

## What China Wants in South Asia

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**ABSTRACT** China claims to have purely benign intentions in South Asia. A closer look, however, at Beijing's actions in the region strongly suggests that it is assiduously securing its national interests, which are likely detrimental to most if not all South Asian nations. In the future, all South Asian countries should be clear-eyed about what precisely Beijing is attempting to achieve in their region, and the potential long-term consequences.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress speech in October 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that “China will deepen relations with its neighbors in accordance with the principle of amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness, and the policy of forging friendship and partnership with its neighbors.”<sup>1</sup> As neighbours of China, South Asian countries—including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—have increasingly come into contact with Beijing in the diplomatic, economic, and security domains. These interactions demonstrate that China is not simply appealing to the better angels of South Asian neighbours. Rather, Beijing has crafted a geostrategic approach to the region that assiduously seeks to secure its own national interests. South Asian countries, therefore, will have to deeply consider the long-term implications of China’s growing presence and activities in their region.

This brief outlines the issues facing different South Asian countries with respect to their relationships with China, and finds that across the board Beijing pledges them support via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—Beijing’s massive infrastructure development and investment programme. Deep suspicions rightfully persist over this economic component of Chinese strategy in South Asia as it could support Beijing’s broader geopolitical goals—namely the potential geostrategic encirclement of India. Either way, in the political and security domains, Beijing wields a finely tailored approach towards each country to achieve its

national interests, whether counterterrorism in Pakistan and Afghanistan, port access in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, or sowing distraction and confusion in its chief regional rival, India. Overall, the one consistent theme appears to be that China is hardly engaging South Asia for mutual benefit, but primarily, if not exclusively, for its own.

## CHINESE WORDS MEET DEEDS IN SOUTH ASIA

### India

Official Chinese commentary on India tends to stay cordial. For example, in October 2019, Xi visited Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Chennai for the second informal summit between the two leaders, with the first having been hosted by Xi at Wuhan in April 2018. Chinese press statements at the time indicated that both Beijing and New Delhi plan to continue the “Wuhan Spirit” of cooperation. Following the summit, Xi said: “We must hold the rudder and steer the course of China-India relations, map out a hundred-year plan for the relations from a strategic and long-term perspective, inject a strong endogenous impetus into bilateral relations, and work together to realize the great rejuvenation of our two great civilizations.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the lofty rhetoric, however, Beijing has also acknowledged that China and India continue to have deep policy differences. In the official readout of the October Xi-Modi summit, for instance, Beijing highlighted the need for both sides to “dispel suspicions and doubts, and properly handle differences and sensitive issues.”<sup>3</sup>

Chief among India and China's disputes is the lingering territorial disagreement over Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin. Indeed, at the time of writing this brief, bilateral tensions over the few weeks prior have flared once again—the second time in three years since the months-long Doklam standoff in summer 2017<sup>a</sup>—along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) at Galwan Valley and Pangong Tso Lake. Thus far, Beijing has accused the Indian side of “blocking” Chinese troop movements and “attempting to unilaterally change the status.”<sup>4</sup> However, the Chinese state-run *Global Times* tamped down expectations of another Doklam, though it still accused Indian forces of “illegal construction of defense facilities across the border into Chinese territory.”<sup>5</sup> For the moment, it appears that both sides have dug in and tensions along the LAC will persist in spite of Beijing's earlier public statements that it seeks enhanced bilateral communication to avoid a repeat of Doklam.<sup>6</sup>

In general, Beijing has been outspoken on matters of concern at the border.<sup>7</sup> India in October, for example, conducted a military exercise in Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>8</sup> Known in China as “South Tibet,” this region is home to the Tibetan holy site of Tawang and therefore is integral to resolving the Dalai Lama dispute, which has roiled China-India relations for decades. Beijing also protested an Indian exercise held in September in eastern Ladakh—near Kashmir and bordering the disputed Aksai Chin.<sup>9</sup> To be sure, Indian

military improvements in patrols as well as infrastructure development along the LAC have contributed to the current round of tensions, but China has also refused to clarify its position on the LAC by exchanging their maps. This suggests that Beijing is content with the ambiguous status quo because it enables China to ramp up pressure on India in disputed areas when deemed politically or geostrategically advantageous to do so.

