Changing Political Dynamics in South Asia
The Belt and Road Initiative and Its Effects on Indian Regional Hegemony

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Abstract

India’s dominance in South Asia is due to its large geographical area, economic might, military strength, and strategic positioning over the Indian ocean. But the coming of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has shaken up this hegemonic balance and given other, smaller regional nations a chance to rise up against the dominant influence in the region. China has been penetrating regional diplomacy in South Asia, all the while keeping in mind its larger aim of further securing its sources in the West. For countries in the region such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the BRI is seen as a more neutral, if not benign force and has pushed India to become more considerate of changes and more responsible for its own actions. With the rise of China, many scholars and think tanks have aggressively researched this issue and proposed theories such as the “String of Pearls,” which has become a topic of discussion and worry not only for India but also for the nations that have become a part of China’s projects. This article will delve into the issue and discuss how China’s rise in South Asia has changed the course of India’s regional and bilateral policies and relations. Although China may seem to have a drastic impact on India’s position, it has not panned out that way. India has been a dominant power in the region and unilateral in its diplomacy, but the rise of China gives smaller nations power at the negotiating table with India and thus pushes India to place more focus on neighbors.

Introduction

China initiated the BRI in 2013 when Chinese president Xi Jinping officially visited Kazakhstan. BRI is considered to be the cornerstone policy of the Chinese Communist Party’s economic policy and is aimed at strengthening China’s ties with the globe through the expansion of infrastructure, policy, and cultural ties. The goal to achieve connectivity has been both land- and sea-based, namely the Belt (i.e., land-based) and the Road (the so-called Maritime Silk Road). The Maritime Silk Road aims to connect China to the North Sea, linking Singapore,
Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Djibouti, Suez Canal, Turkey, Greece, and Italy in between. Through this connectivity, China aims to not only connect itself to its oil sources in the West but also to effectively counter its drawbacks in South Asia and Southeast Asia; front-burner issues include the presence of US and Indian troops in the Indian Ocean, fear of a blockade of the Strait of Malacca (through which passes most Chinese imports), and piracy in the Indian Ocean threatening China’s mercantile business. This region plays a huge role in the BRI project, and China has initiated massive plans enabling China to connect to the Indian ocean, minimizing the threats posed. These include the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Gwadar Port, the Rahim Yar Khan Power Plant, and various wind, solar, and coal power projects in Pakistan, as well as Hambantota Port, the Norochcholai Power Plant, and the Colombo Port City project in Sri Lanka along with various other projects in Myanmar. China has pulled smaller nations such as Nepal, Bangladesh, and Maldives into its orbit of influence as well, targeting their fear and insecurities regarding India and a lack of international funding to enable and support their economic growth. India’s neglect of smaller nations’ demands, both political and economic, have been sidelined for a long time. These nations are now part of the BRI and have been promised massive funding under its banner; some have already received billions of dollars of investment to fund infrastructure projects. But the funding came with drawbacks, such as massive debt on loans, increased Chinese bureaucratic influence, high interest rates, various labor and working rights issues, as well as, in some cases, complete takeover of ports and land to counterbalance increasingly negative trade imbalances. Despite these challenges, politicians in the debtor nations have advanced relations with China as the most viable and/or logical partner against India as well as to maintain standing in the economic development race. China has thereby been able to grow its influence over smaller South Asian countries to support its aims and to counter India. As for Indian foreign diplomacy, we see a change in the decisions taken by the current ruling government. India has started to look at neighboring nations, especially in the East and South East, to expand its influence, as is evident in its Look East policy, the Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal initiative, and the “Neighbourhood First” and other funding projects that India has established individually or through partnership with nations such as Japan and the United States. We next begin to look into the multipolar aspects of policy changes and diplomatic exchanges resulting from the increase of Chinese influence and interests in the region among the affected countries of South Asia, India, and China.
Chinese Foreign Policy Initiatives and India's Responses

The BRI in South Asia aims to build economic partnerships and fulfill geostrategic ambitions. After 2013, Chinese investment and other diplomatic strategies gained ground among Indian Ocean littoral nations. Chinese authorities developed mechanisms to create cultural and economic links, boosting China’s aims and image.

