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Shaping the regional and maritime battlefield? The Sino-Indian strategic competition in South Asia and adjoining waters

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue that China is seeking to establish a balance of power favourable to its interests in South Asia and the adjoining waters to curtail India's rise. Military balancing, economic engagement, and the new multi-regional connectivity project – the “Belt and Road Initiative” – are the key components of China's policy against India. By roping in the South Asian and the Indian Ocean states, China has effectively deployed the “string of pearls” strategy with an express purpose to box-in India within the region so that it cannot challenge China's primacy in Asia and beyond. To neutralise Beijing's assertive activities, New Delhi has evolved its Asia policy with a clear motive to enhance its ties with the key Indo-Pacific states – the US, Japan, Australia, and the Southeast Asian countries – so that it could develop counter-leverages against China and simultaneously manage its rise as a major Indo-Pacific power. Given that both India and China are vying for similar power position in the same region, it is highly likely that their clashing interests might intensify their power competition in the near future.

KEYWORDS

India; China; balancing; South Asia; Southeast Asia; realism; “string of pearls”; Indo-Pacific

Introduction

The dual natured India–China relationship, cooperative and rivalrous, is one of the most important bilateral relationships of the present times which has high potential to shape the trajectory of international order in the twenty-first century. By relying on a sub-systemic approach, our probe is confined to the Indian part of Asian theatre and primarily focused on a query: How China's increasing presence in South Asia and its extended maritime theatre poses strategic challenge to India and how India responds to neutralise assertive China?

To address this question, we examine India and China's active engagement in South Asia, mainly by highlighting how the two states' competitive policies are reshaping the regional security dynamics, and their emerging naval rivalry in the northern theatre of the Indian Ocean. We argue that China is seeking to establish a balance of power favourable to its security interests in the South Asian region with an intention to curtail India's

rise. In this respect, military balancing, economic engagement, and the new multi-regional connectivity initiative – known as the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) project or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – are the key components of China’s policy to expand its presence in the Indian sphere of influence and the world in general.¹ A massive growth in the Chinese economy, which is showing signs to outbid the United States (US) in a decade or two, has by default intensified its power competition with India as well.²

Against this backdrop, India, which has potential to emerge as an economic competitor and political-military opponent of China, has started asserting its claim to shape the norms and structures of regional governance – mainly South Asia and the Indian Ocean, which it considers as its geographic and cultural space – in consonance with its ambition to become a great power with a dominant status in the Asian waters.³

Since both India and China are vying for a similar power position in the same region or sub-regions of influence, it is highly likely that their clashing interests might intensify their power competition in the near future. Based on this understanding, coupled with China’s hegemonic ambition in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond,⁴ we argue that the two states have largely adopted the realist culture that complicates their bilateral equations by charting counter-balancing policies which – apart from undercutting each other’s regional influence – are likely to create greater costs for them as the multi-angular power struggle deepens in the Indo-Pacific or multipolar Asia. “The fact of the matter is that,” as Mohan Malik writes,

China and India are locked in a classic security dilemma: one country sees its own actions as self-defensive, but the same actions appear aggressive to the other. Both suffer from a siege mentality borne out of their elites’ acute consciousness of the fissiparous tendencies that make their countries’ present political unity so fragile.⁵

To secure a favourable balance in the Indian subcontinent, China has deployed the “string of pearls” strategy under which it promotes Pakistan as a regional balancer and effectively engages other small regional states – mainly Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Myanmar – with an objective to “box-in” India so that it cannot step-out of South Asia and challenge China’s primacy in the Asian region at large. On the other hand, India is continuously evolving its Asia policy – that includes the “Act East” initiative and forging closer ties with anti-China powers in the Indo-Pacific – to develop counter-leverages of its own against China’s increasing economic profile and assertive activities in the region and simultaneously manage sufficient space for expanding its capabilities and rise as a major Indo-Pacific power.

