

## Geopolitical Implications of BRI in South Asia

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### Abstract

*The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seems to have reshaped South Asia's geopolitics by increasing China's economic and strategic influence. Although stated as an economic initiative, due to its large scale investment and projects at strategic locations, it has generated tremendous concern in the global and the South Asian context. This article, based on secondary data and utilizing qualitative methods, is an attempt to explore the Implication of BRI in South Asia, focusing on the growing competition between India and China for regional influence. The study employs a descriptive and analytical approach and through the case study of four key project that runs through South Asia, namely, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, Trans-Himalayan economic corridor and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) under BRI, examines the geopolitical implication of BRI in South Asia. The research finds that although the competition for influence is not a new phenomenon, BRI has certainly toughened the struggle for influence. Since BRI is construed by its opposing nations as Chinese grand strategy to expand its influence and developed unilateral and multilateral counterstrategies, BRI appears to have broader implications in the future*

*geopolitical order in South Asia, particularly the strategic implications of the CPEC as its flagship initiative, and the potential security implication with further expansion of ports in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, reinforcing the MSR. For the smaller South Asian nations like Nepal the evolving global landscape presents both economic and geopolitical opportunities alongside inherent challenges, requiring delicate balancing act.*

## **Introduction**

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road, is a massive infrastructure project with a worldwide reach that is driven by China. During his trips to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the BRI, which aims to improve connectivity and cooperation between continents. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt are the two primary parts of this enormous project. The Economic Belt prioritizes the development of land-based transportation networks across Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Asia; and the Maritime Road centers on expanding maritime routes spanning East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (World Economic Forum, 2023). With six corridors, several communication channels, and partnership with many nations, the BRI has garnered a lot of international interest since its launch (McBride & Berman, 2023; Mações, 2019).

The initiative has its root in China's long history of trade and commerce across the ancient Silk Road routes that linked Asia, the Middle East and Europe (World Economic Forum, 2023). Therefore, the BRI Initiative carries the spirit of the ancient Silk Roads, which for thousands of years brought in connection diverse civilizations, religious and cultural groups across vast distances. These historical routes served as major arteries of interaction that linked the Nile, Tigris-Euphrates, Indus-Ganges, and Yellow-Yangtze river valleys (The State Council Information Office, 2023). The ancient Silk Road was basically a wide network of trade routes that spanned 8,000 kilometers of land and sea throughout what are today the Central Asian countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as modern-day India and Pakistan to the south and facilitated the exchange of goods, people, and cultures. Its origins date back to 130 B.C. during the Han dynasty in China which opened trading routes to west. The expedition of Zhang Qian in 138 B.C. is often credited as the foundation of the first "Silk Road." These routes helped promote interactions among civilizations across Asia and exchange of commodities, specifically of China's most precious silk, which gave the Silk Road its name. The route remained active until the Ottoman Empire closed the routes in 1453 A.D (Sheriff & Akeje, 2021)

The BRI connects China with markets across Asia, Europe, and beyond through ports, power plants, and railroads (ONeil, 2024). It is rooted in Xi Jinping's "China Dream,"

prioritizing policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade, financial integration, and cultural exchange to promote sustainable development (Xinhua, 2017) . The BRI has expanded significantly since its inception from the focus on transport, ports, aviation, and energy to include green and digital development in 2023 (Baruah, 2018; Xinhua, 2023; Global Times, 2023). The BRI has strengthened China's global influence with projects spanning Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. This is reflected through over 200 cooperation agreements with 150 plus countries and 30 international organizations (World Economic Forum, 2023; McBride & Berman, 2023).

China has established and institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 1996, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in 2010, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2013, and ultimately BRI in 2013 to reshape the global political economy beyond US dominated system (Amineh, 2023). Six South Asian countries—Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have joined the BRI, leading to the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC), and the proposed Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC) (Dai, 2022). However, it has generated geopolitical concerns from major powers like the U.S., India, Japan, and the EU which highlight geopolitical implication in Central and South Asia regional system (Ghiassy & Zhou, 2017).

**Figure 1**

*China's Belt and Road Initiative*



Source: Sarker et al. (2018)

Examination of four major corridors that pass through India's immediate neighbourhood such as the CPEC, BCIM-EC, THEC, and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) (Figure 1) provide the comprehension of South Asia's geopolitical concerns about the BRI. On the other hand, American scholars and officials typically view the BRI as a challenge to US hegemony, using offensive realist conception of world politics (Mearsheimer 2010; Allison 2017 as cited in Garlick, 2020). Concerns have been raised over the BRI's lack of multilateralism and its role in increasing China's strategic influence. Consequently, China's soft power efforts to legitimize the initiative have produced mixed results (Haoguang & Qinghua, 2023).

In this light, with the help of secondary sources, this paper aims to explore the geopolitical implications of the BRI in South Asia, taking into account the BRI's strategic objectives, resurgence of China as a global power, and its lasting impacts on Asian regional systems. The paper delves into the ways the BRI is changing geopolitical dynamics and extending Chinese influence throughout the region, acknowledging South Asia's pivotal role because of its strategic position and growing economic potential.