Pakistan

China’s relations with Pakistan have been the most notable. They signed a memorandum in 2013, a landmark agreement for long-term planning and development of CPEC, the BRI’s flagship project. It is one of the six branches that serve China’s aims and aims to give China access to the Indian Ocean through the construction of a 3,000km pipeline with road infrastructure. The access to Gwadar Port will put China just 400km away from the Strait of Hormuz and would link Xinjiang to the Indian Ocean. Apart from serving trade and commerce, the base could provide naval support to Chinese forces in the region and help China secure its sea lines of communication, as well as counter the so-called Malacca Dilemma and Indian and US troops in the region. The projects have also brought worry for Pakistan’s politicians and bureaucracy, as the debts to China keep mounting and resulted in the speculative “Dept-Trap” diplomacy, a tool utilized by lending nations to burden borrowing nations with huge dept so as to influence its internal and external affairs.

However, bilateral relations have remained strong since 1951, when diplomatic relations were established. China and Pakistan have backed one another in international disputes. Relations hardened with the advent of the BRI in Pakistan. Increased Chinese interventions in the disputed region and the Indian Ocean caused India to pay greater attention in the region, with the development of Indian naval capabilities to protect Indian interests. The increased cooperation has also resulted in US concerns, not only regarding Chinese activity but also the significance Pakistan plays due to its strategic geographical position. China tried a counterbalance strategy, supporting Pakistan through political, military, and economic fulfillments while trying to allay India’s suspicions by offering antiterror cooperation.

India worries about the repercussions that could follow its rivals’ coordination in areas of interest to India. China’s BRI passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, and China’s construction activity threatened India’s sovereignty. China and India have many conflicts on its long borders, adding to mutual discontent among populations in both countries. Pakistan and India also have disagreements and refuse to solve mutual conflicts, even though the United States and China would...
like to see peace and stability in the region. Pakistan’s foreign policy aims to relieve some of this tension and enmity, if one is to believe Imran Khan, the current elected prime minister of Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan’s military has a propensity of exerting intervention into Islamabad’s external political affairs, and terrorism emanating from Pakistan’s territories has frequently thwarted efforts to calm simmering conflicts.10

Pakistan has taken a positive attitude toward China, the BRI, and its foreign policy despite harsh allegations over how Chinese investments function in the country. The International Crisis Group reported discontent among local populations from regions such as Balochistan and Sindh, the fruits of the investments have not trickled down. The vast amount of raw materials being mined, the huge number of illegal Chinese laborers being granted work permits, and the displacement of communities have created resentment.11 Also, Pakistan has a $62 billion debt to China, causing not only Pakistan but other international players to worry. Pakistan has no other option but to take loans from China.12

India–Pakistan relations have not seen drastic changes as a direct result of the BRI and Chinese intervention. India has always been critical of Pakistan and vice versa, but Chinese investment in Pakistan creates reasons for worry in India. The ruling government there shows no desire to mend relations in light of issues such as the Pulwama attack and the eradication of Article 370. The attack at Pulwama, by a suicide bomber, was one of the deadliest against the Indian military, killing 40 military personnel on the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway. Responsibility was claimed by a Pakistan-based terrorist group, Jaish-e-Mohammed, adding to the anger. The eradication of Article 370 in the Indian constitution, which gave special status to the region of Jammu and Kashmir, meant that India now had more administrative control over the region, adding to Pakistan’s resentment. Relations have soured as a result of these events, with no clear resolution on the horizon.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has also received massive funding under the BRI. Sri Lanka provides China various naval capabilities to function in the Indian Ocean. Sri Lanka’s geostrategic location and its geographical terrain provides China the ability to make deep seaports for docking heavy and large ships and easing the passage of Chinese mercantile ships through the region.13 As another benefit, the Sri Lankan port could function as a checkpoint between China and its source nations in the West, and China’s plans to set up oil refineries in Sri Lanka could bolster that goal. China has also funded the Colombo Port City and other infrastructure projects to the tune of almost $15 billion.
The debt trap is an important issue (as it is in many other nations taking BRI funds), but recent studies have shown that only 5–6 percent of Sri Lankan GDP is owed to China, comparatively much less when taking into account that its other external debts owed including bonds (18 percent), multilateral lenders (6.3 percent), and bilateral lenders (6.3 percent). The decision to lease ports and giving up land on a 99-year lease resulted from Sri Lanka’s foreign reserves falling too low, as well as the fact that China was the only lender that could provide Sri Lanka the type of investment it desired. Many Chinese BRI projects have been unable to produce results promised, and, until recently, statistics associated with projects such as Colombo Port City and Hambantota Port have been left out of analyses altogether. All of these issues combined create an atmosphere of concern for India.

