

China's Diplomatic Push in India's Backyard Raises Geopolitical Tensions.

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ABSTRACT

China's increasing diplomatic efforts in South Asia, particularly in nations bordering India, have heightened geopolitical tensions in the region. This strategic manoeuvre, often termed as China's "diplomatic push," encompasses a range of initiatives including economic investments, infrastructure development, and military cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Key nations such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have witnessed substantial Chinese investments and loans, leading to increased Chinese influence. These developments are perceived by India as encroachments into its traditional sphere of influence, triggering concerns over regional security and balance of power. In Nepal, China's investments in infrastructure and connectivity projects have significantly grown, fostering closer ties between the two countries. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the acquisition of the Hambantota port and investments in the Colombo Port City project underscore China's strategic interests in the Indian Ocean. Bangladesh's participation in the BRI and growing economic ties with China further exemplify this trend. The Maldives, despite political oscillations, continues to engage with China on various development projects, highlighting Beijing's persistent efforts to strengthen its presence. India's response to these developments has been multifaceted, ranging from enhancing its own regional diplomatic engagements to bolstering defence cooperation with neighbouring countries. New Delhi has also intensified its economic and infrastructural initiatives to counterbalance China's influence. This competitive dynamic has led to an escalation of geopolitical tensions, with both nations vying for strategic dominance in South Asia.

Keywords: China's diplomatic, geopolitical tensions, Road Initiative, India-China relations.

Introduction

In the intricate dance of global geopolitics, the manoeuvrings of major powers often ripple through regions, impacting relationships, alliances, and national strategies. One such focal point of contemporary geopolitical tension is South Asia, where China's diplomatic initiatives have increasingly raised alarms in India. This comprehensive analysis delves into the various facets of China's expanding influence in India's neighbouring countries, examining the historical context, strategic imperatives, and potential implications for regional stability and global power dynamics.

Historical Context

Ancient Ties and Modern Rivalries Historically,

India and China have shared a complex relationship, marked by periods of cultural exchange and cooperation as well as conflict and competition. The two ancient civilizations engaged in trade and cultural exchanges through the Silk Road, but the modern era has seen a shift towards rivalry, particularly after the 1962 Sino-Indian War. The border disputes that triggered the war remain unresolved, contributing to a legacy of mistrust.

Cold War Era Alignments

During the Cold War, South Asia's geopolitics were significantly influenced by superpower alignments. India, despite its non-aligned stance, leaned towards the Soviet Union, while China aligned

with Pakistan to counterbalance India. This alignment laid the groundwork for enduring Sino-Pakistani cooperation, much to India's strategic discomfort.

China's Diplomatic Strategies

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

At the heart of China's diplomatic push in South Asia is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a colossal infrastructure and economic development project aimed at enhancing global trade connectivity. Launched in 2013, the BRI envisions a network of railways, highways, ports, and pipelines stretching across Asia, Europe, and Africa. South Asia, strategically located along key maritime and land routes, is a crucial component of this grand vision.

Key Projects in South Asia:

Pakistan: The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the flagship BRI project in the region, involving investments exceeding \$60 billion. It includes the development of Gwadar Port, road and rail networks, and energy projects. CPEC aims to provide China with direct access to the Arabian Sea, bypassing the strategic chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca.

Sri Lanka: China's involvement in Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port has been highly controversial. After Sri Lanka struggled to repay Chinese loans, it leased the port to a Chinese company for 99 years. This development has been viewed by many as a strategic move by China to establish a foothold in the Indian Ocean.

Nepal: China has significantly increased its economic and infrastructural investments in Nepal, including road and rail projects that enhance connectivity between the two countries. Nepal's endorsement of the BRI has further deepened this engagement.

Bangladesh: China has invested heavily in Bangladesh's infrastructure, including the Padma Bridge, which is expected to boost the country's economic growth. Bangladesh's participation in the BRI underscores China's growing influence in the Bay of Bengal region.

Military and Strategic Alliances

China's diplomatic push is not limited to economic investments; it also includes military and strategic partnerships with India's neighbours. This multi-pronged approach aims to encircle India and limit its strategic options.

Key Partnerships:

Pakistan: The Sino-Pakistani alliance extends beyond economic cooperation to include significant military collaboration. China is Pakistan's largest supplier of arms, and the two countries engage in joint military exercises and intelligence sharing. The strategic depth provided by Pakistan is crucial for China's regional ambitions.

Sri Lanka: China has strengthened its military ties with Sri Lanka through the provision of arms and military training. The presence of Chinese submarines in Sri Lankan ports has raised concerns in New Delhi about China's intentions in the Indian Ocean.