## **Review of Literature**

China's BRI, since its launch in 2013 has dominated debates and discussions on international relations. Despite being presented as a massive project for connectivity and economic development, its geopolitical implications have generated a lot of attention and discourses. This literature review examines available researches and books on the BRI, emphasizing its major projects in South Asia and the range of viewpoints relating to geopolitical context.

Geopolitics, as Marshall (2015) notes, goes beyond physical geography to encompass the interaction of geographical factors and international affairs. The BRI aligns with this framework through its two core components land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and sea-based 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and coincide with China's shift in development strategy aiming to connect global markets (Chan, 2018; O'Neil, 2024). Scholars highlight the BRI's strategic motives. Mações (2019) views it as part of China's global economic development policy, aiming for economic reform, industrial growth, and a new global order reflecting Chinese values, while raising concerns about debt sustainability. Yelery (2022) argues that perceptions of the BRI vary, ranging from predatory in economic terms to geostrategic in political terms. The BRI, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is a way to address infrastructure gaps and improve supply chains, trade, and economic growth (Holmes, 2021). As China has emerged as one of South Asia's most important trading partners throughout the last 20 years (Barai & Kar, 2020), Scholars often link BRI to a modern Marshall Plan as well (Ghiasi & Zhou, 2017). Holmes (2021)

highlights its extensive reach by pointing out that its financial scale could be twelve times larger than the post-World War II investment in the United States.

Barai & Kar (2020) highlight the South Asia's strategic significance for projects like CPEC, BCIM, and the THEC. Baruah (2018) argues that the BRI has introduced Sino-Indian competition, challenging India's long-standing regional influence. India previously believed no development partners as threatening, but now views BRI projects in neighboring countries as boosting Beijing's regional prominence (Chakma & Dai, 2022). This concern is heightened by China's port developments in Gwadar, Hambantota, and Payra, perceived as a "string of pearls" strategy to encircle and weakening India's influence (Garlick, 2020; Lew & Roughead, 2021).

Some view the BRI as a catalyst for economic expansion, while others see it as a means of Chinese expansionism that challenges the U.S.-led international order (McBride & Berman, 2023). Western countries perceive the BRI as geopolitical, whereas China and underdeveloped countries regard it as cooperative (Zhang, 2018). In the Indo-Pacific, the Quad countries oppose the BRI, but they could require more than just alternatives (He, 2021). The BRI reflects China's geopolitical and economic goals by promoting exports, construction services, Renminbi internationalisation, and diplomacy (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017). This aligns with Xi's vision of a more assertive China (McBride & Berman, 2023).

China's idea of a "new type of great power relations" challenges traditional zero-sum games, particularly in its policies toward the U.S. (Xiao, 2013). However, growing tensions with Japan, Vietnam, India, and the U.S. have created Sinophobia and positioned China as a potential regional hegemon which has helped Indo-Pacific's emergence in geopolitical discourse (Mahapatra, 2019). Three main trends gave rise to this idea - China's assertive foreign policy, India's rise as an economic and political power, and ASEAN's waning confidence in regional leadership (Mahapatra, 2019).

Existing literature explores economic-strategic ties, Sino-Indian rivalry, and global responses to BRI but lacks a holistic view of its geopolitical impact in South Asia which needs navigating the competing influences of major nations. Building on this identified gap, this research paper aims to analyze the geopolitical implications of the BRI in South Asia. The study examines primarily four major cases related to BRI projects within South Asia for understanding of the geopolitical implications in South Asia.

## **Research Methodology**

This research adopts a qualitative approach that employs a case study design with descriptive and analytical methods. Secondary sources of data from books, journal articles,

reports, news and relevant documents have been studied with the aim to provide an in-depth understanding of the BRI's geopolitical implications in South Asia. It first explored the broader concept of geopolitics and the BRI before narrowing the focus to its impact on South Asia and their geopolitical implications. It combines existing literature with the researcher's interpretation focusing on four major BRI projects; CPEC, BCIM, THEC, and MSR to assess their geopolitical significance, with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as the region's representative.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly reshaped South Asia's geopolitical and economic landscape by enhancing infrastructure connectivity, increasing trade flows, and fostering strategic dependencies among participating states.

### **South Asia and Geopolitics**

South Asia consists of eight countries, namely, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka which are the members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). The region accounts for one-fifth of the world's population with the world's most populous countries covering an area of approximately 42,916,000 km<sup>2</sup> (South Asia Cooperative Environment Programme [SACEP], 2024). With its great potential for economic growth, South Asia is crucial to achieve geopolitical and geo-economics objectives of a number of countries. In the last decade, China has invested more than \$150 billion in South Asian nations (Donnellon-May, 2023)

China borders all of the South Asian nations except Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Sri Lanka and the Maldives are island nations in the center of the Indian Ocean and region's most important member, India, is also located in South Asia (Anwar, 2020), sharing its borders with seven countries, including the second longest border with China. Additionally, India has sea border with Sri Lanka and the Maldives, separated by the Indian Ocean. These nations play a vital role in India's cultural, economic, and geopolitical ties. India and Pakistan were once part of a unified country, sharing a common heritage and culture. However, major conflicts, particularly the Kargil conflict and have strained relations between the two nations. The two states have fought multiple wars and frequent skirmishes, with India accused of human rights violations and Pakistan accused of supporting insurgencies and terrorism (Haque, 2024).

