

# Why the Dragon and the Elephant are More Interested in Dancing Over South Asian Countries?

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## Abstract

This paper aims at examining the growing influence of China and India in the South Asian region. The paper found that both China and India have been doing their utmost to consolidate their influence in this sub-continent through economic, political, and military deployment and want to conquer the hearts of neighbouring countries' governments. Beijing's regional policy primarily focuses on this region for China's internal stability, sustainable economic development, and to slack the powers of the West, particularly the US. India, on the other hand, believes that China wants to contain it in the name of helping its neighbouring countries, which in fact, has stolen the peace of New Delhi. The mistrust between the two countries has reached a high peak after the border conflicts and the global pandemic (COVID-19), followed by vaccine diplomacy.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 vaccine, deep seaport, QUAD, China, India, South Asia

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## Introduction

China and India are not only the two most populous countries in the world but also two emerging giants that will transform the global economy in numerous ways over the coming decades. As per the World Bank's latest GDP rankings in 2019, China and India are the 2nd and 5th largest economies in the world. In addition, among Asian countries, China and India together contribute more than half of Asia's GDP. Therefore, China and India play a vital role in South Asia and global politics. In 2006, China and India pledged to strengthen their relationships by celebrating the China-India Friendship Year of 2006. China and India have deepened their ties with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2016. However, they are never truly friends, but rather friendly enemies. The major clash between Chinese and Indian border forces in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 strained their relationship. According to Indian media, this causality caused the deaths of twenty Indian soldiers, whereas Chinese media acknowledged the deaths of four soldiers from the Chinese side. Despite this, both of them cherish dominating Asia, particularly the South Asian region, to encircle each other. The recent regional focus of India in Southeast Asia and beyond also exposes its emerging role within a competitive regional economic and security space shared with China.<sup>1</sup> India adopts its extending policy not only in South Asia but also in the East. India's approach towards "Look East Policy"<sup>2</sup> and "extended

<sup>1</sup> Manjeets Pardesi, 'Is India a Great Power? Understanding Great Power Status in Contemporary International Relations,' *Asian Security*, 11, 1, (2015):1–30.

<sup>2</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, 'India's Look East Policy: An Asianist Strategy in Perspective,' *India Affairs*, 2, 2, (2003): 35–68.

neighbourhood” policy<sup>3</sup> has made China cautious about its South Asian foreign policy. To counter India’s dominance in this region, China has taken many lucrative and ambitious initiatives and has tightened bilateral relationships with the neighboring countries. During the global pandemic (COVID-19) crisis, both China and India have lent their hands, providing medical supplies and vaccinations around the world, particularly in South Asian countries, to maintain their dominance.

## **2. Economic Affairs of China and India**

The two regional superpowers of South Asia, China and India, are culturally and historically different. But, both China and India fought against the British imperial powers in the mid-19th century. After establishing their own states both the countries have been trying to reform the economy. In the year 2000, China’s economy was a tenth the size of the United States; but twenty years later, the economy is two-thirds as big. Wilson and Purushothaman referred in their famous BRIC study for Goldman Sachs even estimated that China to be the world’s largest economy by 2039, followed by the United States and India. The two regional superpowers of South Asia, China and India, are culturally and historically different. But, both China and India fought against the British Empire powers in the mid-19th century. After establishing their own states, both countries have been trying to reform their economies. In the year 2000, China’s economy was a tenth of the size of the United States, but twenty years later, the economy is two-thirds as big. Wilson and Purushothaman referred in their famous BRIC study for Goldman Sachs even estimated that China would be the world’s largest economy by 2039, followed by the United States and India.<sup>4</sup> India will have replaced Japan and Germany to take the No. 3 spot in the global economic race. Although India hopes to achieve a \$5 trillion economy by 2024 in terms of GDP, the economic slowdown is likely to spoil India’s hopes of becoming so. Amid the US-China trade dispute, China maintained its growth rate of nearly 6 per cent, while India’s economic growth slowed to 4.5 per cent in September 2019. However, during the pandemic (COVID-19), India saw its worst GDP growth in 2020, while China moved forward with its economy.

## **3. Foreign Diplomacy towards South Asia**

For the past decades, China and India have been contemplating and creating influences in the South Asian sub-continent as powerful rivals. To maintain balanced and sustained political and economic relationships with neighbouring states in the South Asia region and the Indian Ocean littoral, Chinese policymakers have reformulated their regional policies. In order to enhance cooperation and establish new lines of communication in the southwestern periphery, China in 2014 nicely followed and executed the foreign policy of President Xi Jinping. China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) envisages linking China with the rest of the world through numerous commercial-financial relationships and industrial projects. Through its BRI Project, China aims to extend its geo-economic footprint in the South Asian region. China is not only changing Asia’s geopolitical

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<sup>3</sup> David Scott, ‘India’s “Extended Neighborhood” Concept: Power Projection for a Rising Power,’ *India Review*, 8, 2, (2009): 107–143.

