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Sino-India competition in South Asia: Can India counter the growing role of China?

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Abstract

Ever since Beijing has launched its grand transcontinental Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), President Xi's key foreign economic plan has ignited interest of policymakers and academia alike. This paper explores that under the BRI framework, China has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure-building in diverse regions across the globe, including South Asia where Beijing has expanded its footprints by implementing projects in various sectors. India, being wary of Chinese ambitions and intentions, has declined to join the venture as it has reservations over Xi's 'project of the century'. In response, India has come up with various initiatives to counter the growing role of Beijing in South Asia and beyond. Key Indian initiatives are examined aimed at rivalling China. For enhancing regional integration and connectivity, India, in partnership with Japan, has launched Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC). International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is another such venture to dwarf the Chinese BRI. In collaboration with the Group of 20 (G20), New Delhi unveiled another connectivity initiative – India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as an alternative to the BRI. The paper concludes that although India is eager to compete with China, it does not have enough resources to match China's regarding investing and implementing mega infrastructure projects.

Keywords: India; China; South Asia; Belt and Road Initiative

Introduction

Since its launching in 2013, the BRI has invoked global response: either it has been welcomed with enthusiasm or rejected with contempt. There is no doubt that an initiative reaching to “4.4 billion people in 65 countries” (Wang, 2018, p. 5), promising hundreds of billions of dollars to build infrastructure and connect countries in various regions is hard to remain unnoticed. Because of its significance as the only Chinese initiative having such a global outreach, the venture was made part of the Communist Party's constitution in 2017. Given its position as the signature foreign and economic policy plan, it has been argued that in recent times, no other project has received such global attention. Due to various reasons, the BRI has created an unprecedented enthusiasm among both participating countries as well as among those opposing the project (Martínez-Galán, 2020).

The BRI project has not remained stagnant as more and more ventures have been added to its portfolio since its initiation. Given its ever-growing horizon, it is estimated that currently valuing over US\$ 1.4 trillion, the overall worth of the initiative has been growing since then as Beijing has come up with massive pledges surpassing the overall volume of US Marshall Plan (Yang, Lewis, Roddy, & Moise, 2018). As per the China Global Investment Tracker of American Enterprise Institute, documenting over 4,000 Chinese-funded mega projects in different sectors, Beijing's foreign investment since 2005 is about US\$ 2.27 trillion (American Enterprise Institute, 2023). Gupta (2020) asserts that the project would exceed US\$ 8–12 trillion and given its colossal scale and outreach, the initiative could certainly transform economic landscape of Asia and the regions beyond.

Such a global project certainly creates winners and losers as countries wary of Beijing's intentions and strategic ambitions perceive the BRI as geostrategic and security gambit rather than an economic enterprise aimed at trade facilitation and economic integration. Like the US and its European allies who have openly expressed reservations over the Chinese initiative, India too has declined to be part of the project. In order to compete with China, India has come up with its own initiatives. The next section explores how Beijing's role has expanded in South Asia and why India

feels threatened with the rising role and influence of China in its backyard. It is followed by an assessment of India's reservations over the BRI. The subsequent section examines what proposals New Delhi has come up with to compete with China. The paper concludes by juxtaposing both China's and India's financial and investment positions in the region.

Growing Chinese influence in South Asia

South Asian countries, barring India, have readily embraced the BRI as they need Chinese investments and soft loans to meet their developmental needs. Often labelled as the nuclear flashpoint, the region is considered a nuclear minefield as both India and Pakistan; two heavyweights of the region possess nuclear weapons. Both the countries have unsettled border disputes and have occasionally engaged in armed confrontation. One of the most populous as well as most densely inhabited regions in the world, South Asia has largely stayed under the economic and political influence of India due to shared history and geography (Wagner & Tripathi, 2018). With regard to population, geographical size and economic and military prowess, India enjoys a predominant position. Given India's colossal size and economic weight, the region is clearly under India's influence as New Delhi accounts for over 80 percent of the of South Asia's GDP, while Pakistan accounts for nearly 10 percent, Bangladesh about 6 percent and Sri Lanka just 2 percent (Kelegama, 2016).