South Asia strategic location bordering geopolitical hotspots and vibrant economies extremely important (Pant & Shah, 2019). Its geopolitical significance is increased by its

closeness to the Persian Gulf, a vital energy transit route through the choke points of the Indian Ocean. Choke points such as Bab El Mandeb, the Mozambique Channel, the Strait of Hormuz, Sunda Strait, and Lombok Strait have been contested geopolitical spaces since the opening of Suez Canal, further elevating its importance in global power dynamics (SACEP, 2024).

Global power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region revolves around India as the United States places India at the centre of the region due to China's increasing influence (Yadav, 2019). Henry Kissinger emphasised how "India will be a fulcrum of twenty-first-century order" due to its geography and resources (Kaplan, 2014). China and India's growing involvement in the region since the Cold War has put the U.S. dominance in question. China is both the biggest investor and trading partner in South Asia, particularly in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives (Donnellon-May, 2023). South Asia used to be geopolitical backwater until cold war. However, due to its proximity to the Indian Ocean Region, where superpowers like the United States, China, India, and Japan compete, has turned into a primary fault line. India's hegemony in South Asia is being challenged by BRI, which is also changing the political landscape in the region (Pant & Shah, 2019).

### **China's Ambition through BRI**

In the document of Vision and Actions, Chinese government has drafted and published the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road which states

The BRI aims to promote the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas, establish and strengthen partnerships among the countries along the Belt and Road, set up all-dimensional, multi-tiered and composite connectivity networks, and realize diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development in these countries (Xinhua, 2017).

The statement highlights the staggering ambition of China through BRI, a global development strategy led by China. It aspires to establish complex and comprehensive connectivity systems. This includes infrastructure development of a vast network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings, creating interconnected frameworks at various levels and spanning both westward across former Soviet republics and southward, to Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asian countries. Such a network is expected to expand greater use of the Chinese currency renminbi in international transactions and "break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity," according to Xi Jinping (Berman et al., 2023).

The BRI is central to China's assertive policy under President Xi Jinping, complementing the "Made in China 2025" strategy. It also serves as a countermeasure to the U.S. "pivot to Asia" policy, creating new trade links boosting China's exports and income (McBride & Berman, 2023). U.S. "pivot to Asia," announced in 2011 aimed to reorient military, diplomatic, and economic endeavours on the Indo-Pacific region in response to China's rise (Blackwill & Fontaine, 2024).

With growing participation representing two-thirds of the world's population and 40% of its GDP, the BRI aims to benefit the whole world community (World Economic Forum, 2023). According to experts, the BRI might cost \$8 trillion in total, a significant amount of the \$97 trillion global infrastructure gap projected by 2040 (Heathcote & Mulhern, 2018). In keeping with China's expanding economic, military, and geopolitical goals as expressed in President Xi Jinping's vision of a more powerful and assertive China, the BRI has the potential to transform the political and economic landscape of South Asia if it succeeds (Modebadze, 2020; Zhang, 2018). Although initial focus was given to infrastructure investments, for example, on the basis of existing railways, China has also established a robust network of trains to promote long-distance trade along the historic Silk Road routes (Chan, 2018). With all these infrastructure and network in place, China seeks to develop an alternative mechanism to diminish the power of India-led institutions in South Asia. This in the form geopolitical and economic motivations exhibits China's BRI pillars for gaining influence over its neighbors and presence in the world stage.

### **BRI Projects in South Asia**

BRI connects three continents Europe, Africa, and Asia via land routes and the Indian Ocean. It runs from Eurasia to Africa, with South Asian states at the intersection point where the continental "belt" meets the maritime "road" (Anwar, 2020). South Asia is one of the relatively less economically integrated regions in comparison to other regions. In this context, the BRI was perceived to become a game changer for bringing regional integration and addressing infrastructural gaps in the region (Barai & Kar, 2020). On the strategical level, the BRI aims to reduce China's Malacca Strait dependency by constructing alternative overland routes via South Asian countries which China hopes to ensure access to Indian Ocean and secure energy supply in case of any conflict (Anwar, 2020). Therefore, South Asia is, in fact, strategically important for China's from the perspective of Eurasian connectivity because of its location at the intersection of Maritime Silk Road and the Silk Road Economic Belt (Barai & Kar, 2020).

Since its start, the BRI has grown into a vast trade, infrastructure, and connectivity initiative that now spans Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. In this sense, some analysts

view BRI as China's updated grand strategic vision of its historical "Middle Kingdom" hierarchy in which China is positioned at the center of the all connection (Miller, 2022). India's opposition in South Asia is because of its conflicting relationship with China over territorial, economic, and strategic domains (Anwar, 2020). This reveals India's concerns over China's growing influence in its neighboring regions and the Indian Ocean. Among the countries that have joined the BRI, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives face economic and political challenges, giving rise to questions on its sustainability. It is also important to note that China's nature of engagement with South Asian countries varies significantly based on their economy and politics.

