

Revisiting India's Security Concern in the Continental Domain of South Asia Following China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Sajib Kumar Banik*

"To Get Rich, One Must Build Roads"
Ancient Chinese Proverb

Abstract

This study examines India's security apprehensions in South Asia in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a significant geostrategic and geoeconomic infrastructure endeavour designed to bolster global connectivity and reinforce China's dominance. India, however, opposes the BRI, viewing it as a threat to its territorial sovereignty and regional influence, a stance shaped by historically fraught Sino-Indian relations, including the 1962 war, the 2020 Galwan Valley clashes, and unresolved disputes over Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. India, therefore, interprets BRI as a scheme devised by China to expand its economic and diplomatic clout over South Asia, marginalising India's strategic interest in the region. India generally has two primary dimensions of security concern with the BRI in South Asia: maritime domain, tied to the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) through the Indian Ocean (IO), and continental domain, mainly encompassing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC), and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). Focusing mainly on the continental sphere, this paper assesses how these corridors pose possible strategic vulnerabilities for India. Moreover, beyond physical infrastructure, the study also highlights that recent political upheavals in Bangladesh (2024), Nepal (2025), and Myanmar's escalating civil war have intensified China's leverage, while simultaneously diminishing India's traditional dominance in its neighbourhood. The findings indicate that China's growing sway over the Himalayan and Bay of Bengal subregions heightens India's security challenges, raises the risk of strategic encirclement, and forces New Delhi to review its blueprint for continental security.

Key words: BRI, South Asia, CPEC, Gilgit-Baltistan, Indian Ocean, Malacca Dilemma, BCIM-EC, THEC.

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter, BRI), unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is an ambitious project that highlights improving networks and collaboration among many countries across Asia, Africa, and Europe. BRI is dubbed the 'Project of

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka and PhD Researcher, University of Leeds, United Kingdom

the Century’, under which, as of December 2023, 150 countries had signed a cooperation agreement.¹ It covers more than one-third of the world’s GDP and 63% of the global population, encompassing nearly all major world religions, demonstrating its grandeur.² However, ever since the BRI project was launched, India has consistently opposed and criticised it, with even External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar expressing concerns over the infrastructure project. This perception is further reinforced by numerous studies showing that the BRI is closely linked to China’s broader foreign policy goals, including expanding diplomatic influence and asserting economic dominance in the region. India’s security concerns regarding the BRI are deeply connected to its geopolitical strategy and regional dynamics. To understand New Delhi’s stance on the BRI, one must consider the wider context of India-China relations. As neighbours, India and China share one of the longest borders—approximately 2,100 miles of frontiers, of which 50,000 square miles are disputed³—mainly ill-defined with overlapping territorial claims. They fought a war in 1962 and are still engaged in a geopolitical rivalry to expand their spheres of influence. China controls 38,000 sq km (Aksai Chin) to the west that New Delhi claims, while India owns 90,000 sq km (Arunachal Pradesh) to the east, which Beijing also claims as its territory.⁴ China consistently asserts that Arunachal Pradesh, which it officially calls ‘Zangnan’, in the eastern Himalayas, is part of southern Tibet⁵ and has opposed numerous Indian infrastructure projects in the area, despite India’s insistence that it is an integral part of the country.⁶ Conversely, Aksai Chin, part of the western Himalayas, is also claimed by India but currently occupied

1 Christoph Nedopil, *China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Investment Report 2023* (Brisbane: Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University; Shanghai: Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University, February 2024), p. 1.

2 Shirley Yu, “THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: MODERNITY, GEOPOLITICS AND THE DEVELOPING GLOBAL ORDER”, *Asian Affairs*, 2019, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 187.

3 “Why India and China Are Finally Starting to Patch Things Up”, *TIME*, November 17, 2024, <https://time.com/7175644/india-china-ladakh-deal-rapprochement/> (Accessed on: January 8, 2025).

4 Crisis Group Asia Report, “Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute”, *Report N°334*, (Belgium: International Crisis Group, November 14, 2023), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/334-thin-ice-himalayas.pdf> (Accessed on: January 1, 2025).

5 In fact, the Sino-Indian relationship and border dispute are fairly intractable and long-running, largely emanating from the differing views on the history and ultimate destiny of Tibet. See David M. Malone and Rohan Mukherjee, “India and China: Conflict and Cooperation,” *Survival*, March 2010, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 137–58.

6 Chaganti Sarita Singh, “India races to build power plants in region claimed by China”, *Reuters*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/india-races-build-power-plants-region-claimed-by-china-sources-say-2024-07-09/> (Accessed on: February 15, 2025).

by China. After the humiliating defeat by China in 1962, which resulted in more than 7,000 Indian soldiers being killed or captured⁷, tensions on the disputed China-India border have recently flared up again following the 2017 Doklam standoff and the deadly Galwan Valley clash (2020), which led to the deaths of twenty Indian soldiers and an undisclosed number of Chinese soldiers. Consequently, a lack of trust has developed over time between the two countries due to the unresolved border dispute. Their relationship is therefore characterised by the 4Cs: conflict, cooperation, competition, and containment. As China's influence expands both regionally and globally, many scholars view India's stance on the BRI as falling under the categories of competition and containment.⁸ Despite Xi's assertion that the BRI would promote regional cooperation, trade, and investment, New Delhi continues to oppose it.

Given India's perception that the BRI will substantially alter territorial sovereignty and regional power dynamics, this article will reexamine India's security concerns – in terms of military, diplomatic, and economic – regarding the BRI in South Asia and analyse its strategic implications. As India's security challenge from BRI in South Asia has both continental and maritime aspects, this article focuses primarily on the former, while the BRI's security threat in the Indian Ocean is less examined here. Therefore, the main research issues this article seeks to examine are:

1. How do China's continental BRI corridors—CPEC, THEC, and BCIM EC—threaten India's influence, strategic depth, and territorial integrity in South Asia?
2. How is the balance of power between China and India in the South Asian continental domain affected by the development of BRI infrastructure?
3. What effects have the recent political developments in Bangladesh (2024), Nepal (2025), and Myanmar's civil war had on India's security environment and enhanced China's influence?

The significance of this study lies in its approach to addressing the regional strategic issues raised by China's BRI corridors affecting India, alongside recent political upheavals in Bangladesh (2024), Nepal (2025), and Myanmar's civil conflict. These

7 Crisis Group Asia Report, "Thin Ice in the Himalayas: Handling the India-China Border Dispute", *op. cit.*

8 Mohammad Shakil Bhuiyan and Wang Yi, "India and Japan Response to the Belt and Road Initiative: What China should do?" *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1–4, 2023, pp. 249-267.

developments collectively are diminishing India's influence within its traditional sphere of influence— an aspect often neglected in earlier research.

Figure 1: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



Source: *file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/All_roads_lead_to_Beijing-1.pdf*

2. Theoretical Framework

India's security concerns regarding China's BRI can be interpreted through four fundamental concepts in International Relations—offensive realism, power transition theory, hegemony, and national interest—each offering distinct perspectives on the structural dynamics of evolving Sino-Indian strategic rivalry in South Asia. A realist perspective, particularly offensive realism, is instructive. Offensive realism, as explained by John J. Mearsheimer⁹, suggests that states seek to maximise power to ensure their security.¹⁰ Applying this to South Asia, India perceives China's BRI projects passing through disputed territories, such as Gilgit-Baltistan, and sensitive border regions, such as Nepal, Rakhine State, and the Northeast, as a way to encircle India and expand Chinese influence in the region. Power Transition Theory, which

9 See for details John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton & Company, 2021).

10 Sverrir Steinsson, "John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism and the Rise of China", *E-International Relations*, UK, March 6, 2014, pp 2-3. <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/03/06/john-mearsheimers-theory-of-offensive-realism-and-the-rise-of-china/> (Accessed on: February 5, 2025).

views a rising power's (or revisionist) dissatisfaction with the status quo power (or hegemon) as the root cause of conflict¹¹, further deepens this perception by extending the interpretation of the Sino-Indian rivalry as a structural competition between a dominant power and a rising power, making conflict over influence in the region almost inevitable. BRI has deepened this structural contestation by extending China's economic and political influence over Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar—countries traditionally within India's sphere of influence. Meanwhile, the concept of hegemony highlights how China uses economic instruments rather than direct control to shape the choices of India's neighbouring states. Underlying all these approaches, the core driver is national interest, which encompasses a broad spectrum of essential interests, including the organic survival of a particular nation's population, the preservation of its sovereignty, the well-being of its citizens, and its political status and prestige—issues that India believes the China's continental BRI corridors, such as CPEC, THMDCN, and BCIM-EC, directly threaten these core interests.¹² Taken together, the theoretical perspective outlined above helps to explain why India takes a cautious, and sometimes oppositional, stance towards BRI in South Asia, as this initiative threatens its material security, diplomatic influence, and long-standing leverage by strategically reordering South Asia's power landscape.

