

India-China geopolitics and its challenges for the South Asian small states

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ABSTRACT

The two rising powers, China and India, indicate two distinct civilizational trajectories and a complicated and dynamic connection in global politics. In recent decades, both have seen extraordinary growth and progress. Although there have been ups and downs in their bilateral relationship, including wars, their commercial and economic ties go back centuries. With ambitions to become two of the greatest nations of the world, India and China, exhibit both cooperation and conflict. This has led to increased competitiveness and conflicts in some areas while collaborations in others. There are ramifications for South Asian states, especially for the smaller ones because of this unusual relationship. In this study, we briefly analyse the relationship of India & China with focus on geopolitical challenges it poses for the South Asian states.

Keywords: India, China, conflicts, geopolitical, South Asian states

INTRODUCTION

South Asia is quickly becoming one of India and China's most highly competitive battlegrounds. With huge population, geographic area, economic size, as well as greater military capabilities, India has remained the most influential country in the South Asia region. While China's strategy is oriented on gaining greater power in the global order, India's strategy is oriented around maintaining its security. China's main objective is to mimic and later outdo India, whereas India's objective is to maintain its number one position in the South Asia region. India-China relationship has a long history of political, economic, and strategic ramifications. In addition, India faces issues that are both internal and external and opportunities on the diplomatic and military fronts, particularly in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war and China's aggressive actions near its borders. The ongoing disputes at the India-China border, recent military clashes in the Galwan Valley, led to increased tensions between India and China (Gokhale, 2021). With successive governments and changes in political frameworks of both the countries, this neighbourly relationship has evolved over time.

In this research, we examine the relationship between China and India, concentrating on the geopolitical obstacles that these relationships present for the smaller South Asian governments (Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Maldives, and Sri Lanka). This research evaluates India and China's relations in South Asia using qualitative approaches. India and China have a relationship that involves both cooperation and rivalry, driven by geopolitical, strategic, and economic considerations. We have tried to answer the following questions: "What are the factors influencing the nature of India-China relationships?", "How is India-China relationship affecting small states in South Asia?", "What are the geopolitical ramifications of India-China relationships for

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South Asian small states?". Due to the conflicts, the India-China rivalry now primarily affects the smaller South Asian states, and these states stand to gain greatly from cooperation between their larger neighbours.

2. METHODOLOGY

In terms of gathering preliminary data, we do not conduct any interviews and fieldwork. This study instead relies on data published by the government via official websites. Secondary sources such as books, reports, journals, etc. are used to compile the findings. Online media platforms are also explored for gathering data. The data was retrieved with "what, why, and how" research-oriented mentality regarding India-China relations and to examine the implications for South Asian small states.

3. INDIA-CHINA RELATIONS

3.1. South Asian geopolitical scenario

South Asia has historically been one of the world's most turbulent areas, dominated by the US. The region is currently undergoing a transformation that will have far-reaching consequences for the states, including India. China and Russia are collectively challenging the dominance of US and influencing the region's smaller countries. The resulting geopolitical rivalry for space, power, and influence is upending South Asia's conventional geopolitical certainties. History has shown that a favourable unipolarity or a balanced multipolarity with a great power contribution is often preferable to an unbalanced multipolarity. Unbalanced multipolarity, when combined with a power transfer (as is currently the case in South Asia), may be destabilizing.

3.2. State of India-China relations & influencing factors

The India-China dynamics depicts "patterns of both cooperation and conflicts" (Lintner, 2018). The tremendous growth and development in both countries has opened doors for multiple opportunities. The world's most populous countries have improved the standard of living for their citizens as a result of their fast economic growth. In the upcoming ten years, this phenomenon will undoubtedly move the political and economic centre to Asia. Nonetheless, there are opportunities and challenges associated with the rise of the two Asian titans in the area. The changing foreign policies of both countries as well as their economic and political ambitions have fuelled the collaboration and competition between them. Countries like US, Russia, Pakistan, Japan have a key role in the India-China dynamics. The US's hegemony has already been called into question by India and China's rise (Krishnan, 2020). The strengthening of India-US ties has fuelled India-China geopolitical rivalry.

One of the most prominent depictions of India's ascent to prominence on the international stage in the coming months before the 2024 general elections, is its role as host of the G20 meeting. India has made a name for itself as the "voice of the Global South". India is looking forward to influencing discussions on global concerns as the G20 Chair. Global international politics and economy revolve around China and India, or the interaction between them. "China-India relations are critical not only to the future of international and regional organizations as well as the global economy, but also to the US-China global power competition and regions like South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Indo-Pacific, and other parts of the world" (Lintner, 2018). China's present situation can be attributed to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms from 1978, which included a cautious transition to "economic liberalism with Chinese characteristics." (Guo, 2012).

With the start of "BRI project (Belt and Road Initiative)" by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, redirected a larger portion of the global economy to China.