Among South Asia's BRI projects, one of the most prominent BRI projects in South Asia is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This project has solidified longstanding alliance between China and Pakistan (ONeil, 2024). The Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN), and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) are other remarkable initiatives in South Asia. Together, these projects illustrate the geopolitical and economic ramifications of BRI in South Asia (Baruah, 2018). This becomes particularly evident in South Asia and the Indian Ocean where India seeks to contain China and maintain its traditional sphere of influence (Chakma & Dai, 2022).

### **The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**

CPEC is a framework of regional connectivity (CPEC Secretariat, 2024). CPEC is a mixture of infrastructure-based projects which constitute a 3,000 km extensive network of roads, railroads, and pipelines of railways, highways, and energy plants under CPEC umbrella. Started in May 2013 with the initial investment of \$46 billion and formally inaugurated in 2015, the CPEC is an ongoing construction (Bari & Shaheen, 2020) scheduled to be built between 2013 and 2030 (Dai 2022). It's the most aspiring initiative in any single country which quickly increased to become \$62 billion project that accounts for one-fifth of Pakistan's GDP (Lew & Roughead, 2021). As China is making a headway in intensifying its economic ties with South Asian countries under BRI, CPEC has become a key project that includes the port of Gwadar in the Balochistan province of Pakistan (Bharti, 2023). The Gwadar port, considered a gem of CPEC after China planned to modernize this abandoned port. The port is located on the Arabian Sea at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz (Garlick, 2020).

**Figure 2***Map of CPEC Transportation and Telecommunication Projects*

Source: Schwemlein (2019)

The CPEC connects Kashgar in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the port of Gwadar in the Balochistan Province of Pakistan (Garlick, 2020). Which means it links the coastline regions of Pakistan on the Arabian Sea with China's inland Xinjiang autonomous province through a multimodal network of fibre optic cables, roadways, and railroads, establishing the most direct route for China to reach those areas. According to a comparative study by Alam et al. (2023) that compares traditional routes with the new CPEC routes in terms of time, distance, and cost, the time required for goods to travel from China to the Middle East and Europe will be shortened by 10 to 20 days, reduce the distance by 3,000 to 10,000 kilometres, lower cost for Xinjiang province although higher for the other provinces. Additionally, by utilizing this route to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean, China benefits for developing its underdeveloped western region, particularly Xinjiang, where Muslim Uighurs are demanding independence (Anwar, 2020).

Two of the corridor's main objectives include the modernisation of the Karakoram Highway between Pakistan's Punjab province and Gilgit-Baltistan, as well as the construction of Gwadar to enable the transportation of Chinese commodities from China's western provinces to the Arabian Sea via the Indian Ocean. The goal of the corridor is

also to link Gwadar in the south with Gilgit in the north of Pakistan (Baruah, 2018). The Karakoram Highway, that runs through the world's highest border crossing has connected northern Pakistan with Xinjiang region in northwest China, providing an overland link between Gwadar and China (Schwemlein, 2019). This corridor is a vital gateway for shipping products from China's western provinces to the Arabian Sea and securing China's oil supply from the Middle East, as the country looks for a number of alternate routes to avoid the vulnerable Malacca dilemma (Anwar, 2020; Dai 2022; Lew & Roughead, 2021). However, political stability and the security of the CPEC projects in Pakistan are crucial for achieving China's ambitious energy security strategy (Fazl-e-Haider, 2023).

Despite having little to do with China's economic growth or geopolitical resurgence, Pakistan has taken the lead in the BRI (Schwemlein, 2019) and warmly welcomed it because of its perception of its geopolitical position in the region, which includes the threat posed by India and the waning of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Beijing too wanted to showcase Islamabad as a model for other BRI nations by using their relationship to build infrastructure under CPEC (Garlick, 2020). CPEC Secretariat (2024) in Pakistan states

CPEC will not only benefit China and Pakistan but will have positive impact on Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asian Republic, and the region. China Pakistan Economic Corridor is journey towards economic regionalization in the globalized world.

This statement emphasizes the wider regional significance of the CPEC, suggesting that its influence extends beyond these two nations. According to Dai (2022), CPEC is a key component of its growing BRI and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road initiative. Gwadar Deep Seaport, which connects the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, is a critical node for regional maritime trade and is strategically located on Pakistan's southwest coast (Khan et al., 2024) at the intersection of three commercially important regions: West Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia which can make enough revenue for Pakistan from transit fees (Hussain, 2022). Khan et al. (2024) add that the port has the potential to develop into a crucial hub for China's military, political, and economic efforts in the northern IOR. Therefore, Chinese analysts view Gwadar as strategic position to establish it as a overseas strategic hold make it a popular choice for Chinese strategists looking to construct a new overseas strongpoint. Many PLA analysts consider Gwadar to be a good location for naval support (Kardon et al., 2020).