3. Methodological Notes

This study employs a qualitative and interpretivist paradigm to analyse India's security concerns in South Asia in relation to China's BRI. Given the geopolitical nature of the topic, this analysis primarily draws on secondary sources from a wide range of academic and policy-oriented sources, including academic literature (books, journal articles), policy papers, government documents, think-tank reports, reputable international news outlets, and credible media analyses. Given the complexity of the subject matter, which has its roots in international relations, regional security and geopolitical theory, the qualitative approach enables a thorough comprehension of historical continuities and contextual subtleties. Moreover, being explanatory and analytical in nature, this research aims to clarify the causal relationships between China's strategic goals and India's responses in the continental South Asian region,

11 Serafettin Yilmaz and Wang Xiangyu, "Power Transition Theory Revisited: When Rising China Meets Dissatisfied United States", *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 5, No.3, 2019, pp. 317–341.

12 E. Azhar and C.-I. Moon, "Third World National Security: Toward a New Conceptual Framework," *International Interactions*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1984, pp. 108-9.

while employing historical methods to trace the growth of China's regional infrastructure diplomacy and the evolution of China's relations. This combination of historical and analytical perspectives enables the research to identify both long-term structural trends and shorter-term political developments in South Asia, including recent crises in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar.

While reliance on secondary data provides a solid foundation for theoretical and policy analysis, the absence of primary empirical data also has its shortcomings. Deeper insights might be obtained by accessing primary data, such as through field research in project regions or stakeholder interviews. Nonetheless, given the availability of a large corpus of existing research on this issue, the study maintains a high degree of analytical rigour and contextual depth. To ensure the research's credibility, the sources used are duly acknowledged, and citations are meticulously accomplished, enabling readers to follow the research trail for further investigations. Moreover, data from multiple sources are cross-referenced and triangulated to confirm the research's authenticity. Note that although this study provides a comprehensive analysis of India's strategic outlook, it places less emphasis on viewpoints from China, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, or Myanmar to maintain its primary focus. However, these limitations underscore the necessity for future research that includes multi-country perspectives and adopts a comparative framework to improve analytical balance.

4. China's BRI: A Strategic Overview

BRI is a stepping stone for China's aspirations of global leadership. Historically, Communist China was left in ruins due to the Cultural Revolution, which Mao Zedong started in 1966 and continued until 1976. Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1978, Deng Xiaoping, another paramount figure in the Communist Party of China (CCP), proposed the concept of a socialist market economy. This reform ultimately opened the country to foreign investment and lowered other trade barriers. As a result, China grew rapidly in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, driven mainly through increased investment and production as the country's integration into regional cross-border production networks deepened.¹³ As a result, the percentage of

13 "China's Economic Transformation: Impacts on Asia and the Pacific", *ESCAP* (New York: United Nations, 2019), https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/China%27s%20economic%20transformation_impacts%20on%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific.pdf (Accessed on: November 18, 2025).

Chinese people living in poverty dropped from nearly 90% in 1981 to 6% in 2017.¹⁴ This reform also paved the way for China's grand design, BRI. In fact, China seems to be progressing towards Pax Sinica in the mid-21st century through the BRI project, following Pax Britannica, which reached its peak in the mid-19th century and was replaced by Pax Americana in the mid-20th century.¹⁵

However, BRI could potentially be interpreted as the implementation of CCP's revisionist agenda, discarding the Deng Xiaoping's strategy that stated, China was to rise if it was to "[o]bserve calmly; secure our position; cope with affairs calmly; hide our capacities and bide our time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership".¹⁶ Following Deng, President Jiang Zemin advocated for 'cooperation, multilateralism and regionalism', while President Hu Jintao pushed forward Deng's approach of 'peaceful development' to a 'strategic opportunity' for China.¹⁷ But Xi has emerged as the most formidable leader since the Mao era. China, under Xi's leadership, has been adopting a proactive foreign policy – a clear departure from Deng's low-profile foreign policy. The BRI, as Xi's pet project, essentially demonstrates a more assertive and proactive stance on regional and global affairs. According to Xi, the time has come to show strength and to recover what rightfully belongs to China. BRI affirms the shift in China's foreign policy, particularly Xi's articulation of 'China's Dream', which refers to a rejuvenated nation that is internally developed and more engaged externally.¹⁸ Accordingly, there is a common belief that China is now projecting an image of being less insular by enacting its own modern-day Marshall Plan, albeit this belief may not be entirely pure in intentions.¹⁹

14 Martin Ravallion, "A historical perspective on China's success against poverty", *Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR)*, February 4, 2021, <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/historical-perspective-chinas-success-against-poverty>, (Accessed on: January 10, 2025).

15 Deepak Nayyar, "One Belt, One Road has no basis in China's history", *Mint*, Jun 9, 2017, <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/lrHNZQcdLcDN2eTtmbC9cK/One-Belt-One-Road-has-no-basis-in-Chinas-history.html> (Accessed on: March 7, 2025).

16 Quoted in A Latham, "Offshore Balancing: A Grand Strategy for the China Dream", Retrieved from *The Diplomat*, July 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/offshore-balancing-a-grand-strategy-for-the-china-dream/> (Accessed on: January 15, 2025).

17 S Y Surendra Kumar, "China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): India's Concerns, Responses and Strategies", *International Journal of China Studies*, 2019, Vol. 10, No.1, pp.27-45.

18 Joshua P Meltzer, "China's One Belt One Road initiative: a view from United States", *Brookings*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinas-one-belt-one-road-initiative-a-view-from-the-united-states/> (Accessed on: January 9, 2025).

19 Daniel Lindley, "Assessing China's Motives: How the Belt and Road Initiative Threatens US Interest", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, (Air University Press), August 1, 2022),

BRI, which China conceived, rationalised, popularised, and is currently operationalising, is a massive geostrategic and geoeconomic initiative with several aims, including diplomatic, energy security, and economic objectives. China primarily seeks to accomplish three strategic goals through the BRI: global connectivity, regional influence, and economic dominance.²⁰ Consequently, China is leading the BRI with the aim of securing regional leadership and hegemony, motivated by both geopolitical and economic factors. According to Xi, the BRI is an attempt to counter the much-discussed American ‘pivot to Asia’, while also giving China an opportunity to forge new economic ties, expand its export market base, raise domestic incomes, and export its excess productive capacity. Simultaneously, China is driven to foster global economic ties with its western regions, which historically received less attention. Xinjiang—the most western province of China—is pivotal to China for securing its uninterrupted and long-term energy supply from Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly via routes the US military cannot impede.²¹ Thence, at the outset, BRI was partly designed to address the economic problems of Western China, which was far from the affluent ports of China’s East coast and the South China Sea.²² Additionally, China, at the time of the outset of BRI, was also confronting the Uyghur separatist movement in the western Xinjiang province that caused significant regional instability. As a result, China sought to promote economic growth to establish stability in the area.

5. South Asia: A Distinct Geo-Physiography and a Critical Node for BRI

South Asia is the southern subregion of Asia, stretching from the Himalayas in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south, and from the Ganges and Indus River valleys in the east and west. It is a triangular landmass that is frequently used interchangeably with the term ‘Indian subcontinent’.²³ South Asia has a very distinct

<https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3111114/assessing-chinas-motives-how-the-belt-and-road-initiative-threatens-us-interests/> (Accessed on: November 18, 2025).

20 Jingdong Yuan, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia and the Indian Response”, *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan, and East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 55, No. 2, June 2019, pp 3-6.

21 “China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative,” *Council on Foreign Relations (CFR)*, February 1, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>, (Accessed on: November 26, 2025).

22 “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: A Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Assessment”, *AN IISS STRATEGIC DOSSIER*, (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 17, 2022), <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/11/bri-dossier-chapter-one/> (Accessed on: November 26, 2025).

23 “South Asia” (n.d.), In: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Asia> (Accessed on: December 11, 2024).

geography and static reality, where India's setting in this region is unlike any other in Asia; therefore, other states in the region rely heavily on India for intra-regional land connectivity. Like a monolith, India borders four of the five regional, continental states – Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan. Additionally, the Maldives and Sri Lanka – as island states – are also located closer to India than any other continental Asian state.²⁴ Consequently, the agency of South Asian smaller states is constrained by India's geographic centrality as the regional hegemon. Similarly, China, the only nation apart from India, is close to every sub-region of Asia, making it the region's other shared neighbour and geographic reality. Because all the continental South Asian states border China, except for Bangladesh. Thence, South Asian nations lie, in both physical and symbolic senses, between the fastest-growing China and India and their divergent connectivity goals.

