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## Research Article

### China's Foreign Policy Shift in South Asia vis-à-vis Belt and Road Initiative

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#### ABSTRACT

China's foreign policy shift in South Asia has been largely driven by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to enhance connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia and beyond. South Asia, with its strategic location and growing economic potential, has emerged as a key area of focus for China under the BRI. In this context, China has pursued a multi-pronged approach, which includes infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and strategic partnerships with key countries in the region. One of the key components of China's foreign policy shift in South Asia has been its emphasis on infrastructure development. China has invested heavily in the construction of roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure projects in the region, with the aim of improving connectivity and facilitating trade and commerce. These investments have been largely made through the BRI framework, which has provided China with a platform to promote its economic and strategic interests in the region. China has also sought to deepen economic cooperation with South Asian countries through the BRI. This has involved the signing of a number of bilateral and regional trade agreements, as well as the establishment of special economic zones and industrial parks. Through these initiatives, China has sought to increase its access to South Asian markets and promote the growth of its own economy. In addition to these economic initiatives, China has also sought to establish strategic partnerships with key countries in the region. This has involved strengthening its ties with countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, which have strategic significance due to their location and their potential to provide China with access to key markets and resources. These partnerships have also involved cooperation in areas such as defense and security, with China seeking to establish a greater presence in the Indian Ocean region.

**Keywords:** *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Cultural Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Indian Ocean, Soft Power, South Asia*

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## Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a comprehensive strategy aimed at enhancing connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia and beyond. One of the key areas of focus for China under this initiative has been South Asia, which has emerged as a region of strategic significance due to its location and growing economic potential. China's foreign policy shift in South Asia under the BRI has been characterized by a multi-pronged approach that includes infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and strategic partnerships with key countries in the region. This shift has significant implications for the economic and strategic landscape of the region, as China seeks to expand its influence and establish itself as a key player in the region. This essay will explore China's foreign policy shift in South Asia vis-à-vis the BRI, examining the key components of this shift and the implications for the region. It will also examine the challenges and opportunities that this shift presents for South Asian countries, as well as the broader regional dynamics that are likely to shape China's engagement with the region in the years to come.

China's foreign policy shift in South Asia has been largely driven by its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to promote economic cooperation and connectivity across Asia and beyond. South Asia has emerged as a key area of focus for China under the BRI, due to its strategic location and growing economic potential. One of the key components of China's foreign policy shift in South Asia has been its emphasis on infrastructure development. China has invested heavily in the construction of roads, railways, ports, and other infrastructure projects in the region, with the aim of improving connectivity and facilitating trade and commerce. These investments have been largely made through the BRI framework, which has provided China with a platform to promote its economic and strategic interests in the region. For example, China has invested in the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a network of highways, railways, and pipelines that connects the Chinese city of Kashgar with the Pakistani port of Gwadar. Similarly, China has invested in the construction of the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka and

the Kyaukpadaung port in Myanmar, both of which have strategic significance due to their location and potential to provide China with access to key markets and resources.

China has also sought to deepen economic cooperation with South Asian countries through the BRI. This has involved the signing of a number of bilateral and regional trade agreements, as well as the establishment of special economic zones and industrial parks. Through these initiatives, China has sought to increase its access to South Asian markets and promote the growth of its own economy. For example, China has signed a Free Trade Agreement with Pakistan, which has helped to increase bilateral trade between the two countries. Similarly, China has established a special economic zone in Bangladesh, which has helped to attract Chinese investment and promote economic development in the country.

In addition to these economic initiatives, China has also sought to establish strategic partnerships with key countries in the region. This has involved strengthening its ties with countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, which have strategic significance due to their location and their potential to provide China with access to key markets and resources. These partnerships have also involved cooperation in areas such as defense and security, with China seeking to establish a greater presence in the Indian Ocean region. For example, China has signed a strategic partnership agreement with Pakistan, which has involved cooperation in areas such as defense, energy, and infrastructure development. Similarly, China has established a strategic partnership with Sri Lanka, which has involved the development of the Hambantota port and other infrastructure projects.

China's foreign policy shift in South Asia under the BRI has significant implications for the region. On the one hand, it presents opportunities for South Asian countries to attract Chinese investment and promote economic development. On the other hand, it also presents challenges, such as concerns over debt sustainability, environmental impact, and the potential for increased Chinese influence in the region. Overall, China's foreign policy shift in South Asia vis-à-vis the BRI represents a significant

development in China's approach to the region. Its multi-pronged approach, which includes infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and strategic partnerships, is likely to have far-reaching implications for the region's economic and strategic landscape in the years to come.

### **Research Objectives**

1. To examine the evolution of China's foreign policy towards South Asia and identify the factors that have influenced this shift.
2. To investigate the Belt and Road Initiative's impact on China's foreign policy towards South Asia, including its economic, political, and strategic implications.
3. To analyze the role of South Asian countries in shaping China's foreign policy and the Belt and Road Initiative's implementation in the region.
4. To identify the challenges and opportunities posed by the Belt and Road Initiative for China's foreign policy towards South Asia and assess their significance.
5. To evaluate the potential implications of China's foreign policy shift in South Asia vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative for the region's economic development, geopolitical landscape, and regional security.

To provide policy recommendations for China and South Asian countries to enhance cooperation and address potential challenges arising from the Belt and Road Initiative's implementation in the region.