India strongly opposes CPEC because it worries that Pakistan may utilize it to reinforce its military capabilities. Another concern is that the CPEC runs through Gilgit-Baltistan, which is administered by Pakistan but also claimed by India as an integral part of its territory (Aleem, 2023). Additionally, it is where borders of Pakistan, India, and

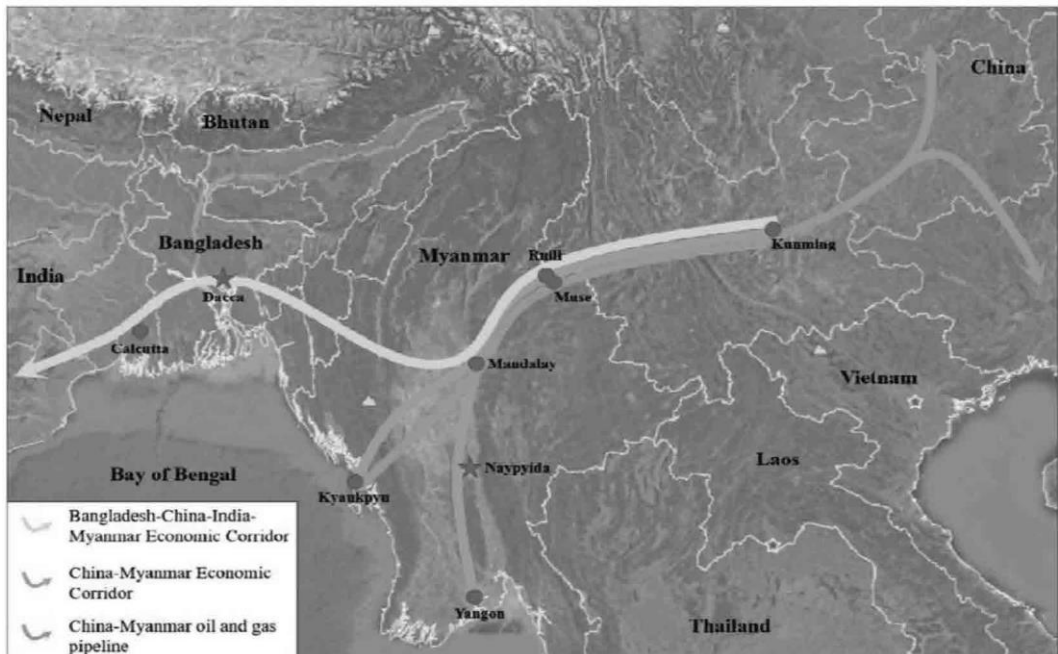
China's converge (Anwar, 2020). India's strained relations with China have an impact on its opposition to the CPEC development. India worries the possibility of Gawdar Port becoming a naval base for China to support its vast blue-water fleet, which would also enhance its operational capabilities in the IOR (Aleem, 2023). The three nuclear powers of Asia are actually engaged in direct confrontation due to this new dimension (Anwar, 2020). This further escalates the long-standing struggle for power in South Asia (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017).

According to a report by Schwemlein (2019) published by the United States Institute of Peace, China's long-term investments in the CPEC can be explained in at least three ways: to show that China is a attractive partner; to demonstrate that China's development model can be exported; and to use Pakistan as a component of its strategic competition with the United States and India. In light of the common threat posed by China and Pakistan, the report cautions against strengthening the US-India alliance. On the other hand, Hussain (2022) argues that the risk of this Sino-Pakistan closeness is that it may heighten the probability of an India-Pakistan confrontation. It might also become a flashpoint between the US and China.

Moreover, under the PEACE (Pakistan East Africa Cable Express) project, China is heavily investing in the fibre optic cable network together with a new submarine cable network to establish direct connections between Pakistan and other regions of the world (Dai, 2022). For China, Digital Silk Road (DSR) is a solution for more Sino-centric Asian and global digital order against U.S.-centric (Ghiasy & Krishnamurthy, 2021). It also challenges the dominance of existing U.S. digital value system and the tech corporations' dominant market share. China will also be able to use data for surveillance and strategic advantage with the DSR (Ghiasy & Zhou, 2017).

### **Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor**

The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC) is a Chinese initiative that was started 14 years before BRI. It has been under discussion since the 1990s (Baruah, 2018). Built along the ancient Southern Silk Road, The goal of this project was to connect the relatively underdeveloped territories that run from landlocked parts of Southwest China to Eastern India, as well as the neighbouring least developed nations of Bangladesh, Myanmar, and northern India (Singh, 2021). BRI framework incorporated earlier projects like the BCIM corridor and the Karakoram Highway, combining both existing and new bilateral and multilateral projects. In South Asia, this presents different geographical, economic, and political contexts (Miller, 2022).