<sup>4</sup> Dominic Wilson and Roopa Purushothaman, ‘Dreaming with BRICs: the path to 2050,’ *Global Economics Paper* 99, Goldman Sachs, New York (2003).

landscape through its economic and infrastructural activities but also maintaining a global balance of power to defend its rivals. Even a few decades ago, China expressed less interest in South Asia's security and economy, but after four decades of reform and opening-up policy, China emerged as wealthy and militarily strong enough to pursue its ambitious role in South Asia.

#### 4. Strategic Gaining's in South Asia

China's rapid military modernization, capitalising on its economic growth, has already surpassed India's military advancement.<sup>5</sup> China's growing military and diplomatic power had become a security threat to India's regional aspirations. Thus, India's China policy choices were profoundly consequential for the Indian government. After declaring itself as a nuclear power state in the late twentieth century; India established its new strategic military partnership with the United States, what Ganguly and Scobell called a "healthy relationship".<sup>6</sup> To counter China's dominance over the Asia Pacific region and South Asia; India and the United States took some of the converging strategic interests. The formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, also known as QUAD, by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007 recently has drawn attention to the world community. The diplomatic and military arrangement among the QUAD country members Australia, India, Japan and the United States is viewed as to counter Chinese resurgence, especially in economic, military and maritime power. China has already shown its deep concern over this so-called QUAD group and warns other south Asian countries not to join or involve in it by any means. Tensions between Quad members and China have led to fears of what was dubbed by some commentators as "a new Cold War" in the region.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.1 To Uphold Political Affairs

China and India have shared a long-range of border areas where some parts of territories are claimed by both countries. The Indian side claims that the de facto border between China and India is 3,488 kilometres long, while China opposes this claim and says it is considerably shorter. Regarding border disputes, the two countries fought a war against each other. The two-week military standoff in Ladakh in 2014 further aggravated the two countries' relations. In 2017, the Indian Armed Forces and the People's Liberation Army of China faced off over the Chinese construction of a road in Doklam, near a tri-junction border area. This standoff raised tensions between the countries. To react to this border dispute issue, India's foreign secretary said in February 2018, "We cannot see the relationship with China the way we perhaps saw it thirty years ago, or even 15 years ago." Both countries share the belief that this relationship is slated to become one of the defining relationships of this century, certainly in our

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<sup>5</sup> Alexandr Buriilkov and Torsten Geise, 'Maritime Strategies of Rising Powers: Developments in China and Russia,' *Third World Quarterly*, 34, 6, (2013):1037–1053.

<sup>6</sup> Sumit Ganguly and Andrew Scobell, 'India and the United States: Forging a Security Partnership,' *World Policy Journal*, 22, 2, (2005): 37–43.

<sup>7</sup> John Power, 'What is the Quad, and how will it impact US-China relations under the Biden administration?', *South China Morning Post*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/explained/article/3122933/what-quad-and-how-will-it-impact-us-china-relations-under-biden> (accessed 10 Mar. 2021).

region...'.<sup>8</sup> After the June clash in the Galwan Valley in 2020, another recent skirmish happened between the dragon and elephant in India's Sikkim state on January 20, 2021. Amid the political tensions between the two countries, India too has contemplated ways to reconnect with its South Asian neighbours and has inculcated a spirit of integration and interdependence in the subcontinent through its cooperation and influence since the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> It is believed that there are similarities between Indian culture and neighbouring countries' cultures; therefore, it paves the way for India's easy influence over these countries. According to India's foreign policy, it always tries to maintain friendly relations with its neighbours. Unfortunately, in recent times, India has lost most of its friendly neighbours because of its unwanted interference in the internal affairs of those countries. China usually maintains a neutral balance with whatever regime is in power and avoids intervening in domestic political affairs. As a result, most of India's neighbours now lean toward China, as China typically remains silent on other countries' internal affairs. It is noteworthy that Pakistan has always become India's biggest enemy, while China is one of its friendly allies. In recent years, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and even Myanmar have also closely embraced China.

#### **4.2 Vaccine Diplomacy in South Asia**

The outbreak of COVID-19 coronavirus locked the entire world and south Asian countries have also plunged into this crisis. Though China has successfully enabled to curb the COVID-19 crisis and provided nationwide vaccination for further prevention. India, on the other hand, has been severely affected by a coronavirus in its second wave. As of 20 June 2021, 29,881,965 coronavirus cases have been reported in India of which 386,740 have died.<sup>10</sup> During the second wave coronavirus crisis, hospitals in India are desperate for oxygen and other medical supplies including coronavirus vaccine. China thereupon extended its hands to India by providing assistance with oxygen concentrators, ventilators, monitors, medications and other medical supplies in battling COVID-19 pandemic. Both Beijing and New Delhi are continuing its cooperation around the world to combat the outbreak. However, India has minimized its cooperation with the global community since India itself has been devastated by the coronavirus. Beijing has taken this opportunity to get closer with south Asian countries. Therefore, it establishes a Covid-19 "emergency supplies reserve" for South Asian countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and, has sent medical supplies along with vaccines to help them battle against growing coronavirus pandemic. Concerning China's vaccine diplomacy, according to a report of the South China Morning Post, India would send its neighbours 10 to 20 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines for free.<sup>11</sup> However, China is running faster in this vaccine diplomacy race than India. China has sent 700,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine to Afghanistan, where the

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, India, 'Sino-India relations including Doklam, border situation and cooperation in international organizations', *Sixteenth Lok Sabha*, 4 September 2018, 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> Zorawar Daulet Singh, 'Managing India-China Relations in a Changing Neighbourhood,' *Centre For Policy Research*, June 14, 2019, <https://cprindia.org/news/7887> (accessed 7 April. 2021).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/> (accessed 20 June. 2021)

<sup>11</sup> Subir Bhaumik, 'Can India outshine China with Covid-19 vaccine diplomacy?' *South China Morning Post*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3119194/can-india-outshine-china-covid-19-vaccine-diplomacy> (accessed 5 Feb. 2021).