Relations between India and Sri Lanka have not been ideal since India’s intervention in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, when India deployed peacekeeping force. Although India wanted to resolve the issue within Sri Lanka (which also affected the southern regions of India), things got out of hand and India had to withdraw its forces within two years, creating a rift. India’s attempts to fulfill its objectives in Sri Lanka have been seen as leading to instability. And Sri Lanka politicians have always criticized the bossy nature of Indian politicians, with allegations from previous presidents such as Mahinda Rajapaksa and Srisena expressing India’s negative attitude toward their governments. India did not help Sri Lanka with its developmental projects and backed out of the Hambantota Port development, which eventually led to China’s entry into the country’s economics. Sri Lanka–China relations have progressed as a result of Hambantota, and today China’s investment stands at almost $15 billion, mostly after 2013; the Hambantota deal was revised in 2017 under the BRI banner. Since 2015, India–Sri Lanka relations have remained sour, with the outgoing president even stating India’s role in his defeat. But India has been cautious with the government established in 2019. India has offered investments such as the Eastern Container Terminal, with the aid of Japan, lease of the Colombo airport, and a $450 million pledge to Sri Lanka. All this could be seen as an effort by India to reduce China’s hold over Sri Lanka.

Relations between India and Sri Lanka, although sour, have never led to a great conflict, as in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. India has always been a reliable ally for Sri Lanka, and it has only been India’s pessimistic attitude that led to discontent. India still plays an important role in influencing Sri Lanka’s foreign policy. Sri Lanka had instructed China not to use Hambantota for military purposes in 2018, after India objected when submarines entered the port in 2014; India’s investments are also welcomed by Sri Lankan politicians. All that the Sri Lankan governments have desired is mutual respect and cooperation, but India’s
foreign policy has not been very cooperative due to internal political issues, such as the ongoing Tamil dispute, or simply negligence. With the rise of China, India increased its interactions with the Sri Lankan government. India’s largely forgotten “Neighbourhood First” policy has started to gain importance.20

**Bangladesh**

Bangladesh joined the BRI in 2016, and bilateral relations with China have been growing since, much to India’s dismay. Geographically, Bangladesh is covered by India on three sides, with the Bay of Bengal on the other. It shares 54 rivers with India and thus is susceptible to water-based natural disasters. Bangladesh’s population and vegetation are often damaged due to floods, and underdeveloped infrastructure adds to the misery. Bangladesh’s severe lack of infrastructure, including ports, power plants, and roads makes the BRI a perfect platform to pursue improvements. Padma Bridge has become symbolic of China’s growing relevance in Bangladesh’s politics, largely due to the neglect that Western nations have shown toward Bangladesh.21 The bridge was not among the seven to be built by China and being funded by the World Bank, but issues of corruption caused the World Bank to withdraw its support to the project, a vacuum that China filled. Fear over the debt trap is being applied to Bangladesh, but Bangladesh has been careful. Bangladesh received investments from the Japanese International Aid Agency, private investors, and public-private partnerships, and Bangladesh’s foreign minister stated it will “never will” ask for more loans from China (i.e., to put a cap on the loans received).22 Other reasons for this careful approach has been fear of Indian hostility, as well as the current leaders’ close relationship. India’s close proximity and geography will always be dominant factors in Bangladesh’s foreign policy. Currently Bangladesh owes $10 billion to China out of a total $33 billion, but its growth in recent years has been immense, even matching and surpassing India in measures such as expected life span, GDP growth, and income per capita (perhaps in 2025).23 So it seems that the reason for worry in Bangladesh is getting more investments; the nature of those investments is secondary. Bangladesh has received investments for two ports, Matarbari and Payra (from Japan and China, respectively). But China influence and desires have shifted toward Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar, which provides China better accessibility to the Bay of Bengal as well as gas and oil pipelines directly to China. Thus, China’s role in Bangladesh could be decreasing, but China would no doubt benefit from a reliable partner in such close proximity to India. Lately, the leaders of Bangladesh and China have become closer, which is visible through statements from both the leaders, Sheikh Hasina and Xi Jinping.
India–Bangladesh relations as well have surely been boosted since the coming of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Bangladesh to solve the contentious border issue, as well as the resolution of the maritime dispute under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. But the counter is also true, and much discontent has sprung up in Bangladesh due to the Citizenship Amendment Act being passed in India. That act has led to fears in Bangladesh of illegal migrants living in India being sent back to Bangladesh, and with the already existing Rohingya crises and migrants in Bangladesh, the issue adds concern in the Bangladesh population due to added migrants. Adding to it are the disrespectful remarks by Amit Shah regarding infiltrators, which was visible during the prime minister’s visit on the fiftieth anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence day and riots following his visit. India also lost support from Bangladesh when issues in Ladakh propped up,24 with Bangladesh expressing neutrality in the case. If bilateral relations are made and destroyed on the basis of fulfilling mutual interests, then India needs to do more.