In what follows, we first briefly describe India and China’s reshaping security equations in the South Asian region and its adjoining waters. The second section explains China’s increasing presence in India’s neighbourhood, mainly through the construction of naval bases and the extension of BRI-steered land and maritime connectivity network, and how its competitive power projection impacts India’s vital interests. The third section presents India’s strategy to neutralise China by engaging anti-China triad – that is, the US, Japan, and Australia – in the Indo-Pacific region and forging closer economic ties with the Southeast Asian states through the “Act East” initiative. This is followed by a discussion on India’s strained ties with its South Asian neighbours and how they extend China an opportunity to consolidate its position against India. The concluding section briefly summarises the key findings of the paper.

China's growing presence in India's neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean

Over the last two decades, despite considerable improvement in India and China's relations – particularly in the arena of bilateral trade – the two states have persistent differences over their unresolved boundary dispute, the Tibet issue, the Sino-Pakistani strategic ties (often termed as “all-weather friendship”), and intervention in each other's regions of influence. Of late, China's core areas of interest, that include the land and maritime connectivity networks through South Asia and maritime and terrestrial border disputes with the neighbouring states of South China Sea, have compounded differences between New Delhi and Beijing.⁶ India perceives China's occupation of Tibet as a potential security threat as Beijing is engaged in expanding its rail and road network close to the border – probably further extend it to Nepal's capital – and simultaneously damming the rivers that originate from Tibet to curtail India's hydro-capacity and increasing water demand.⁷

As the Indo-US strategic partnership is emerging as a principal factor in China's relations with India, Pakistan – a major Muslim ally which, apart from balancing India, acts as China's gateway to the Islamic world – is the regional factor in India's relations with China.⁸ From China's perspective, India's growing economic strength and hard power capabilities – conventional and nuclear deterrence – not only upset the existing regional and extra-regional balance but also undercut its influence in Asia. That is why it is keen to encourage security competition in and around South Asia to weaken India's regional standing.⁹ With this objective, as many Indian intellectuals and area experts believe, it has deployed a long-term strategy – called the “string of pearls” – to develop a chain of commercial and military facilities from China's mainland to the Port Sudan for use by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to protect its sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and strategic interests in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰

By investing in the dual-use commercial and military port facilities and critical infrastructure in the friendly states of South Asia, for example, Gwadar in Pakistan, Colombo and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Coco islands and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Bangladesh's Payra deep-sea port (after the Chittagong port did not materialise), Marao Atoll in the Maldives and drawing Nepal into its larger framework of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network, Beijing not only aims to develop a cordial security and economic interdependency-based relationship with these states but also intend to neutralise India's geostrategic advantage in the Indian Ocean against the PLAN.¹¹

To reduce its dependence on the Malacca Strait, that connects the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, Beijing has built an alternative route – called the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – by developing Pakistan's southwest port of Gwadar which not only provides it a direct access to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf to secure its energy supply and trade chain but also assists it to add another security layer to its “offensive” strategy against India and the US.¹² In this respect, a recent study analyses the impact of transport cost and travel time through the CPEC.¹³ For China, the findings show, this alternate route decreases a total of 11,000–13,000 kms distance from Kashgar (Western China) to destination ports in the Middle East and Europe that reduces travel time by 21–24 days and saves China about \$71 billion dollars on its imports and exports in comparison to its existing South China Sea route via the Strait of Malacca.¹⁴ By increasing its land and naval-based security presence in South Asia,

China's CPEC project not only rescues it from the US-Singapore-Indian blockade of Malacca chokepoint in an event of crisis but also ensures its strategic outreach to the Indian Ocean region (IOR) – that counters India's advantageous position.¹⁵ Chih-yu Shih's work, though based on the "relational identity" aspect, highlights how the CPEC is reshaping the Sino-Pakistani "Iron Brotherhood":

no other nation in human history has ever invested as much in another as China has, as part of the CPEC, in Pakistan. To some extent, this prefigures transcendence not only of any sovereign estrangement that may linger between China and Pakistan, but also that may between traditional rivals, primarily Pakistan and India, as well as China and India. In itself, the CPEC is a base of identity and calculation, but it has no clear boundary in the traditional territorial sense. Its scope may extend continuously, and its benefits reach far beyond both Pakistan and China, in the narrowest sense of sovereignty.¹⁶

