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SOUTH ASIA AND CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE:

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

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Introduction

In 2013, Chinese President and Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping initiated the One Belt One Road 一带一路 (yīdài yīlù) project, whose English name was quickly changed by China to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is primarily a Beijing-financed infrastructure project, which aims to bolster China's connectivity through Central, South, and Southeast Asia, all the way into the Middle East, Africa, and Europe[1]. Xi contrasted this ambitious undertaking with the late Chinese "paramount leader" Deng Xiaoping's "hide and bide" 韬光养晦，有所作为 (Tāo guāng yǎng huì, Yǒu suǒ zuò wéi) doctrine,[2] which emphasized strengthening domestic capacities and avoiding external involvement. It is Xi's signature foreign policy initiative aimed at transforming China into a global superpower. After the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress, the BRI was enshrined in the party charter, and its offshoot, 人类命运共同体（Rén lèi mìng yùn gòng tóng tǐ) "a community with a shared destiny

OBOR or BRI

"One Belt One Road" (一带一路) is still the name used in China and in the Chinese language, but China simplified the English translation of this name to the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). While OBOR implied two routes, a maritime road through the Indian Ocean and a land belt across central Asia, in reality, there are multiple and growing interconnected global networks. In addition, the name BRI tries to counter the critical narrative that both routes go only to Beijing.

for humanity" was included in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (PRC).[3] It is a master concept of Chinese foreign policy for the foreseeable future, all the way to 2049, the 100th anniversary of the PRC.

The BRI runs from Eurasia to Africa, but its major states lie in South Asia,[4] the intersection point, where the continental "belt" meets the maritime "road," and connects three continents—Europe, Africa, and Asia—via land and the Indian Ocean. With a foothold in South Asia via connectivity, China could reduce its dependency on the vulnerable Malacca Strait by constructing alternative overland routes to ensure its access to the Indian Ocean and a secure energy supply.[5]

Nevertheless, the BRI poses a whole gamut of serious security challenges in South Asia, from traditional conflicts centered on territorial and border disputes, to potential naval competition with India, to non-traditional religious insurgencies, to environmental unsustainability and corruption. China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) challenges India-dominated regional security architecture—as it leverages easy-cash and lucrative investment potentials to encourage smaller countries to tilt towards China.

But China's poorly regulated loans and financial infusions produce corruption and social tensions in South Asian countries.[6] In addition to the possibility of dual-use (civil-military) of China-built ports from Pakistan to Myanmar, the potential for India to lose its strategic edge in the IOR to an expanded Chinese naval presence looms large. BRI is an essential component of China's grand strategy, with the potential to reshape this sub-regional security architecture and alter the balance of power in the entire IOR in China's favor. The chapter will examine the security risks posed by China's BRI and ways for South Asia to develop economically while maintaining the regional security status quo.

The Importance of South Asia for BRI and of BRI for South Asia

Although South Asian states possess similarities in language, politics, economy, culture, administrative and legal processes, South Asia is far from a homogenous region. Thus, in the post-colonial period, each South Asian country's relationship with China has evolved differently, reflecting the region's patterns of international relations, including the India-Pakistan competition, the geostrategic positioning of each country to China, the domestic politics within each country, and their differing economic

positions and needs. In South Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, and Afghanistan have extended support to the BRI, with the holdouts being India and Bhutan. Indian opposition is due to its confrontational relationship with China, which has been marked by competition rather than cooperation.

South Asia is also a region of dichotomies for China. China shares borders with all South Asian overland countries except Bangladesh, while Sri Lanka and the Maldives are island states located in the middle of the Indian Ocean. BRI's most successful project—the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—runs through South Asia, and BRI's most critical country, India, is also located in South Asia. Despite its opposition to BRI, India is the largest loan taker from the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In addition, South Asia accommodates one-fourth of the world's population and has sustained an average annual growth rate of 6% over the last two decades.[7] This region offers fertile territory for the BRI, as South Asian countries have considerable potential for economic growth, because of their youthful populations. One-fifth of all South Asians are between 14 and 24 years old.[8] South Asia's growing market, with its 2.5 billion population, is a lucrative place to invest and engage. However, this region is also at a high risk from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which could devastate South Asia's thriving potential for the next decade.