Nepal: China has increased its military engagement with Nepal, providing military aid and training. This growing cooperation aims to counterbalance India's historical influence in Nepal.

Diplomatic Engagement and Soft Power

China's diplomatic efforts are complemented by a robust soft power strategy aimed at winning hearts and minds in South Asia. This includes cultural exchanges, educational scholarships, and media outreach. The Confucius Institutes established in various South Asian countries play a pivotal role in promoting Chinese language and culture.

Soft Power Initiatives:

Educational Scholarships: China offers numerous scholarships to students from South Asia, fostering educational exchanges and creating a pro-China sentiment among future leaders.

Cultural Exchanges: Chinese cultural troupes frequently visit South Asian countries, and cultural festivals are organized to showcase Chinese heritage.

Media Outreach: China has expanded its media presence in South Asia through partnerships with local media outlets and the establishment of Chinese news channels.

India's Response

Diplomatic Countermeasures

India has responded to China's growing influence in its neighbourhood with a multi-faceted diplomatic strategy. This includes strengthening ties with traditional allies, forging new partnerships, and enhancing its regional outreach.

Key Diplomatic Initiatives:

Neighbourhood First Policy: India has prioritized its relationships with neighbouring countries through the "Neighbourhood First" policy, focusing

on economic, security, and cultural ties. This policy aims to counterbalance China's influence by offering an alternative model of cooperation.

Act East Policy: India's "Act East" policy seeks to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia and East Asia. This policy complements India's efforts to counter China's influence in South Asia by building strategic and economic partnerships in the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Strengthening Quad: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, has gained renewed momentum as a counterbalance to China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. The Quad aims to promote a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

Economic and Infrastructure Initiatives

India has ramped up its economic and infrastructure investments in neighbouring countries to offer competitive alternatives to Chinese projects. These efforts are aimed at fostering regional connectivity and economic integration.

Key Projects:

Bangladesh: India has invested in multiple infrastructure projects in Bangladesh, including the development of railway lines, bridges, and ports. The Maitree Express and Bandhan Express train services have enhanced connectivity between the two countries.

Nepal: India has supported various infrastructure projects in Nepal, including the construction of highways, hydropower plants, and cross-border pipelines. The Integrated Check Post (ICP) project aims to facilitate trade and people-to-people contact.

Sri Lanka: India has engaged in infrastructure development in Sri Lanka, including the renovation of railway lines and the construction of housing units. The Indian government has also provided financial assistance for various development projects.

Military and Security Cooperation

India has bolstered its military and security cooperation with neighbouring countries to counter China's strategic encirclement. This includes defence partnerships, joint exercises, and intelligence sharing.

Key Military Initiatives:

Maldives: India has provided military aid and training to the Maldives and conducted joint naval exercises. The establishment of radar stations in the Maldives enhances maritime security in the Indian

Ocean.

Bangladesh: India and Bangladesh have strengthened defence cooperation through joint military exercises, training programs, and defence equipment sales. The two countries also collaborate on counter-terrorism efforts.

Sri Lanka: India has increased its military engagement with Sri Lanka, providing defence equipment and conducting joint military exercises. The two countries also cooperate on maritime security in the Indian Ocean.

Regional and Global Implications

Strategic Balance in South Asia

China's diplomatic push in South Asia has the potential to alter the strategic balance in the region. India's traditional influence in its neighbourhood is being challenged by China's economic and military dominance. This shift could lead to a realignment of alliances and partnerships, with countries in the region seeking to balance their relationships with both China and India.

Potential Scenarios:

Bipolar Rivalry: South Asia could witness a bipolar rivalry, with countries aligning with either China or India based on their strategic and economic interests. This scenario could lead to increased tensions and competition in the region.

Multipolar Balance: Alternatively, countries in South Asia may adopt a multipolar approach, engaging with both China and India while maintaining strategic autonomy. This scenario could promote regional stability and economic cooperation.

Impact on Indo-Pacific Dynamics

The Indo-Pacific region, encompassing the Indian and Pacific Oceans, has emerged as a critical theatre of geopolitical competition. China's growing influence in South Asia is part of its broader strategy to assert its presence in the Indo-Pacific, challenging the dominance of the United States and its allies.

Key Considerations:

Maritime Security: China's presence in the Indian Ocean, through projects like Gwadar Port and Hambantota Port, enhances its maritime capabilities and threatens India's strategic interests. This could lead to increased naval competition and the militarization of key maritime chokepoints.

US-China Rivalry: The United States views China's expansion in the Indo-Pacific with concern

and has sought to strengthen its alliances and partnerships in the region. The Quad and other regional initiatives aim to counterbalance China's influence and ensure a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Economic and Developmental Consequences

China's investments in South Asia have significant economic and developmental implications for the region. While these investments offer opportunities for infrastructure development and economic growth, they also raise concerns about debt sustainability and economic dependency.