However, in recent years China has made tremendous inroads as its trade with the region and its investments in South Asian countries has significantly increased. Particularly, after the onset of the BRI, Beijing has provided billions of dollars and invested heavily in infrastructure in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. In Bangladesh, the Chinese government has come up with investment plans of over US\$ 38 billion, mostly in power and infrastructure sectors. In Sri Lanka, China has invested around US\$ 14 billion in numerous infrastructure projects between 2005 and 2015. Under the banner of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing has planned to invest about US\$ 62 billion in various sectors in Pakistan between 2015 and 2030. China has already implemented 26 projects costing over US\$ 17 billion and 30 projects worth US\$ 8.5 billion are under construction. Similarly, 36 projects worth US\$ 28.4 billion are under different stages of consultation between Pakistani and Chinese officials to be executed under the CPEC framework. In all these countries, China has emerged the largest investor as it has built power plants, ports, airports and transport and telecommunication infrastructure. Fingar (2016) asserts that one trend is quite visible among smaller South Asian countries that they are mostly keen in Beijing's investments in their economies. The author argues that in addition to welcoming Chinese financial assistance in various forms, these smaller countries of the region also perceive Beijing as a counterweight to New Delhi as some of these countries have their own reservations vis-à-vis India. Similarly, Lagerkvist (2021) also states that smaller South Asian countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives see the rise of China as an opportunity to come out of India's strong sway. Because of New Delhi's historical, political, economic and social connections with smaller South Asian states, the region remained under strong Indian clout but with rise of China as an economic giant, the balance of power has gradually shifted towards China. Given Beijing's deep pockets, it is in a strong position to use its financial prowess and further weaken India's shrinking developmental role in the region (Pal, 2021).

In view of these shifting dynamics because of a rising role of China in South Asia, regional countries are in a better position to offset New Delhi's central role and use China as a bargaining chip against India. In the given situation, these smaller countries have attained a reasonable agency and bargaining power in South Asia (Ghiasy, 2021). In addition to ballooning trade and investment linkages, South Asia and China have seen increased people-to-people linkages as thousands of students from South Asian states are pursuing their studies in Chinese universities. Beijing has expanded its soft power via greater and stronger people-to-people connections. These linkages have further expanded in diverse areas including the fields of science, technology, education, and health. It must be mentioned here that China has been providing 10,000 scholarships per year to countries which are signatories to the BRI (Gupta, 2020). Another key area where Beijing has made inroads in South Asia is Chinese cultural influence through Confucius centres. As per its policy elsewhere, Beijing has founded various Confucius Institutes in South Asian countries. For example, China has established two Confucius Institutes in India and Pakistan each while one such centre each in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Scobell et al., 2018). It must be emphasized that the number of Confucius Institutes has expanded rapidly across the globe that China has been operating

and funding. Due to all these factors, New Delhi is concerned that its traditional dominant role in its backyard has been declining while that of China's, its strategic rival has been consistently growing in diverse sectors.

India's reservations over the BRI

India has serious concerns over the growing role of Beijing in South Asia. India is aware of expanding Chinese engagements and influence in South Asia. India also feels that China's growing role will ultimately reduce New Delhi's dominant position in South Asia and it is something of a nightmarish situation for Indian policymakers (Thaliyakkattil, 2019). The author gives the example of China and Nepal as both countries had held a consultation related to extending the Lhasa railway to Nepal. If implemented, the author argues that it will not only increase Beijing's influence in Nepal but the said railway project would certainly augment China's ability and would put Beijing in an advantaged position to swiftly place its security forces near the India-China boundary areas (Thaliyakkattil, 2019). It must be emphasised here that the two Asian giants have over 400,000 square miles of disputed territory. Despite having fought one full pledged war, several skirmishes and holding many rounds of negotiations, China and India have failed to resolve their border dispute and the issue resurfaces time and again afflicting their bilateral relations (Miller, 2017). Besides China-India bilateral dispute including the 1962 Indo-China War which culminated with Beijing's victory and China's seizure of the Aksai Chin region, Beijing's steadfast material as well as diplomatic support for Islamabad has also added to New Delhi's heightened sense of insecurity.