Ethnic and religious insurgencies could also upset China's ambitious plans. China faces growing ethnic tension in its Muslim-majority Xinjiang region, while Pakistan and Afghanistan are wracked by ongoing militant insurgencies. In addition, India's nationalist politics is enabling Hindu-Muslim tension that could result in widespread religious violence and ultimately spill over into neighboring countries—especially, China's tumultuous Xinjiang province. India and Pakistan are also two nuclear-armed countries bordering China, which are locked in a long-term and bitter territorial dispute and historical antagonism. An Indo-Pakistan military conflict could directly jeopardize China's investment projects. Despite China's active deterrence, its BRI projects have the potential to drag it into an active war. China's role as Pakistan's principal military ally and arms supplier could also propel it into an Indo-Pakistan conflict.

As China is strategically blocked on its east by two island chains, and has a tremendous vulnerability in the Malacca Strait,[9] South Asia is its potential gateway to ensure Indian Ocean access needed to transport

oil from the Middle East and Africa to China. Economic corridors and maritime roads through South Asia could also connect China's landlocked southwestern provinces, such as Yunnan and Sichuan, to the coastal region. Having a stake in strategic South Asian ports could enable China to project power beyond its borders and neutralize potential external threats. Liu Jinxen, a major proponent of the BCIM-EC (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor), argues that this can be seen as part of a national "bridgehead" strategy of identifying cities or regions occupying a strategic position on a logistical and supply chain that can control the flow of resources along international trade routes.[10]

These are not only one-sided interests. Barring India, South Asian countries see China's presence in the region as contributing to their national interest. Pakistan has embraced China as a strategic balancer against India, and an alternative to the US economic lifeline.[11] While the United States has been a long-term economic supporter of Pakistan, this lifeline is unlikely to continue as the United States wraps up its "war on terror," and withdraws from Afghanistan. Like Pakistan, the region's smaller countries have resented Indian regional dominance for years, and are therefore tempted to hedge towards China as a new alternative. However, despite expected benefits from Chinese economic engagement in this region, its countries remain wary. They fear that a too-close embrace with China could end sour their relations with India—the regional hegemon and, by extension, the United States. Therefore, South Asian states want to extract whatever possible benefits they can from China without offending the United States and India. Besides, China's predatory economic practices in recent years have created financial risks in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, dampening enthusiasm in other countries contemplating Chinese assistance.

China's Unique BRI Approach in South Asia

Despite South Asia's uniform importance for China's BRI as a region, China has taken country-wise customized approaches. China's historical warm relationship with nuclear-armed Pakistan gives BRI a unique advantage to achieve its partial strategic objectives in South Asia. However, as the regional de facto leader, India opposes this initiative. This opposition from the regional hegemon could compel China to take a different approach to achieve its long-term regional goal. While it touts the BRI as a massive infrastructural investment project, China sees BRI as a tool to achieve its long-term geopolitical goals.[12] Although India has rejected BRI

infrastructure projects, China hopes to enlist Indian cooperation in other BRI components. China hopes to convince India that engagement with China is in its own self-interest, or at least, that India should refrain from opposing China's regional involvement. Examples of China's tilting in this direction include the facts that India is the largest recipient of a China-led AIIB loan of the 78 member states, Xi has increased personal meetings with Modi, and China has distanced itself from India-Pakistan brinkmanship. Aiming to bolster public diplomacy, China has increased social and cultural engagement with India, increasing the number of scholarships for Indian students and artists, for example.