But South Asia is not a homogeneous region, although it shares commonalities in politics, language, culture, and legal and administrative processes. It remains one of the least integrated regions in the world, despite being home to more than 1.7 billion people. Interestingly, South Asia accounts for only 3.4% of the world's land surface area but hosts one-fourth of the global population, with an average annual economic growth rate of 6% since 2000.²⁵ Due to its large population, several developing nations, expanding economies, poor intraregional communication, and urgent infrastructure needs, South Asia generally appeared to be an ideal first destination for China's BRI. Since the BRI extends from Eurasia to Africa, most of its central states are in South Asia.²⁶ But China's arch-enemy, India, has long maintained traditional dominance over this region. As the dominant state in South Asia, India controls 64% of the land, 75% of the population, 78% of the GDP²⁷, and nearly 79% of all military assets' expenditure.²⁸ However, apart from this distinct geography,

24 Richard Ghiassy, "The Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia: Regional Impact and the Evolution of Perceptions and Policy Responses," in Florian Schneider (ed.), *Global Perspective on the China's Belt and Road Initiative: Asserting Agency through Regional Connectivity*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), p.267.

25 Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward", in Alexander L Vuving (ed.), *Hindsight, Insight, and Foresight: Thinking about Security in the Indo-Pacific*, (Honolulu: DKI Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2020), pp.162-63.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Antara Ghosal Singh, "China's Evolving Strategic Discourse on India: From Doklam to Galwan and Beyond", *STIMSOM Policy Paper*, May 4, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/chinas-evolving-strategic-discourse-on-india/> (Accessed on: January 29, 2025).

28 Bhumitra Chakma, "The BRI and India's Neighbourhood", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2019, pp. 183-186.

South Asia is least integrated because of its deep-rooted geopolitical landscape, particularly the geopolitical acrimony between India and Pakistan since 1947, where Pakistan, as an all-weather friend, sides with China and India currently aligns with the US, which is intertwined with the BRI to understand it clearly. To fully understand this, a more detailed analysis of the BRI's effects on South Asia should take these realities into account.

It is also undeniable that China has emerged as a true global actor, continually maintaining its footprint across all key strategic and geographic domains. One of the underlying strategic aims of the BRI for China is to secure an even more dominant position in Asia, especially in South Asia. Except for Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan, most South Asian countries have coastal borders on the Indian Ocean and other seas, making them strategic locations on the global map and vital nodes for BRI.

Figure 2: Political Map of South Asia.



Source: <http://ephsg2019.weebly.com/south-asia.html>

6. Decoding India's Security Concerns in South Asia

Kautilya, the pen name of Chanakya, in his *Mandala* (meaning 'Circles') theory cited in the *Arthashastra*, argued that 'Vijigishu' (central state or conqueror) and 'Ari' (enemies, whose territories are adjacent to *Vijigishu*) could not live together in a

peaceful manner.²⁹ Kautilya concluded in his theory that the King and his immediate neighbours are the natural enemies (*Prikritik Ari*) due to geographical proximity and the expansionist ambitions of nations. In the context of South Asia, both India and China could be regarded as 'Vijigishu'. Due to their proximity, China has consistently posed challenges for India since independence, sometimes through full-scale war or via proxies such as the Doklam or Galwan skirmishes. Mandala Theory could therefore be a valuable tool for understanding India's security concerns regarding the BRI.

6.1 Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

South Asia is a "Priority Zone"³⁰ in China's BRI, especially given its highest concentration of early-harvest projects, where China has carried out numerous infrastructure initiatives and launched its first large-scale plans. To accelerate China's BRI, Xi has been focusing on Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, and the Maldives. South Asia is currently covered by three major BRI projects—the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC), and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC). To understand the security threat posed by BRI corridors to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity, one must examine each project. Moreover, combined with shifting domestic politics in Bangladesh and Nepal and the prolonged civil conflict in Myanmar, these dynamics deepen New Delhi's concerns about sovereignty, strategic encirclement, and the erosion of regional primacy.

a. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

The main reason for India's apprehension about the BRI stems from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of the BRI, which passes through the disputed region of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), an area India claims as part of its territory. This has led Indian authorities to believe that the BRI compromises India's territorial integrity and sovereignty, a belief that serves as a focal point of India's opposition to the initiative. The Indian government has consistently articulated its concerns about the BRI, viewing it as a strategic manoeuvre by China to expand its influence in South Asia at the expense of Indian interests. In 2015, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar stated about CPEC, expressing

29 Ramesh Kumar and Akshat Pushpam, "Strategic Importance of Gilgit-Baltistan in India's Neighborhood Foreign Policy," *ZENITH International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, Vol. 11, No. 10, October 2021, pp. 27–30.

30 Hina Aslam, "BRI for Trade and Connectivity in South Asia: A CPEC Model," in Kalyan Raj Sharma (ed.), *Belt and Road Initiative and South Asia*, (London: Routledge, 2023), pp. 39–54.

concern that it is a “national Chinese initiative” devised without broader consultation.³¹ Former Minister of State for External Affairs M J Akbar also clearly summarised the Indian position on CPEC as follows:

...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 a lack of appreciation of India's concerns on the issue of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The government has conveyed to the Chinese side, including at the highest level, its concerns about their activities in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and asked them to cease these activities...³²

However, Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang first proposed CPEC in May 2013 during his visit to Pakistan.³³ This massive \$62 billion³⁴ multifunctional 3,000 km infrastructure project, the most significant Chinese investment abroad, is aimed at building a vast network of roads, railroads, and pipelines for oil and gas transportation and will use Pakistan as a trade bridge between China and Europe and the Middle East.³⁵ CPEC is a long-term plan (2017- 2030) which was not made public until December 2017.³⁶ With the completion of the first phase of CPEC, work on the second phase has begun, and it is expected that CPEC will connect China's westernmost city, Kashgar in Xinjiang, with the port of Gwadar in Balochistan (a province in southwest Pakistan). Owing to its proximity to the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, this port could serve as a transshipment hub for China's energy supply, obviating the need to cross the Strait of Malacca in Southeast Asia.

How China's Achilles Heel– the Strait of Malacca– might be addressed by CPEC?

31 IISS Fullerton Lecture—India, the United States and China, July 20, 2015, Singapore, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=et2ihw8jHaY>.

32 “Belt and Road Initiative of China”, *Rajya Sabha*, Question no.2735, August 10, 2017, https://www.mea.gov.in/rajyasabha.htm?dtl/28857/QUESTION_NO2735_BELT_AND_ROAD_INITIATIVE_OF_CHINA (Accessed on: January 10, 2025).

33 Khalid Mehmood Alam, Xuemei Li & Saranjam Baig, “Impact of Transport Cost and Travel Time on Trade under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)”, *Hindawi: Journal of Advanced Transportation*, Vol. 2019, p.2.

34 Anu Anwar, “South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward”, *op. cit.*, p.166.

35 Syed Shujat Husain, Muhammad Asif Shamim, S.M. Shoaib Wasim, Aalia Aslam and Umair Ansari, “CPEC and Indian Concerns: A Serious Threat for Regional Stability”, *Webology*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2019, pp.1270-73.

36 Peter Cai, *Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative* (Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy, March 2017).

With a total area of 65,000 sq km³⁷ and only 2.7 km wide at its narrowest point,³⁸ the Strait of Malacca is a natural maritime chokepoint that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific through the South China Sea. This strategically so important 800 km funnel-shaped stretch of water lies like a river between the Malaysian peninsula and Indonesian Sumatra to the West, and Southern Thailand to the East. About 25% of oil transported between the Middle East and Asia passes through this strait, which accounts for about 60% of the global maritime transport. As one of the most heavily travelled shipping channels, this strait accounts for about 60% of international maritime trade and is traversed by over 150 ships per day, most of which are colossal oil tankers from China and Japan.³⁹ Being the second-largest economy and energy user, about 83% of China's oil imports are transported by sea, with 77% of those imports passing through the Strait of Malacca, which might act as a possible bottleneck for China.⁴⁰ China is truly reliant on this strait for its daily transportation of 4 million barrels of crude oil, which is considered as the economic lifeline of China.⁴¹ However, the South China Sea is a disputed area involving China, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia, where the US remains vigilant with its naval fleets. China is feared to face a possible blockade of the Strait of Malacca by the US and its allies – often referred to as the Chinese Malacca Dilemma – which could choke its energy-import-dependent domestic diplomacy, rendering China's economy inoperable. With CPEC, China could easily avoid the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea. Since Gwadar and Kashgar are about 1,500 km apart, but this will cut the energy supply route by about 12,000 km.⁴² China imports its oil to Shanghai via the Strait of

37 T. Long, Yen Tran, H. Huynh. & H. Tran, "Competition of Strategy Between China and India in the Indian Ocean Nowadays", *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No.2, 2023, pp. 454-468.

