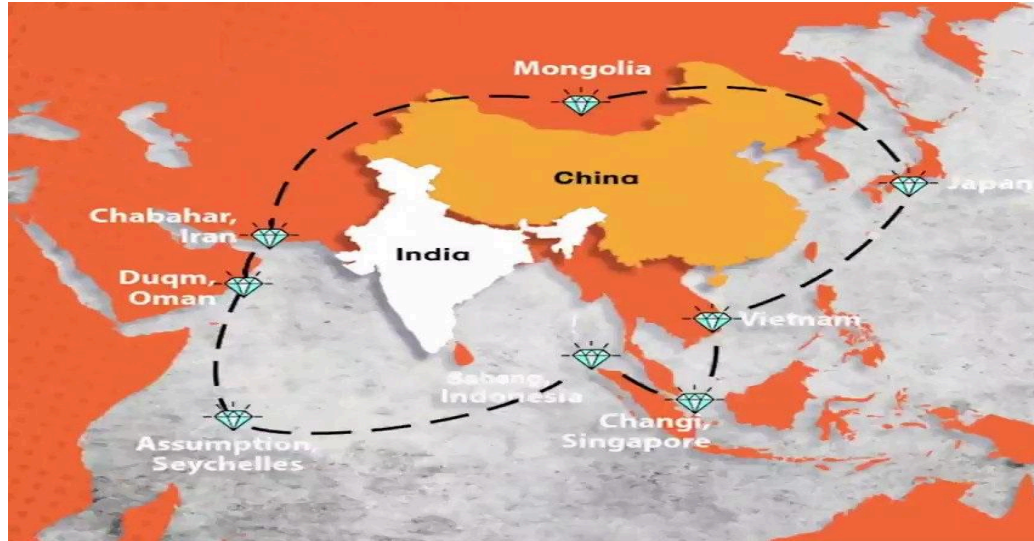
2. Act East Policy (1992) - India's 'Look East Policy' launched in 1992 was upgraded to the Act East Policy in 2014, to strengthen ties with the Southeast Asian countries to globally as well as regionally challenge China with a proactive and pragmatic focus on India's extended neighbourhood in the Indo-Pacific. The Act East policy focuses on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. India's northeastern region shares land borders with many neighbouring countries. The economic development of northeastern states is integral to the success of the Neighbourhood First Policy and the Act East Policy. A synergy should be maintained between these two policies. This can help improve connectivity, economic development, and security of the North-Eastern Region.
3. SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) - The 'Security and Growth for All in the Region' concept or policy was first articulated by the Prime Minister in Mauritius in 2015. Vision SAGAR aims to strengthen India's maritime capabilities and enhance its presence in the Indian Ocean region. It aims to safeguard India's maritime interests, including resource exploration, trade routes, and security concerns. Vision SAGAR promotes maritime diplomacy and collaboration with neighbouring countries and global partners. It recognises the importance of the Indian Ocean as a critical region for economic growth and geopolitical stability.
4. International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a multi-modal transportation established on 12 September 2000 in St. Petersburg by Iran, Russia, and India to promote transportation cooperation among the member states. This corridor connects the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via the Islamic Republic of

IRAN, then is connected to St. Petersburg and North Europe via the Russian Federation. It has the potential to enhance India's connectivity with Central Asia and the Eurasian region, taking into account the geo-strategic and economic importance of all the involved countries.



[Figure 11 - China's String of Pearls Strategy](#)

5. Instead of adopting a passive approach toward Beijing's "String of Pearls" Policy, New Delhi has adopted the strategic offensive principle of War ("Necklace of Diamonds) Strategy. This approach, also known as the counter-encirclement policy, aims to encircle China by expanding Indian naval bases and forging alliances and partnerships with strategically located nations in the Indian Ocean region. India has increased its presence in the IOR and established strong security relations with regional countries. New Delhi sees India as the net security provider in the region and views any outside influence as a threat to national security. India's first focus was on establishing a presence near the Strait of Malacca, a critical strategic intersection. India's involvement in building the Sabang port in Indonesia is regarded as a counterbalance to China's ambitions in the region. India also signed a bilateral agreement with Singapore allowing for the deployment of the Indian Navy at Changi Naval Base. In addition to Singapore, India is forming strategic and maritime alliances with China's neighbours, such as Japan and Mongolia, which are also involved in border disputes with China.