### **Methods**

Aims and objectives of this research study have been carried out by opting bi-method i.e. descriptive-analytical method. To comprehend the problem in historical and present context, descriptive method has been adopted. Moreover, the nature of the study in hand is secondary, as the data has been collected by using the secondary sources such as books, magazines, journals, newspapers, policy papers, conference proceedings, press release and various websites.

**Data Collection:** Data has been collected by using the secondary sources such as books, research reports, government reports, academic articles, and news articles.

**Data Analysis:** Data has been analyzed by using the qualitative research methods such as content analysis and grounded theory to identify patterns, themes, and relationships.

**Instrument:** To carry out the research, all the available content has been analyzed. This involves analyzing written or spoken communication, such as speeches, policy documents, and news articles, to identify patterns and themes related to China's foreign policy towards South Asia and the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Data Validation:** Data validation is a critical step in the research process, as it helps to ensure that the data collected is accurate, reliable, and trustworthy. So, the data collected has been analyzed using appropriate statistical and qualitative analysis techniques to ensure that the findings are valid and reliable.

**Sampling Technique:** Expert sampling technique has been used to carry out the research. This technique involves selecting experts who are knowledgeable about the research topic and can provide valuable insights. For example, experts in the field of China's foreign policy towards South Asia can be selected for interviews or surveys to provide their opinions on the factors that have influenced China's foreign policy shift in the region. Formal interviews of experts have not been made but discussions have been made in this regard.

### **China's Foreign Policy shift in South Asia**

China's foreign policy shift in South Asia has been a significant development in the region's economic and strategic landscape. Under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has made significant investments in infrastructure development, economic cooperation, and strategic partnerships with key countries in South Asia. This essay will examine the key components of China's foreign policy shift in South Asia vis-à-vis the BRI and the implications for the region. It will also analyze the challenges and opportunities that this shift presents for South Asian countries, as well as the broader regional dynamics that are likely to shape China's engagement with the region in the years to come (Malik, 2001).

### ***China's Expanding Military Maritime Footprints in the Indian Ocean Region***

China's expanding military maritime footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) have been a growing concern for regional powers such as India. China's military engagement in the region has increased significantly in recent years, with the country building naval bases, conducting joint exercises with regional partners, and deploying its naval assets for anti-piracy operations. China's most significant military engagement in the IOR has been the establishment of naval bases in the region. China's first overseas military base was established in Djibouti in 2017, which is strategically located near the Bab-el-Mandeb strait, a key chokepoint for global maritime trade. China has also been building a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative, which is expected to provide China with a strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea (Suri, 2017).

China has also been increasing its military cooperation with regional partners through joint exercises. China has conducted joint naval exercises with Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in the region. These exercises have included the deployment of advanced naval assets such as submarines, destroyers, and frigates. In addition, China has been providing military assistance to Sri Lanka, including the provision of naval vessels and training for Sri Lankan naval personnel. China has been actively involved in anti-piracy operations in the IOR since 2008, when it deployed its first naval task force to the region. China has since deployed several task forces to the region, which have operated in close coordination with other naval forces such as those of the United States, India, and the European Union. China's participation in anti-piracy operations has been seen as a positive contribution to regional security (Kumar, 2017).

China's expanding military maritime footprints in the IOR have significant implications for India's security interests in the region. The establishment of naval bases in Djibouti and Gwadar has raised concerns about China's strategic intent and its ability to project power in the region. China's naval cooperation with Pakistan and Sri Lanka has also been viewed with suspicion by India, which sees these countries

as part of its sphere of influence. In addition, China's growing naval presence in the region has implications for India's maritime security. The Indian Navy has traditionally dominated the IOR, but China's naval build-up in the region has challenged India's naval superiority. This has led India to increase its naval presence in the region, including through the deployment of aircraft carriers and submarines (Garver, 1992).

China's expanding military maritime footprints in the IOR have significant implications for regional security and stability. While China's engagement in the region has been driven by its economic and strategic interests, its military build-up in the region has raised concerns about its strategic intent. As China's naval presence in the region continues to grow, it is likely to challenge India's traditional dominance in the IOR and raise tensions between the two regional powers. It will be important for regional powers to engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation to ensure that the region remains peaceful and stable. Here is a list of China's expanding military maritime footprints in the Indian Ocean Region:

- Establishment of a naval base in Djibouti
- Building a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan as part of the CPEC initiative
- Conducting joint naval exercises with Pakistan, Russia, and Iran in the region
- Providing military assistance to Sri Lanka, including naval vessels and training for Sri Lankan naval personnel
- Active participation in anti-piracy operations in the IOR since 2008, deploying several task forces to the region.

### ***China's Interests in the Indian Ocean Region***

China is interested in the Indian Ocean for several reasons. One of the main reasons is that the Indian Ocean is a critical trade route for China, as the majority of China's energy supplies and trade pass through this region. Therefore, China has a strong economic interest in maintaining the security and stability of the Indian Ocean. In addition to its economic interests, China also has strategic and security interests in the Indian Ocean. China sees the Indian Ocean as a key component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to increase China's

connectivity with the rest of the world and promote its economic and strategic interests. To achieve this objective, China is investing heavily in port infrastructure in the region, such as the Gwadar port in Pakistan, to facilitate its trade and commerce. China is also seeking to expand its strategic presence in the Indian Ocean to counter the influence of the United States and India in the region. China has established a naval base in Djibouti and is building a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, to project its power in the region. Additionally, China is participating in anti-piracy operations in the region to ensure the security of its sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean, which are critical for its energy supplies and trade. Overall, China's interests in the Indian Ocean are driven by its economic and strategic objectives, as well as its concerns about the security and stability of the region (Cordner, 2010).