38 John C. Hulsman, "Xi Jinping is about to make the most important strategic decision of our era", *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, Jul 18, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/xi-jinping-make-most-important-strategic-decision-era> (Accessed on: December 11, 2024).

39 Kashif Khan and Omid Ali, "China-India Counterbalancing Measures through International Corridors and Ports: The Focus on Chabahar and Gwadar Ports", *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No.2, 2023, p.146.

40 Khalid Mehmood Alam, Xuemei Li & Saranjam Baig, "Impact of Transport Cost and Travel Time on Trade under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)", *op. cit.*

41 Mudassar Hussain Shah, Saima Kausar and Danish Sarwar, "Crisis Perception on CPEC: How India Is Using Regional and Pakistan's Domestic Issues in Manufacturing Global Pseudo Discourse", *NDU Journal*, 36, 2022, pp.38-49.

42 Crisis Group Asia Report, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks", *Report N°297*, (Belgium: International Crisis Group, June 29, 2018), <https://www.crisisgroup.org>.

Malacca, which now takes three months to cross a distance of 16,000 km, whereas with CPEC, the shipment period will be shortened to a few days, covering only 3,218 km.⁴³ Additionally, despite being a deep-sea port, Gwadar will also be able to accommodate aircraft carriers and submarines, which essentially act as a strategic and military rationale for the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) behind the port's expansion.⁴⁴

Figure 3: China's Malacca Dilemma



Source: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/considerations-prospective-chinese-naval-base-africa/>

Why is India worried?

India refused to participate in the first, second, and third Belt and Road Forums (BRFs), held in 2017, 2019, and 2023, due to concerns about the CPEC and its route

[org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/297-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-opportunities-and-risks](https://www.africacenter.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/297-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-opportunities-and-risks) (Accessed on: January 22, 2025).

43 Zofeen T. Ebrahim, "China Pakistan Economic Corridor: A boon for the economy a bane for locals", *DAWN*, January 30, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1236159/china-pakistan-economic-corridor-a-boon-for-the-economy-a-bane-for-locals> (Accessed on: February 6, 2025).

44 Peter Cai, "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative", *op. cit.*

through Pakistan.⁴⁵ India has three major concerns regarding CPEC: territorial sovereignty, security, and the deepening China-Pakistan strategic partnership.⁴⁶

CPEC passes through Kashmir, which has been a disputed territory since the creation of Pakistan. Three countries have a shared part in this territory, including India (Jammu and Kashmir), China (Aksai Chin), and Pakistan (Azad Kashmir & GB/Pakistan-occupied Kashmir).⁴⁷ For CPEC, it begins at the Arabian Sea port of Gwadar in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, and then travels along the Karakoram Highway through the Khunjerab Pass in Gilgit-Baltistan before entering the Kashgar Prefecture in Xinjiang, China.⁴⁸

Figure 4: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)



Source: <https://www.etvbharat.com/en!/opinion/attacks-on-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-enn24040102600>

45 Syed Shujat Husain, Muhammad Asif Shamim, S.M Shoaib Wasim, Aalia Aslam and Umair Ansari, "CPEC and Indian Concerns: A Serious Threat for Regional Stability", *op. cit.*

46 Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward", *op. cit.*, pp.165-66.

47 Herbert Traxl, "South Asia and India", *AIES Fokus 9/2021*, Special Series on the Strategic Review of Global Hotspots, 2021, <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2021/fokus-09.php> (Accessed on: December 10, 2024).

48 Crisis Group Asia Report, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks", *op. cit.*

Most of the area that is thought to be Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) is located in the GB region, formerly known as Northern Areas until 2009⁴⁹ – and India has always considered PoK as an integral part of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Although Chinese presence in Gwadar has garnered more media attention, there will be much larger investments in PoK, especially in GB. For instance, under the CPEC, Gwadar is anticipated to receive USD 793 million, while PoK would get USD 5.94 billion, of which only infrastructure projects in GB are projected to be worth USD 2 billion.⁵⁰ Because all three prospective routes of CPEC pass from Pakistan to China through GB.⁵¹

The strategic location of GB gives Beijing a massive advantage against India. The semi-autonomous GB region, which covers 72,971 sq km, is located in northern Pakistan, bordering India to the east, China to the northeast, and Afghanistan to the northwest.⁵² It is a mountainous region where the world's most incredible mountain ranges – the Himalayas, the Karakoram, the Hindukush, and the Pamir – converge, making it one of the most geographically significant areas in the world.⁵³ India sees CPEC's GB component as a violation of its sovereignty and territorial integrity and as a disregard of its historical claim over PoK. According to India's claim, this region is a part of J&K, which has now illegally been occupied by Pakistan since 1947 and India also rejects Pakistan's deliberate cession of the part of this region called Shaksgam Valley to China under the 1963 border agreement. Indian analysts believe that, through CPEC, China is attempting to redefine the territorial status quo in the region.⁵⁴ In fact, the Shaksgam Agreement endorsed that after the settlement of the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan, the sovereign authority concerned would reopen negotiations with China. This was essentially an acknowledgement that

49 Mudassar Hussain Shah, Saima Kausar and Danish Sarwar, "Crisis Perception on CPEC: How India Is Using Regional and Pakistan's Domestic Issues in Manufacturing Global Pseudo Discourse", *op. cit.*, pp.38-49.

50 *Ibid.*

51 Crisis Group Asia Report, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks", *op. cit.*

52 Izhar Hunzai, "Conflict Dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan", *United States Institute of Peace (USIP) Special Report 321*, January 2023, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR321.pdf> (Accessed on: February 12, 2025).

53 I. Storey, "China's Malacca Dilemma", *China Brief* 6, NO.8, The Jamestown Foundation, April 12, 2006, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-malacca-dilemma/> (Accessed on: August 28, 2025).

54 Vikram Sood, "The strategic importance of Gilgit Baltistan", *Observer Research Foundation (ORF)*, August 24, 2016, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-strategic-importance-of-gilgit-baltistan> (Accessed on: December 4, 2024).

Pakistan did not own the indisputable rights over GB.⁵⁵ But now it seems that China does not want to wait for India and Pakistan to settle their dispute over the Kashmir issue. Instead, the perception of China was mainly echoed by Hu Shisheng, Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. According to Hu, "if India can carry out developmental projects in Arunachal Pradesh, which claimed by Beijing, China do the same in PoK. India can oppose the project passing through PoK in the same way China continues to oppose schemes in the eastern disputed area or Arunachal Pradesh".⁵⁶

There are also strategic benefits for China in selecting PoK for CPEC. CPEC will allow PLA to get very close to India's northern and western borders by scaling up China's geostrategic reach inside Pakistan. Ladakh is pivotal to maintaining India's presence on the Siachen Glacier because Ladakh provides physical access to this frozen battlefield. And to the west of Siachen, across the Saltino Ridge, Pakistan-controlled GB is stationed. China occupies Aksai Chin to the east of it. India has been able to separate China and Pakistan in maintaining its position on the Siachen Glacier.⁵⁷ CPEC in this area will strengthen China's hold over PoK by weighing down India's position in the region. J&K would be surrounded on three sides by the Chinese road network through the Shaksgam Valley (about 5,000 square miles), which connects the Karakoram Highway to the Tibet-Xinxiang Highway.⁵⁸ As CPEC is routed through GB and PoK, if the CPEC is successful, India's claim over this 73,000 sq km region will be undermined, and the region's status as internationally recognised Pakistani territory will be strengthened.⁵⁹ As Professor Harsh V. Pant argues:

China's decision to construct major civil, energy and military infrastructure projects in the CPEC, which runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) and the areas of Gilgit and Baltistan, has essentially accorded de facto 'legitimacy' to Pakistan's illegal occupation of these areas.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Quoted in Monika Chansoria, "China's Current Kashmir Policy: Steady Crystallization", *CLAWS Journal*, Winter 2016, pp. 68-80.