The nature of Chinese engagement with the six smaller South Asian countries—specifically Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan and Afghanistan—is also very diverse. These countries, each at a different stage in its interaction with China, are learning from one another's experiences.[13] Chinese construction of the debt-ridden Sri Lankan Hambantota port sounded alarm bells to other countries, and the Bangladeshi government has raised concern[14] over excessive Chinese investment. Recognizing this concern, China has taken a nuanced approach in Bangladesh, expanding its engagement in other sectors tactfully, ranging from education to culture. At the same time, China is Bangladesh's largest military supplier.[15] As a part of the BRI project, China is building the country's largest bridge, *Padma*, which is 6.4 kilometers long.[16]

China has adopted a unique approach to Nepal, which contrasts with India's big brother role. Since it cannot build a port in a landlocked country, China has offered Nepal the use of its four major ports to reduce Nepal's disproportionate dependency on India.[17] In 2019, Xi Jinping made a state visit to Nepal, and promised billions of dollars in investments.

The Maldives is an island country heavily dependent on tourism. This enables China to use tourism to both reward and punish the country,[18] sending Chinese tour groups when the Maldives supports Chinese policy. Although China claims to adhere to its "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," one of which is non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, it blurred the line by sending a navy ship to the Indian Ocean to signal its willingness to protect a China-friendly government in the Maldives.[19]

China may face its most imminent security threat in Afghanistan.[20] The recent U.S.-Taliban deal portends the eventual withdrawal of US forces. The resulting vacuum may pose a security threat to China's most

volatile province, Xinjiang. The Taliban sympathize with the Uighurs, and could ramp up support to a budding insurgent movement as it gains political power and influence in Afghanistan. To tackle potential security threats, China is already working on contingency planning. In such contingency plan includes China's increasing investment through BRI projects, aiming at post-conflict reconstruction and development. The discussion about the extension of the CPEC via a railway to Kandahar is underway. After the withdrawal of US forces, as a part of the stabilization process, Beijing may also advocate for multilateral intervention —including UN peacekeeping operations.[21]

BRI's Security Implications in South Asia

As China increases its presence and engagement in the South Asian region through BRI, the potential for regional destabilization looms large, both in traditional and non-traditional ways. Both dimensions could be summarized broadly under the BRI's three main overland projects in South Asia (CPEC, BCIM-EC, and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor) and the Maritime Silk Road. An examination of these four initiatives helps illuminate the security risks posed by the BRI in South Asia.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The CPEC, a US$62 billion infrastructure project,[22] lies at the heart of the Silk Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road. It connects both routes through Gwadar port in Pakistan's Baluchistan Province, utilizing a planned 3,000-kilometer network of roads, railways, and pipelines originating in Kashgar in China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. As China pushes forward numerous alternative routes to avoid the vulnerable Malacca dilemma, this corridor is a crucial gateway to transport goods from China's western provinces to the Arabian Sea and ensure China's energy supply from the Middle East.

However, the CPEC brings a set of regional security implications for South Asia, mainly driven by New Delhi's three main concerns—territorial sovereignty, security, and the deepening China-Pakistan strategic partnership. The CPEC runs through disputed Jammu and Kashmir, where the borders of China, India, and Pakistan meet. India views Jammu and Kashmir as its territory, and the China-Pakistan joint project as a violation of its territorial sovereignty. As then-Indian Defense Minister A.K. Antony

noted in 2012, "Indian territory under occupation by China in Jammu and Kashmir since 1962 is approximately 38,000 square kilometers."[23] Speaking at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in 2015, the Indian representative noted, "India's reservations about the proposed China-Pakistan Economic Corridor stem from the fact that it passes through Indian territory illegally occupied by Pakistan for many years."[24]

China's apparent disregard for territorial sovereignty in India's border region is the principal bone of contention between the two Asian giants regarding BRI's infrastructure and connectivity development programs. In conventional international relations discourse, the Jammu and Kashmir territorial dispute is between only two parties—India and Pakistan, but as CPEC runs through Kashmir, China becomes involved. This new dimension literally brings Asia's three nuclear powers into head-to-head conflict. China and India went to war in 1962 over a border dispute along the Himalayas in northern and eastern India. Even though not a single shot has been fired on the China-India border since 1987, there are reports of periodic confrontations in Indian's western and eastern border segments in Arunachal Pradesh, which China claims as "South Tibet."[25] In 2017, a standoff between Indian and Chinese troops, on the Doklam plateau along the Himalayan border, severely strained Sino-Indian relations.[26] And most recently, on May 10, 2020, both border guards again scuffled along the disputed border at Naku La pass in the northeastern Indian state of Sikkim.[27]