Since its inception, India has consistently stated that Beijing's investment in Pakistan in the form of CPEC is the violation of India's sovereignty (Colley & Noort, 2022; Pant & Passi, 2017). Because of this, New Delhi openly shunned the Chinese venture and declined to participate in the BRI forums held in Beijing. Prior to the 1st BRI summit, the Modi government clearly voiced its criticism of the connectivity project and specified that India would not be part of a project that has ignored New Delhi's main concerns regarding sovereignty (Ministry of External Affairs, 2017). India refused to attend the 2nd BRI forum in 2019 as well. The government maintained its previous stance. It came up with the justification of boycotting the forum on the grounds that the Chinese project has clearly violated India's territorial integrity. India specifically mentioned that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) traversing via Jammu & Kashmir is the violation of India's sovereignty (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

In addition to the above, India is anxious because of unprecedented Chinese investment in the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. New Delhi is aware that via Gwadar, China would have a direct access to the Indian Ocean, further complicating India's sense of insecurity. Wolf (2018) asserts that New Delhi is primarily concerned with the emergence of the Gwadar Port as key node as Indian strategists believe that the facility would be used by Chinese for security purposes to keep an eye on India. Indian strategic community concurs that right now the port is certainly a civilian facility used for commercial purposes but there is no guarantee that in future Beijing would not use it as a naval base expanding its role in the Indian Ocean (Baruah & Mohan, 2018). Thus, along with the issues of sovereignty and national security, New Delhi is also concerned that Chinese investments in Pakistan are building infrastructure in a country that India has always considered its arch rival in the region (Colley & Noort, 2022). Hence, India has multiple and complex worries regarding the growing role of China in its backyard, including the uneasiness that a financially strong Pakistan will eventually be a militarily strong Pakistan too.

There is a consensus among academic and policy community that Gwadar is pivotal to China's grand string of pearls strategy in the Indo-Pacific. Besides Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, other 'pearls' include Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port and that Maldives has also held fruitful negotiations with Beijing related to the construction of a port (Kanwal, 2018). In so doing, as asserted by Marshall (2015) in his well-known book 'Prisoners of Geography', Beijing has planned to become a two-ocean power (Pacific and Indian). Hence, to achieve this goal and become a two-ocean power, Marshall states that China is investing in deep-water ports in countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to enable its navy to have friendly bases to visit or reside in, and trade links back home. Benard (2020) also concurs that increasing Chinese trade with pivotal Asian maritime states from Japan and South Korea and in the wider Indian Ocean region from Burma and Bangladesh to Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Pakistan seems to be an important policy of Beijing that has unfolded more quickly and systematically following the launch of the BRI. This has

certainly increased India's apprehensions regarding the BRI framework under which Beijing has been investing heavily in South Asian countries. Because of this prevalent thinking, New Delhi has come up with different initiatives of its own to counter the rising role of China.

How to counter China? India's initiatives

To compete with Beijing, New Delhi has come up with various ventures. The Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) is among one of the projects, championed by India and Japan to found a corridor for enhancing regional trade and integration and also to rival the BRI (Wagner & Tripathi, 2018). The key objective of AAGC project is the Indian Ocean and various littoral states. There is no doubt that New Delhi has the resolve to challenge Beijing and therefore it proposed this initiative to counterbalance growing Chinese influence in the region. However, it is also a reality that as compared with China which has enormous resources and expertise to fund and execute mega infrastructure projects, India does not have the luxury and financial prowess at its disposal to finance and implement mega infrastructure projects beyond its shores (Wagner & Tripathi, 2018). It cannot compete with Beijing on its own. Hence, in collaboration with Japan, both New Delhi and Tokyo intend that the AAGC project could be helpful in creating a mode of financing which would promote their long-term economic and strategic objectives in this region. However, critics of the initiative claim that the AAGC initiative aimed at developing and connecting ports from Myanmar to East Africa has made little progress since its announcement in 2017 (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023). Thus, while India still has the will to establish the proposed corridor, it has been scrambling for resources and it is looking for partners to develop the said project into a reality.

Another important India-inspired initiative is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Announced in 2015, two years after the BRI, the INSTC is primarily a trilateral project consisting of India, Iran and Russia. Envisioned to start at the Iranian port of Chabahar, the project is expected to enable New Delhi to get access to Afghanistan and Central Asian states as well as Russia. Because of Indo-Pak impasse and worsening bilateral ties since Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014, Islamabad has consistently declined New Delhi's request of access to Afghanistan and Central Asian markets via Pakistan's landmass. Eventually, India decided to circumvent Pakistan and get access to Afghanistan and Central Asia via Iran. To this end, in May 2016, New Delhi announced the provision of US\$ 500 million to upgrade Iran's Chabahar port facility. This 7,200 KM long multimodal trilateral project is expected to connect India to the Caspian Sea, Russia, and Northern Europe through Iran. There are visible benefits for all participating countries as it bypasses the Suez Canal, and it has been estimated that the route is 40 percent shorter and 30 percent cheaper in comparison to traditional routes that New Delhi currently uses for its international trade. That said, there has been little tangible progress on this project because of the uncertainty that prevails on account of international sanctions on Iran.