COVID-19 crisis is getting worse. India also contributed to Afghanistan by supplying 968,000 doses of Made-in-India vaccines. Last year, Bangladesh signed an agreement with India for the India-made AstraZeneca corona vaccine. However, after the second wave of coronavirus emerged in India, India ceased supplying the vaccine to Bangladesh. To fill the vaccine shortage, Bangladesh approached China and received 5,00,000 doses of China's Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine in the first phase. Additionally, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) has approved a \$250 million loan to Bangladesh to help the country cope with the coronavirus pandemic. Bhutan received COVID-19 vaccines from the Indian government while it also received 550,000 doses from China. Both the Chinese and Indian governments have handed over 500,000 and 1.5 million doses of coronavirus vaccines to Myanmar, respectively. China provided 200,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine and anti-epidemic materials to the Maldives, while India provided 100,000 doses. Nepal received a consignment of 800,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines from China in March 2021, and another 1 million doses will be received soon. The Nepal government has decided to procure 4 million Covid-19 vaccines from China under a non-disclosure agreement. However, Nepal has also procured 1 million doses of the vaccine from India. Pakistan received 1.2 million COVID-19 vaccines from China as both are long-term allies. The Chinese government and the Chinese military have also donated vaccines to Pakistan. Besides, purchasing several consignments of COVID-19 vaccines from China, Pakistan launched its homemade COVID vaccine, 'PakVac', with the assistance of an all-weather ally, China. China has granted Sri Lanka a concessionary loan of \$500 million to deal with the coronavirus crisis along with sending 1.1 million doses of vaccines. To maintain balance in vaccine diplomacy, India has sent 500,000 doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Sri Lanka.

India is donating millions of AstraZeneca shots to countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. But, neighbouring countries that relied on India for vaccines have increasingly turned to China due to India's own vaccine crisis. Many believe that Beijing's humanitarian plan against the COVID-19 pandemic globally has gained a geopolitical advantage, and Beijing has managed to transform the pandemic into a strategic opportunity to assert its leadership role and expand its geopolitical influence. Many nations reacted positively to Beijing's decisive, swift, and effective response to COVID-19 and embraced Chinese health policy. Moreover, China's Ali Baba Group has also been cooperating with the Chinese government in building its global image by sending medical supplies to many countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, etc. India, on the other hand, is seen as having slowed in its efforts to reach out to these South Asian countries in terms of vaccine diplomacy as a new rising power.

#### **4.3 Geostrategic Interests in South Asia**

China and India, both neighbours, have expressed some common interests in managing non-traditional threats, promoting secular and stable regimes, securing maritime trade routes, and geo-economically linking South Asia with East Asia. Huang Yasheng argues that China and India's relations are fraught with more

competing issues than their mutually common interests.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, in terms of regional approaches, China and India have some basic differences in agendas. China's vision is to connect South Asia with China, while India's approach is to bring South Asia closer and connect with Eurasia and South East Asia. India's unwillingness to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other projects like the Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation (BCIM) have caused concern. India believes that the BRI and BCIM will cement the relationships among India's neighbours and reorient the foreign policies of South Asian states, which eventually harm its interests and lessen its influence in this subcontinent. In fact, China's main interest is to engage the neighbours in its goals and provide them with economic, infrastructural, and technological support that enables China to pursue its engagement with South Asia and other countries. China's soft corner and political, economic, and diplomatic support for Pakistan and Myanmar for its geostrategic interests have made its rivals, India and the US, worried.

## **5. Foreign Policy towards South Asian Countries**

Although China and India are today seen as regional competitors, none of them has fully succeeded in building close relations with neighbouring states. Due to its lack of intra-regional trading, poor infrastructural networks, poor economy, and the bad habit of intervening in others' domestic politics, India has not fully won the hearts of its neighbours. China, on the contrary, has partly succeeded in deepening its relationships with the South Asian region through its economic strength and willingness. Here we will discuss country-wise how China and India influence the South Asian region in terms of their foreign policies.