Bangladesh is being aided by China, but India–Bangladesh cultural and geographical proximity will dominate. India and Bangladesh have mutual issues and interests that can be used by India to strengthen relations at any point. Prime Minister Modi has always shown a positive attitude to Sheikh Hasina, and signing trade deals, bridge projects, and other transport-related deals would help India maintain balance with China.25 India would be pressurized to solve other concerns, such as the Teesta water dispute, which is based on water-sharing rights of Teesta River, a tributary of the Brahmaputra between India and Bangladesh. India has shied away from discussing the issue and has dissapointed Bangladesh, the lower reparian nation, which is affected by Indian projects on the river. Also, India needs to provide clarifications to Citizenship Amendment Act, because India does not want to lose a reliable partner in the East. China’s entry into Bangladesh has thus made India more accountable to Bangladesh.

Nepal

Nepal is another nation bordering India that signed a BRI agreement with China in 2017. Under that agreement, China agreed to build a trans-Himalayan connectivity network costing $2.75 billion, the Koshi economic corridor, the Gandaki economic corridor, and Madam Bhandari University for Science and Technology, plus other agreements of cultural and social relevance.26 Other than technology and infrastructure deals, the two nations have also signed agreements on security elements, with China foreseeing an extradition deal in the future with Nepalese authorities. Nepal also recognizes the “One China” policy and has in instances helped Chinese authorities to catch and return Tibetan infiltrators. The
Chinese Communist Party’s influence in Nepal, exerted largely through strong political links to the ruling communist bloc in Kathmandu, has also enabled China to create strong political links in Nepal’s political sphere and influence its foreign policy, as during the conflict with India in border skirmishes. Although India has the upper hand in terms of cultural dominance in Nepal, China has furthered its approach by establishing Confucius centers in Nepal and also has furthered its desire to introduce Mandarin language teaching in elementary schools.

But India’s dominance in Nepal’s day-to-day matters cannot be rivaled by the Chinese as of now. India and Nepal have open borders, with people travelling from Nepal to find work in the neighboring country, and the majority Hindu population enables increasing people-to-people connections. India has held strong bilateral relations with Nepal since the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, and India’s vaccine diplomacy to treat COVID-19 has played a major role in strengthening relations. Although India and Nepal have experienced some troubled waters in their relations since 2015, such disputes have not become consequential. For smaller nations such as Nepal issues can turn into bigger issues, as is the case with the Nepal–India border dispute. Thus it becomes necessary for India as the larger to address such issues to counter Chinese growing influence.

China has economically dominated Nepal’s foreign direct investment (FDI), with 90 percent of FDI coming from China in 2020. China has flexed its economic might in other South Asian regions as well, and India in this respect needs to invest more in the Nepalese economy. India is not as strong as China in economic terms, but close proximity and cultural links (in addition to economic aid) can play out well for India. Similar to the case of Bangladesh, China’s entry into Nepal has made India more accountable and increased Nepal’s importance to India’s foreign policy. Nepal also plays a major role in the Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal initiative, and India needs to further such initiatives to balance out Chinese investments.