China has several economic, strategic, and security interests in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Here are some of China's interests in the region:

- **Energy security:** China is heavily dependent on imported oil and natural gas, and the majority of its energy supplies come from the Middle East and Africa, which are located in the IOR.
- **Trade and commerce:** China is the world's largest trading nation, and a significant portion of its trade passes through the IOR. China has invested heavily in port infrastructure in the region to facilitate its trade and commerce.
- **Regional connectivity:** China is investing in several infrastructure projects in the region, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor, to improve regional connectivity and promote economic development.
- **Strategic presence:** China is seeking to expand its strategic presence in the IOR to counter the influence of the United States and India in the region. China has established a naval base in Djibouti and is building a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, to project its power in the region.

- **Security:** China is concerned about the security of its sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the IOR, which are critical for its energy supplies and trade. China is participating in anti-piracy operations in the region and has been deploying its naval assets for this purpose (Khurana, 2008).

Overall, China's interests in the IOR are driven by its economic and strategic objectives. China sees the region as a key component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to increase China's connectivity with the rest of the world and promote its economic and strategic interests.

### ***China's Security Gambit in the Indian Ocean***

China's Security Gambit in the Indian Ocean refers to the measures and strategies adopted by China to enhance its security posture and protect its interests in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Ocean region is of critical importance to China, as it is a key trade route for the country's energy supplies and trade. Therefore, China has been investing heavily in port infrastructure and expanding its naval capabilities in the region. China's security gambit in the Indian Ocean is driven by several factors, including its economic interests, strategic objectives, and concerns about the security and stability of the region. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a major driver of its security gambit in the Indian Ocean, as it seeks to increase its connectivity with the rest of the world and promote its economic and strategic interests (Markey & West, 2016).

China's security gambit in the Indian Ocean involves the expansion of naval capabilities, the building of naval bases, participation in anti-piracy operations, providing military assistance, and diplomacy and engagement with countries in the region. These measures are aimed at enhancing China's security posture and protecting its interests in the region. However, China's increasing presence and influence in the Indian Ocean have raised concerns among other major powers in the region, including India and the United States. This has led to a competition for influence in the region and an increased focus on security issues. Overall, China's security gambit in the Indian Ocean is a critical aspect of

its broader foreign policy and strategic objectives (Jash, 2016).

China's security gambit in the Indian Ocean involves several measures to enhance its security posture and protect its interests in the region. Some of the key elements of China's security gambit in the Indian Ocean include:

- **Expansion of naval capabilities:** China is rapidly expanding its naval capabilities and deploying more naval assets in the Indian Ocean, including submarines, destroyers, and frigates. This has enabled China to enhance its ability to project power in the region and protect its interests.
- **Building naval bases:** China has established a naval base in Djibouti and is building a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, as part of its security strategy in the Indian Ocean. These bases provide China with the capability to monitor and control sea lanes in the region, protect its interests, and project power if needed.
- **Participation in anti-piracy operations:** China has been an active participant in anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean since 2008. China has deployed several task forces to the region and has worked closely with other countries to ensure the security of shipping lanes in the region.
- **Providing military assistance:** China has been providing military assistance to countries in the region, including Sri Lanka and Pakistan. This includes the provision of naval vessels and training for naval personnel to help these countries enhance their maritime security capabilities.
- **Diplomacy and engagement:** China has been engaging in diplomacy and dialogue with countries in the region to build stronger relationships and enhance cooperation on security issues. This includes participating in regional security forums, such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), and engaging in bilateral dialogues with individual countries.

Overall, China's security gambit in the Indian Ocean is aimed at enhancing its security posture and protecting its interests in the region. China is investing heavily in naval capabilities and infrastructure, participating in anti-piracy operations, providing military assistance, and engaging in diplomacy and dialogue to achieve its security objectives in the Indian Ocean.

### ***China's Oil Imports***

China is the world's largest oil importer, with oil imports accounting for approximately 75% of its total oil consumption. China's increasing demand for oil is driven by its rapid economic growth and urbanization, which has led to a significant increase in the country's energy consumption. China imports most of its oil from the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia being its largest supplier. Other major suppliers include Russia, Angola, and Iraq. In recent years, China has also been increasing its oil imports from Africa, Central Asia, and South America. To secure its oil supplies, China has been investing heavily in oil infrastructure and exploring new sources of oil. China has been building strategic oil reserves and expanding its pipeline network to ensure a steady supply of oil. China has also been investing in oil fields and refineries overseas, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, to secure long-term supplies of oil (Lai, 2007).

However, China's dependence on oil imports makes it vulnerable to disruptions in the global oil market and geopolitical tensions. China's oil imports have also been a source of tension with major oil-producing countries, particularly the United States and Saudi Arabia, which have raised concerns about China's growing influence and its impact on global oil prices. Overall, China's oil imports are a critical aspect of its energy security and a key driver of its foreign policy and economic development (Chen, Ding & Zhang, 2022).