Beijing has also been frustrated with Modi's decision in August to strip the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir of its special status and to deploy troops to the region. The next month, in September, China voiced concerns about this at the United Nations on behalf of Pakistan, only to more recently dial-back its approach to focus on resolving the issue through encouraging India-Pakistan dialogue. For example, Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson, Geng Shuang said, “We call on India and Pakistan to step up dialogue on disputes including the Kashmir issue to enhance mutual trust and improve relations. It serves the common interests of both India and Pakistan and represents the shared expectation of regional countries and the international community.”<sup>10</sup>

The crucial problem with Beijing's overtures for India-Pakistan dialogue on Kashmir is that China has traditionally been aligned with Pakistan against India on nearly every major issue, breeding deep Indian

a Doklam is a trijunction border area between China, India, and Bhutan, and the military standoff began when India challenged Chinese road construction in the disputed region.

distrust of Chinese intentions. Indeed, Beijing's "all-weather" partnership with Pakistan serves as the primary constraint on improving China-India ties. By keeping Pakistan relations, as the two sides always say, "higher than the mountains and deeper than the oceans," Beijing has a useful strategic counterweight that distracts New Delhi. For example, New Delhi tends to worry considerably about Chinese activities involving Pakistan, such as the potential establishment of naval facilities at Gwadar and how it might one day become linked with other Chinese ports or naval bases throughout the Indian Ocean.

This could, as many have discussed, constitute a "String of Pearls" strategy of encirclement.<sup>11</sup> New Delhi further worries about the geostrategic implications of Beijing's BRI flagship initiative, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is a collection of infrastructure projects traversing disputed territory between India and Pakistan.

Regarding BRI, India is one of China's few neighbouring states that has outright and publicly rejected participation, much to the chagrin of Chinese leaders. Beijing seeks to gain economically from India's involvement in BRI, but New Delhi clearly harbours deep suspicions about how BRI could be used against it. Specifically, India worries that BRI is too enticing for the smaller and poorer South Asian countries to turn down, thereby opening the door to India's potential encirclement by countries participating

in the project. While BRI certainly seeks heightened economic interaction with India's neighbours, it remains debatable whether Beijing has a grand plan of leveraging BRI for regional power projection purposes in the future. What is clear, however, is that New Delhi feels uncomfortable with Chinese attempts to secure port access agreements along the Indian Ocean in places like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and New Delhi is probably watching Myanmar closely as well. The bottom line is that India will not want to relinquish its dominant position in the Indian Ocean.

Finally, China undoubtedly wants to prevent India from getting any closer to the United States. Although Chinese military preparation for potential contingencies against Taiwan or in the East or South China Seas understandably receives much of the attention in the West, Chinese military scholars have written extensively about the potential for a renewed border war against India along the Himalayas.<sup>12</sup> In fact, armed conflict with India is so prominent in Chinese military thinking that it is encapsulated in a campaign called the "Joint Border Area Operations (边境地区联合作战)"—the only known campaign of China's five official campaigns that would not primarily occur in the naval and air warfighting domains.<sup>13</sup> According to Ian Easton, who has studied these campaigns closely, a war against Taiwan occurring simultaneously with another one against India in the south would be a "nightmare scenario" for Beijing.<sup>14</sup> Thus, India's strengthening security ties with

the United States would be a worrisome development on China's western flank, where it already apparently feels vulnerable.

## Pakistan

A month before participating in his summit with Modi in October 2019, Xi met with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan in Beijing. Xi's acceptance of the meeting just prior to his summit with Modi was clearly meant to demonstrate Pakistan's continued importance in Chinese decision-making in South Asia within the strategic context of countering India. According to the joint press release, China-Pakistan discussions were "marked by traditional warmth, mutual understanding, and strategic trust" and each side reaffirmed their commitment to supporting the core issues of the other.<sup>15</sup> While Beijing "reiterated solidarity with Pakistan in safeguarding its territorial sovereignty, independence, and security," Islamabad "reaffirmed its commitment to the One China Policy" and the need to "uphold international law and basic norms of non-interference in internal affairs of other countries."<sup>16</sup>