Surrounded by the BRI projects, India has registered its opposition to the CPEC not only because it undercuts Indian influence in South Asia but also runs through the Indian-claimed territory of Gilgit and Baltistan, which is under Pakistan's occupation, and in close proximity to its sensitive border areas.¹⁷ While answering a question in the parliament, General V.K. Singh (Retd.), India's Minister of State for External Affairs, responded how this project violates India's sovereignty and complicates the regional security:

The inclusion of the so-called "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC), which passes through parts of the Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir under illegal occupation of Pakistan, as a flagship project of "OBOR" reflects lack of appreciation of India's concerns on the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Government has conveyed to the Chinese side, including at the highest level, its concerns about their activities in Pakistan Occupied Jammu & Kashmir and asked them to cease these activities.¹⁸

This underlines how Beijing's aggressive connectivity project is making New Delhi insecure as its dual-use character assists Pakistan – to whom China has already transferred nuclear and missile technology with an intention to cap India's geo-strategic ambitions – to continue as India's regional rival in spite of stark power asymmetry against the adversary.¹⁹ Additionally, China's policy of cultivating economic ties with India while simultaneously building economic and military capabilities of Pakistan and other South Asian states, which are much more open to external influence, keeps India under strategic pressure. Another angle to the South Asian situation is China's increasing concerns about the US overseas military activities and its China-centric strategic partnership with India – which has ambition to acquire blue water capabilities to dominate the IOR – that poses a serious challenge to its regional muscularity and economic synergy. This therefore provides China a justification to engage in infrastructure projects and forge close security ties with Pakistan and other South Asian states that surround India.²⁰

According to the Pakistani and the Chinese versions, which are against India's understanding of Beijing's strategy to constrain its rise, there are two key reasons behind China's continuous attention towards the Indian neighbourhood. One is to ensure safe transportation of imported energy and resources to its shores through the Indian Ocean where it is heavily dependent on the SLOCs.²¹ The other is to export finished goods to the West and the Afro-Asian markets at a price that no other competitor can afford to provide. For this reason, it is argued, China has set up a series of ports in friendly countries along the Indian Ocean's northern seaboard.²² Though these developments do have a geo-strategic

dimension, asserts Muntazir Ali, especially in India's regional policy calculations, they are primarily meant to secure China's access to energy and other resources.²³

Another scholar gives an interesting angle to the Pakistani version by projecting China's policy towards the IOR as its domestic policy to secure the passage of ships without any intention to balance or encircle India.²⁴ From such a "trouble-free" portrayal of China's regional engagement, Beijing's involvement in South Asia and the Indian Ocean appears to be more of an economic policy rather than the strategic one that India's military establishment perceives. There is, thus, a stark divergence in the Indian geopolitical and strategic vision of China's increasing presence in the region of its influence.²⁵ Indian policymakers and analysts believe that on the pretext of energy security, trade and infrastructure connectivity, China's growing presence in India's immediate neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean threatens the country's vital interests and strategic position.²⁶

In short, China's substantial material power and increasing engagement with the South Asian states shows that it has an express purpose to attain strategic edge against India in its home region, which has close proximity to the world's major sea lanes and land routes. And simultaneously, on the other extreme, maximise its prospects to secure support from India's neighbours to renegotiate some of the primary institutions and norms of the Asian order. China's interest in West Asia and its development of commercial and naval bases in the IOR underlines how it is strategising to control important choke points and maintaining access to major islands of the region, which are central to India's security and economic prosperity. For instance, China has signed and secured rights to its first foreign base in Djibouti along the BRI routes, which can host up to 10,000 soldiers until 2026, and the second base where it intends to station its naval vessels and troops is Pakistan's Gwadar deep-sea port situated at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, close to the Strait of Hormuz.²⁷

Reading this development in conjunction with (a) China's acquisition of Hambantota Port in a US\$ 1.1 billion debt swap deal with Sri Lanka to affirm its naval operations in the IOR, (b) keeping its cards close with respect to its increasing presence in the Seychelles, and (c) signing of a controversial Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Maldives – a tiny archipelago nation located strategically in India's maritime backyard – shows how deep and calculated China's encirclement strategy is.²⁸ China's increasing civilian and military presence in the IOR brings much disquiet to India because these islands' connectivity not only beefs up the opponent's modern-day "Silk Road" of land and maritime trade routes and forge interdependency with the network states, but also impinges upon India's security by subverting its influence and ties with the regional states at a crucial juncture of its rise.

