

## THE SILK ROAD AND SOUTH ASIA: CHINA'S BRIDGE FROM REGIONAL TO GLOBAL POLITICS

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*China's shift under Xi Jinping from a regionally focused foreign policy in East Asia to a global strategy challenging U.S. leadership may seem abrupt, but it has unfolded gradually. South Asia has been central to this transition, particularly through its role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has helped extend China's influence beyond its immediate neighborhood. Several factors explain the region's importance. South Asia's strategic geography is critical to China's connectivity and security objectives. Its complex power dynamics also allow Beijing to exploit tensions between India's traditional dominance and the ambitions of states such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. In addition, the absence of cohesive regional institutions comparable to ASEAN enables China to expand its influence through overlapping, Sino-centric multilateral frameworks. Finally, the shared narrative of a rising Global South provides a normative basis for engagement between China and South Asian states.*

Under Xi Jinping, Chinese foreign policy has expanded beyond its “core interests”<sup>1</sup> concentrated in East Asia, adopting a global approach wherein Beijing seeks a leading role in world affairs. At the heart of this transformation are the Four Global Initiatives, the Global Development, Security, Civilization, and Governance initiatives, introduced by China from late 2021 to late 2025. The four initiatives (and possibly more to come) seek to

advance a comprehensive roadmap to redress pressing global issues and realize Xi's vision for a “community with a shared future for mankind” [人类命运共同体].<sup>2</sup>

The globalization of Chinese foreign policy is not a bolt from the blue but rather: (1) an effort to strategically leverage the turn-of-the-century “going out” policy initiated by Jiang Zemin that

sent Chinese businesses overseas in large numbers;<sup>3</sup> and (2) a reaction to intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition, including, in Beijing’s eyes, enhanced U.S. efforts to contain China centered along the First Island Chain in the East Asian littoral.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Chinese strategists began to look west to the old Silk Roads to advance core national interests, not only seeking to consolidate the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) control over its restive “autonomous” regions of Xinjiang and Tibet, but also to secure the energy and trade routes that are the lifeblood of the modern Chinese economy.

In October 2012, on the eve of Xi’s ascension to the top leadership roles, Wang Jisi [王缉思] published his now famous case for China to “March West” in response to the U.S. rebalance to Asia under the Obama administration.<sup>5</sup> Wang, often considered China’s leading contemporary foreign policy scholar, noted that from 2001 to 2011, China’s trade with South and West Asia had increased thirtyfold.<sup>6</sup> He contended that to ensure unimpeded energy and other commodity supplies, “the route from China’s western regions to the Indian Ocean should be constructed as soon as

possible.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, Wang argued that the “March West” must be planned carefully and undertaken strategically, not only to deal with the suspicions of other great powers, the U.S. and Russia, but also to navigate regional fissures, including the “intractable” India-Pakistan dispute.<sup>8</sup>

China began to implement Wang’s vision in 2013, focusing on increasing infrastructure links with South Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), originally known in English as One Belt One Road (OBOR), embedding South Asian partners in Chinese-led regional connectivity initiatives. The Office of the BRI Promotion Leading Group’s paper on “Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice and China’s Contribution,” published in May 2017, underscores the key role that South Asia plays in the BRI.<sup>9</sup> The paper highlights two of the BRI’s six main initial corridors that traverse South Asia: (1) the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—the BRI’s original “flagship project,” and (2) the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which seeks to connect the subregions of East, South, and Southeast Asia, linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>10</sup>

The PRC views both corridors as a means to alleviate its “Malacca dilemma”: the passage of the majority of China’s energy imports through the narrow straits of Malacca, a critical shipping lane passing between Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Beijing has long feared that this chokepoint is vulnerable to foreign naval interdiction. For example, in a 2023 People’s Forum article, Beijing Institute of Technology Professor Hao Yu [郝宇] states that China launched CPEC to “eliminate security threats to shipping routes in the Indian Ocean.”<sup>11</sup> In the early months of 2026, this vulnerability has been further driven home to the PRC by the ongoing global energy crisis resulting from the current Middle East conflict and reports of disruption around the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>12</sup>

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As the BRI has taken shape in South Asia, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have all hosted various large-scale infrastructure projects. However, the PRC has had little success in enlisting India, which has its own vision for regional connectivity, to join BRI. However, the PRC has had more success in engaging India as a partner in advancing a multipolar world predicated on the growing aspirations of a rising Global South. Although India has also been wary of China's recently launched Global Initiatives, it has remained a willing participant in platforms such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which aim to advance progress towards multipolarity.

Moreover, bilateral relations between China and India, which hit a nadir during violent border clashes in the Galwan Valley of Eastern Ladakh in June 2020, have shown signs of recovery, particularly as India's differences with the U.S. and the West intensified over its close links to Russia following the onset of the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022. In October 2024, Xi and Modi reached a border agreement at the BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, establishing a mechanism to ease the largest sources of bilateral tensions.<sup>13</sup>

### **Marching Southwest**

In mid-2013, the PRC began to roll out the initiatives that would provide a strategic framework for its westward pivot, including corridors through South Asia that became key links in BRI. In May 2013, then Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang signed a joint statement deepening bilateral strategic cooperation in areas including trade, aerospace, maritime domain, defense, and connectivity, alongside joint economic development through the launch of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) corridor.<sup>14</sup>

The move was significant not only because it established Pakistan as a potential future

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transshipment corridor linking China with energy markets but also because it was grounded in China's closest security partnership, an "All Weather Friendship" underpinned by a hard-edged geostrategic calculus in both Beijing and Islamabad. As a result, China has an enduring strategic interest in ensuring that Pakistan maintains sufficient military capability to occupy a significant portion of India's strategic focus, thereby relieving pressure on China's own long southwestern border with India across the Tibetan Plateau.