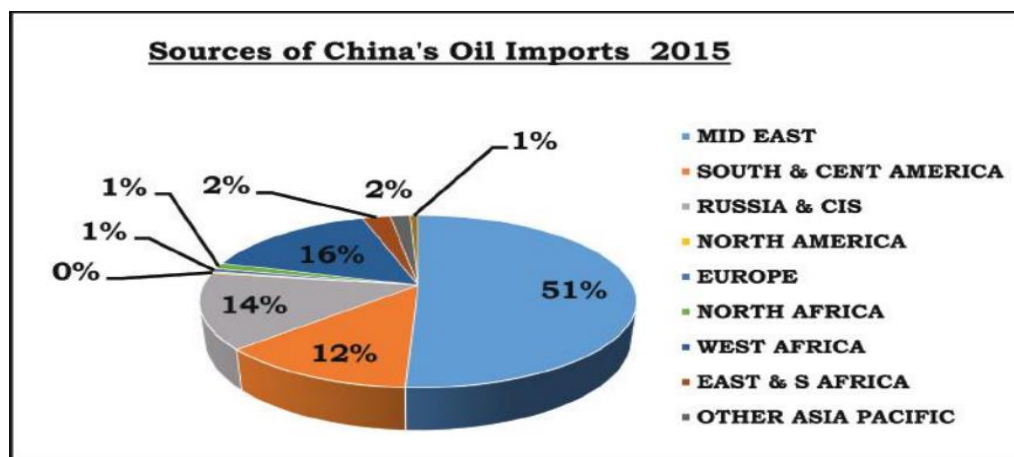


Figure 1 Sources of China's Oil Imports 2015

Source: China's Expanding Military Maritime Footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR): India's Response, [https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/china-s-expanding-military-maritime-footprint-in-the-indian-ocean-region-india-s-response\\_0.pdf](https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/china-s-expanding-military-maritime-footprint-in-the-indian-ocean-region-india-s-response_0.pdf)

Here are some statistics on China's oil imports:

- China is the world's largest oil importer, with imports reaching 10.9 million barrels per day (bpd) in 2020.
- The Middle East is China's largest source of oil imports, accounting for approximately 44% of its total imports in 2020.
- Saudi Arabia is China's largest supplier of oil, providing approximately 15% of China's total imports in 2020.
- Other major suppliers to China include Russia (14%), Angola (11%), Iraq (8%), and Brazil (4%).
- China's oil imports from Africa have been increasing steadily, reaching 1.86 million bpd in 2020, up from 1.68 million bpd in 2019.
- China has been investing heavily in strategic oil reserves, with a target to reach 500 million barrels by 2021.
- China has been expanding its pipeline network, with a focus on connecting its western regions to its coastal areas and increasing its imports from Central Asia.
- China has been investing in oil fields and refineries overseas, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, to secure long-term supplies of oil.

### China's Gas Imports

China's demand for natural gas has been rapidly increasing in recent years due to its economic growth, urbanization, and efforts to reduce air pollution and carbon emissions. However, China's domestic natural gas production has been struggling to keep up with its rising demand, leading to a growing dependence on natural gas imports. To meet its increasing demand for natural gas, China has been importing natural gas from various countries around the world, including pipeline gas from Central Asia and Russia, as well as liquefied natural gas (LNG) from countries such as Australia, Qatar, and Malaysia (Tang, 2014).

China has been investing heavily in natural gas infrastructure, including pipelines, LNG terminals, and storage facilities, to support its growing demand for natural gas. Additionally, China has been exploring new sources of natural gas, such as shale gas and coal-bed methane, to boost its domestic production. China's shift towards cleaner energy sources, including natural gas, is also driven by its efforts to reduce air pollution and carbon emissions, and to meet its climate change commitments. As such, China's gas imports are a critical aspect of its energy security and a key driver of its economic development and foreign policy (Wang & Feng, 2013).



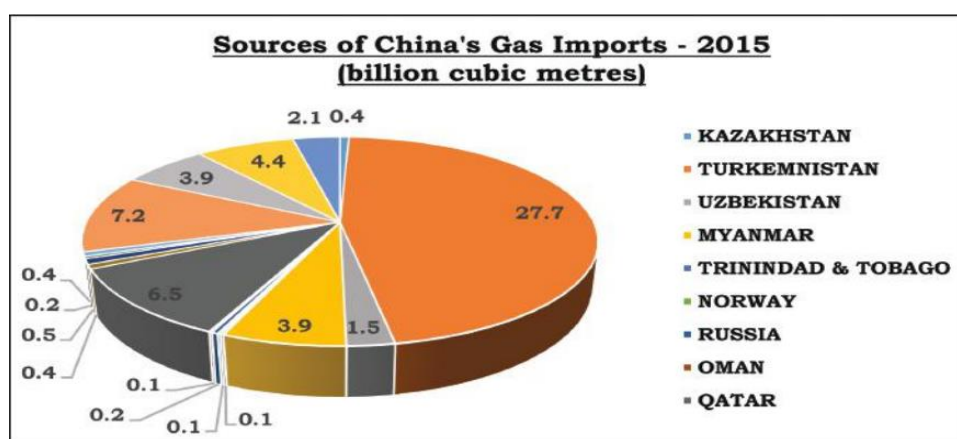


Figure 2 Sources of China's Gas Imports 2015

Source: China's Expanding Military Maritime Footprints in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR): India's Response, [https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/china-s-expanding-military-maritime-footprint-in-the-indian-ocean-region-india-s-response\\_0.pdf](https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/china-s-expanding-military-maritime-footprint-in-the-indian-ocean-region-india-s-response_0.pdf)

China is the world's third-largest natural gas consumer, and its demand for natural gas has been growing rapidly in recent years. To meet its increasing demand, China has been importing natural gas from various countries around the world. Here are some statistics about China's gas imports:

- China imported a total of 101.7 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas in 2020, an increase of 5.3% from the previous year.
- The top three sources of China's natural gas imports in 2020 were: pipeline gas from Central Asia (45.4 bcm), liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Australia (30.4 bcm), and pipeline gas from Russia (8.9 bcm).
- Other major sources of China's natural gas imports include Malaysia, Qatar, Indonesia, and the United States.