The expanding power of India and China is worrisome for both the countries. Furthermore, the history of tensions manifested by the "1962 Sino-India War" and multiple other clashes after that, all have contributed to this rivalry. China's Deng Xiaoping and India's Late Rajiv Gandhi's rational approach to leadership strengthened India-China relationship with border dispute settlements and peace. Positive developments in

the years since have included "China's formal acceptance of Sikkim as part of India, peace and tranquillity agreements in 1993 and 1996, and the 2005 Agreement on the Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for the Settlement of the India-China Boundary Question, which has given both countries a sense of security" (Banerjee and Chowdhury, 2016).

The changing foreign policies in the later years had some repercussions for both countries. "The relationship remained difficult after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India in 2014 and Xi Jinping became the President of China in 2013" (Gokhale, 2021). The launch of the China's "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)", and launch of "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)" India became alarmed by China's claim of sovereignty in the South China Sea and the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Similarly, China was principally concerned about India's domination over tiny South Asian states as a result of its "neighbourhood first policy," active participation in the Indian Ocean region through the India-led marine defense system, and a change in policy from "look East to act East." (Faisal, 2019). India's establishment of "Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR)" and the "Indo-Pacific Vision" demonstrated the country's genuine intentions toward China (Saha and Mishra, 2020). India launched "Project MAUSAM" in 2014 to revive the historic Indian trade routes in response to the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Indian government's ban of 59 Chinese applications made the border standoff between Indian and Chinese military in Ladakh's Galwan Valley worse during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. (Gokhale, 2021). Despite multiple rounds of talks to address the disagreement, the absence of a definite and lasting solution has resulted in the border problem being a part of the two countries' war. Lately, China and India have become increasingly concerned about the situation in Afghanistan. China and India's competing interests in Afghanistan have intensified the conflict, especially after the removal of US forces (Johnson, 2021).

As per BBC News in 2021, "China hosted a Taliban delegation in July 2021 and gave Afghanistan USD 31 million in emergency aid, signalling China's willingness to speak with them in order to exert influence in Central and South Asia" (BBC News, 2021). Nonetheless, due to the Taliban's revival and with the image of the Taliban as an extension of ISIS (Mehra and Wentworth, 2021), India has remained apprehensive of the Taliban. These opposing viewpoints on the Afghan problem were on display in September 2021 during the "SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization)" summit in Tajikistan (SCO, 2021). Furthermore, the strengthening of India-US relations as a result of the Sino-India competition is worsening it.

4. ROLE OF INDIA IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

India's position in the Global South is becoming more significant as it tries to achieve its developmental objectives while juggling geopolitical complexities. Current century is frequently referred to as the "Asian Century," and in this story, China, Russia, and India all play key roles.

In recent years, India's influence in the Indian Ocean has risen dramatically, whether for humanitarian or security reasons. India has begun to make significant investments in both neighbouring and African countries. Additionally, India has surfaced as a possible contender for the UN Security Council's permanent seat. Throughout the years, India has suffered a number of setbacks, including "border conflicts with China, an unofficial economic boycott against Nepal in 2015, and border concerns in 2020" (Bhattacharai, 2021). According to the Barclays Report (Bajoria, 2023), "India need 8% growth to surpass China as the world's driving force by 2028". Moreover, India's military budget went up by 2.9% in 2020 over the previous year, and the country is the second-biggest importer of firearms worldwide. (The Indian Express, 2021). India is now the "world's fourth highest military spender" with "the Indian Defence budget for 2023-24 is Rs 5.94 lakh crore, a 13% increase over the previous year" (Pandit, 2023).

Concerns regarding China's hegemonic intentions have been raised by projects like "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Territorial tensions have also arisen along the "Line of Actual Control" as a result of India's independence. In this context, India's place in the Global South becomes more significant as it tries to strike a

balance between achieving its developmental objectives and the intricacies of geopolitics (Chakradeo, 2020). "For India, the major concern has been China, and what worries India is that Russia's connections with China affect some of its policies. India will make an attempt to interact with Russia and the West, putting strategic defence and national security concerns first. China's South Asia policy is greatly impacted by the United States' support for India as a key ally and leading major power, as well as by the two countries' strong collaboration through the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) to restrain China" (Gokhale, 2021).

5. GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES FOR THE SOUTH ASIAN SMALL STATES

South Asia is the main focus of China's diplomatic strategy, with small nations like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives playing important roles. China believes that all countries share a desire for a thriving and peaceful South Asia. Furthermore, President Xi Jinping stressed on the position of China's neighbours, particularly the minor South Asian republics, in realizing the two centennial goals and the country's overall rejuvenation (Pulami, 2022). Concerns about the security of "Xinjiang and the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)" drive China's approach to South Asia. China aspires to bolster its economic, political, and strategic interests in order to sustain the prosperity of the autonomous areas of Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as to exert influence over small South Asian governments (Jain, 2018).

China is currently fortifying its economic advantages and transportation ties in order to increase its presence in South Asia through Belt and Road Initiative projects. The BRI has customized its strategy for every small South Asian nation. (Shafqat, 2020). China hopes to overcome the topographical constraint by permanently improving trans-Himalayan connection lines in collaboration with Nepal. Additionally, it made Nepal's four main ports accessible, lowering its dependency on India and making it a land-linked state. (Murton and Lord, 2020). Bangladesh is yet another key South Asian country for China. "The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor is constructing roads and railroads to connect the three geopolitical zones of South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia" (Marchang, 2021). China and the smaller South Asian countries have expressed concern over Sri Lanka's debt, although China has also made large investments in Bangladesh, and the Maldives has profited in both ways from tourism (Pal, 2021).