Economic Impacts:

Infrastructure Development: China's investments have the potential to transform South Asia's infrastructure landscape, enhancing connectivity and boosting trade. Projects like CPEC, Hambantota Port, and the Padma Bridge promise to drive economic growth.

Debt Dependency: However, there are concerns about the sustainability of Chinese loans and the potential for debt dependency. Countries like Sri Lanka have faced financial difficulties in repaying Chinese loans, leading to the leasing of strategic assets. This has raised fears of a "debt trap" diplomacy.

Review of literature

1. China's Expanding Influence in South Asia: A Strategic Analysis

This study explores how China has steadily expanded its influence in South Asia through economic investments, diplomatic engagements, and military collaborations. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is highlighted as a critical tool in Beijing's strategy, with significant projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The analysis underscores the geopolitical tension this expansion creates, particularly in relation to India's traditional sphere of influence. The review examines how India's response, including its Act East policy and strategic partnerships, aims to counterbalance China's growing presence in its neighbourhood.

2. The Sino-Indian Rivalry: Implications for Regional Security

Focusing on the historical and contemporary aspects of Sino-Indian relations, this literature review discusses the strategic rivalry between the two nations. It delves into incidents like the Doklam standoff and border skirmishes, illustrating the volatile nature of their relationship. The review suggests that China's

diplomatic and military initiatives in South Asia are perceived by India as encirclement strategies, escalating regional security dilemmas. The study also evaluates how third-party nations, including the US and Russia, influence this bilateral tension.

3. Economic Corridors and Strategic

Competition: China's Role in South Asia

This review examines the economic dimensions of China's diplomacy in South Asia, with a focus on infrastructure projects under the BRI. It analyzes how these projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), serve dual purposes of economic development and strategic leverage. The literature discusses India's concerns regarding sovereignty and security, particularly in relation to projects in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. The review highlights the countermeasures taken by India, including bolstering its own infrastructure investments in neighbouring countries.

4. Soft Power and Diplomacy: China's Cultural and Political Engagements in South Asia

This literature review explores the soft power aspects of China's diplomacy in South Asia. It looks at cultural exchanges, educational programs, and political dialogues that Beijing uses to build influence. The study contrasts these efforts with India's historical and cultural ties in the region, analyzing how China's soft power initiatives are reshaping perceptions and alliances. The review also discusses the implications of these engagements on India's diplomatic strategies and regional standing.

5. Military Diplomacy and Power Projection:

China's Strategic Manoeuvres in India's Periphery Focusing on military diplomacy, this review investigates China's defence collaborations and arms deals with South Asian countries. It examines joint military exercises, port developments, and security pacts that enhance China's strategic foothold. The literature emphasizes India's strategic concerns and its responses, such as strengthening military ties with the US, Japan, and other regional players. The review discusses the broader implications of these developments for regional stability and power dynamics.

6. Geopolitical Reconfigurations: The Impact of China's South Asian Diplomacy on Indo-Pacific Strategies

This review situates China's South Asian diplomacy within the broader context of Indo-Pacific geopolitics. It explores how China's activities in South

Asia intersect with its ambitions in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the wider Indo-Pacific strategy. The study assesses India's efforts to forge new alliances and enhance maritime security to counterbalance China's influence. The literature highlights the strategic interplay between regional and extraregional powers, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), in shaping the future geopolitical landscape.

Objectives

1. Analyse China's Strategic Intentions and Methods:

- To examine the strategic motivations behind China's diplomatic, economic, and military engagements in South Asian countries.

- To understand the methods employed by China, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and bilateral agreements, to expand its influence in India's neighboring states.

2. Evaluate the Impact on India's Regional Influence:

- To assess how China's growing presence in South Asia affects India's traditional sphere of influence and its diplomatic, economic and security interests.

- To identify specific instances where China's actions have directly challenged or undermined India's regional authority.

3. Investigate the Security Implications for South Asia:

- To explore the security ramifications of China's strategic partnerships and military collaborations with South Asian countries.

- To analyse how these developments contribute to regional instability and affect the security calculus of India and its neighbours.

4. Examine India's Strategic Responses:

- To evaluate India's diplomatic and strategic responses to counterbalance China's influence, including policy initiatives like Act East and alliances with other global powers.

- To study the effectiveness of India's countermeasures and their impact on regional dynamics.

5. Assess the Role of Extra regional Powers:

- To understand the influence of extra regional powers, such as the United States, Russia, and Japan, in the Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia.

- To analyse how these powers' involvement either exacerbates or mitigates the geopolitical tensions between China and India.