The IMEC is another major venture that India and the G20 countries came up with to rival China. Announced on the occasion of the G20 annual summit held in India, it was stated that India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, Germany, Italy, the European Union (EU) and the US would establish the corridor to enhance trade and economic integration (The White House, 2023). Indian Prime Minister Modi hailed the initiative and stated that it 'is going to become the basis of world trade for hundreds of years to come, and history will always remember that this corridor was initiated on Indian soil' (The Indian Express, 2023). The proposed corridor consists of road, railway, internet, and energy connectivity between South Asia and Europe through the Middle East. The project is comprised of two discrete sections or corridors: the eastern corridor that links India to the Arabian Gulf via sea and the northern corridor which connects the Arabian Gulf to Europe via both inland and sea. The planned route is from Mumbai to Jabal Ali Port in Dubai via sea, then over the Saudi and Jordanian landmass to the Israeli port of Haifa, and from there through the Mediterranean Sea to the Greek port of Piraeus and other European ports. Thus, like other trade and economic corridors, the IMEC also includes a railway line via the Middle Eastern countries - the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel and a sealine. Advocates of the project claim that the corridor is of enormous potentials. According to Tanchum (2021, p. 4), from the Indian port of Mumbai, shipments would be sent through a multi-modal transport corridor to "the European mainland in as little as 10 days, 40 per cent faster than via the Suez Canal maritime route". Once completed, the IMEC is anticipated to kindle economic interdependence among participating countries.

However, when it comes to concrete and binding financial obligations, there have been no such commitments. Also, there have been no official estimations but some estimates suggest that the corridor could cost over US\$ 20 billion (Calabrese, 2023). That said, participating countries are yet to come up with clear mechanisms concerning how the financial burden would be shared among the signatories. In addition to financial constraints, another critical challenge is the volatile situation in the Middle East, particularly exacerbated by the war in Gaza. The region was fast moving towards normalisation, particularly the way Israel successfully normalised ties with four Arab states (the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan) under the Abraham Accords in 2020 and the Israelis and Saudis were too getting close to ink an agreement. Tanchum (2021) asserts that the latest connectivity venture is the result of the 2020 political normalisation that the Middle Eastern countries such as Israel and the UAE witnessed and that the railway tracks would culminate in Israel's Haifa port after traversing through the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. However, political and security situation have drastically worsened after the Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and Israeli retaliation in which over 31,000 people have been killed. Hence, in the given situation, the fate of the IMEC is uncertain as there is a fear of public backlash against Arab rulers if they normalise ties with Israel and go ahead with the project. As long as there is no reasonable truce between Hamas and Israel, there are fears that the war could spread into the larger Middle East.

Conclusion: can India match China?

This paper has examined the growing and more tangible role of China in South Asia under the BRI. While several South Asian countries have eagerly greeted the BRI, India has declined to participate on the grounds that the initiative is a breach to its sovereignty. Unlike India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have exhibited eagerness to join the BRI and address their myriad development challenges. Despite the fact that India is the largest economic power and most populous country in South Asia, due to various factors, smaller South Asian countries perceive China an important development partner as well as someone that could be deployed to offset political clout that India has in these countries (Kelegama, 2016). Hence, rather than complementing Chinese ventures for greater regional connectivity and economic integration in South Asia, India has come up with its own projects to compete with China. Despite the fact that it is the largest economy in South Asia, India has not been able to build lasting political and diplomatic connections in South Asia as at one point or another, some of the regional countries have remained uneasy regarding India's dominating position (Kelegama, 2016).

While India has come with several ventures, as compared with China, it has not been able to finance and implement mega projects abroad. In this context, Gupta (2020, p. 54) has appropriately stated that "the BRI shows that the Chinese have ambition, vision, and resources and all three are required to formulate a future international economic order". In the same vein, the author laments that no other economic power has been in a position to come up with an economic vision that could compete with the BRI and bring major transformations to countries in the Global South (Gupta, 2020). Garlick (2023) asserts that numerous developing countries which lacked access to financial resources or which are unable to get concessional loans from Western financial institutions are now better placed to build much-needed infrastructure with the assistance of China. In sum, while China has successfully implemented thousands of projects under the BRI banner in numerous countries, India has not been able to match China in this game. New Delhi has determination and political capital to challenge Beijing, but when it comes to actual resources, it lags far behind.

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