### **5.1 Afghanistan**

Both India and China enjoy a very stable, robust, and dynamic bilateral relationship with Afghanistan. China is moving forward in Afghanistan with the hope of expanding its influence in the geopolitically important South Asian region. Afghanistan and China share only a 76-kilometre long border known as the Wakhan Corridor. The two countries have been maintaining diplomatic ties since 1955. Although during the Taliban government, China's foreign policy toward Afghanistan was not positive, later on, China had to change its policy to work with the Taliban government on certain conditions. China knows very well that political instability, lack of good governance, the threat of Islamic extremists, the flow of drugs, etc., will destabilise its own country, particularly its western region, Xinjiang. To ensure regional stability, China wants to counter the Afghanistan-based East Turkestan Independence Movement (ETIM), a Xinjiang-focused Islamic separatist group. China wants to prevent ETIM from "radicalizing" Uyghurs in Xinjiang and prevent them from carrying out jihadist and terrorist attacks on the mainland.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, the rise of Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), a regional terrorist group in Afghanistan, has become a threat in South Asia. The IS-K focuses its heinous mission on Central Asia and China's western borders. China also realises

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<sup>12</sup> Yasheng Huang, 'The Myth of Economic Complementarity in Sino-India Relations,' *Journal of International Affairs*, 64, 2, (2011): 111–124.

<sup>13</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, 'Is China Bringing Peace to Afghanistan?', *The Diplomat*, June 20, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/is-china-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan> (accessed 2 May, 2021).

that maintaining peace and stability in Afghanistan and nearby states is very important to China. China believes that instability in this region will inevitably welcome US and NATO forces, which may hinder peace and stability in China. Therefore, China hurried to establish strong ties with Afghanistan after the US announced plans to scale down its military presence there. China connects Afghanistan through its Belt and Road initiative. The success of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, as well as other initiatives that run through the southern stretches of Central Asia, depends on keeping stables around China. However, China has been strengthening its economic, political, and diplomatic ties with Afghanistan, providing it with observer status in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China, being a close ally of Pakistan, is trying to warm the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

India, on the other hand, has no geographical connection with Afghanistan but has historically had friendly ties. Despite its global image, India takes a soft stance toward Afghanistan in order to contain China's influence in the region and defend Pakistan, which it regards as its main adversary. India's interest in establishing stronger and more direct commercial and political relations with Afghanistan and Central Asia has been impeded by its regional rival, Pakistan. Therefore, India adopts soft power diplomacy with Afghanistan to win its hearts and minds and strengthen political and cultural relations. India wants to protect the lives and properties of Indians working in Afghanistan and prevent Pakistan's security agencies from training anti-India radicals on Afghanistan's soil.

Since 2001, India has been assisting Afghanistan in development cooperation. It has spent \$3 billion on reconstruction and development plans such as building roads and highways, electric power lines, hydroelectric power projects, educational institutions, primary health centers, and parliamentary houses. It is also providing training to Afghan administrators, teachers, and officer cadets and offering scholarships to Afghan students. Moreover, India's Chabahar port project in Iran will connect India, Iran and Afghanistan with Central Asian countries and boost sea, railway, infrastructure and energy projects. This Chabahar project is seen as a counter of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). However, India did not send its troops to war-torn Afghanistan for security reasons and other cost; but, aided military support like providing with Mi-24 helicopters, four Mi-25 (Mi-24D) helicopters and three HAL Cheetah light utility helicopters to the Afghan Air Force (AAF) in December 2016. Although India's developmental approach has been praised by ordinary Afghan people but China's increasing influences have compelled New Delhi to reshape its foreign policy to Afghanistan.

## **5.2 Bangladesh**

Bangladesh historically maintains moderation in its foreign policy pursuits. Bangladesh is an important partner of China. The dreams of Bangladesh and China are similar. Since 1976, China and Bangladesh have been maintaining diplomatic relations. In recent years, Bangladesh-China relations have reached a new height. China is a major development partner of Bangladesh in infrastructure. Bangladesh has joined the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since 2016 and China considers Bangladesh an important country for its BRI project. It has been

participating actively in China's grand project.<sup>14</sup> Sultana Yasmin thinks "China-Bangladesh relations are going through a change in the 21st century with a wider scope of mutual cooperation and benefits".<sup>15</sup> In 2016, the high-level visit of Chinese President Xi to Bangladesh owed \$26bn under the BRI scheme. Geographically, Bangladesh is connected to both the overland and maritime routes of the BRI. So, Bangladesh has eagerly joined the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) initiative aimed at expanding the social and economic ties of the people of these four countries. In other words, the BCIM-EC project will connect China to the Bay of Bengal through the revival of the Southern Silk Road, also known as the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road under BRI.

Bangladesh has become one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). It is largely dependent on China for infrastructural development. China now helps Bangladesh with setting up power generation, the Padma Bridge construction, road and rail connectivity improvement, building seaports and economic zones. Bangladesh has created a favourable environment for greater Chinese investment in special economic zones and hi-tech parks. In terms of education and cultural exchanges, both countries are cooperating with each other, establishing Chinese language institutes and offering scholarships in Bangladesh and China, respectively. Since 1977, China has largely been selling defence equipment to Bangladesh, and now Bangladesh buys one-fifth of China's military exports. In 2016, Bangladesh received two submarines from China in order to intensify surveillance in the Bay of Bengal and to protect its blue economy, which raised eyebrows in India.

On the contrary, Bangladesh is geographically, culturally, and politically proximal to India. India firmly believes that to acquire a worthwhile image among the global powers and gain regional hegemony, it must first extend its influence in its neighbourhood. Retired Brigadier Gurmit Kanwal of the Indian Army said: "India has to militarily reach out to countries like Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Nepal—the same way it helped the Afghan army."<sup>16</sup> It was further stressed that India has no other way to fight China's increasing dominion over the neighbouring countries.