**Maldives**

Maldives is a nation of great geographical significance in the Indian Ocean, including 1,200 small islands with major sea lines of communication that are important strategically to China and India. India and Maldives held strong bilateral ties until 2012, when President Mohamed Nasheed was ousted by President Abdulla Yameen; various projects that were initially promised to India were given to Chinese-owned companies. The growth of relations between Maldives and China gained momentum with Yameen at the helm, and massive FDI and other agreements were signed by the leaders. The nations also signed a free trade agreement and a memorandum of understanding that linked Maldives to the BRI
network. China’s investment focused on infrastructure, road connectivity, upgrades to airports, and tourism. China’s FDI enabled development of the international airport near Male, several islands such as Feydhoo Finolhu, Kunaavashi, and Male, the iconic bridge linking the capital to the airport, and many other housing and development projects. The country’s major GDP contributor is tourism, which is dominated by Chinese aid as well as Chinese tourists visiting the country. Under the leadership of President Yameen, China saw major developments in political, economical, as well as military terms. But after the change in government and the new government under Ibrahim Solih, Yameen faced allegations of corruption and favoring the Chinese government. The allegations were proven in subsequent court proceedings showing that Yameen had been bribed to favor Chinese builders and projects under his rule. The deepening of Chinese loans and concerns over Chinese projects gained greater transparancy when the finance minister, Ibrahim Ameer, during his visit to Japan stated that Maldives owned 38 percent of its national debt and 78 percent of its external debt to China.

With a new president in Maldives in 2018, India has been able to again gain importance in the oscillating relations. India and Maldives signed various bilateral deals that focus on infrastructure, India’s $1.4 billion line of credit and currency swap to backset China’s loans, and the provision of medical equipment in response to COVID-19.

India’s relationship with Maldives backtracked with the incursion of China’s influence, as when President Yameen’s cancelled development projects and redirected them to China. Under Yameen’s presidency, China was able to dominate Maldives infrastructure projects (similar to Cambodia’s Sihanoukville). China has dominated the country’s real estate market with the help of Cambodian politicians, brought in Chinese builders, and changed the ethnic composition of the region. Similarly, China gained growth in the building and tourism sectors under Yameen’s rule. China was also at the forefront in developing several islands, and although none has proven to be under military use, as was feared by many in India. With the increase in China’s dominance in the Maldives, Maldives has been successful to date in averting that possibility thanks to Indian aid. The new government, concerned about China’s tightening grip, has leaned India’s support. India cannot let go of this opportunity and should follow through on aid to Maldives as guaranteed to President Solih.

**Bhutan**

Adding to a sense of relief in India is Bhutan. Bhutan has been dismissive of China’s intrusion into the country, whether in economic or political terms. Bhutan–China relations have traditionally been scarred due to the continuous border
issues cropping up between the two nations. Both nations have had informal relations since 1950 and have had 24 bilateral talks on issues relating to the border.\textsuperscript{34} The India–China border conflict in 2020 caused indirect effects in Bhutan, when China challenged Tibet in the eastern territories, which it had never contested previously. China has aggressively tried to build official bilateral relations and partner with Bhutan on the BRI, but Bhutan has continuously declined despite the pressure.\textsuperscript{35}

Over time, relations between Bhutan and India have been politically and economically strong. India has developed major hydropower plant projects in Bhutan and has also proposed the Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal initiative, in which Bhutan is an observer. India, in coordination with Japan, has merged the objectives of India’s Act East policy and Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific policy and has proposed connecting the landlocked nation of Bhutan to Dan Nand in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{36} The current Indian government is open to Bhutan’s desire to gain greater importance within India’s foreign policy, as Prime Minister Modi’s visit to Bhutan showcased. India–Bhutan relations have been constructive and optimistic throughout, and each country plays an important role in the other’s policies to achieve a mutual goal of protecting their borders from China.

**India’s Response**

The Look East/Act East policy, as it morphed under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, emphasizes acting toward change and pushing relations further in the nations in East Asia and Southeast Asia. The Act East policy is the cornerstone of Indian diplomacy to develop relations with nations such as Japan, South Korea, and those in ASEAN. Under Act East, India launched initiatives to increase trade, improve bilateral relations, and bring investments to multiple sectors such as highways, food processing, auto components, and others. India initiated a development project for the North Eastern Region (NER) in collaboration with Japan. The two nations combined the aims of India’s Act East and Japan’s Open and Free Indo-Pacific, with both nations signing an agreement in 2017 to form India–Japan Act East.\textsuperscript{37} Under the agreement, Japan aided the growth of the NER and the construction of highways and other projects that could link the region to Southeast Asia. Thus, this plan will be able to bring in smaller nations such as Bangladesh, helping India counterbalance Chinese aims and aid development of trade mechanisms leading to mutual growth. India has also collaborated with the Quad to further its aims of a free and open Indo-Pacific. Such initiatives would ensure that smaller nations enjoy opportunity of growth and development in a diversified manner rather than being dependent on a single nation. The programs have also envisioned projects to counter the BRI such as the US Pivot
Toward Asia, Japan’s China Plus One and Democratic Security Diamond, and the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor by India in collaboration with Japan.\textsuperscript{38}