• China's imports of LNG have been growing rapidly, with a year-on-year increase of 7.3% in 2020. Australia, Qatar, and Malaysia are the top three suppliers of LNG to China.

China has been investing heavily in natural gas infrastructure, including pipelines, LNG terminals, and storage facilities, to support its growing demand for natural gas. China's shift towards cleaner energy sources, including natural gas, is driven by its efforts to reduce air pollution and carbon emissions, and to meet its climate change commitments.

### **Bolstering Sino-Pakistan Cooperation**

Bolstering Sino-Pakistan cooperation has been a cornerstone of China's foreign policy in South Asia for several decades. The relationship between China and Pakistan is often described as "all-weather" and "ironclad," as it is based on mutual trust, common interests, and shared strategic goals. There are several factors that have contributed to the strengthening of Sino-Pakistan cooperation: Strategic location: Pakistan's location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East makes it a critical partner for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its broader geostrategic interests in the region (Ahmad & Singh, 2017).

Economic ties: China is Pakistan's largest trading partner and a major investor in its economy, particularly in the infrastructure and energy sectors. China has invested heavily in the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under the BRI that aims to connect China's western provinces to the port of Gwadar in Pakistan via a network of roads, railways, and pipelines. Security cooperation: China and Pakistan have a long-standing strategic partnership, and they have cooperated closely on a range of security issues, including counterterrorism, border security, and regional stability. Diplomatic support: China has been a strong diplomatic ally of



Pakistan on the international stage, particularly in the United Nations and other multilateral forums. China has also supported Pakistan in its disputes with India over Kashmir and other issues. Overall, the Sino-Pakistan relationship is a critical component of China's foreign policy in South Asia, and it is likely to remain a key priority for China in the years to come (Hussain, 2014).

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been a flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a key driver of China-Pakistan cooperation. The completion of the CPEC has opened up new opportunities for strengthening the bilateral relationship between the two countries in several areas:

- **Industrial cooperation:** The CPEC has created opportunities for industrial cooperation between China and Pakistan, particularly in the areas of energy, infrastructure, and manufacturing. The two countries are working to establish Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the corridor, which will offer incentives for Chinese and Pakistani businesses to invest and operate in these zones.
- **Connectivity:** The CPEC has improved connectivity between China and Pakistan, and the two countries are working to further enhance their transport and communication links. The development of Gwadar Port as a deep-water port has the potential to transform Pakistan's economy and provide a strategic maritime link for China to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.
- **People-to-people exchanges:** The CPEC has also created opportunities for people-to-people exchanges between China and Pakistan. The two countries are working to enhance their cultural, educational, and tourism ties, which will help to build greater mutual understanding and friendship between their peoples.
- **Regional stability:** China and Pakistan have a shared interest in maintaining regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan and the wider South Asian region. The two countries are working closely on regional security issues, including counterterrorism, border security, and peace-building initiatives.

Overall, the completion of the CPEC has opened up new opportunities for strengthening Sino-Pakistan cooperation, and the two countries are likely to continue to deepen their relationship in the years to come.

### ***Promoting Soft Power Image in the Region***

China has been promoting its soft power image in the region as part of its broader foreign policy objectives. The concept of soft power refers to a country's ability to influence others through non-coercive means such as culture, language, education, and diplomacy. China has been using a range of tools to project a positive image of itself in the region, including: Cultural exchanges: China has been promoting its culture and language in the region through cultural exchanges, language courses, and Confucius Institutes. These initiatives have helped to build bridges of understanding and friendship between China and the countries in the region. Educational exchanges: China has been offering scholarships to students from the region to study in Chinese universities. This has helped to build human capital in the region and fostered greater understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture and values (Sun, 2012).

Public diplomacy: China has been using public diplomacy initiatives to promote its image in the region, including hosting cultural events, organizing business forums, and launching media campaigns. These initiatives have helped to build awareness and understanding of China's policies and values among the public in the region. Humanitarian aid: China has been providing humanitarian aid to countries in the region affected by natural disasters and other crises. This has helped to build goodwill and positive feelings towards China among the people in these countries. Overall, China's efforts to promote its soft power image in the region have been aimed at building trust, understanding, and positive relationships with its neighbors. These initiatives have helped to create a more favorable environment for China's economic and strategic interests in the region, and they are likely to continue to be a key component of China's foreign policy in the years to come (Wagner, 2013).

China has been actively pursuing cultural diplomacy with South Asian countries as part of its soft power strategy. Cultural diplomacy refers to the use of cultural activities, such as cultural exchanges, arts and literature, language courses, and tourism, to promote mutual understanding and foster good relations between countries. Some of the key ways in which China has been promoting its cultural diplomacy with South Asian countries include:

- **Cultural exchanges:** China has been promoting its culture and language in South Asian countries through cultural exchanges. This includes sending Chinese cultural delegations to South Asian countries, hosting cultural festivals and events, and inviting South Asian artists and cultural groups to China. These initiatives have helped to build closer ties and promote mutual understanding and respect between China and the countries in the region.
- **Language courses:** China has been offering Mandarin language courses in South Asian countries to promote its language and culture. This includes the establishment of Confucius Institutes, which are cultural and language centers that offer Mandarin language courses, cultural events, and exchanges. These initiatives have helped to strengthen cultural ties and promote greater understanding between China and the countries in the region.
- **Tourism:** China has been promoting tourism to South Asian countries by highlighting

their cultural heritage and natural beauty. This includes promoting tourism to historical sites, museums, and cultural events in South Asian countries. This has helped to increase cultural exchange and promote people-to-people ties between China and the countries in the region.