With pleasantries out of the way, Xi and Khan discussed Modi's decision to strip Kashmir of its special status and Beijing "reiterated that the Kashmir issue is a dispute left from history, and should be properly and peacefully resolved based on the UN Charter, relevant UNSC resolutions,

and bilateral agreements. China opposes any unilateral actions that complicate the situation."<sup>17</sup> Although Chinese statements on Kashmir tend to favour Pakistan, they should not be viewed as directly supporting Islamabad's position. Significantly, Beijing decided against stating that Kashmir was part of Pakistani territory and instead took a more balanced approach to the South Asian rivals. This has been a theme over the years in India-Pakistan disputes.

Another recent example occurred after Pakistan-based terrorists in February 2019 attacked Pulwama district in Kashmir, prompting Indian air strikes against Balakot town.<sup>18</sup> In response, Beijing noted, "A harmonious relationship between the two [India and Pakistan] are crucial to regional peace, stability, and development and serves the interests of India and Pakistan fundamentally. We hope the two sides will exercise restraint and take actions that will help stabilize [the] situation in the region and improve bilateral relations instead of doing the opposite."<sup>19</sup> China has been similarly even-handed in the aftermath of the Uri terrorist attacks (2016), Mumbai bombings (2008), and Kargil crisis (1999).<sup>b</sup>

Another major factor for Beijing in its relationship with Islamabad is counter-terrorism. As indicated in their joint press statement after the Xi-Khan meeting in September, "China appreciated Pakistan's

b In 2016, heavily-armed Pakistan-based terrorists carried out attacks near Uri in Jammu and Kashmir that killed 18 Indian soldiers. In 2008, the terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba struck multiple targets across Mumbai over the course of four days. In 1999, the Kargil crisis occurred in the town of Kargil astride the Line of Control between the Indian and Pakistani militaries, resulting in New Delhi retaking possession of Kargil.

unrelenting efforts and tremendous sacrifices in counter-terrorism.” Beijing also “supported Pakistan in implementing its National Action Plan and called on the international community to objectively recognize Pakistan’s contributions to regional peace and security through its success in fight against terrorism.”<sup>20</sup> China’s keen interest in counter-terrorism relates back to concerns about potential Muslim separatist activities in its restive northwestern province of Xinjiang.<sup>21</sup> Beijing certainly views Islamabad as a critical ally in this fight as it is a neighbouring state and has an intricate understanding of Islamist groups.

In addition, Pakistan rarely criticises China’s harsh treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang. Beijing reciprocates by protecting Islamabad in international organisations. For instance, Beijing has wielded its veto power at the UN Security Council multiple times to prevent the sanctioning of Masood Azhar, the leader of a Pakistan-based militant group called Jaish-e-Mohammed, until finally relenting last year.<sup>22</sup> As the rotational president of the Financial Action Task Force, Beijing also likely played a key role in 2019 in helping Pakistan avoid sanctions for terrorism financing.<sup>23</sup>

China also holds up its partnership with Pakistan as an important demonstration of benign intentions to develop the rest of the world through BRI. Indeed, BRI’s flagship project, CPEC, runs through territory under de facto Pakistani control, but disputed by India. Following Xi and Khan’s last meeting,

the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to CPEC, stating their “determination to speedily execute CPEC so that its growth potential can be fully realized making it a high-quality demonstration project of BRI.”<sup>24</sup>

This statement tracks with previous flowery assessments of CPEC, such as in July when Beijing touted “the achievements of the CPEC, adding that the CPEC cooperation is heading toward a new stage featuring enrichment, expansion, and high-quality development.”<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, that in spite of the positive statements made by each side, CPEC has faced numerous challenges, such as deep concerns surrounding how Pakistan is actually going to afford CPEC.<sup>26</sup>