For these reasons, the leadership in New Delhi believes that Beijing's strategic moves and increasing presence in South Asia – mainly in the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and Sri Lanka – on the pretext of gaining access to energy resources, transit routes, and free trade are providing it tactical advantage against India in South Asia and the IOR, hence it must be balanced by carving out parallel strategies with like-minded powers in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

India engages anti-China triad: The US, Japan, and Australia

From the emerging security scenario in the Indo-Pacific, it is not yet clear what pattern the US-India-China triangle and Japan and Australia's association with it will actually evolve

into.²⁹ In light of India and China's simultaneous rise in the same part of the world, former Indian National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon opines that "India-China relations do not fall into a simple binary opposition but exhibit a complex interplay in political, economic, security, and other realms," therefore the policymakers in New Delhi need to fine tune the country's policies so that it could be able "to deal with a complex continental system, the rise of China, and simultaneously with an equally complex maritime system."³⁰ "India's best interests," stresses former Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran,

are served by its assistance in shaping a multipolar order with the support of other major powers. It should not hesitate in promoting and participating in a countervailing coalition to constrain any aspiring hegemon even while it expands its own economic and military capabilities.³¹

Against the backdrop of changing geopolitical situation and policymaking dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian leadership has reframed the country's policy choices by taking important steps against assertive China: (1) deepened the Indo-US strategic partnership; (2) shown interest to be a part of the emerging Quadrilateral arrangement or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) in the Indo-Pacific;³² and (3) set a collaborative connectivity initiative with Japan, "the Asia Africa Growth Corridor" (AAGC), into motion to counter China's ambitious OBOR project.³³

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, India has attempted to reduce tensions with China and cultivate security ties with the US, but the two rival great powers' divergent policies and clashing power aspirations keep on perplexing the security situation in Asia that affects India's policy choices.³⁴ However, it is also correct to note that the US skilfully maintains the post-Cold War *systemic primacy* by knitting a favourable security alliance with key Asian partners and engaging India and China separately to uphold its hegemonic status in this part of the world. At present, the US interest largely lies in encouraging India to offset China's influence in the newly shaping Indo-Pacific sub-systemic order so that it could prevent China's potential domination of the region when no other Asian power has capability to balance China alone.³⁵ In this direction, by building on his predecessors' policy of developing a counter-China coalition, President Barack Obama had taken a key step by accommodating India into the US "Asian rebalance" strategy.³⁶ In his remarks to the joint session of the Indian Parliament in November 2010, President Obama emphasised:

It is my firm belief that the relationship between the United States and India—bound by our shared interests and our shared values—will be one of the defining partnerships of the 21st century. This is the partnership I've come here to build. This is the vision that our nations can realize together. ... We want India not only to "look East," we want India to "engage East," because it will increase the security and prosperity of all our nations.³⁷

Since then, the two states have effectively built a strategic partnership by signing the defence and logistics exchange agreements, which reaffirm "their commitment to expand and deepen the bilateral defence relationship" as well as ensures to "open up [Indo-US] relationship on everything, from maritime security to aircraft carrier and jet engine technology cooperation."³⁸ After the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has assumed power in Delhi, India has redefined its role in the Indo-Pacific by showing eagerness to forge closer security ties with the US and its allies and balance China to prevent power shift in Asia.³⁹

To secure its long-term goals and outbid China's unilateral maritime strategies, India entered into a political and strategic arrangement with the US through the QSD framework (or the Quad), an informal grouping of maritime democracies that loosely aligns Australia, India, Japan and the US, and plans to move ahead on the AAGC project in collaboration with Japan to integrate the African continent with South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Oceania to create a "free and open" "rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific region."⁴⁰ To realise the people centric and sustainable growth oriented Asia-Africa partnership, the prime ministers of India and Japan have shown their commitment

to promote cooperation and collaboration in Africa, with the objective to synergise their efforts and explore specific joint projects including in the areas of training and capacity building, health, infrastructure and connectivity. In this regard, they also expressed their intention to work jointly and cooperatively with the international community to promote the development of industrial corridors and industrial network in Asia and Africa.⁴¹