**Figure 3***Map Showing BCIM Economic Corridor**Source:* Song et al. (2020)

The BCIM-EC, a 2,800 km project (Ahmad, 2020) aims to connect Kunming in China with Kolkata in India, creating a "K2K" connectivity corridor through Dhaka in Bangladesh and Mandalay in Myanmar (Dai, 2022). Initially known as the Kunming Initiative it aimed to expand tourism, transportation, and trade routes across these countries through the enhancement of trade, infrastructure, and connectivity among the participating nations. In contrast to CPEC, the BCIM-EC has provided a forum for diplomatic interaction between Beijing and New Delhi. Both nations have expressed their support for it (Baruah, 2018). During the 7<sup>th</sup> summit held in Dhaka in February 2013, they even arranged a car rally from Kunming to Kolkata, symbolizing the route of the initiative. A Joint Study Group (JSG) was also formed by four member nations to carry out additional research and assessment (Singh, 2021). Beijing understands that India's role is crucial to achieving the BCIM-EC (Marchang, 2021). However, given the severe geopolitical conflicts and India's concern for its own national security, particularly in the northeast which is separated from mainland India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor (Fillingham, 2023). India also cite trade deficit as a reason for its reluctance to BCIM (Marchang, 2021). The political complexity of other participating countries also presents difficulties. For example, two crucial countries for the

project Bangladesh and Myanmar have strained relations due to Rohingya crisis. However, both nations are concerned that robust connectivity would facilitate greater Rohingya migration to Bangladesh (Banerjee, 2023).

Despite these challenges, China prioritises the BCIM-EC. But, since late 2017, Beijing has been pursuing China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) (Dai, 2022). CMEC links China's Yunnan province with the Kyaukphyu deep-sea port in western Myanmar's Rakhine state through highways, high-speed rails, and transportation corridors (Sin, 2024). It's strategic significance is highlighted by its integration with the Sino-Myanmar Oil and Gas pipelines, which connects Kyaukphyu and Kunming (Fillingham, 2023). Kyaukpyu is a port close to the Indian coastal city of Visakhapatnam and almost directly across India's covert and formidable nuclear submarine base INS Varsha which is under construction (Honrada, 2024). Now, under BRI, the BCIM-EC continues to be a crucial element of China's plan for connectivity in South Asia, highlighting both advantages and challenges of promoting cooperation in a complex geopolitical environment.

### **Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC)**

The CPEC and the BCIM are the two official Silk Road Economic Belt routes in Asia. A third corridor proposed is THEC which would connect Nepal to southeast China and Indo-Gangetic Plains (Dai, 2022). Initially a bilateral proposal between Nepal and China, It's a proposal led by Beijing in April 2018 as an addition to BRI component. After the document from the second Belt and Road conference in 2019 introduced the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network (THMDCN), China and Nepal have reiterated their commitment to carry forward with projects under the THMDCN. It includes wide range of connectivity initiatives of ports, roads, railways, aviation, tunnels, digital connectivity (Giri, 2024a). Through these multiple access points, China provides an alternative to South Asian countries, thereby challenging India's position as a South Asian power (Baruah, 2018).

China has offered Nepal its four main ports for use, this may be an effort to minimize Nepal's over-reliance on India (Anwar, 2020). As with the BCIM corridor, the development of the THEC is also being held back probably by the Sino-Indian geopolitical discord. Hence, a bilateral Nepal-China THMDCN has been conceived to take the place of the tri-partite THEC in medium term. Central to the THMDCN will link Chinese cities with Kathmandu by extending China's Sichuan-Tibet railway (Baruah, 2018). The 170 km Kathmandu-Kerung Railway would link Kerung in southern Tibet with Kathmandu and is intended to extend onward to Pokhara and Lumbini (Pandey, 2024).

**Figure 4***Proposed Route of Tibet-Nepal Railway*

Source: Bhushal (2022)

Nepal's ties to China, India, and the ancient Silk Road dates back to the fifth or sixth century BCE (Sapkota, 2017). The trans-Himalayan salt trade routes were popular passes for trade between Tibet, China, and Nepal (Acharya, 2015 as cited in Sapkota, 2017). In particular, the Rasuwa-Kyirong corridor has been a crucial trade route between China, Tibet, and India for ages and still the quickest way to get from China to India via Nepal, making it the focus of ambitious trans-Himalayan railway (Murton & Lord, 2020). Yeping (2024) also agrees that the railway will allow Nepal to take advantage of the transit service. China and Nepal signed a BRI framework agreement in 2017, but no projects could begin due to various reasons including geopolitical. In 2019, Nepal and China announced a strategic partnership and the "Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network" under BRI (Pandey, 2024). In 2018, the MoU for the railway project was signed, followed by MoU to carry forward a feasibility study in 2019 (Murarka, 2024). After an implementation agreement in December 2022, the first phase of the feasibility study was completed by January 2024. A second phase of study began in March 2024 by Chinese technicians and the overall study is expected to complete by 2026 (Daye, 2025). Nepal initially proposed 35 projects for the BRI in 2018, but it was reduced to ten, which includes roads, tunnels, bridges, a cross-border railway, and various infrastructure projects in different places (Giri, 2024a; Murarka, 2024). Now, all bilateral projects along the Himalayas form a part of the Himalayan Economic Corridor and by extension the BRI (Baruah, 2018).