India feels uneasy seeing a close and deeper relationship between Bangladesh and China. In particular, India is wary about improving security ties with China, which it sees as a threat to its territory. Therefore, India recently made an agreement with Bangladesh to install a network of 20 coastal surveillance radar systems. With these radar systems, India wants to enhance surveillance in Bangladesh's maritime domain, aiming to share advanced information regarding the identity and movement of non-military commercial vessels in the Bay of Bengal.

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<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, (2018), 'China and Bangladesh Hold the 11th Round of Diplomatic Consultation,' [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/t1612507.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/t1612507.html) (accessed 6 Feb. 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Sultana Yesmin, 'The changing dynamics of China-Bangladesh relations,' *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2018, <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/global-affairs/news/the-changing-dynamics-china-bangladesh-relations-1658695> (accessed 10 Mar. 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Ranjan Basu, 'Bangladesh should be at the center of India's diplomacy,' *The Dhaka Tribune*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2018/02/12/bangladesh-centre-india-diplomacy> (accessed 17 May. 2021).



In fact, the purpose of installing the radar system in India is to diminish the growing presence of China in this region.

It is undeniable that since the liberation of Bangladesh, India has considered it its best ally. India announced \$5 billion in loans for Bangladesh in 2017, countering China's \$26 billion. Throughout the decades, India has been facilitating cooperation with Bangladesh on infrastructural development, road and bridge building, improvement of power plants, and, to some extent, security issues. Both countries have pledged not to use their soil for terrorist activities. On the contrary, India's hegemonic posture and coercive tactics are viewed as mixed and, at times, negative by Bangladeshis, particularly the indiscriminate killing of innocent people along the borders and the unresolved Teesta river water sharing dispute. In recent times, India's National Register of Citizens Act has created mistrust towards its Bangladeshi counterpart, which hopes to push in about 20 lakh or more so-called illegal Indians to Bangladesh.

### 5.3 Maldives

Due to the strategic importance of the Maldives, China and India vie for influence in the region. In this small archipelago, both Beijing and New Delhi compete to pursue their often conflicting maritime strategies. Since India always suspects any kind of activity by China in its neighbourhood, as a result of China's growing presence in the Maldives, India is concerned that this tiny archipelago will become part of China's "String of Pearls" strategy to circle India. During the period of president Abdulla Yameen, China enjoyed bliss since Yameen was considered pro-China. Beijing spent a huge amount of money, some as high as US \$830 million, to build infrastructure, such as upgrading the Maldives airport, building a bridge to link the airport island with the capital, and building apartment complexes and hospitals under its new Silk Road initiative. But, in the recent presidential election, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's victory made China worried as he is seen as closer to India for hampering its infrastructure projects. The opposition alleged that Yameen's government caused the Maldives' debt to China. They said Chinese interests had leased at least 16 islets of the 1,192 scattered coral islands that make up the country and were building ports and other infrastructure there, according to an Agence France-Presse report.<sup>17</sup> China's foreign ministry, on the other hand, has clearly said that China has no intention of intervening in the Maldives' domestic politics and jeopardising this region.

Historically, India has been a major influencer in Maldivian economic development, providing social and financial aid and acting as the first responder to offer assistance. But, Yameen's pro-China approach severely frustrated the Modi government's neighbourhood outreach. Yameen's liberal policy towards China and support of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signing free trade agreements (FTA), and giving priority to Chinese companies for undertaking major infrastructure projects made India angry at Yameen's administration. There was no Chinese embassy in the Maldives until 2012. From the beginning, India has consistently opposed any kind of agreement with China that hurts her. India perceives China as attempting to isolate it from its neighbours by excluding Bangladesh, Maldives,

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<sup>17</sup> Jeong-ho Lee, "Why are China and India so interested in the Maldives?", *The South China Morning Post*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/2165597/why-are-china-and-india-so-interested-maldives> (accessed 19 Feb. 2021).

Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka from its various initiative projects. Ultimately, this kind of engagement activity will surround the Indian coast with Chinese-dominated ports. New Delhi fears that Beijing's BRI project will erode the Indian sphere of influence, make its neighbours dependent on Chinese infrastructure, and enable Beijing to become the first responder in South Asia in place of India. However, in holding the power of Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, India has turned the page in its relationship with the Maldives. Solih's first visit to India affirmed his government's "India First Policy" and won \$1.4 billion in assistance. The state-level exchange visit hopes to enhance bilateral relations in trade, energy, security, connectivity, socio-economic development, and cooperation in regional and multilateral forums. Since assuming power, Solih has demonstrated a willingness to engage with the world in a balanced manner, and he has expanded his firm support for the BRI project.