India's initial ambiguous China policy and policy dilemmas in the Indo-Pacific made little headway toward the QSD-type arrangements,⁴² but gradually the country's changing approach and collaboration with some QSD and Asian states have picked momentum by holding joint naval exercises with Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Australia and trilateral Malabar exercises with the US and Japan. The momentum has also come from its simultaneous initiatives to build more trade relations with the Southeast Asian states, mainly with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), under the newly unveiled "Act East" outreach policy. In addition, on the security and strategic front, India has expanded high level defence consultations, military exchanges, port calls, joint exercises training and limited arms transfers.⁴³

Taking together, these policy steps underscore that India is serious to play a key role in the unfolding Indo-Pacific order.⁴⁴ In other words, from the Modi government's bold policy moves and initiatives to cultivate deep partnership with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, it seems the leadership in New Delhi has decided to shun India's "reluctant hegemon" status and assume larger global responsibilities by prioritising the country's transition from defensive to offensive policy posturing.⁴⁵ Rajesh Rajagopalan, Professor of International Politics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), supports New Delhi's proactive policy initiatives and stresses that India must employ all possible means to undercut China because its

balancing and containment strategy against India would be unlikely to cease even if India did not partner with the United States. It would be better for India to have the means to respond adequately to China's containment efforts than to increase China's relative advantage by failing to exploit all of India's possible choices.⁴⁶

From the Sino-Pakistani perspective, the Indo-US civil nuclear deal and the two democracies' rapidly developing strategic partnership further consolidate India's position in South Asia and the IOR. In the long-term, it is argued, this will not only help India institute its hegemony in the subcontinent and adjoining waters by crossing the barrier of "regional security complex" but also assists it to project itself as a formidable Asian player in the reshaping security architecture.⁴⁷ Worried about the deepening Indo-US security relations and India's growing strategic ties with Japan, Australia, Singapore, and Vietnam, the leadership in Beijing perceives these developments have high likelihood to evolve into another expansionist security layer against its global rise.⁴⁸ To overcome

the Malacca dilemma and counter-balance the new great game revolving around the Indo-Pacific, the Chinese leadership is desperately in search of potential allies with resources, market, and naval facilities at strategic locations in the Indian Ocean – mainly in the North Western and South Western Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and states bordering the South China Sea. With this aim, the Xi Jinping-led China is steadily moving forward on its devised strategy to regain territories (islands) in the South China Sea (by asserting its ancient claims over them) and dominate a larger part of Eurasia through its strategic projects and massive BRI connectivity drive, that aims to connect China with more than 60 countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

To respond to China's grand connectivity drive and its increasing security aggression in the IOR, it is noteworthy that India has taken measures by designing a sharper security policy and cultivating deeper ties with the US as well as shown interest to be part of the QSD arrangement and initiate the AAGC project in collaboration with Japan. But now what is more important is that how the QSD and the AAGC unfold in the foreseeable future and how effectively the Indian leadership would carve a role for the country in a multipolar Asia by transforming both arrangements into a reality.

“Feet of clay”: India's mismanaged engagement in South Asia

Despite sharing common religious, linguistic and ethnic ties with its South Asian neighbours, India could not manage to establish itself as a recognised regional power.⁴⁹ A more subtle explanation of India's failure to mould the regional situation to its advantage is that, as David Brewster argues, its political leadership failed to pursue the foreign policy goals vis-à-vis its neighbours in a consistent manner, thereby lost opportunity to create a favourable and stable security environment in South Asia.⁵⁰