India's other concern about the CPEC is that it could result in an increased Chinese military presence in disputed territory, including the Pakistan-occupied portion of Kashmir, with serious security implications for India. China argues that the deployments are necessary to protect Chinese assets in Pakistan. Over 30,000 Chinese nationals are said to be employed constructing CPEC-related projects across Pakistan.[28] However, the continuous attack on Chinese nationals, assets, and symbols sounded a powerful reminder of the risks that China faces due to CPEC projects. For example, the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a militant group advocating separatism for the Baloch people, attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi.[29] China is increasingly concerned about the security of its nationals in Pakistan, and the Chinese embassy sent a letter expressing these concerns and requesting increased security for Chinese companies to the Pakistani Interior Ministry in October 2017.[30] In response, the Pakistani and provincial governments implemented coordinated measures aimed at protecting Chinese investments. A key component of the security architecture put

in place around the economic corridor is the Special Security Division, headed by a two-star Pakistan Army general and comprising 15,000 soldiers, including 9,000 military and 6,000 paramilitaries.

India sees the shift in Beijing's Kashmir position as emblematic of the deepening China-Pakistan strategic partnership. From India's perspective, the CPEC marks the emergence of China as Pakistan's principal external partner, replacing the United States. This comes at a time of deteriorating Sino-U.S. relations, improving India-U.S. ties, and emerging tensions between India and China,[31] while Kashmir's emergence as a land bridge between China and Pakistan sharpens the traditional geopolitical divide between New Delhi and Beijing.

The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC)

BCIM-EC predates the BRI by 14 years, as it was first mooted in 1999 by China during a sub-regional forum, as a track-II initiative to connect the economically backward regions of southwest China and northeast India via the infrastructurally deficient countries of Myanmar and Bangladesh.[32] Although it has reached the track 1.5 level and intergovernmental discussions have been initiated, there have been no concrete measures to realize the project. Indian opposition remains the principal obstacle. However, as BRI evolves, Beijing prioritizes BCIM-EC as an important loop to the greater sub-regional connectivity plan[33] and it is increasingly coupled with and compared against other BRI sub-regional projects like the CPEC.

The BCIM-EC, albeit promising massive infrastructural investment and greater market connectivity, runs through contentious and insurgency-prone borders and regions. India fears that the measure risks increasing China's geopolitical influence, and is apprehensive that China may, in the worst case, abet the separatist aspirations of the many tribes in India's northeast region.[34] India's north-east region, made up of seven provinces and separated from central/mainland India by a narrow land border of 14 miles locally known as the "chicken's neck corridor," is extremely insurgency-prone. Separatist aspirations have challenged governance since India's independence from Britain in 1947. The political and economic power of the area's separatist groups have waxed and waned over the years. Although violence has declined, India remains reluctant to let a competing geopolitical rival gain access to this sensitive region and potentially undo the relative peace achieved by the government in the last decade.

Myanmar and Bangladesh, owing to the Rohingya refugee crisis, also do not have an easy relationship. Both countries' participation in BRI is complicated by the Rohingya issue. Bangladesh might view the construction of a connectivity corridor, without resolution of this outstanding issue, as providing Rohingyas better access to the country. Although the international community is pressuring Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya crisis, Myanmar has used Chinese diplomatic and economic cover to harden its stance. Consequently, the Rohingya crisis is deepening—embittering Bangladesh-Myanmar relations. In the long run, the persistence of a large Rohingya refugee presence in Bangladesh will pose a grave security threat to regional stability and prosperity.

The Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC)

The Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor is centered around the not-yet-built China-Nepal railway. The plan calls for this railway to connect to the Tibetan railway, providing unprecedented Chinese access into South Asia via landlocked Nepal,[35] which currently has only 18 miles of rail track. Both China and India are competing to expand Nepalese rail service. China started planning a Nepal-China railway in 2013 and has included this project in its Nepal-China Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network.

Nepal has been a longtime traditional partner of India, with India controlling Nepal's access to goods via its land borders. Nepal has long looked to counterbalance India's massive strategic influence, by embracing Chinese plans to spend millions on improving the country's much-needed energy and transport infrastructure. Although India and Nepal are both Hindu-majority countries, Nepal's longstanding relationship with India took a major hit when India imposed an economic blockade in 2015, to express its disapproval of changes to Nepal's constitution. The blockade created severe shortfalls in fuel, food, medical goods, and post-earthquake relief materials, and the ensuing suffering irked ordinary Nepalis, severely souring the Indo-Nepal relationship. The resulting major trust deficit provided an opening into Nepal. Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's pro-Beijing stance brought him to power in Nepal, as he hoped China could temper India's unbalanced influence.

In aiding Nepal, China has its own greater geopolitical ambitions. China's broader plan includes connecting the proposed Nepal-China railway eventually to Lhasa via Tibet, which is an autonomous region in which

China has long wanted to yield greater influence.[36] Tibet has always remained a central issue in the Indo-China bitter conflict. Tibet, a historical buffer between China and India, has increasingly come under central Chinese control, despite being an autonomous region. China has built strategic infrastructure in Tibet to enable it to rapidly reinforce its military presence. The Trans-Himalayan railway could place Nepal in debt to Chinese heavy financing, heightening Indian security concerns.[37]

The Maritime Silk Road (MSR)

The 21st century MSR was conceived and mooted alongside the "Silk Road Economic Belt" as a part of the larger BRI—aiming to strengthen China's maritime connectivity with the IOR, Southeast Asia, and Africa.[38] In addition to enhancing regional connectivity, the initiative hopes to revive China's historical and cultural linkages with countries along ancient Silk Road-affiliated sea routes. The MSR encompasses a variety of infrastructure projects, including ports, roads, highways, bridges, airports, and underwater oil and gas pipelines.

Hambantota, a port built at the site of a Sri Lankan fishing village—was the inception project of MSR. Built by China in 2017, the port has been leased to a Chinese company for 99 years. On the day of the handover, China's official news agency *Xinhua* tweeted triumphantly, "Another milestone along the path of #BeltandRoad."[39] Not everyone is celebrating. The majority of Sri Lankans are not entirely happy about the lease, which has sparked local protests and accusations that Sri Lanka was selling its sovereignty. Sri Lanka, which experienced a decades-long civil war between its Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority, is particularly vulnerable to a national crisis involving international players.[40] In China's grand strategy, Hambantota is an important foothold and part of its "String of Pearls strategy"[41] for the Indo-Pacific. Other "pearls" in South Asia include Pakistan's Gwadar port and Myanmar's Kyaukpyu.

Gwadar deep seaport, now under construction, is located close to the mouth of the Persian Gulf just below the Straits of Hormuz—and is a key element of the greater CPEC. The port is being developed by the China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC), to which it was leased by the Pakistan government for 40 years in April 2017.[42] Although Gwadar is currently a civilian facility, Delhi suspects it is part of China's unfolding maritime power projection into the Indian Ocean. The prospect of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy in Gwadar forms another

link in China's efforts to expand its maritime presence in the Indo-Pacific region to counterbalance the United States and India. Satellite imagery recently detected PLA naval activity in Karachi port.[43] In addition, 10 Chinese laborers died in a May 2017 BLA attack near Gwadar.[44] To ensure the safety of the project, the Pakistan Navy established "Task Force 88" to beef up security in Gwadar.[45] Reports from the area indicate that the port city has been turned into a fortress, with heavy security and frequent police and army checkpoints.[46] In turn, these measures have caused resentment among local populations in both Gwadar and Baluchistan, exacerbating existing tensions within Pakistan about unequal allocation of resources across the federation.[47]