#### **5.4 Myanmar**

The geo-strategic position of Myanmar is important for two Asian rivals, China and India. China's close ties with Myanmar are not only to contain its neighbour India but also to limit or diminish the US's influence in this region, which China considers a threat to its growth and prosperity. Thus, Beijing's intention is to be nearer Naypyidaw in economic, political, and military relations. India, however, is in the process of following suit to counter China's growing influence. New Delhi's move towards Naypyidaw is mainly to develop its "seven sisters" Northeast provinces, which are literally isolated from mainland India, acquire energy for its vulnerable seven sisters, create links with ASEAN for trade and investment, and reduce Beijing's influence over Naypyidaw. As India's closest Southeast Asian neighbour, Myanmar plays a vital role in its Act East policy. Bordering Myanmar, India's north-eastern region has long suffered from chaos and an underdeveloped economy.<sup>18</sup>

India's foreign policy towards ASEAN countries is very immature and short-term, whereas China's mature and long-term strategic framework towards ASEAN countries enables her to develop its western region and secure its energy supply. China provides Myanmar with military hardware to increase its strength and uproot ethnic militancy. Like the Indian north-eastern parts, the northern tribal regions of Myanmar are underdeveloped and prone to ethnic militancy. They often have collisions with governments over their independence. However, Myanmar gets most of its defence equipment from China, along with a few amounts from Russia, Ukraine, and India.

In the last two decades, China has increased its influence on Myanmar through economic, military, and development assistance. With actively integrating with Beijing's corridor project and Belt and Road Initiative, Naypyidaw has paved the way to Beijing, the shortest land and sea access to South Asia. To conduct smooth and secure trade and commerce, Beijing needed an alternative route like Gwadar port in Pakistan.

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<sup>18</sup> Gancheng Zhao, 'India threatened by China-Myanmar ties: Chinese think-tank', *The Economic Times*, July 12, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-threatened-by-china-myanmar-ties-chinese-think-tank/articleshow/54328467.cms?from=mdr> (accessed 11 April, 2021).

The strategically significant Rakhine state of Myanmar has opened that opportunity both to China and India, by which China will connect its south-western part and India's landlocked north-eastern provinces. Beijing wooed Naypyidaw to build a deep-sea port in Sittwe, a special economic zone, and an oil and gas pipeline in Rakhine State as part of the BRI. Although India is also participating in some development projects, its concerns and tensions have increased seeing China's extensive military involvement in developing ports, naval and intelligence facilities, and industries, specifically the upgrading of a naval base in Sittwe, a major seaport located close to the eastern Indian city of Kolkata.<sup>19</sup>

Although Myanmar's atrocities or "ethnic cleansing" to displace its millions of Rohingya Muslims from their lands to neighbouring Bangladesh have become a world concern in recent years. Myanmar State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi warned Western ambassadors that pressure over the Rakhine issue would push Myanmar closer to China. China is playing a neutral stance on Rohingya refugee issues and is negotiating with Dhaka and Naypyidaw to resolve the burning issue. India, on the other hand, remained silent in order to maintain friendly relations with both Bangladesh and Myanmar. Regarding the recent military coup in Myanmar, China blocked a UN Security Council statement condemning the coup but has backed calls for the release of Ms Suu Kyi and a return to democratic norms.

## 5.5 Nepal

India has historically played an instrumental role in shaping the power dynamics of South Asia.<sup>20</sup> For a long period, India has traditionally been Nepal's main ally. In recent years, there has been a vacuum between the two countries, which has thus instigated China to intensify its presence in Nepal. Beijing knows very well that the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy in Nepal is being implemented just to contain China. To keep an eye on the issue, Beijing embraced Nepal in its BRI project in 2017; under this project, Beijing will invest millions of dollars in projects ranging from roads to hydropower plants to defend the US's Indo-Pacific strategy. Actually, the Indo-Pacific strategy was denied by Kathmandu to realise its future consequences. Kathmandu thinks accepting the policy means allowing New Delhi's influence in Nepal. However, Nepal wishes to reduce its reliance on India so that it can deal with critical situations effectively while maintaining relations with other neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh and China. Consequently, people from all walks of life have strong support for China in Nepal. Chinese president Xi Jinping's visit to the landlocked country of Nepal in 2017 was to land-link it. Nepal sees linking with China's Belt and Road Initiative as creating an opportunity for infrastructural development in the country. Both sides made a decision to upgrade bilateral relations from a "comprehensive" partnership to a "strategic" partnership.<sup>21</sup> Kathmandu described his state visit as the "beginning of a new era".

China urges Nepal to stop providing safe passage for Tibetan refugees to India that Beijing deems a long-standing US policy in Nepal. China largely aimed

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<sup>19</sup> Myanmar shows India the road to Southeast Asia, (2019), *The Asian Times*, <https://www.asiatimes.com/reports/CB21AiO1.html#top5> (accessed 16 Feb. 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Jahangir Alam, 'Changing dynamics of South Asian balance of power,' *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 01(01) (2013): 50–58.