After its economic liberalisation in 1991, however, India began to view South Asia in a new light by including non-traditional security aspect in its policy with an objective of making the regional economy more market oriented and securing a leading role for itself in the new liberal arrangement. For instance, Prime Minister I.K. Gujral's regime emphasised on the principle of non-reciprocity vis-à-vis India's small neighbours – famously called as the Gujral doctrine – and later Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's regime had taken initiatives to strengthen India's bilateral and multilateral ties by moving “economic relations to the centre of India's foreign policy, promot[ing] economic development ... and establishing friendly relations with the neighbouring countries.”⁵¹ In the foreword of Shyam Saran's book, *How India Sees the World: Kautilya to the twenty-first Century*, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has once again reposed his faith on this notion: “I have always believed that without the normalization of our relations with [the South Asian states], India cannot realize its full developmental potential.”⁵² Despite India's accommodation of its small neighbours some concerns (barring Pakistan), China managed to sneak in the region and consolidate its position as a neutral and economically more viable player – for instance, the BRI project includes all the small states of South Asia except Bhutan.

There is no dearth of opinion pieces claiming or portraying that India has a coherent South Asian strategy, but as of now New Delhi failed to produce any effective policy or framework to engage the region's small states in unison to its collective security vision. For instance, Prime Minister Modi's “Neighbourhood First” policy could not succeed to add

much required value addition to India's foreign policy goals vis-à-vis its neighbours, as initially expected, nor does it effectively counter the growing Chinese influence in South Asia.

On the basis of its enormous regime-building capacity and material strength (in terms of military capabilities and economic growth), India projects itself as a dominant regional power but a deeper reading of the changing power structure of South Asia reflects that China has made significant forays into the region.⁵³ By investing in energy, infrastructure and military sectors, China has expanded its footprints in the regional economy which has complicated the nature of India's traditional ties with neighbours in a region where it wields substantial power and authority. These developments, as former Indian Army Chief General Deepak Kapoor rightly flags, act as catalyst in already fractious Sino-Indian ties:

China's "string of pearls" policy, its strategic relationship with Pakistan, the extensive infrastructure development in Tibet, an increased footprint in the Indian Ocean and the Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and its aid to fledgling insurgent movements in India are some of the irritants that are not conducive to good relations.⁵⁴

Similarly, other scholars in the field believe that India's increasing association with the US prompts China to embrace India's smaller neighbours.⁵⁵ Over the last few years, negative developments towards India's interests ensued with the Modi government's bold as well as controversial policy decisions, which brought India into loggerheads with its smaller neighbours. For instance, New Delhi's intervention in Nepal's constitutional deadlock eventually resulted in a prolonged border blockade by the pro-India Madheshi community in 2015–2016.⁵⁶ With limited options in its diplomatic kitty to balance Delhi's intervention in its internal affairs, the leadership in Kathmandu strategically approached Beijing and "sign[ed] a slew of trade, transit and infrastructural agreements with it."⁵⁷

As far as Bangladesh is concerned, though New Delhi managed to settle a border agreement with the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League government in June 2015, under which 162 territorial enclaves spread across the border were exchanged, now the issue of illegal Bangladeshi migrants is picking momentum in the Indian state of Assam.⁵⁸ The National Register of Citizens of India (NRC) has potential to strain relations between the two neighbours again, which might compel New Delhi and Dhaka to toe aggressive lines to safeguard their respective political positions in their domestic arenas. Such a situation might further strain the India-Bangladesh bilateral ties, dent India's "Act East" economic outreach initiative, and may possibly tilt Bangladesh towards China with whom Dhaka has already developed strong economic and defence ties.⁵⁹

In South Asia and its adjoining waters, Indian policymakers shall always remember that India cannot effectively outbid China by having strained ties with its neighbours, mainly Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, as they have tendency to block Indian moves by inviting external power(s) to balance the changing regional structure.⁶⁰ For instance, as Sri Lanka leased its Hambantota port and Maldives entered into a controversial FTA with China in a bid to balance India and assist China to make its Indian Ocean stretch of "Maritime Silk Road" viable.