- **Arts and literature:** China has been promoting its arts and literature in South Asian countries through exhibitions, performances, and translations. This includes hosting art exhibitions, cultural performances, and translating Chinese literature into local languages. These initiatives have helped to increase cultural exchange and promote greater understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture in the region (Breslin, 2011).

Overall, China's cultural diplomacy initiatives in South Asia have been aimed at building closer ties, promoting mutual understanding and respect, and creating a more favorable environment for China's economic and strategic interests in the region. These initiatives are likely to continue to be a key component of China's foreign policy in the years to come. Confucius Institutes are cultural and language centers established by China around the world to promote Chinese language and culture. In South Asia, China has been actively promoting its culture and language through the establishment of Confucius Institutes in several countries. Here is a brief overview of the growth of Confucius Institutes in South Asia:

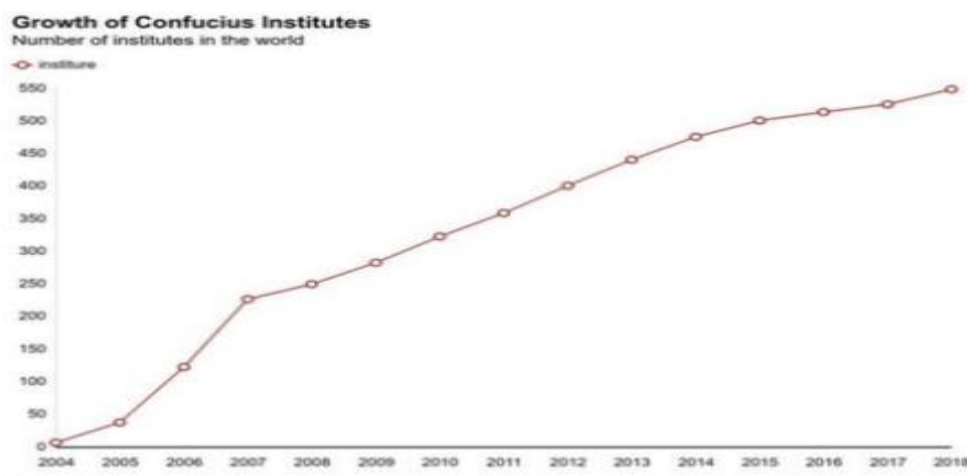


Figure 3 Growth of Confucius Institutes (Number of Institutes in the World)

Source: Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), <http://english.hanban.org/>

Pakistan was one of the first countries in South Asia to establish a Confucius Institute. The first Confucius Institute in Pakistan was set up at the National University of Modern Languages in Islamabad in 2005. Today, there are a total of five Confucius Institutes in Pakistan. India currently has three Confucius Institutes, which are located in Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru. The first Confucius Institute in India was established at the University of Mumbai in 2007. Sri Lanka has two Confucius Institutes, which are located at the University of Kelaniya and the University of Colombo. Both institutes were established in 2011. Bangladesh currently has one Confucius Institute, which is located at the University of Dhaka. The institute was established in 2013. Nepal currently has one Confucius Institute, which is located at the Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. The institute was established in 2014 (Yuan, Guo & Zhu, 2016).

Overall, the growth of Confucius Institutes in South Asia reflects China's increasing focus on promoting its language and culture in the region. While these institutes have helped to increase cultural exchange and promote greater understanding between China and the countries in the region, they have also been subject to criticism and controversy in some countries over concerns about China's influence and control over academic institutions.

### ***Economic Engagement***

China's engagement with South Asia has been steadily increasing over the past few years. China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to connect China with countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East through infrastructure development and investment. In South Asia, China has been involved in a number of infrastructure projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which includes the development of roads, railways, and ports in Pakistan. China has also invested in projects in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, among others. China's increasing involvement in the region has both positive and negative implications. On the positive side, it provides much-needed

infrastructure and investment in countries that often lack such resources. It also strengthens economic ties between China and South Asian countries, which can lead to increased trade and economic growth (Samaranayake, 2019).

However, on the negative side, some experts are concerned about China's strategic intentions in the region, particularly its increasing military presence in the Indian Ocean. There are also concerns about the debt burden that some of these countries may face as a result of accepting Chinese loans. Overall, China's engagement with South Asia is a complex issue with both opportunities and challenges for the region. China's economic engagement with South Asian countries has increased significantly in recent years. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has invested heavily in infrastructure projects in the region, including the development of ports, roads, railways, and energy projects (Palit, 2010).