⁵⁷ I. Storey, "China's Malacca Dilemma", *op cit.*

⁵⁸ Rohini Saini, "CPEC: Exploring Pakistan as a Reliable Partner for China and its Implications on India. *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3, December 20, 2021, pp.465-67.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Harsh V. Pant, "The China-Pakistan axis gains momentum and could pull India into a war on two fronts", *Daily Mail*, April 15, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/article-3542499/The-China-Pakistan-axis-gains-momentum-pull-India-war-two-fronts.html> (Accessed on: December 3, 2024).

Figure 5: Location of Gilgit-Baltistan and Siachen Glacier

Source: <https://www.iasgyan.in/daily-current-affairs/siachen-glacier>

India is also worried about the CPEC because of the strategic Karakoram Highway (KKH), also dubbed as the China-Pakistan Friendship Highway. KKH was built between 1959 and 1978 by piercing through the formidable Karakoram-Himalayan mountainous range, running from the strategic trade post of Kashgar in Xinjiang and snakes its way through GB at Kunjeram mountainous pass (15,397 ft) to link the small city of Hasan Abdal near Pakistan's capital of Islamabad.⁶¹ KKH gives China a window to the Persian Gulf, particularly Iran and to the Indian Ocean. In recent years, the 1,300 km-long Karakoram Highway was upgraded to the Karakoram Railway Corridor, which falls under the CPEC, and will link Kasghar with Havelia near Rawalpindi through the Khunjeram Pass in PoK, where it will join the Pakistan railway network.⁶² It has been noted that this rail line, running nearly 700 km, will transform the geopolitics of western China and the Indian subcontinent. The infrastructure of the Karakoram Railway Corridor will be built upon the existing KKH. In addition, as part of CPEC, KKH is being widened and repaved to turn it into an all-weather expressway, which is fundamental to the growth of the port of Gwadar.⁶³

61 "Karakoram Highway" (n.d.), in Encyclopedia Britannica online, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Karakoram-Highway> (Accessed on: February 2, 2025).

62 Vijay Sakhuja, "The Karakoram Corridor: China's Transportation Network in Pakistan", *China Brief*, Vol. 10, Issue 20, October 8, 2010, pp. 5-7.

63 *Ibid.*



Figure 6: Karakoram Highway (KKH)

Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Karakoram-Highway_fig2_369389483

Under CPEC, China is also planning to construct a 3,000 km (1860 mi) railway link from Kashgar to Gwadar through the disputed PoK, which could cost about USD 57.7 billion. This proposed CPEC rail network, although highly ambitious and the costliest transport infrastructure, will link the Chinese province of Xinjiang with the Arabian Sea, enabling China to bypass the Strait of Malacca. India registered a strong protest against it, as it will also pass through PoK.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ "At \$58 billion, China's CPEC railway to Pakistan to be its costliest Transport Infrastructure: Study", *The Times of India*, April 28, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/at-58-billion-chinas-cpec-railway-to-pakistan-to-be-its-costliest-transport-infra-study/articleshow/99830257.cms> (Accessed on: February 15, 2025).

Figure 7: Proposed CPEC Rail Corridor

Source: <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514f3249444f34457a6333566d54/index.html>

In recent years, CPEC has experienced terrorist attacks, particularly by the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), an umbrella organisation of Baluch separatists. Baluchistan, which makes up more than 40% of Pakistan's landmass but only 6% of the total population, has a long history of political unrest and separatist movements. BLA separatists attacked China's consulate in Karachi in 2018. The central government of Pakistan developed CPEC's long-term plan (2017-2030) with minimal input from business, civil society, or local leaders.⁶⁵ There are reportedly 30,000 Chinese nationals currently working on CPEC-related projects in Pakistan.⁶⁶ Furthermore, following the suicide attack on Chinese engineers at Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan in March 2024, China is thinking of deploying PLA personnel to guard its CPEC assets. However, 15,000 Pakistani military personnel, under a Special Security Division, are already assigned to secure CPEC

⁶⁵ Crisis Group Asia Report, "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks", *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward", *op. cit.* p.167.

installations.⁶⁷ As a result, CPEC may lead to a greater Chinese military presence in the disputed territory of PoK, with profound security implications for India.

So, CPEC's real intention is to balance India by maintaining China's presence in its backyard. The entire strategy may be summed up as geopolitical balancing, which appears to be based on the ancient Chinese idea of geographical encirclement strategies used in the Chinese game of *Weiqi*.⁶⁸ In that scenario, Pakistan serves as a crucial lynchpin for China to leverage its military diplomacy footprint in South Asia, particularly in India's backyard.

b. Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC)

Nepal signed the BRI agreement in 2017, when relations with India were at their lowest point following an alleged border blockade imposed by India in 2015 over New Delhi's dissatisfaction with some clauses in Nepal's new constitution. Under this agreement, one of the key projects is the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network (THMDCN) (also referred to as Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor), which aims to connect Kathmandu and Tibet through railways, roads and digital infrastructures.

In parallel with the ongoing CPEC with Pakistan, Beijing hopes to provide an alternative to Kathmandu's traditional reliance on Indian ports for trade and the movement of commodities by building the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC). Nepal came into direct contact with China only after the annexation of Tibet in 1950-51.⁶⁹ Nepal is critical to China due to geostrategic considerations, as it served as a passageway for Tibetans in 1959 to escape Chinese brutalities. Therefore, China has sensitivities that Tibetan separatism and activism could be exported to Tibet from India via Nepal, as India has established itself as a bastion of support for Tibetans by providing asylum to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala.⁷⁰

67 DCS Mayal, "Decoding Chinese Military Diplomacy in South Asia", *Observer Research Foundation. ORF Issue Brief No. 744*, October 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/decoding-chinese-military-diplomacy-in-south-asia> (Accessed on January 7, 2025).

68 *Weiqi* is the Chinese name for the classic board game, which has a history of over 3,000 years. Originating in ancient China, *Weiqi* is very popular in East Asia and embodies strategic complexity despite its simple rules.

69 Rishi Gupta, "Nepal's Geopolitical Crossroads: Balancing China, India, and the United States," *Asia Society Policy Institute (USA)*, September 20, 2023, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/nepals-geopolitical-crossroads-balancing-china-india-and-united-states> (Accessed on January 1, 2025).

70 *Ibid.*

So, taking Nepal into the BRI agreement, China has its own greater geopolitical consideration. THEC revolves around the not-yet-built China-Nepal Railway, which will link Kathmandu with Southern Tibet. Despite being an autonomous region, China wants to exert greater influence over Tibet by bringing Tibet under central Chinese rule, which has historically been used as a buffer zone between China and India.⁷¹ The rivalry between China and India in the Himalayas is expected to intensify, complicating the security dilemma between the two countries.⁷² According to the security dilemma theory, in anarchy, “states assume the worst about each other’s intentions” and therefore tend to maximise their own security perceptions as a defensive stance.⁷³ This, in turn, creates the potential for similar actions. For China and India, the same reasoning holds true.

The China-Nepal Railway – a core of THMDCN – will be one of the toughest railways from both technical and financial perspectives, as it requires crossing the lofty, rugged, and environmentally fragile Himalayan terrain. Just after India’s trade blockade, Nepal sought to build alternative trade routes to avoid its overdependence on its southern neighbour, which ultimately led Nepal to move forward with China’s cross-border railway proposal.⁷⁴ It will link Kerung in southern Tibet to Nepal’s capital, Kathmandu, via Nepal’s Rasuwa district.

The THEC could pose a challenge for India on both economic and security fronts. This corridor, due to its deepened presence near India’s northern border, may shift Nepal’s traditional stance of equidistance between India and China, enhancing China’s influence and strengthening its foothold in Nepal. Chinese Infrastructure development (rail, roads, and other transportation links, etc.) and improved connectivity in Nepal, centred on THEC, may have a dual-use nature, ultimately heightening Indian military concern. Moreover, the infrastructure of this corridor may

71 Anu Anwar, “South Asia and China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward”, *op. cit.* p.170.

72 Darshana M. Baruah, “India’s Answer to the Belt and Road: A Road Map for South Asia”, *CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE*, August 21, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2018/08/indias-answer-to-the-belt-and-road-a-road-map-for-south-asia?lang=en> (Accessed on: January 25, 2025).

73 Safiqul Islam, Huang Ailian & Zhang Jie, “Major Challenges and Remedies in Building the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor”, *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Vol. 4, No.4, 2018, pp.7-8.

74 Prithvi Man Shrestha, “Feasibility study of Nepal-China railway on track, department says”, *The Kathmandu Post*, December 14, 2023, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2023/12/14/feasibility-study-of-nepal-china-railway-on-track-department-says> (Accessed on: December 1, 2024).

facilitate the Chinese authorities' access to remote Himalayan regions, raising fears of possible Chinese incursion or increased activities near the delicate India-Nepal-China trijunction.