India's continuous strained political-security relations with small states might adversely affect its great power ambition and potential role as credible security provider in the emerging Indo-Pacific sub-systemic order. In this regard, S.D. Muni, Professor Emeritus JNU, cautions New Delhi,

[it is correct that] the South Asian neighbours need India because they cannot progress without [it], but India need to take care how to play its cards so that it could not [get] trapped in their politics. The Indian leadership ... [shall also] understand that India's heritage or past belongs to a composite culture and heritage, not to any single entity, ... and [India's small neighbours'] some concerns [do] have merit [and] that must be addressed.⁶¹

On the other hand, one can argue that China too has a problematic neighbourhood, particularly the South China Sea where it is engaged in overlapping maritime claims with the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, and Taiwan.⁶² But in comparison to India, the key difference is that China's long-term vision in the form of BRI provides it a window to forge economic-strategic realignment across the Afro-Eurasian region which also boosts its prospect to shake the Indo-Pacific power balance and transform the trajectory of its relations with the immediate neighbours.

This geopolitical scenario, if become a reality, will have implications for India's peaceful rise in the Indo-Pacific and its aspiration for global outreach and recognition. Additionally, New Delhi's strained ties with the South Asian states, particularly those having developed cordial equations with China, might affect its power projection and credibility in Asia in a time when critical normative tensions in the regional and international affairs are under way. Given that the South Asian security dynamic is in a competitive state, as the smaller regional states are reluctant to continue the traditional India-centric power arrangement by engaging China to balance its overwhelming regional profile, hence there is an imperative for India to integrate its neighbours into its collective security vision.

To come out of this situation, the Modi-led BJP government now lays its stress on the "Act East" policy and as well spearheading a cross-regional initiative around the Bay of Bengal rim, that is, "the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation" (BIMSTEC), for meaningful economic cooperation with the group members that include promoting the FTA and the idea of inter-member energy grid connectivity.⁶³ In addition to this, the Modi government's key objective in reviving the BIMSTEC is to bypass the regional challenger, Pakistan – whose persistent rivalrous conduct vis-à-vis India has made the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) dysfunctional – and forge closer economic ties with the member states by interlinking South Asia and Southeast Asia and, by extension, materialise its ambitious "Act East" policy through Bangladesh to Vietnam in the transcending region against a Chinese-led regional order.

India needs to be more cautious as well as proactive to expand its outreach and participation in key regional groupings, stresses former Indian ambassador T.P. Sreenivasan, so that it would remain within the range of major regional and global initiatives and vice-versa.⁶⁴ For instance, India's "Act East" policy would be seriously handicapped if it could not negotiate and secure the membership of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and enter into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement, where its friendly ASEAN states are engaged in isolating it at the behest of China.

If India could not manage to change the trajectory of its relations with small South Asian neighbours, barring Pakistan, this might give an impression that it is not able to engage its neighbours constructively and that is why it is overstepping its influence with the home region by aligning at a larger level, that is, at the regional sphere in Asia, through the QSD arrangement.

If India would like to project itself as a norm-making and reliable security provider against assertive China, it must devise a comprehensive framework, which shall not

only cater the regional states' interests but also take them along in its flight to progress so that they would genuinely extend their effective backing to India's great power aspiration in the emerging sub-systemic order in the Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The South Asian region holds a distinctive strategic position in the Asian geopolitical landscape as it is surrounded by two maritime trade gateways, the straits of Hormuz and Malacca, which connect the European continent with East Asia and has close proximity to the world's major trade sea lanes and land routes. Of late, the region has been witnessing structural changes with China's increased presence and closer engagement with India's neighbours through its carefully planned infrastructure development projects, economic initiatives, and defence ties. Coupled with these developments, China's outright support to Pakistani terrorist outfits by blocking India's bid to ban Jaish-e-Mohammed leader, Masood Azhar and other extremist organisations at the United Nations and downplaying India's concerns with regard to the dual-purpose CPEC project and strategic buildup close to its maritime and terrestrial boundaries further deepens suspicion in Indian minds that Beijing schemes to outwit and encircle India in its own locale.

Given that India's advantageous geostrategic location situates it in a unique position in South Asia and the IOR, this also augments its ambition for power status and thereby compels it to resist China's increasing footprint and security networking within its home region and the adjoining maritime sphere. It is correct that India continues its strategy of economic engagement towards China, but the unfolding geopolitical changes in the Indo-Pacific region is pushing it to transform its policies to balance the rival's growing assertiveness in the area of its influence.