One of the most significant examples of China's economic engagement with South Asia is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project that aims to connect China's western region with Pakistan's Gwadar port, and ultimately provide a gateway to the Middle East and Europe. China has also invested in infrastructure projects in other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and the Maldives. These investments have the potential to bring economic benefits to the region, such as increased trade, job creation, and improved connectivity. However, there are concerns about the long-term sustainability of these investments and the potential for countries to become burdened with debt as a result of accepting Chinese loans. In addition, China's economic engagement with South Asian countries has also raised concerns about its strategic interests in the region, particularly with regards to its increasing military presence in the Indian Ocean. As such, China's economic engagement with South Asia is a complex issue that requires careful consideration and analysis of the potential benefits and risks involved (Hazarika & Mishra, 2016). Here are some examples of China's economic engagement with South Asian countries:

- China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) - a multi-billion dollar project that aims to connect China's western region with Pakistan's Gwadar port through the development of infrastructure such as roads, railways, and energy projects.
- Hambantota Port Project in Sri Lanka - China has invested heavily in developing Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, which is strategically located near some of the world's busiest shipping lanes.
- Gwadar Port in Pakistan - China has also invested in developing Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which is a key part of the CPEC project and provides China with access to the Arabian Sea and the Middle East.
- China-Bangladesh Economic Corridor - a project that aims to improve connectivity between China and Bangladesh through the development of infrastructure such as highways, railways, and energy projects.
- China-Nepal Railway Project - a proposed railway project that would connect Nepal with China and provide a more direct trade route between the two countries.
- Economic cooperation with the Maldives - China has invested in infrastructure projects in the Maldives, such as the development of a new runway and terminal at the Velana International Airport.

### ***Balancing and Stabilizing the Regional Security Environment***

The regional security environment of South Asia is complex and multifaceted, with a range of interrelated political, economic, and security challenges. The ongoing tensions between India and Pakistan over issues such as Kashmir and terrorism continue to be a major source of instability in the region. The two countries have fought several wars and engage in frequent border skirmishes, and their nuclear arsenals pose a significant threat to regional security. South Asia is home to a number of terrorist and extremist groups, including the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS. These groups pose a threat to regional security and stability, and their activities have led to instability in countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. China's growing economic and strategic influence in the region is also a significant factor in the security

environment of South Asia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is expanding its economic footprint in the region, and its growing military presence in the Indian Ocean has raised concerns among other regional powers (Khan, 2019).

South Asia is a diverse region with a range of ethnic and religious groups, and tensions between these groups can lead to violence and instability. For example, the ongoing conflict between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers, as well as the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, have raised concerns about human rights violations and instability in the region. South Asia is vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods, droughts, and earthquakes, which can have significant impacts on regional security and stability. Climate change is also a growing concern in the region, as rising temperatures and sea levels threaten to exacerbate existing security challenges. The regional security environment of South Asia is complex and challenging, and requires a comprehensive approach that addresses political, economic, and security challenges. Regional cooperation and dialogue, as well as international support, will be essential in addressing these challenges and promoting peace and stability in the region (Miller, 2014).

China has been playing an increasingly important role in balancing and stabilizing the regional security environment in recent years. China is a major economic power, and it has been using its economic influence to promote stability in the region. China has been investing heavily in infrastructure projects in countries throughout the region, and this has helped to create jobs and stimulate economic growth. China has been actively engaging in diplomacy with other countries in the region. For example, it has been involved in talks aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, and it has been working to build stronger ties with countries like Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN nations. She has also been working to promote military cooperation with other countries in the region. It has been involved in joint military exercises with countries like Russia and Pakistan, and it has been working to build stronger military ties with countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (Ikenberry, 2014).

Moreover, China has been promoting the development of a regional security architecture that is inclusive and cooperative. For example, it has been pushing for the establishment of an East Asia Summit that includes all the major powers in the region. Overall, China's efforts to balance and stabilize the regional security environment have been welcomed by many countries in the region. However, there are also concerns about China's growing military and economic power, and some countries are wary of China's intentions. Therefore, it will be important for China to continue to engage in diplomacy and work to build trust with its neighbors in order to maintain a stable and peaceful regional security environment.

### **Promoting Regionalism**

Another feature of China's foreign policy in 21<sup>st</sup> century is that it is promoting regionalism promoting. China has been actively promoting regional cooperation and integration through a range of initiatives and institutions, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Through these initiatives and institutions, China is seeking to build closer economic and diplomatic ties with its neighbors, and to promote regional stability and development. For example, the BRI aims to build infrastructure and promote economic connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa, while the AIIB provides financing for infrastructure projects in the region. China's emphasis on regionalism is driven by a number of factors, including its desire to expand its economic influence, its concerns about regional security, and its desire to counterbalance the influence of other major powers in the region, such as the United States and Japan (Oba, 2019).

However, there are also concerns among some countries in the region about China's growing influence, and about the potential for China to use regional institutions and initiatives to advance its own interests at the expense of other countries. Therefore, it will be important for China to continue to engage in constructive dialogue with its neighbors, and to work towards building a regional architecture that is transparent, inclusive, and respects the

interests of all countries in the region. Promoting regionalism is a key aspect of China's foreign policy, as the country seeks to build closer economic and diplomatic ties with its neighbors and promote regional stability and development. Here are some ways in which China is promoting regionalism:

- **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):** The BRI is a flagship initiative of China's regionalism strategy, which seeks to build infrastructure and promote economic connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa. The initiative includes a range of infrastructure projects, including ports, railways, and highways, aimed at increasing trade and investment flows among participating countries.
- **Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB):** China played a leading role in establishing the AIIB, which provides financing for infrastructure projects in the region. The bank has been seen as a counterweight to existing international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, which are dominated by Western powers.
- **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):** China is a key member of the SCO, which is a regional security and economic organization that includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The organization aims to promote cooperation on a range of issues, including counterterrorism, economic development, and regional stability.
- **Regional trade agreements:** China has also been promoting regional trade agreements, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the China-Japan-South Korea Free Trade Agreement. These agreements aim to reduce trade barriers and increase economic integration among participating countries (Jiang, 2011).