Figure 8: Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network



Source: <https://sundayguardianlive.com/world/strategic-china-kathmandu-rail-line-gather-speed-post-wang-yis-visit>

c. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM-EC)

BCIM-EC, a giant sub-regional connectivity framework spearheaded by China, which was formally mooted by the 'Kunming Declaration' in 1999, aims at creating a sub-regional cooperation zone that connects the relatively underdeveloped regions of southwest China and northeast India via Bangladesh and Myanmar. As part of the BRI, China intends to promote six planned economic corridors, including BCIM-EC. However, the multilateral rationale of BCIM-EC was compromised when the BRI was announced in September 2013, and the BCIM Forum was subsequently incorporated into the broader BRI framework, altering the 'sub-regional cooperation' aspect of BCIM-EC into a Chinese unilateral vision.

The goal of proposed BCIM-EC is to link 20 major cities of BCIM countries through a 2,800 km economic corridor which is expected to begin in Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, and travel through Jessore, Dhaka, and Sylhet in Bangladesh, Imphal of Manipur and Silchar of Assam in Northeastern India, and Ka Lay, Monywa, Mandalay, Lashio, and Muse in Myanmar before arriving in Kunming, the capital of

China's Yunnan Province.⁷⁵ Prior to China's introduction of BRI, the BCIM-EC was perceived by India as a single project for mutual benefits. But as BRI is currently operational and the primary focus of constant debate and discussion, there is a sense that China's grand strategy of trans-boundary connectivity needs to be critically examined to better comprehend its ramifications for India's strategic interests.⁷⁶

Through the BCIM-EC, northeast India will be integrated with Bangladesh, China and Myanmar. Encircled by these countries, northeast India is mostly cut off from mainland India. Nearly 90% of its 4,500 km land border is shared with five neighbouring countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, and southern China. Northeast India is connected to mainland India by only a 21 km landmass, known as the Siliguri Corridor (also locally called the 'chicken neck corridor'), which accounts for only 2% of this region's border with mainland India.⁷⁷ There have been numerous unresolved issues between India and China since the 1950s, primarily border disputes, the Tibet and Dalai Lama issues, the Pakistan factor, India's fear of China's 'String of Pearls' strategy, and China's concern about possible encirclement by the United States through deepening strategic ties with India. As a result, the relationship between India and China has been marked by ongoing strategic mistrust.⁷⁸

Northeast India, which consists of seven states, is a severely insurgency-prone area where separatist activities have been operational since 1947. Northeast has long been ignored and geographically isolated for many years, resulting in underdevelopment and an ethnic insurgency problem. India is concerned that BCIM-EC might increase China's geopolitical clout and, in the worst-case scenario, encourage the separatist aspirations of the numerous tribes in the northeastern region.⁷⁹ Therefore, India does not want its geopolitical rival to gain access to this region through BICM-EC connectivity, as this could undermine its stability. Additionally, India also fears that if BCIM-EC is constructed, Indian products will lose their market share and Chinese goods will take over the markets of northeast India and other BCIM countries.

75 "Tapping the Potential of BCIM", *The Financial Express*, February 18, 2021, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/views/tapping-the-potential-of-bcim-ec-1550415602> (Accessed on: January 10, 2025).

76 K. Yhome, "The BCIM economic corridor: Prospects and challenges", *Observer Research Foundation*, February 10, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-bcim-economic-corridor-prospects-and-challenges> (Accessed on: December 17, 2024).

77 *Ibid.*

78 Safiqul Islam, Huang Ailian & Zhang Jie, "Major Challenges and Remedies in Building the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor", *op. cit.*

79 Anu Anwar, "South Asia and China's Belt and Road Initiative: Security Implications and Ways Forward", *op. cit.*, p.168.

As a result, despite India's commitment to the BCIM, New Delhi is likely to want to take its time implementing it until it connects its internal linkages with the Northeastern region. Likewise, China didn't open the western area until it was fully integrated with the mainland.⁸⁰

Figure 9: BCIM Economic Corridor



Source: <https://www.insightsonindia.com/2019/04/29/bangladesh-china-india-myanmar-bcim-economic-corridor/>

6.2 Recent Political Instability in South Asia and the Deepening of China's BRI Influence

Recent political turbulence in South Asia has notably heightened India's concerns, as it provides China with an opportunity to expand its BRI-related foothold. Although India's worries regarding the BRI have traditionally focused on physical corridors such as CPEC, THEC, and BCIM, recent political developments in Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar are undermining India's traditional strategic stance, opening the door for China in this region. These incidents should not be seen as mere peripheral issues but rather as catalysts for China's deeper penetration of BRI in continental South Asia.

a. Bangladesh 2024: Political Upheaval and China's Expanding Leverage

⁸⁰ K. Yhome, "The BCIM economic corridor: Prospects and challenges", *op. cit.*

The political upheaval in Bangladesh during July–August 2024 introduced a new and significant element to India’s continental security concerns related to the BRI. This crisis created opportunities for China to assume a greater role in Bangladesh’s political economy. Historically seen, Bangladesh and China did not get along immediately after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, but following the establishment of diplomatic relationship in 1976, China gradually has been an important ally and Bangladesh’s key suppliers of defense weapons – for instance, according to Swedish think tank SIPRI, between 2019 and 2023, China supplied 72% of the weapons Bangladesh needed.⁸¹ Additionally, China has been Bangladesh’s largest trading partner for 13 years in a row, and Chinese investments in Bangladesh reached USD 3.2 billion by 2023, making it the nation’s second-largest source of foreign investment.⁸²

Conversely, as neighbours, India and Bangladesh share a complex blend of relationships shaped by deep-rooted bonds of history, language, culture, regional geopolitics, and mutual interdependence. The phrase “one cannot choose one’s neighbor” stands true for both Bangladesh and India in a similar way. Bangladesh, surrounded on three sides by India, shares the world’s fifth-longest porous border (4,096 km), often referred to as ‘India locked’, and its access to the Bay of Bengal has, until now, been dominated by the Indian Navy. To India, Bangladesh is crucial not only for its security – that is, containing the insurgency in the northeastern territories (colloquially known as ‘Seven Sisters’), preventing the drug and human trafficking, and deploying forces via Siliguri Corridor, which runs north of Bangladesh – but also for the development and integration of the northeast by utilizing the territorial access that Bangladesh has already granted and also for India’s strategic ‘Neighborhood First’ and ‘Act East’ policies.⁸³

However, the 2024 student-led mobilisation and the subsequent ouster of the long-standing Sheikh Hasina government altered the diplomatic tenor. Hasina’s administration had adopted a somewhat India-friendly diplomatic stance since 2009. But the current interim administration emerged amid heightened anti-India sentiment

81 Ms Manshi Suhag, “India and Bangladesh: A Strategic Partnership Revisited for the 21st Century”, *CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES*, May 2, 2024, <https://cenjows.in/india-and-bangladesh-a-strategic-partnership-revisited-for-the-21st-century/> (Accessed on: February 25, 2025).

82 Syed Munir Khasru, “Why Bangladesh’s India-China balancing act is becoming increasingly difficult”, *The Indian Express*, July 12, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bangladesh-indo-china-sheikh-hasina-9448869/> (Accessed on: March 4, 2025).

83 Atif Jala Ahmad, “Bangladesh’s BRI Conundrum: Between China and India”, *South Asia Voices*, November 10, 2020, <https://southasianvoices.org/bangladeshs-bri-conundrum-between-china-and-india/> (Accessed on: March 8, 2025).

among the Bangladeshi people.⁸⁴ In fact, amid the souring of India-Bangladesh relations following Hasina's overthrow, the interim administration appears to be seeking to avoid Indian pressure by diversifying Bangladesh's partnerships and increasing engagement with China and Pakistan – two nations India considers strategic adversaries.⁸⁵ In fact, one of the main issues that influenced the 2024 movement in Bangladesh was India's access to Bangladesh's road and rail networks, as well as the need to connect with Northeast India. Connectivity, infrastructure development, geopolitics, and great power rivalry all played a role in the background of the political events that unfolded in Bangladesh then and continue to influence the present. For example, just before being ousted from power, the Sheikh Hasina-led government signed a railway transit agreement with India in June 2024, offering an alternative route through Bangladesh for India to connect the Northeastern states, bypassing the Siliguri Corridor. This was a first-of-its-kind agreement between South Asian nations, which sparked a firestorm of criticism from opposition parties and public discontent, labelling it an anti-state, national-security-compromising agreement.⁸⁶

India has good reasons to be concerned about Chinese double-dealing (economic investments cloaked in strategic intent) in Bangladesh through the BRI and other channels. Beijing's recent interest in modernising Bangladesh's military capabilities is not entirely commercial, but it must be understood in the framework of China's broader strategic objectives of counterbalancing India's long-standing influence in the Bay of Bengal and South Asia. For instance, as of April 2025, according to several reports, Bangladesh is apparently weighing the China-backed plan to revive a World War II-era airfield in its northern Lalmonirhat district, located alarmingly just 10 kilometres off the Indian border, which could potentially endanger India's security along its eastern border, particularly the Chicken's Neck. If it is really built with Chinese assistance, this airbase might be a dual-use facility that hides Chinese

84 "The dimming of Bangladesh–India relations", *International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), Strategic Comment*, Vol. 31(03), February 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2025/02/the-dimming-of-bangladeshindia-relations/> (Accessed on: March 24, 2025).