<sup>21</sup> Kunal Purohit, "India watches warily as China deepens ties with Nepal," *The Deutsche Welle*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-watches-warily-as-china-deepens-ties-with-nepal/a-50845436> (accessed 22 Feb. 2021).

at cracking down on Tibetan refugees residing in Nepal whom China blames for anti-China activities. By signing of an extradition treaty that could allow China to remove Tibetan refugees from Nepal. In Nepal, Xi made it clear that his government would not tolerate anti-China activities. "Anyone attempting to split China in any part of the country will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones".<sup>22</sup>

China sees the security considerations of the growing influence of India over Nepal, particularly on Tibet issues. Thus, Beijing's aspirations and foreign policy are to create influence in South Asia and preserve its secure position in Nepal to restrain any kind of anti-Chinese activities by its rivals. Nepal, on the other hand, assures China that it will adhere to its "One-China policy" and will not use its territory against China. In recent years, Sino-Nepali commerce has grown rapidly. Kathmandu believes a better relationship with Beijing will lessen its dependency on India and promote tourism and international trade. Moreover, it will allow Kathmandu to use China's dry and seaports in tough situations. The Nepali government sees that the infrastructural development of Nepal will benefit China and India too. The new routes will allow China and India to connect their vast economies via Nepal and to South Asia as a whole.

With some exceptions, India and Nepal have always had good ties. After 1989, Indo-Nepalese relations became worse again in 2015. Kathmandu accused New Delhi of worsening fuel shortages and supporting Madhesi protesters against the new Constitution. A five-month economic blockade imposed by India on Nepal gave the country a good lesson. According to a Nepali scholar's post (2015), Nepal has learnt the danger of depending too much on one neighbour. India and Nepal's dispute has mounted on border encroachment, high-structure build-up along the border, river treaties, inundation complaints, border forces' harsh behaviour, trade and transit crises, and embargoes. Additionally, India's deliberate interference in Nepal's domestic affairs had turned the Nepali people against India, making it the next best option. When India made life difficult in Nepal through its economic confinement, China then reopened its border with Nepal and appeared as a potential geopolitical saviour. Thus, Nepal inevitably had to look for other options to reduce its dependency on India.

## **5.6 Pakistan**

The India-China-Pakistan triangle is one of the most dangerous strategic formations. These three are nuclear-powered states. In terms of economic and military power, China plays a vital role in the Indian sub-continent. Historically, China has been an acid-trusted ally of Pakistan and a rival of India. Since their liberation, India and Pakistan have also been proving themselves as all-time big enemies. On the other hand, India and Pakistan have fought four times with numerous confrontations. On the other hand, China has fought one war with India in 1962 along with a few smaller confrontations, including the 2017 Doklam standoff. The Doklam standoff in 2017, however, forced India to prepare for a two-front war with China and Pakistan.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Kanti Bajpai, 'The India-China-Pakistan triangle: Strategic ebbs and flows,' *The Asia Dialogue*, October 19, 2017, <https://theasiadialogue.com/2017/10/19/the-india-china-pakistan-triangle-strategic-ebbs-and-flows/> (accessed 26 Mar. 2021).

India's "neighborhood-first" policy excludes China and Pakistan now, with whom India sees its territorial and geopolitical disputes. In fact, China and Pakistan have been constant allies against India except from 1949 to 1958, when Pakistan was part of the US alliance and China and India were seen as friends and close to the Soviet Union. Due to security concerns, China has long wished to sever ties between Pakistan and the United States. China knew very well that the proximity of Xinjiang and Tibet to Pakistani territories might be a potential base for the Americans. China and Pakistan, meanwhile, cemented their relations by resolving territorial differences in 1963 and enjoyed a golden period from 1959 to 1989.

India-China relations have improved by taking steps to resolve border disputes. However, from 1990 to 2015, China maintained a neutralist stance between India and Pakistan, especially on the Kashmir issues. China has preserved its neutral position in this region just to limit US influence in India. But after 1998, America came forward to repair relations with India. Thus, it made Beijing wary and compelled to adopt an even-handed approach in South Asia. Following the election of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2014, who is frequently referred to as anti-China, he formed an anti-China coalition with the United States, Japan, Australia, and Vietnam of such a coalition took Beijing closer to Islamabad.

For a long time, India has accused Pakistan of harbouring terrorists and extremists engaged in anti-India activities. Pakistan, however, completely denies such allegations. A large amount of Chinese investment in India's neighbourhoods made India nervous, especially since providing Pakistan with the economic, military, and diplomatic support and cooperation stole its sleep. Pakistan is geopolitically important to China. China imports most of its oil through the Indian Ocean, which China thinks is risky and expensive. Not only is most of India's trade transported by sea, but also forty per cent of the world's oil supply and sixty-four per cent of global oil trade travel through the Indian Ocean.<sup>24</sup>

To resolve these problems, China-linked Pakistan through its BRI project and invested \$62 billion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) at the Gwadar port, including nationwide highways, railways and energy infrastructure development. Pakistan considers this project a "game-changer". The big-budget project aims to connect China's landlocked Xinjiang to Pakistan's southern port city of Gwadar, which is situated on the lap of the Arabian Sea, to conduct Beijing's international trade in a much shorter and more secure way. India, from the beginning, opposed this project for geopolitical reasons. The Indian side believes that throughout this project activity, China will suppress India by entering its troops and deploying military armaments in Pakistan, which India considers a great threat to its sovereignty. India is also concerned about the Chinese establishing a military base in *Jiwani*, Baluchistan province, which India believes is spying on her.