It may seem that India pursued a great through the Act East policy, but it has not been so. India has not been able to reach $200 billion in trade between South Korea and Japan, which still stands at $80 billion; apart from that, Act East, which had focused on pursuing the strengthening of relations through ASEAN, has seen a dilution in its “ASEAN centrality.”\textsuperscript{39} Thus, there are concerns that the policy is losing its core focus, rather than focusing on developing relations through ASEAN in the numerous multilateral cooperation agreements. India should clarify its priorities and form a path to ease future decision-making; it could highlight its desire to aid neighboring nations and thereby counterbalance Chinese investments and China’s political grip over the Indian Ocean littoral nations.

Apart from broader international programs, India has increased its focus on developing transport connectivity and infrastructure in neighboring regions under the banner of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). India is also a member of other regional bodies, but the inability of countries to find a consensus, and the presence of China in other regional forums, limited opportunities for India to further its aims in regional development. But India has been able to achieve better results in terms of BIMSTEC, with the finalization of the BIMSTEC Master Plan for Transport Connectivity,\textsuperscript{40} signing of the Agreement on Mutual Assistance on Custom Matters, and other plans for programs to help member nations tap into resource-rich areas and create mechanisms to boost trade and investment.\textsuperscript{41}

India also launched the MAUSAM Project in 2014, an initiative to reestablish India’s maritime routes with the traditional trade partners located around the Indian Ocean. The project would enable economic and cultural ties, placing emphasis on monsoons, the natural wind patterns that guide trade routes in the region. Currently, the plan has not been able to garner much support from the 39 countries that had been included as probable partners, and the project has not advanced very far in terms of planning and functioning.\textsuperscript{42} If operationalized correctly, the project could lead India’s political goal to increase its relevance in the Indian Ocean.

India has also signed multiple bilateral agreements and worked on constructing practical and beneficial relations among neighboring countries. Projects such as the Chabahar Port in Iran, which aided India’s links to Russia and Central Asia, have also been seen as a way to counter the Chinese Gwadar Port experiment. India could in the future focus more on building such projects, as they not only aid India in trade and commerce but also increase India’s credibility on the global stage.
Conclusion

China is the second-largest economy in the world and one of the fastest-growing. China is the largest importer of crude oil, and it needs to find effective measures to secure energy sources. China wants to lead economic advancement in Asia, with BRI leading the way. Keeping in mind all its aims and objectives, China brought BRI to most nations in South Asia, except for India and Bhutan. Countries that signed agreements with China under BRI have surely seen growth in economic sectors but have not been free of the drawbacks that come with Chinese investments. Along with internal turmoil, there was the ability to challenge India’s hegemonic position and make India more accountable to its neighbors. India has reciprocated the change and has surely been increasing its interests and attention in the region. With various international actors wanting to subdue China’s growing power in the region, India has various avenues to counterbalance China. India also holds cultural and well as geographical superiority over China, and it would be difficult for China to remain relevant in times of conflict due to fundamental strategic vulnerabilities. Thus, there hasn’t been any radical policy changes by either sides, but the value and importance of the region have been brought to light, which has made this region an important component of many countries’ foreign policy.

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Notes

6. Andersen and Jiang, Pakistan and the Belt and Road Initiative.
15. Deutsche Welle (Director), *The New Silk Road, Part 1: From China to Pakistan* [Motion Picture], 2019.
19. Wignaraja et al., *Chinese Investment*.
20. Cherian, “Troubled Neighbour.”
31. Lintner, “Quarantined Maldives Needs China to Survive.”
32. *The New Silk Road, Part 1: From China to Pakistan* [Motion Picture].

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