85 K.M. Seethi, "Corridors of Contest: Is Bangladesh's Turn to China Redrawing South Asia's Geopolitical Map?" *The Geopolitics (TGP)*, April 17, 2025, <https://thegeopolitics.com/corridors-of-contest-is-bangladeshs-turn-to-china-redrawing-south-asias-geopolitical-map/> (Accessed on: April 20, 2025).

86 Faisal Mahmud, "Proposed India-Bangladesh Rail Link Sparks Mix of Optimism and Backlash," *Anadolu Agency*, July 2, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/proposed-india-bangladesh-rail-link-sparks-mix-of-optimism-and-backlash/3264175> (Accessed on: September 20, 2025).

military capabilities under the pretence of civilian infrastructure.⁸⁷ Moreover, the recent Chinese entry into the Teesta project has further strained India's security. The Transboundary Teesta River, spanning 258 miles, originates in Sikkim and flows through West Bengal before entering northern Bangladesh. It is crucial for irrigation and livelihoods in the country's northern districts, such as Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, and Kurigram. It has long been a source of conflict between India and Bangladesh. Recently, when the Bangladesh government solicited Chinese investment in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (estimated to cost around USD 1 billion) in February 2025 as part of the BRI, it caused worry in India. India fears that the river's proximity to the Siliguri Corridor will give China strategic leverage, complicating India's negotiations with Bangladesh on future water-sharing agreements, while Chinese engineers may also use water-flow data to influence regional security dynamics.⁸⁸

However, the 2024 political upheavals in Bangladesh and their aftermath demonstrate how domestic political dynamics in a neighbouring country can realign alliances. Anti-Indian sentiment centred on connectivity projects coincided with increased acceptance of Chinese finance and technology, raising concerns about the BRI's capacity to reshape South Asia's balance of influence. As a result, Bangladesh's crisis reinforces the structural connection between BRI investments and the decline of India's geopolitical comfort zone on its vulnerable eastern flank.

b. Nepal 2025 Crisis: China's Expanding Himalayan Influence

Nepal became the third South Asian nation-after Sri Lanka in 2022 and Bangladesh in 2024-to witness a youth-led uprising that toppled its government. Since declaring itself a republic in 2008, Nepal has faced continuous political instability due to the absence of a long-lasting government. Nepal borders China to the North and India on three sides, and its geography links its domestic politics closely to regional power struggles. For India, Nepal is not just a neighbour but also a key part of its first line of defence, acting both as a shield and a vulnerability, serving as a buffer along its most fragile frontier.⁸⁹ Given Nepal's strategic location, both India and China are

87 "India Turns Siliguri Corridor (Chicken Neck) into Fortress: Rafales, S-400s Deployed Amid Rising China-Bangladesh Threat," *Defence Security Asia*, April 7, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/india-turns-siliguri-corridor-chicken-neck-into-fortress-rafales-s-400s-deployed-amid-rising-china-bangladesh-threat/>, (Accessed on: December 12, 2025).

88 Anil Khosla, "Bangladesh Tries Creating Thorns in India's Achilles Heal, A Region Defended by Rafale, BrahMos, S-400", *Eurasian Times*, April 14, 2025, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/defended-by-rafale-brahmos-s-400-can-bangladesh-threaten-indias-chicken-neck-with-chinese-help/>, Accessed on: April 20, 2025.

89 Paulo Aguiar, "Nepal Between Giants: India-China Rivalry in the Himalayas," *Geopolitical Monitor*, October 3, 2025, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/nepal-between-giants-india-china-rivalry-in-the-himalayas/> (Accessed on: January 15, 2026).

competing for influence, leading to accusations that the two Asian giants are interfering in Nepal's internal affairs.⁹⁰

In September 2025, widespread protests in Nepal, led by Gen Z, forced Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to resign. The September crisis emerged amid rising Chinese involvement in Nepal's infrastructure sector, particularly the China–Nepal Railway and related cross-border energy and digital projects.⁹¹ These initiatives signified not only economic aid but also strategic influence over areas traditionally within India's sphere of influence. Though historically close to India, Nepal's foreign alignments have recently shifted with domestic politics. KP Sharma Oli was widely seen as leaning towards Beijing.⁹² In fact, the Chinese Communist Party worked hard to unify the Nepal Communist Party and successfully brought it to power in 2018. In return, Beijing secured binding assurances that the Nepali government would support China on key issues such as Taiwan and Tibet, along with a clear commitment to Nepali participation in the BRI.⁹³ Recent instability in Nepal could naturally cause China to worry about losing influence, broken investment commitments, or even border security challenges. However, this chaos is not solely a threat but also a chance for China to strengthen its ties through aid, concessional credit, BRI infrastructure investment, or party-to-party diplomacy. It has, in fact, created a complex yet strategically advantageous situation for BRI by shifting the balance of power in Beijing's favour. Because in Maoist logic, "great chaos" means an increase in the ability to "divide and rule," a powerful tool for maintaining lasting influence.⁹⁴ Thus, even as Nepal's political future remains uncertain, the current unrest may raise the potential for greater Chinese influence once the political dust settles.

At the same time, Nepal's instability in 2025 briefly shifted its external alignment, revealing how China's BRI-linked political investments can sway domestic affairs

90 "Nepal turmoil adds to India's woes in South", *BBC News*, September 10, 2025 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c8xrqld50dko>, (Accessed on: January 5, 2026).

91 "China's Engagement in Nepal's Infrastructure: Status, Issues and Challenges," *Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy (CESIF)*, July 15, 2025, <http://cesifnepal.org/080825-chinas-engagement-in-nepals-infrastructure-status-issues-and-challenges>, (Accessed on: January 11, 2026).

92 Paulo Aguiar, "Nepal Between Giants: India–China Rivalry in the Himalayas," *op. cit.*

93 Vijay Gokhale, "China's Influence in Nepal Isn't Limitless," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 6, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/04/chinas-influence-in-nepal-isnt-limitless?lang=en>, (Accessed on January 16, 2026).

94 Pham Quang Hien, "Why China Need Not Worry About Nepal?" *Modern Diplomacy*, September 26, 2025, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/09/26/why-china-need-not-worry-about-nepal/>, [moderndiplomacy.eu], (Accessed on January 15, 2026).

and modify regional power dynamics. For India, Nepal's crisis thus reinforced the view that BRI is not just an economic project but also a strategic tool that directly impacts India's northern border, highlighting how Sino-Indian rivalry increasingly manifests through the domestic politics of smaller neighbouring states.

c. Myanmar Civil War: CMEC Vulnerabilities and India's Eastern Security Risks

The ongoing civil war in Myanmar, which began following the 2021 military coup, remains in constant flux. Initially, the military junta (*Tatmadaw*) government seemed to have the upper hand, but it is now facing difficulties after the coordinated and unprecedented attack from October 2023, known as 'Operation 1027', by three major ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), collectively referred to as the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BA).⁹⁵ Given this background, China is now pursuing a double-standard policy in Myanmar, which is more pragmatic and primarily motivated by economic and geopolitical interests. Beijing initially supported the 3BA offensive involving two pro-China EAOs, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). China is now carefully backing the junta's State Administration Council (SAC) to limit the growing influence of India over junta leaders and to keep its connections in Myanmar through CMEC safe.⁹⁶ Conversely, China also supports EAOs to safeguard its economic interests, where junta control has been limited. Beijing's foremost interest in Myanmar is gaining access to the Indian Ocean via Myanmar's ports, which, in turn, depends on the junta's ability to maintain control and stability in the country. Myanmar's civil war conflicts are unevenly distributed across the country, emphasising its multifront nature. It is most intense in the central Sagaing region (near Mandalay), northern Shan State, and Rakhine State, where prominent CMEC projects and other Chinese investments have been directly involved and affected.⁹⁷ China has already received economic and strategic concessions from the SAC chief regarding the implementation of the ambitious CMEC project.⁹⁸

For India, the stakes are equally high. Sharing a border of about 1,600 km with north-eastern Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, India's main concerns regarding Myanmar

95 Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan and Scott N. Romaniuk, "China's Geopolitical Balancing Act in Post-Coup Myanmar," *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/chinas-geopolitical-balancing-act-in-post-coup-myanmar/> (Accessed on January 25, 2026).