For decades, China, India, and Pakistan have been carrying out territorial disputes for decades after decades. India claims the entire Kashmir valley, including Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and China-controlled Aksai Chin. On the other hand, China and Pakistan, on the other hand, claim the Indian-administrated Arunachal province and Jammu and Kashmir as their own parts. China and India,

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<sup>24</sup> Dhruva Jaishankar, 'Indian Ocean region: A pivot for India's growth,' *Brookings*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/indian-ocean-region-a-pivot-for-indias-growth/> (accessed 20 Feb. 2021).

Asia's two economic giants, aspire to become global powers by strengthening their positions in neighbouring countries and around the world. After India's refusal to join the BRI, China opposed India's Nuclear Suppliers Group membership. Additionally, China opposed UN moves directed against Masood Azhar, whom India considers responsible for terror attacks in India. When India leads a diplomatic campaign against Pakistan, to prove Pakistan as a terrorist state and stop Pakistan from obtaining all sources of external funding, China then comes to Pakistan's defence as a trusty ally.

## **5.7 Sri Lanka**

China and India have strategic interests in the Indian Ocean, where Sri Lanka and the Maldives play significant roles. Dr Jonathan DT Ward, one of the leading experts on China, said, "The China-India tension is gradually shifting towards the maritime domain, especially in the Indian Ocean Region."<sup>25</sup> Since China and India pay special attention to the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka plays an important part in this maritime great game. China's vision is to surround India in the south by establishing seaports in neighbouring countries through its "String of Pearls" policy. China and Sri Lanka have been maintaining a friendly relationship for a long time. The ties between the two countries became stronger during Sri Lanka's prolonged civil war. At that time, China not only gave war-torn Sri Lanka financial and military support but also gave diplomatic support to fight against the Tamil Tigers. Since 1950, China has been the largest arms supplier to Sri Lanka. In 2007, then-President Mahinda Rajapaksa's visit to China led to a \$37.6 million deal to purchase Chinese Jian-7 fighter jets, anti-aircraft guns, JY-11 3D air surveillance radar, armoured personnel carriers, and other weaponry.<sup>26</sup>

Sri Lankan authorities permitted two Chinese submarines and a warship to enter its port in Colombo. Moreover, the growing transfer of arms and cooperation between China and Sri Lanka, the frequent presence of the Chinese navy and the building of an aircraft maintenance facility at the port of Trincomalee, which is strategically important for India, cause deep concern for India. Additionally, Mahinda Rajapaksa's close relationship with China helped him receive a \$1.4 billion loan. Under the New Silk Road project, Beijing offered these funds for roads, airports, and seaports, the two highest-profile initiatives being the Hambantota Port Development and the Colombo Port Project.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, Sri Lanka failed to repay the loan and, consequently, had to lease the Hambantota port to China on a 99-year contract.

From the Indian perspective, Trincomalee port has strong strategic value. India provided military aid and training to Sri Lankan military officers to end the nationwide LTTE rebellion. In addition, it facilitated technological support to tarnish the LTTE and separatist groups in Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lanka's newly

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<sup>25</sup> Ranjan Basu, 'Bangladesh should be at the center of India's diplomacy,' *The Dhaka Tribune*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/foreign-affairs/2018/02/12/bangladesh-centre-india-diplomacy> (accessed 29 Apr. 2021).

<sup>26</sup> Shantanu Roy Chaudhury, 'India-China-Sri Lanka Triangle: The Defense Dimension,' *The Diplomat*, July 12, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/india-china-sri-lanka-triangle-the-defense-dimension> (accessed 19 May. 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Yigal Chazan, 'India and China's Tug of War Over Sri Lanka,' *The Diplomat*, May 23, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/india-and-chinas-tug-of-war-over-sri-lanka/> (accessed 12 June. 2021).

elected President, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, seems not to have a similar political ideology to his brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who is often described as pro-China. Gotabaya Rajapaksa maintains balancing powers with the regional powers.

## 8. Conclusion and Discussion

Despite the fact that China and India are now seen as regional rivals, neither has fully succeeded in establishing close relations with neighbouring South Asian countries. India has not fully won the hearts of neighbours due to its lack of intra-regional trading, poor infrastructural networks, poor economy, and its intervening in others' domestic politics. China, on the contrary, has partly succeeded in deepening relationships with South Asian nations through its economic strength and willingness. From the above discussion, we can conclude that there is a "security vacuum" in the Indo-Pacific zone. Each of China's and India's South Asian neighbours is now feeling insecure. India is often alleged to be interfering in other countries' internal affairs, which actually annoys the people of those countries and has created a negative impression of India. However, India has tried to engage its neighbours by providing coronavirus vaccines. China, on the other hand, has lent its hand to the world community, including its South Asian neighbours, by providing necessary medical equipment and medical supplies to combat the global pandemic (COVID-19) together. With development activities, China is also getting closer to India's neighbours. Many say that such Chinese development activities are an effort to surround India on land, sea, and air. India, however, has no other good option to defend China's huge economic and military power but to make a counter-strategy. Although Beijing's foreign policy doesn't enter other countries' bedrooms, by investing huge amounts of money in India's neighbouring countries, New Delhi sees it as a way to gain political influence over the governments.

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