The Joint Statement between the China and Nepal signed in December 3, 2024 reflects the strategic intent of both countries to promote bilateral connectivity and expand cooperation under BRI framework which includes THMDCN. It reads that

The two sides expressed their readiness to sign the MoU on building the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network and the Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation between the two Governments as soon as possible. Both sides expressed their commitment to strengthening connectivity between the two countries in such areas as ports, roads, railways, aviation, power grids and telecommunication, to help Nepal transform from a land-locked country to a land-linked country (Embassy of Nepal, 2024).

This statement shows the spirit the two countries have and the aspiration of Nepal to turn into a land-linked nation between two giant economies. According to Murarka (2024) better connectivity and trade with South Asia would also help China's economy flourish and connect its undeveloped western regions with the South Asian market. Nepal, of course, plays a key role in China's BRI as part of this broader connectivity initiative in South Asia, suggesting a possible shift in Nepal's diplomatic priorities (Times of India, 2024). India's 2015 blockade strengthened Nepal's relationship with China while seeking a viable alternative (Baruah, 2018). The notion of trans-Himalayan connectivity has been a sensitive geopolitical issue since long. China's desire for the railway renews concerns about Beijing's geopolitical intentions, which were previously raised by projects like the 1961 Nepal-China highway agreement (Nepali Times, 2021). Even now, the completed China funded projects in Nepal such as new international airports faces operational challenges due to India's airspace restrictions (Times of India, 2024). From all these scenarios which India views as China's strategic goal of increasing its influence in South Asia, It seems evident that growing Sino-Nepalese partnership with extension of the BRI has been a concern to India, particularly with Nepal-China railway agreement that India views will expand China's influence in Nepal.

On the other hand, in 2018, India and Nepal signed a MoU for a preliminary survey of a broad gauge railway between Raxaul and Kathmandu. Analysts see this project and China's Kerung-Kathmandu Railway as efforts to bring Nepal into their respective orbits of influence (Shrestha, 2024). Another issue with China's response to MCC compact Nepal signed in 2017 and ratified in 2022 underscore the Compact's role in countering China's BRI. Nepal was caught between these two substantial global initiatives (Tricontinental Asia, 2024). This ambitious project when materialize can help to enhance movement of

people and goods contributing to easy link between Nepal and China. However, concerns exist regarding Nepal's trade deficit due to Nepal's weak industry and limited production for export. On the other hand, the undeclared power competition in the Himalayas seems intense having a geopolitical implication for Nepal and South Asia as a whole.

### **The Maritime Silk Road (MSR)**

The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) was launched in 2013 as an important component of BRI. It is a vast sea-based framework that focuses on strengthening maritime relation (Baruah, 2018). Its primary focus lies in ports development across the Indo-Pacific, giving rise to suspicion over its use as military objectives (Green, 2018). The MSR gives China access to important strategic ports in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), such as Gwadar, Kyaukpyu, and Hambantota (Anwar, 2020). These are significant geostrategic implications of these developments. For example, Kyaukpyu of Myanmar, located along Bay of Bengal coast, predates the BRI but has become a part of MSR, reducing Beijing's dependence on the Strait of Malacca (Green, 2018). Hambantota, in Sri Lanka leased to a Chinese company for 99 years is also a part of MSR and considered a keystone of China's "String of Pearls" strategy. Gwadar port in Pakistan as a part of CPEC also serves the maritime route (Baruah, 2018).

With the term "Indo-Pacific" gaining prominence since 2012 to emphasise the connection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the IOR which includes important maritime chokepoints and trade routes has emerged as a center of gravity (Garlick, 2020). Kutcher (2024) views Alfred Thayer Mahan's geopolitical theory reflected in China's MSR as it includes port infrastructure projects which have capacity to project its power in Indian Ocean for naval dominance and control over maritime chokepoints as a means to global power. Given the built up of ports including Djibouti near the Red Sea, Hambantota, Kyaukpyu and Gwadar port which offer connections in Indian Ocean, it seems evident that it provides Maritime route in Indian ocean and works as an alternative energy routes, avoiding the Malacca Strait which highlights China's larger geopolitical ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. These corridors and the associated infrastructure projects also have a bearing on India's strategic interests since it raises concerns about shifting regional power dynamics and regional actors' responses in countering China's increasing influence.

### **Response to BRI and Geopolitical Implications**

The expansion of the BRI in South Asia has heightened geopolitical rivalry, as its infrastructure projects reshape regional power structures and strategic relationships.

## **BRI and India**

China and India are two giant nations sharing border which have a sizable populations that are very different politically and culturally (Marshall, 2015). The rivalry between China and India is long-standing. Both nations aspire to become a significant part in the world order (Chakma & Dai, 2022). As they both have few common traits like nuclear weapons, sizable populations, and a desire for a multipolar world. They view each other as a counterbalance to their individual goals, even though they have many traits in common as growing powers (Donnellon-May, 2023).

Despite being the biggest borrower from the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), India has opposed China's BRI in South Asia (Anwar, 2020; Bharti, 2023). Majority of India's neighbors in South Asia, with the exception of Bhutan, have joined the BRI (Donnellon-May, 2023). This means China can strengthen its ties in the region by investing in infrastructure and connectivity. Moreover, both nations want a control of the Indian Ocean that has strategic chokepoints like the Straits of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca as a critical maritime route.