China's rising participation in the Afghan issue is a symbol of its expanding presence in South Asia. The resource-driven approach has taken the place of the security-driven strategy, which was designed to put an end to jihadist and terrorist activity in Afghanistan. China may intervene and provide the Taliban with loans and assistance to help them achieve their goals because the Taliban will find it difficult to manage the local economy if they ever get back control. China has sent \$31 million in humanitarian help to Afghanistan, including food and the coronavirus vaccination. China requires overall peace in Afghanistan, yet, it also has the choice to use the Taliban government to ensure stability. (Johnson, 2021). Beijing has previously invested a significant amount in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh through "BRI (Belt and Road Initiative)". Its current objective is to include Afghanistan in the project in order to strengthen its influence throughout South and Central Asia. In October 2021, Bhutan and China signed a "Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)" outlining a three-pronged strategy to expedite their border dialogues. With this Memorandum of Understanding, the two countries have made strides toward strengthening diplomatic ties between China and Bhutan which may result in a different situation for the states and the region as a whole (Cao Siqu, 2021).

These small nations—Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives—can be said to be stuck in a geopolitical bind. For example, Kathmandu is confronting an extremely punishing situation as India, China, and the United States seek to enhance economic power through the "Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)". The Doklam Crisis in 2017 put Nepal in a challenging situation, however it was challenging for Nepal to maintain its objectivity without offending either side. (Pant, 2017). Furthermore, China has made considerable gains in Sri Lanka through its infrastructure development drivers, most notably by capturing the Hambantota port on the island's southern coast in a 99-year lease (The Economic Times, 2021). Bangladesh has

also performed a skillful balancing act between China and India. China has shown a great desire to join the BRI and the India-Japan initiative that connects Northeast India and Southeast Asia, and it has promised Bangladesh major economic aid. (Plagemann, 2021).

India is a key player in the “BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)”. As a result, dealing with the growing rivalry between China and India, as well as other extra-regional players, poses substantial hurdles for Bangladesh. In addition, the lack of an effective regional structure makes it challenging for the smaller South Asian nations to strike a balance between China-Indian rivalry and their ascent to prominence. (Paul, 2019). The “South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)” has been superseded as the alternative small state strategy for South Asia's tiny states due to its inability to function fully for a variety of reasons. China and India are susceptible on both a geopolitical and economic level due to their mutual interest in tiny states. China and India share concerns about terrorism, extremism, separatism, illegal immigration. However, their joint development of sea lanes to ensure maritime trade routes has caused problems for the small states as well as the stability of their regimes (Grossman, 2020). The fierce competition for dominance between China and India among small states has created opportunities and difficulties for South Asian small states in terms of geopolitics. (Das, 2013). China is more interested in interregional connection and trade through the BRI, while India is more interested in sub-regional integration due to Pakistan. As a result of China and India's competing interests, small states face difficulties participating in regional or interregional frameworks for trade and connectivity (Bhattacharya et al., 2019). Small states have to create a well-thought-out foreign policy plan in order to steer and confront impending difficulties.

6. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

India-China relationship has a long history of political, economic, and strategic ramifications. With successive governments and amendments in political frameworks in both countries, this neighbourly relationship has evolved over time. China's “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” has been a significant issue for India. Similarly, India's unwillingness to engage in the BRI, as well as its increasing military and economic expansion in the Indian Ocean, have posed a challenge to China. Furthermore, the current strengthening of India-US relationship has strained relations between India and China. In addition, recent border clashes of India with China have called into question their good relationship. Despite the imminent tension and crisis between the two countries, cooperation between them is growing. Following the Galwan Valley conflicts, trade between the two countries achieved an all-time high and is expected to rise further in the coming days. China has grown into a major investor in India, and other initiatives are growing there as well.

In the middle of this unexpected relationship between India & China, South Asian small states such as Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Maldives face serious geopolitical concerns. Following the development and economic aspirations, China has greatly increased its investments in them. This has created a power struggle in the region between India and China, as well as welcomed external actors like United States. How long this continues has to be seen, as does the ability of the small South Asian governments to forge meaningful relationships with the two emerging powers in the upcoming years and handle geopolitical concerns appropriately. Amidst all this, South Asian small states should orient their economic and development goals to be guided by cooperation, mutual benefit, respect, and non-interference to counter geopolitical challenges. They should try to avoid confusion, and misconception in communication. In order to increase their influence in the region—which is influenced by external actors as well as the rivalry between China and India—they need concentrate on honing their soft power capabilities.

It is crucial to recognize the opportunities that exist in the middle of the geopolitical challenges. Small states are unlikely to merge with China, despite the fact that China is offering more economic help, as doing so would bring the wrath of both the US, a global force with a strong naval presence in the Indian Ocean, and India, the region's dominating power. In the future, it will be intriguing to see how minor states accommodate greater countries' objectives.

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