In this respect, over the last few years, India has taken effective steps to match China's assertiveness in the South Asian region and complemented it further by forging closer political-security relations and economic ties with the US and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. But from the regional standpoint, if India desires to outbid China effectively and consolidate its regional dominance, it has to make extra efforts to freeze Beijing's growing influence in South Asia and the extended neighbourhood, as former Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran stresses, by "adhering to positions of principle and policies rather than personalities"⁶⁵ and taking initiatives to develop a comprehensive framework, which could accommodate its neighbour's concerns (barring Pakistan).

Additionally, India must proactively capitalise on already existing, but largely inactive, regional forums – for example, the BIMSTEC, the Mekong-Ganga Cooperation, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association – by meaningfully activating them and knitting the member states' interests with the emerging larger platforms in the Indo-Pacific (like the APEC and the RCEP) with a clear vision to increase its political profile and diplomatic capital.

In short, from India and China's collective rise and the latter's targeted regional presence to surround the former, it can be surmised that the clashing policies and intersecting interests of the two competing Asian powers have potential to enhance their conflictual engagement into a stringent regional and maritime competition or great power rivalry in the foreseeable future.

Notes

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3. See Anne Clunan, "Why Status Matters in World Politics," in *Status in World Politics*, eds. T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson and William C. Wohlforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 273–96.
4. We employ Robert Gilpin's definition that a hegemon is a state that has a preponderance of power in the international system. See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
5. Mohan Malik, "India Balances China," *Asian Politics & Policy*, 4, no. 3 (2012): 349.
6. See Manish and Prashant Kaushik, "CPEC, Afghanistan and India's Concerns," *India Quarterly*, 75, no. 2 (2019): 253–61; S. Y. Surendra Kumar, "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): India's Concerns, Responses and Strategies," *International Journal of China Studies*, 10, no. 1 (2019): 31–35; J. Susanna Lobo, "The South China Sea Dispute and the Growing Sino-American Rivalry," *World Focus*, 39, no. 4 (2018): 141–7.
7. For Indian concerns on China-steered water insecurity, see Ministry of Water Resources, *National Water Mission under National Action Plan on Climate Change*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Government of India, 2008), 4; J. Susanna Lobo, "The India-China Relations: Tibet as a Factor," *Journal of Asian Politics and Society*, 1, no. 1 (2017): 50–74.
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9. Mohan, "Re-examining the Rivalry Paradigm," 254, 260.
10. Personal interviews with Indian academicians at an international conference on "The Geopolitics of Indo-Pacific: Perceptions, Opportunities and Challenges" held at Department of Political Science, University of Kerala, December 11–13, 2019. Intellectuals who shared their views in line with this understanding are: Prof. Srikanth Kondapalli, Prof. Shankari Sudararaman, Prof. Manish, Prof. Shaji Varkey, Prof. Sajad Ibrahim K. M., Dr. Nanda Kishor M.S., Dr. Anil Kumar P., Dr. S.Y. Surendra Kumar, Dr. Joyce Sabina Lobo, Dr. Anu Unny, Dr. Uma Purushothaman, and Dr. Ashish Shukla.
11. C. Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), 124–30; Shohel Mamun, "Bangladesh Signs MoU with China on Payra Deep-sea Port Construction," *Dhaka Tribune*, December 9, 2016; Jayanna Krupakar, "China's Naval Base(s) in the Indian Ocean-Signs of a Maritime Grand Strategy?" *Strategic Analysis*, 41, no. 3 (2017): 210.
12. See John Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 3, no. 4 (2010): 381–96; Xiaoting Li, "Applying Offensive Realism to the Rise of China: Structural Incentives and Chinese Diplomacy Toward the Neighbouring States," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 16, no. 2 (2016): 241–71.
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17. For a succinct understanding of India's growing concerns, see Manish and Kaushik, "CPEC, Afghanistan and India's Concerns", 257–59. For historical understanding, see Surinder Mohan, "Ideology, Territorial Saliency, and Geographic Contiguity: The Beginning of India-Pakistan Rivalry," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 16, no. 3 (2016): 384–86; Surinder Mohan, "Military Capabilities and Regime Type: The Emergence of India-Pakistan Rivalry," *International Politics*, 56, no. 1 (2019): 53–55.
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