The four major corridors discussed earlier and the related infrastructure projects pass close to both India's maritime and continental borders have impact on India (Baruah, 2018). Although India opposes the CPEC on the grounds of territorial integrity, the project's wider geopolitical ramifications are the real cause for concern for India (Chakma & Dai, 2022). India's concerns also include Chinese investments in Sri Lanka in the vital port of Hambantota. Such expansion of China in IOR and South Asia is viewed by India as China's "String of Pearls" for encircling India (Manhas, 2020). With such a threat, according to Bharti (2023) India has started to develop counterstrategies like "Neighbourhood-First Policy", shifting of its foreign policy "Look East Policy" to the more active "Act East Policy" and Indo-Pacific Oceans project (IPOI), introduced in 2019 and builds on India's earlier "Security and Growth for All in the Region" (SAGAR) project (ICWA, 2022 as cited in Sen, 2023). Further, India's Maritime India Vision, 2030 and Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision, 2047 (VisionIAS, 2024), with massive Sagarmala project, aiming to modernize the nation's maritime infrastructure connecting country's coastal areas is seen as a direct response to BRI (Pradhan, 2021; Samuel, 2018). In what is often interpreted as a move to offset China's influence in Gwadar and more generally along the MSR, India has also stepped up its attempts to develop the Iranian port of Chabahar (Anwar, 2020). Moreover, tensions mount as the two countries vie for dominance in the Bay of Bengal. India's response was the establishment of the INS Varsha naval base, which serves as crucial countermeasure

for India (Palve, 2024). All these initiatives and perception of India and its participation in numerous alliances to work together in South Asia and the Indian Ocean can be seen as India's diplomatic and infrastructure maneuvers in South Asia that can result in geopolitical competition.

### **US Response to BRI and South Asia**

The adoption of the 'Pivot to Asia' policy in 2012 marked a significant shift in U.S. strategy toward the Indo-Pacific region. The geographic location of the United States has historically made it a Pacific power. With the Indo-Pacific strategy, United States entered into the Indian Ocean and expanded its influence as an Indo-Pacific power (Aamer & Mishra, 2024). U.S. political, military, and economic approaches to the region were framed by the Trump administration's South Asia strategy, which was centered on the war in Afghanistan (Threlkeld & Zazycki, 2024). But once the United States left Afghanistan, countering China's influence in the area became the priority, especially after China's BRI (Aamer & Mishra, 2024).

In South Asia, United States considers Bangladesh is vital nation due to its strategic location and economic potential. The US has also supported Sri Lanka in post-conflict rebuilding and provided Nepal a substantial development aid through programs like the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact, which was signed in 2017. As the Indo-Pacific strategy continues to prioritize countering China's move, the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China is having a growing impact on South Asian countries and India is expected to become more involved in regional dynamics (Aamer & Mishra, 2024). This seems obvious as the Indo-Pacific strategy highlights India's role as a like-minded leader in South Asia and Indian Ocean area and a major force behind regional growth and development with an active engagement in regional forums like the Quad (Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2021).

India's collaboration with the United States in shaping the security and economic framework of the Indo-Pacific region is further exemplified in the 2015 U.S.-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region. It states

As the leaders of the world's two largest democracies that bridge the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean region and reflecting our agreement that a closer partnership between the United States and India is indispensable to promoting peace, prosperity and stability in those regions, we have agreed on a Joint Strategic Vision for the region (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2015).

Although this vision underscores the importance of a closer partnership between the two democracies in promoting peace, prosperity, and stability across these regions, It also implies countering China in the region by agreeing on such strategic vision. This is in line with US policy as geopolitical shifts continue to reshape the global order.

In 2017, the revival of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India served as a collective effort to counter China's growing regional influence, including its presence in South Asia (Basnyat, 2021). Concurrently, India and China continue to engage through multilateral platforms such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South and Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. While such forums provide opportunities for dialogue, tensions between the two nations persist, contributing to geopolitical implications (Baruah, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

India's view of South Asia as its natural sphere of influence is being significantly challenged by China with its growing presence in the South Asian region along with its BRI Projects. India views China's expanding relationships with South Asian nations as a direct challenge to its geopolitical interests, particularly with regard to the CPEC and MSR. India's primary concerns revolve around territorial sovereignty, the strategic China-Pakistan partnership, and the growing Chinese military footprint in the region, especially in the Indian Ocean, an area of significant interest to the Indian Navy.

At the same time, China's rise provides South Asian countries an alternative to India's regional supremacy where South Asian countries can have the comfortable space to negotiate for their foreign and economic goals. Although this competition has the potential to destabilise the area, it also opens doors for communication and collaboration. Although the enormous connectivity and infrastructure projects of the BRI offer substantial economic advantages, they also pose new difficulties in terms of regional power dynamics. The future of South Asia's geopolitical landscape, which is characterised by a continuous balancing act among the region's smaller governments, seems to intensify amidst both China and India continue to expand their areas of influence.

## **Author Introduction**

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