China's emphasis on promoting regionalism is driven by its desire to expand its economic influence and counterbalance the influence of other major powers in the region. However, there are also concerns among some countries in the region about China's growing influence, and it will be important for China to work with its neighbors in a transparent and

inclusive manner to ensure that regional cooperation and integration benefits all countries in the region.

### **Regional Anti-Terrorism Cooperation**

China has been actively promoting regional anti-terrorism cooperation in order to address the threat of terrorism and extremism in the region. China is a member of the SCO, which is a regional security organization that includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The organization aims to promote cooperation on counterterrorism, as well as other security and economic issues. The SCO has conducted joint military exercises and intelligence sharing among member states in order to address the threat of terrorism. China has also been engaging in bilateral cooperation with neighboring countries in order to address the threat of terrorism. For example, China and Pakistan have established a joint counterterrorism mechanism, which includes regular consultations and information sharing. China has also worked with Central Asian countries to address the threat of terrorism along the China-Central Asia Economic Corridor (Xinning, 2015).

China has enacted a range of counterterrorism legislation, which includes provisions aimed at combating terrorism financing and online extremism. China has also established a counterterrorism center within the Ministry of Public Security, which coordinates counterterrorism efforts across different agencies. China has also been promoting de-radicalization efforts in order to address the root causes of terrorism and extremism. This includes efforts to provide education and job opportunities to vulnerable populations, as well as initiatives aimed at promoting moderate religious beliefs. China's regional anti-terrorism cooperation is driven by its concern about the threat of terrorism and extremism in the region, and its desire to work with neighboring countries to address this threat. However, there have been concerns among some countries about China's approach to counterterrorism, particularly in relation to its policies towards Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. It will be important for China to continue to engage in dialogue with neighboring countries and work towards a transparent and

collaborative approach to counterterrorism (Yuan, 2010).

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

China's foreign policy shift towards South Asia has been characterized by its emphasis on promoting regionalism, promoting economic connectivity, and enhancing regional security cooperation. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has played a central role in this shift, as it seeks to build infrastructure and promote economic connectivity across the region. Through the BRI, China has been investing heavily in infrastructure projects in South Asia, including ports, railways, and highways. These projects have the potential to increase trade and investment flows among participating countries and promote regional economic integration. However, China's growing influence in the region has also raised concerns among some countries, particularly in relation to issues such as debt sustainability and environmental sustainability. There have also been concerns about China's policies towards Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, which have been criticized by some countries in the region.

Overall, China's foreign policy shift in South Asia reflects its desire to expand its economic and diplomatic influence in the region, as well as its concerns about regional security and stability. While the BRI has the potential to promote regional economic integration and development, it will be important for China to address concerns and engage in dialogue with neighboring countries to ensure that the benefits of regional cooperation and integration are shared by all countries in the region. China's increasing role in South Asia has been a topic of discussion and debate among analysts and policymakers in recent years. China's economic, strategic, and diplomatic interests have led it to increase its engagement in the region.

Economically, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has provided a platform for China to expand its economic influence in South Asia. Through the BRI, China has invested in infrastructure projects in countries like Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, among others. These investments have provided much-needed funding for infrastructure development in the region, but they have also raised

concerns about the debt burden on these countries. Strategically, China has sought to increase its presence in South Asia to counter India's influence in the region. China has developed close ties with Pakistan and has invested heavily in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key part of the BRI. China has also sought to increase its military presence in the region, with its military base in Djibouti and its increasing naval presence in the Indian Ocean.

Diplomatically, China has sought to build relationships with countries in South Asia through initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). China has also increased its engagement with regional organizations like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). China's increasing role in South Asia has raised concerns among some countries, particularly India, which sees China's actions as a challenge to its own influence in the region. However, others see China's engagement as an opportunity for economic development and increased regional cooperation. Ultimately, the impact of China's increasing role in South Asia will depend on how China balances its economic, strategic, and diplomatic interests with the interests of other countries in the region.

Based on the research conducted on China's foreign policy shift in South Asia vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative, the following are some recommendations that can be made:

- Strengthen communication and cooperation between China and South Asian countries to enhance trust and understanding. This can be done through regular high-level dialogues, joint committees, and people-to-people exchanges.
- Address the concerns of South Asian countries regarding the Belt and Road Initiative's transparency, debt sustainability, and environmental impact. This can be done through increased transparency in project financing, environmental assessments, and joint efforts to address debt issues.
- Enhance the capacity of South Asian countries to participate in and benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative. This can be done through technical assistance, skill development, and capacity-building initiatives.
- Increase private sector involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative to promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth in South Asia. This can be done through public-private partnerships and joint ventures.
- Promote regional connectivity and integration through the Belt and Road Initiative, including the development of transport infrastructure, energy connectivity, and digital connectivity.
- Address geopolitical challenges and concerns arising from the Belt and Road Initiative's implementation in South Asia through increased regional cooperation and dialogue.
- Strengthen the role of regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in promoting regional cooperation and integration.
- Encourage greater participation of civil society and local communities in the Belt and Road Initiative's implementation in South Asia to ensure that their voices and concerns are heard and addressed.

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