[Figure 12 - Necklace of Diamond Strategy - Development, Challenges, and Facing China's String of Pearls](#)

6. One of the most significant developments in post-Cold War South Asia is the growing convergence of Indian and US interests which were previously hindered by their differing perspectives on security and geoeconomics during the Cold War period, While distant from the US mainland, China still poses a threat to the United States due to Beijing's strategic aspirations, while for India, China's geographic proximity, border issues, and expansionist policies make it an imminent threat. During Barack Obama's presidency, the strategic partnership between India and the United States continued to function almost intact as a linchpin of the US "Pivot to Asia" strategy. Under the Trump administration, Washington's approach to the region gained greater traction, explicitly rebranded as an Indo-Pacific strategy, with New Delhi being accorded even greater significance and a flurry of initiatives aimed at enhancing Indo-US defense capacity in the region. Washington has increasingly considered New Delhi as a potential strategic partner with various initiatives such as the establishment of the QUAD, and Joint-Military Exercises.

7. Way Forward

1. India needs to take a leadership role in making SAARC more functional and dynamic. Yet, due to its conflict with Pakistan, India canceled the 19th SAARC Summit, making smaller nations question if India truly wants SAARC to succeed and if it is committed to seeing South Asia prosper as a region. To make SAARC more effective, the organisation must be reformed and the member countries should

reach a consensus regarding the changes required. The member countries should avoid any hostility among themselves and engage in regular talks, diplomatic and bilateral meetings, conventions, summits, and resolutions. Beneficial policy decisions should be adopted like strengthening transport connectivity among the SAARC countries which will help in enhancing intra-regional trade and investment and overall economic development and well-being of the region.

2. India needs to put effort into creating a South Asia Free Trade Zone even if it means that its South Asian neighbours will have wider access to the enormous Indian market and could potentially pose as competitors to the Indian domestic firms. It will help in promoting regional trade and economic cooperation among the member countries. It will also provide a framework for the elimination of tariffs and non-tariff barriers to trade among member countries. SAFTA will play a key role in the economic integration and solidarity of the South Asian region.
3. India will have to give more priority to its South Asian neighbouring countries. The Modi Administration in its third term will look to build strong relations with its neighbours by focusing on trade diplomacy which will be economically beneficial for both countries. India needs to emphasise regular diplomatic dialogues, bilateral and multilateral agreements, confidence-building measures, people-to-people exchanges, cultural diplomacy, joint infrastructure projects, and collaboration in areas of mutual interest such as trade, security, and environmental issues. Transparency, respect for sovereignty, and non-interference in internal affairs are also key principles.
4. When China's influence in India's backyard area is too great as of now, India must continue to ensure its security by expanding its influence in the strategic periphery. To achieve this, India needs to develop proper sub-regional cooperation mechanisms. These cooperation mechanisms need to ensure two factors: the exclusion of countries with particularly close relations with China and opposing India such as Pakistan and also the expansion of connectivity with areas outside South Asia. The Modi Government has further strengthened the sub-regional

cooperation groupings such as BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation). This is a regional cooperation mechanism linking South Asian countries (except Pakistan and Afghanistan) with some Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand. At the inauguration of the second tenure, Prime Minister Modi invited leaders from the BIMSTEC countries but not from the SAARC nations giving a clear message to China.

8. Conclusion

China has found a pragmatic mechanism (i.e., development financing) to get a foothold in South Asia. Smaller South Asian nations for the first time have the option of choosing or balancing between two competing regional powers rather than relying solely on India. South Asian nations are also enjoying massive financial assistance as India and China compete for regional hegemony. Since it will not be possible for India or the US to match the hard, easy loans that China is offering, they can bide their time and sway the smaller countries away from China by demonstrating the pitfalls of Chinese investment such as corruption, debt trap, loss projects, poor regulations and little transparency. The launching of infrastructural projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network by China are part of its strategy to consolidate its political, economic and geo-strategic position in South Asia and limit India's rise as the sole regional power in South Asia. China's main aim is to strategically encircle India on all fronts..

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