96 *Ibid.*

97 Pascal Abb, Saw Kyaw Zin Khay, Indra Overland, and Roman Vakulchuk, "Road through a Broken Place: The BRI in Post-Coup Myanmar," *The Pacific Review* 38, No. 4, 2025, pp.593–61.

98 Khandakar Tahmid Rejwan and Scott N. Romaniuk, "China's Geopolitical Balancing Act in Post-Coup Myanmar," *op. cit.*

are ethnic cross-border conflict in Manipur, illicit trafficking, and geopolitical rivalry with China.⁹⁹ Beijing's renewed dominance in Myanmar, compounded with the Arakan Army's seizure of over 80 per cent of Rakhine state by the end of 2024, directly challenges India's strategic interests, its Act East Policy, and key projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project in its north-eastern states. India now faces a dilemma over whether it should engage with the Arakan Army to safeguard its regional stakes.¹⁰⁰

More broadly, India's concern about Myanmar's civil war and China's involvement with it are multifaceted. Beijing's engagement with Myanmar's military junta, along with its growing influence in Myanmar's infrastructure and resource sectors, raises worries in New Delhi for several reasons.¹⁰¹ India fears that China is taking advantage of the instability in Manipur to diminish India's influence in the northeast and bolster its position in Myanmar.¹⁰² By ensuring Myanmar stays dependent on Chinese economic and military aid, Beijing indirectly exerts pressure on India's northeastern regions, complicating New Delhi's regional security approach.¹⁰³

Taken together, these recent developments in India's neighbourhood highlight how political instability increasingly interacts with and bolsters China's BRI economic corridors. Instead of being isolated incidents, these political upheavals serve as accelerators for continental BRI expansion, reducing India's strategic space in South Asia.

7. Economic Competition (Debt Trap Policy)

BRI has become quite controversial in India, fueled by a lack of transparency in the financing of the initiative and the specific project, as well as its terms.¹⁰⁴ The concept of Debt-Trap Diplomacy (DTD), popularised by Brahma Chellaney, argues that China uses lending to economically unstable countries to gain political leverage or

99 Srinii Sitaraman, "Manipur and the Myanmar Conflict: Challenge for India with Implications for Regional Security Competition," *Security Nexus*, Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, March 2025.

100 Tin Shine Aung, "Strategic Gamble: The Arakan Army, Rakhine and India," *South Asia @ LSE*, March 10, 2025, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2025/03/10/strategic-gamble-the-arakan-army-rakhine-and-india/>, (Accessed on: January 25, 2026).

101 James Palmer, "Is China Playing Both Sides in Myanmar?" *Foreign Policy*, January 9, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/01/09/myanmar-china-border-offensive-cyberscams-three-brotherhood-alliance/>, (Accessed on: December 25, 2025).

102 Gunjan Singh, "How China and India View Growing Unrest in Myanmar," *Deccan Herald*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/how-china-and-india-view-growing-unrest-in-myanmar-3174629>, (Accessed on: February 25, 2025).

103 Srinii Sitaraman, "Manipur and the Myanmar Conflict: Challenge for India with Implications for Regional Security Competition," *op. cit.*

104 David Dollar, "Seven Years into China's Belt and Road", *The Ripon Forum*, Vol. 54, No.4, 2020.

control strategic assets.¹⁰⁵ This, DTD usually indicates the practice of a creditor nation or establishment lending money to a borrower nation with the intention of increasing the lender's political clout.¹⁰⁶ Many see Sri Lanka as a prime example of China's debt trap, which started in 2007 when China offered military and diplomatic support to Colombo against the Tamil Tigers. This ultimately led Sri Lanka to lease its Hambantota port to China for 99 years. From 2000 to 2020, Sri Lanka borrowed USD 12 billion from China to build infrastructure projects. While the concept of DTD has received substantial attention in policy and academic debates, it is also important to recognise that a large part of Sri Lanka's debt was not owed to China but rather came from loans taken from international financial markets, with Chinese loans being a part of its overall external debt. Therefore, China's role in the debt trap is a contentious issue and should be viewed as a contributing factor, but not the sole one, in Sri Lanka's debt situation. For example, Sri Lanka's total government external debt as of the end of March 2024 was \$37.0 billion, with 40% classified as commercial debt, 32% as multilateral debt, and 28% as bilateral debt.¹⁰⁷ The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank were the main multilateral creditors, accounting for over 90% of the total multilateral debt.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that Sri Lanka's foreign debt from China was considerably lower than the market borrowings and multilateral development bank borrowings.

The other South Asian country struggling with Chinese debt is Pakistan. Pakistan owed about \$100 billion in external debt, of which 30% was held by China and Chinese commercial banks, and, most importantly, much of that debt has come under CPEC.¹⁰⁹ Although China has demonstrated considerable flexibility to Pakistan in repaying debt, mainly due to Pakistan's rivalry with India, it should also recognise that China has the necessary ammunition to take charge of Gwadar through a debt-for-equity transaction, as it did with Hambantota.¹¹⁰

105 Michal Himmer & Zdeněk Rod, "Chinese debt trap diplomacy: reality or myth?" *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, VOL. 18, NO. 3, 2023, pp.250–256.

106 Rahul Ajnoti, "The Complete Story of Debt-Trap Diplomacy", *The Geopolitics (TGP)*, October 11, 2022, <https://thegeopolitics.com/the-complete-story-of-debt-trap-diplomacy/> (Accessed on: February 5, 2025).

107 "Who Holds Sri Lanka's External Debt and How China Is Assisting Sri Lanka," *Daily FT (Colombo)*, August 6, 2024, <https://www.ft.lk/columns/Who-holds-Sri-Lanka-s-external-debt-and-how-China-is-assisting-Sri-Lanka/4-765176>, (Accessed on: October 30, 2025).

108 *Ibid.*

109 Abdul Khaliq, "Pakistan's debt from China becomes burden as CPEC does not generate enough growth", *COMMITTEE FOR THE ABOLITION OF ILLEGITIMATE DEBT (CADTM INTERNATIONAL)*, May 16, 2023, <https://www.cadtm.org/CADTM>, (Accessed on: January 14, 2025).

110 Devyansh Dullar, "Unmasking the Narrative: Is China's Debt Trap Diplomacy Fact or Fiction?", *E-International Relations*, UK, August 19, 2024, <https://www.e->

8. Concluding remarks

Overall, this study demonstrates that India has some legitimate concerns about the BRI in South Asia, particularly regarding military, diplomatic, and economic issues such as sovereignty, debt vulnerabilities, and dual-use infrastructure. China has already entrenched itself in areas crucial to India's political, economic, and territorial security through important continental corridors, including BCIM EC, THEC, and CPEC. The Himalayan frontier, Gilgit Baltistan, and India's northeast are just a few of the sensitive areas where these projects intersect, increasing India's sense of strategic encirclement and shifting regional power dynamics. India, by default, seems to be a regional power in South Asia, historically exerting influence over what is often seen as its own diplomatic backyard. India has therefore generally taken a pragmatic, cautious, and reserved stance toward the BRI. But India also needs to recognise that the BRI will proceed with or without Delhi's presence. Conversely, Chinese strategists also should be well aware of the fact that India's stance matters for BRI in South Asia and India's cooperation is also crucial to pursue China's strategic objectives in South Asia due to some definite reasons: sub-continental geography, South Asia's asymmetric power structure, smaller neighboring states' dependency on India and India's relations with big powers like the USA, Russia and Japan, etc. It is undeniable that South Asia suffers severely from an infrastructure deficit, which could compel small South Asian nations to tilt in favour of BRI. So, discarding a reactionary approach, India needs to act sensibly and proactively and within a well-thought-out policy framework. Avoiding a purely defensive stance, India should adopt a measured strategic approach grounded in sovereignty, regional collaboration, mutual respect, and credible economic alternatives, along with resilience, selective cooperation, and ongoing regional engagement. Rather than seeking total victory, only this balancing approach will ensure India's strategic autonomy and prevent South Asia from becoming prey to great-power rivalry. Therefore, it can be assumed that India's future stance on the BRI will involve a meticulous balance between recognising the potential economic benefits of improved connectivity and addressing the serious geopolitical threats posed by China's strategic ambitions.