China has long hoped to construct another strategic port in Sonadia, a gateway to the Bay of Bengal, but has held off, recognizing Bangladesh's concern regarding India's opposition. China, however, has not completely abandoned the proposal. China has doubled down on its engagement with Bangladesh in other strategic infrastructure projects such as Payra Seaport, lending further legitimacy to India's suspicions of China trying to encircle India on the seas.[48] As the Sonadia plan slowed down, China found a strategically similar alternative—Kyauk Phyu in Myanmar's Rakhine state—the origin of the Rohingya crisis. Kyauk Phyu's exclusive economic zone, controlled by a Chinese company, not only includes a port, but a 2,806-kilometer-long oil-gas pipeline connecting Kyauk Phyu to the landlocked city of Kunming in China's Yunnan province.[49] Chinese control over this port extends its enormous economic interests in Rakhine state and beyond.

The tiny climate-vulnerable island nation of the Maldives also holds immense strategic importance for China. Both China and India view the Maldives as the fulcrum for their strategic aspirations in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, the country has partially shed its reliance on India as a strategic partner, and inched closer to China. Maldives has also negotiated an agreement with China for the long-term lease of a port. Ousted President Abdullah Yameen strongly supported China's BRI and courted Chinese financing to build infrastructure. Yameen's increased borrowing from China and fears of loss of Maldivian sovereignty led to his ouster as president in 2018.[50]

India has long been an important security provider and strategic partner to island nations like the Maldives and Sri Lanka. Although these islands are small, they lie in crucial sea lines of communication that offer a significant basis for projecting power and securing and protecting key trad-

ing routes. Chinese maritime strategy, aimed at a rapid expansion in the Indo-Pacific, reflects Alfred Mahan's sea power hypothesis—"whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate the whole of Asia." To this end, MSR offers a unique pathway for China to access strategic ports surrounding the IOR, ranging from Gwadar to Kyauk Phyu to Hambantota.

To protect its own interests, India has already begun taking some unilateral steps. For example, the Modi government has intensified efforts to develop the port of Chabahar in Iran, widely seen as an attempt to counter China's presence in Gwadar and along the MSR more broadly. India has also launched Project Mausam, a cultural initiative to develop a narrative about India's historical links with the Indian Ocean littoral. Many observers see this as an attempt to offset China's Silk Road claims.[51] Delhi has also reached out to littoral countries, such as Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles, with maritime security assistance. As China ratchets up its sphere of influence in India's neighboring countries, it increases the competition between the two Asian giants, and ultimately poses a threat to regional security and stability.

In 2017, India, the United States, Japan, and Australia revived the informal Quadrilateral Security Dialogues, also known as the Quad, established in 2007 in response to massive Chinese investments in Indo-Pacific waters.[52] As China continues to extend its strategic outreach into the IOR with BRI projects, it may encourage India to drop its earlier reluctance and participate in the Quad more actively. India's recent participation in the Quad Plus video conferences to collaborate on combating the COVID-19 pandemic indicates the country's foreign policy is moving in that direction.[53] In the long run, India may opt to form a partnership with other democratic countries to balance growing Chinese outreach in the IOR but such a trend will eventually increase arms competition and make smaller countries more vulnerable.

The Way Forward

The above discussion reveals the security threats to South Asia presented by China's BRI. Some threats are existing, and others may come down the road. Two sets of policies should be implemented to tackle these security challenges, one by South Asian countries acting as a unified region, and the other in coordination with extra-regional powers such as the United States, Japan, Australia, and the European Union. However, in both cases, India, which possesses 68% of the region's landmass, 75% of its population,

and 79% of its economic output, should take the lead role, while ensuring equal participation of its smaller neighbors and addressing their concerns.