On Afghanistan, Chinese leaders believe that Pakistan serves as a useful partner to achieve security in order to eventually benefit from economic development there. The joint statement following the Xi-Khan meeting in September indicates that “the Chinese side appreciated Pakistan’s efforts in promoting peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan. Both sides maintained that an inclusive, and Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process would be key to bringing peace and stability in the country.”<sup>27</sup> Both Beijing and Islamabad are part of the trilateral China-Pakistan-Afghanistan foreign ministers dialogue which, according to the last Chinese readout in September, produced “positive achievements in facilitating Afghan domestic political reconciliation, enhancing

regional connectivity, and improving regional common development.”<sup>28</sup> China almost certainly assesses Pakistan to be a valuable asset toward better understanding the situation in Afghanistan and in communicating with different actors in the country, to include the Taliban, who China believes must be a part of any future government. Finally, the trilateral discussions also agreed to push “forward under the BRI” and “to enhance connectivity by extending the CPEC to Afghanistan.”<sup>29</sup>

### **Afghanistan**

China seeks Afghan reconciliation, to include Taliban integration, in a future government. Most recently in September, Beijing noted that Afghanistan “should have broad representation and inclusiveness in order to make all factions and ethnic groups equally involve[d] in the political life so as to build a united political foundation.”<sup>30</sup> This has been a consistent Chinese policy over the years.<sup>31</sup>

As noted earlier, Beijing further seeks to incorporate Afghanistan into BRI. According to a readout of Xi’s meeting with Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani in June 2019, Beijing seeks to “steadily promote practical cooperation in economy and trade [via BRI].”<sup>32</sup> In April, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reaffirmed Beijing’s interest in helping Afghanistan through BRI, stating “China is willing to work with Afghanistan to deepen joint construction of the Belt and Road and advance bilateral

cooperation in various fields in order to jointly benefit the two countries and peoples.”<sup>33</sup>

Like in its relationship with Pakistan, China looks to Afghanistan to support counter-terrorism operations to prevent instability from spilling over into bordering Xinjiang province. Xi has pledged to “continue to help Afghanistan build its capacity in fighting terrorism and maintaining stability.” Xi further “called on the Afghan side to continue to firmly support China in its fight against the terrorist force of East Turkistan Islamic Movement.”<sup>34</sup> In a trilateral context, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are working together to share more intelligence related to counter-terrorism.<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, China probably views the continued stationing of US troops in Afghanistan as foolhardy. According to a Chinese opinion piece from February 2017, “the total expense of the mission is even higher than that of reconstructing Europe after WWII. However, only 63 percent of Afghanistan’s territory is under the control of the Afghan government, and the area is plagued by rampant opium plant and corruption problems.”<sup>36</sup> The editorial goes on to state that “the [U.S.] government is unable to function without international aids. The U.S. seems to be overwhelmed by its operation in Afghanistan.”<sup>37</sup> Given these conditions, Beijing probably finds it strategically advantageous to have the US hobbled by this conflict and less able to focus on countering China in the Indo-Pacific.

## Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka

In July, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang met with Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and the two leaders focused much of their discussion on the need for the economic development of Bangladesh via BRI funding.<sup>38</sup> According to the joint communique issued after the engagement, “the two sides shared the view that the BRI offers a model of international cooperation for all the participants and provides new opportunities for regional connectivity and economic integration.”<sup>39</sup> It is possible that Beijing seeks to leverage BRI development of a power hub at Payra to obtain port access in the future.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to the focus on economic issues, China and Bangladesh pledged to deepen defense cooperation, especially in the areas of “defense industry and trade, training, equipment and technology, mutual visits of navy ships, and the UN peacekeeping operations.”<sup>41</sup> The Chinese navy in 2016 made its first port visit (and again in 2017) to Chittagong, perhaps signaling Beijing’s belief that the largest port in Bangladesh holds geostrategic value.<sup>42</sup> China is also the largest arms supplier of the Bangladeshi military, providing 71.8 percent of weapons from 2008 to 2018, suggesting that Beijing seeks to further ingratiate itself with Dhaka through these sales.<sup>43</sup> A final important feature of Chinese statements on Bangladesh is that Beijing will continue to look to Dhaka for counter-terrorism cooperation as both “opposed terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.”<sup>44</sup>

Bhutan does not have diplomatic relations with China, and so there is much less interaction than with other South Asian countries. However, in the last meeting held in February 2019 between visiting Chinese ambassador to India, Luo Zhaohui, and Bhutanese Prime Minister Lotay Tshering, Beijing emphasised the need to continue working together with Bhutan on resolving the border issue.<sup>45</sup> This is likely in reference to the Doklam region in which a China-India dispute occurred in 2017. Either way, the last round of China-Bhutan border talks were held in 2016.<sup>46</sup>