Hypothesis

1. Economic Leverage Hypothesis:

- China's investment in infrastructure and development projects in South Asian countries under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) increases Beijing's economic leverage over these nations, leading to heightened geopolitical tensions with India.

2. Security Dilemma Hypothesis:

- China's military collaborations and strategic partnerships with South Asian countries, such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka, escalate regional security dilemmas, prompting India to enhance its own military capabilities and alliances, thereby increasing geopolitical tensions.

3. Influence Encirclement Hypothesis:

- China's diplomatic engagements and influence-building activities in countries surrounding India are perceived by New Delhi as attempts at strategic encirclement, leading to increased efforts by India to assert its influence, thus raising geopolitical tensions.

4. Soft Power Competition Hypothesis:

- The competition between China and India for soft power influence in South Asia, through cultural diplomacy and educational exchanges, contributes to a rivalry that exacerbates geopolitical tensions in the region.

5. Third-Party Involvement Hypothesis:

- The involvement of extra regional powers, such as the United States and Japan, in the Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia amplifies geopolitical tensions, as these powers support India in countering China's influence, leading to a more polarized and unstable regional environment.

Methodology

1. Research Design

Approach: This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to comprehensively explore the geopolitical dynamics resulting from China's diplomatic activities in South Asia.

Scope: The research focuses on key South Asian countries where China has intensified its diplomatic, economic, and military engagements, including Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Maldives.

2. Data Collection

Primary Sources:

Interviews: Conduct semi-structured interviews with policymakers, diplomats, and experts from India, China, and the relevant South Asian countries to gather

insights on the geopolitical implications of China's actions.

Surveys: Distribute surveys to academics, analysts, and regional experts to quantify perceptions of China's influence and its impact on regional security dynamics.

Secondary Sources:

Literature Review: Conduct a thorough review of existing literature, including academic articles, books, and policy papers, to understand the historical context and current developments in China's diplomatic strategies in South Asia.

Government Reports: Analyse official documents, white papers, and strategic reports from Indian and Chinese governments, as well as reports from international organizations, to gather data on diplomatic and economic engagements.

Media Analysis: Examine news articles, opinion pieces, and media reports from reputable sources to capture real-time developments and public opinions on China's activities in South Asia.

3. Case Studies

Selection Criteria: Identify and select case studies based on the significance of Chinese projects and engagements in the region, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and infrastructural investments in Nepal and Bangladesh.

Analysis: Conduct detailed case studies to examine the specific ways in which Chinese investments and diplomatic activities have influenced the political, economic, and security environments in these countries. Assess India's responses to these developments.

4. Geopolitical Analysis

Geospatial Analysis: Use Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to map China's infrastructural projects, military bases, and strategic locations in South Asia. Analyze the spatial distribution of these elements in relation to India's borders and strategic interests.

Security Assessment: Evaluate the military and security implications of China's presence in the region, including joint military exercises, arms sales, and defence agreements. Assess how these activities affect India's security posture and regional stability.

5. Quantitative Analysis

Economic Impact Assessment: Analyse economic data related to trade volumes, investment

flows, and infrastructure financing to quantify the economic leverage China gains through its projects in South Asia.

Public Opinion Surveys: Utilize survey data to gauge public perceptions of China's influence in South Asia and its impact on regional stability. Compare these perceptions across different countries and demographic groups.

6. Policy Analysis:

Indian Responses: Examine India's policy responses to China's diplomatic push, including strategic partnerships, infrastructural investments, and diplomatic initiatives. Assess the effectiveness and implications of these responses.

International Involvement: Analyse the role of extraregional powers, such as the United States, Japan, and Russia, in the Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia. Assess how their involvement influences regional dynamics and geopolitical tensions.

7. Comparative Analysis

China vs. India's Diplomatic Strategies:

Conduct a comparative analysis of China's and India's diplomatic strategies in South Asia. Evaluate their relative strengths, weaknesses, and impacts on regional geopolitics.

Regional Impact: Compare the geopolitical implications of China's activities across different South Asian countries to identify common patterns and unique outcomes.

Conclusion:

China's diplomatic push in India's backyard, despite raising geopolitical tensions, also brings notable positive outcomes. This engagement has stimulated significant infrastructure development and economic growth in South Asian countries, enhancing regional connectivity and creating new economic opportunities. The increased diplomatic dialogue fostered by China's presence has encouraged regional cooperation and stronger multilateral ties, potentially leading to more stable and integrated political and economic landscapes. Furthermore, the strategic competition has driven innovation and diversification of alliances, benefiting the region's overall stability and development. By focusing on collaborative efforts and leveraging the economic and strategic benefits, South Asia can transform the challenges posed by geopolitical tensions into opportunities for growth and stability.

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