South Asians should recognize that the region suffers from acute deficits in infrastructure financing, giving China a wide entry point and strengthening its regional foothold. The Asian Development Bank suggested that to sustain growth and deal with climate change, South Asia must invest almost 9% of its gross domestic product on infrastructural development over 2016-2030, higher than most other sub-regions of Asia.[54] While this may not be viable, due to other major domestic priorities and deficient annual budgets, these countries should, at the very least, significantly increase their infrastructural allocations by reallocating from other sectors. This will partially help reduce excessive dependence on Chinese loans through the BRI.

The leading regional organization, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), could organize regional countries' response to China's unilateral initiatives in the region. However, the Indo-Pakistan rivalry has rendered this organization almost moribund. India and Pakistan need to realize that their animosity gives China an advantage to advance its own regional interest—and therefore runs counter to the interests of South Asian countries. The inability of India and Pakistan to resolve their differences and learn to cooperate has led the region's smaller nations to question whether these two giants truly want to see South Asia prosper. The region's six smaller nations should exert diplomatic pressure on India and Pakistan to set aside their hostility and cooperate in the best interest of the region. Regional leaders also need to recognize that any alternative initiative to SAARC, such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal Initiative (BBIN), fail to gain much traction—because those initiatives do not include all South Asian countries. As the majority of South Asian states are small and economically weak, they must recognize that the only way to protect their regional interest is to work together as a bloc like the European Union and ASEAN.

However, it is a fact that South Asia's persistent infrastructural deficit could compel countries in the region to request BRI financing. In this instance, South Asian states should insist that any BRI financing be fair and transparent. The massive debt resulting from the construction of the Hambantota port should serve as a cautionary tale for South Asian countries considering taking on excessive loans with poor terms and conditions. Pakistan had to seek an International Monetary Fund bailout package to

rescue its economy from excessive debts. South Asian countries should be vigilant not to follow suit. One way they can do better is to diversify their borrowing portfolios. Instead of over-relying on a particular country's initiative, such as BRI, countries can work with multilateral development banks and other initiatives such as the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP). Unlike BRI projects, which are state-driven initiatives, FOIP seems to promote private investment and a wide range of sectoral engagement.[55] Such diversified options offer South Asian countries ways to avoid being manipulated by lending states.

India, for its part, needs to adopt a proactive strategy, not reactive tactics. If India continues to pursue a reactive policy, it will exhaust its limited resources chasing China as Beijing's economic clout is larger. India must prioritize strategically; create a sensible, coherent policy framework in response; and move toward a burden-sharing model with its partners to secure its strategic interests in the region. However, India's economic and technical constraints make it difficult to present a viable alternative to BRI's vision for regional connectivity. One key will be taking a collaborative approach. There is a convergence between Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure, United States' FOIP, and India's Act East policy. Delhi needs to collaborate actively with the United States, Japan, Australia and the region's smaller countries to construct a sustainable and more viable alternative to a China-led infrastructure funding model.[56] This economic cooperation platform could provide a foundation moving forward to tackle the security challenges presented by China's BRI.

The United States should play a leading role as the regional security guarantor. However, initiating an overtly anti-China front is unlikely to gain significant support in this region. Growing skepticism about BRI provides openings for the United States to offer viable alternatives to Chinese loans and projects. The United States should customize FOIP for South Asia, emphasizing a nuanced approach that recognizes variations among the region's states. By recognizing the "smaller" countries' concerns, the United States could promote shared values and address common security concerns. Maintaining traditional US support for development and liberal values will be especially useful in countering trends towards exploitative economics and autocratic governance.[57]

Given the similarity of ideology, size and deepening importance of India, the United States should consider India a linchpin of its regional security architecture in the IOR. Overcoming past differences and building a strong relationship with India will require nuance and patience. The

United States will have to prioritize interests and make some compromises. Over-prioritizing on India may make smaller countries looks less important, which can jeopardize regional objectives. A cautious but comprehensive approach reflecting South Asian needs could be a tipping point.

Notes

1 Although, BRI's physical connectivity projects runs mainly through these geographical regions but BRI related other projects such as digital silk road, infrastructure investment runs all over the world (138 countries), including Latin America and Oceania. https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/wap/wap.htm

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