China’s relationship with the Maldives is near-exclusively focused on leveraging BRI to develop Maldives as well as to raise Chinese influence there to counter India. Beijing’s preferred Maldivian President, Abdulla Yameen Abdul Gayoom, was defeated in elections in 2018, and the current leader, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, is more amenable to India’s wishes. Bilateral ties, however, remain positive, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang as recently as July 2019 noting his appreciation for continued Maldivian support of BRI.<sup>47</sup> Beijing has touted the completion of the “China-Maldives Friendship Bridge” as a tangible example of what positive bilateral relations can create to benefit average Maldivians.<sup>48</sup> Indian and Western suspicions persist, however, that Beijing plans to develop Maldives for geostrategic purposes.

Following his visit to India in October, Chinese President Xi went directly to Nepal in what was the first visit by a Chinese head



of state in 23 years. While on the ground, Xi signed 20 agreements through BRI to better enable China to develop and connect with Nepal.<sup>49</sup> The two sides “will accelerate the building of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network through connectivity projects including ports, highways, railways, aviation, and communications, and have announced the launch of a feasibility study of the China-Nepal cross-border railway.”<sup>50</sup> Beijing was further pleased to see Kathmandu acknowledge that “Tibet affairs are China’s internal affairs, and the determination [of Nepal] on not allowing any anti-China activities on its soil.”<sup>51</sup>

Finally, on Sri Lanka, the Chinese focus is mainly on developing the island and likely currying influence there for future geostrategic aspirations. During a meeting between Chinese Premier Li and Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena in May 2019, the two leaders expressed an interest in progressing with BRI projects, consistent with the last joint statement issued in 2016.<sup>52</sup> Western “debt-trap” concerns persist, however, and rightfully so. In exchange for paying down Colombo’s BRI debt, the Chinese got Sri Lanka in December 2017 to hand over Hambantota port on a 99-year lease; Hambantota is geostrategically located on the Indian Ocean, potentially bolstering Beijing’s String of Pearls.<sup>53</sup>

In response, Beijing has noted that debt-trap fears are “a false proposition created by Western media with a direct attempt to obstruct the joint development of China and

other developing countries, including Sri Lanka.”<sup>54</sup> Beijing has instead argued that “the Hambantota port was built for the Sri Lankan government and its people” and has focused on improvements to the port making it more commercially viable.<sup>55</sup> To demonstrate that it has no malign intentions at Hambantota, Beijing has floated the idea that third countries should invest in the port.<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As detailed in this brief, Chinese interests in South Asia stretch far beyond simply maintaining amicable relations in the region. Rather, China is dissatisfied at the LAC with India and is trying to improve the situation to its liking. Beijing is also frustrated with New Delhi’s persistent support of the Dalai Lama and rejection of BRI. As a result, China seeks to undermine India by aligning closely with archrival Pakistan.

India is already painfully aware of these realities, and since Modi came to power in 2014, New Delhi has attempted to deter China while being cordial and productive with it—most notably through the series of informal leadership summits held between Xi and Modi at Wuhan (2018) and Chennai (2019). However, as the recent border flare-up demonstrates, Beijing does not simply appreciate New Delhi’s cooperation and dispense with assertiveness in the bilateral relationship. Instead, China doubles down, and that is likely to push India even closer to the US and other like-minded democracies such as Australia and Japan—with all four countries making up the Quadrilateral

Security Dialogue or 'Quad'. The Quad is perhaps stronger today than it has ever been, and may be on the verge of holding its first naval exercise.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond India, China further uses its long-standing and deep relationship with Pakistan to insulate itself from terrorism and to establish a strategic foothold in a

future Afghanistan. Furthermore, Beijing leverages BRI in nearly every country (except India)—potentially with geostrategic implications, especially at ports throughout the Indian Ocean. Going forward, all South Asian countries should be aware of what precisely Beijing is attempting to achieve in their region, and the potential long-term consequences. 

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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