However, by the early 2010s, extremism and insecurity threatened the viability of the Pakistani state, imperiling its ability to serve as an effective partner to China.<sup>15</sup> Hence, strategic necessity likely compelled the PRC to invest large sums to support this critical yet challenged partner. In 2013, such investments aligned with the broader strategic framework of the BRI, further advancing China's regional and global interests.

Later in 2013, Xi launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introducing its two main Eurasian mega-corridors in succession. In a September 2013 speech in Kazakhstan, Xi outlined the Silk

Road Economic Belt, traversing Central and West Asia and providing an overland route between China and Western Europe.<sup>16</sup> Although the notion of using this route to reach Europe has been important, the route has served primarily to deepen China's connectivity with Central and West Asia, as the vast majority of China's trade with Europe continues to be transported via maritime routes. In October 2013, Xi announced the establishment of the other main route within the BRI, the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.<sup>17</sup>

The Maritime Silk Road (MSR) has two routes, the first passing “from Chinese coastal ports through the South China Sea, through the Strait of Malacca to the Indian Ocean, and extending to Europe; and the second, from Chinese coastal ports through the South China Sea to the South Pacific Ocean.”<sup>18</sup> The first, main trunk of the MSR cutting across the Indian Ocean and running through the Suez Canal to Europe overlaps closely with established global maritime trade routes connecting East Asia with the Middle East and Europe.<sup>19</sup> Consequently a key priority of the MSR has been to build on China's existing economic interest in strategically crucial but chronically underinvested South Asian ports, such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in

***“A key priority of the Maritime Silk Route has been to build on China's existing economic interest in strategically crucial but chronically underinvested South Asian ports, such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka.*”**

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Notably, China's strategy often entails providing loans for concessions including management rights, and/or ownership stakes in local ports. For example, the PRC began providing support for Pakistan's development of Gwadar in 2001, and eventually in May 2013, China Overseas Ports Holding Company Limited (COPHC) assumed control through a 40-year concession agreement.<sup>21</sup> In November 2015, Pakistan tendered the PRC 2,000 acres near the port for development of a terminal, free trade zone, and an airport.<sup>22</sup> Although the commercial viability of Gwadar appears dubious, the development of the port and overland infrastructure through CPEC, provides a costly and risky yet still logistically possible route for the PRC to avert the straits of Malacca and move energy overland through Pakistan to Western China.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time that China has sought to facilitate development of maritime infrastructure and connectivity across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the PLA Navy has expanded its presence in the IOR conducting counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 and establishing China's first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017. En route to naval deployments in the Gulf of Aden, PRC naval vessels make port calls at Indian Ocean ports such as Karachi, Pakistan, and Colombo in Sri Lanka.<sup>24</sup> The PLA Navy conducts joint exercises and trainings with the navies of regional partners such as Bangladesh and Pakistan, as well as making port calls in Pakistani and Bangladeshi ports.<sup>25</sup>

In 2023, a PRC defense firm completed the construction of submarine base for Bangladesh, and PLA military officers are likely involved in training submariners at the base.<sup>26</sup> Although Gwadar is not a PLA base it is used extensively by the Pakistani Navy, which operates numerous Chinese-made surface combatants and submarines, and its port facilities would be able to support large PLA

vessels.<sup>27</sup> This accords with China's development of a dual-use model for naval access in South Asia, whereby the PRC has hitherto avoided establishing its own bases, but has built up a presence, through good relations with host governments, regular blue water patrols launched from ports in Southern China, and investment in large port facilities that the PLA could potentially access for military missions.<sup>28</sup>

### **Why has South Asia been a Springboard for Chinese Foreign Policy to Go Global?**

By the early 2020s, the BRI had transformed from a regional into a global effort.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Xi's launch of the "Four Global Initiatives" from 2021 to 2025 not only signaled China's adoption of a fully globalized foreign policy but also arguably marked the end of the Eurasian bridge period or interregnum that characterized Chinese foreign policy from 2013 to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021. During this time, South Asia played a key role as part of a trans-regional Eurasian bridge that functioned as the pivot point for the globalization of Chinese foreign policy. The other regions on the PRC's Southern and Western peripheries, Southeast Asia and Central Asia, are also integral to this shift but factor less in the BRI as a springboard to China's transition to a global foreign policy.

While a long history of trade and cultural exchange exists between South Asia and China, the subcontinent belongs firmly to a separate civilization, whereas Central Asia and South Asia have been heavily influenced by Chinese culture, with states such as Vietnam periodically incorporated within the imperial tributary system. Moreover, in Southeast Asia, the PRC faces a combination of strong regional connectivity through ASEAN-centric organizations, and external actors, primarily the U.S. and Japan focused on balancing China, have limited Beijing's ability to translate its

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massive economic linkages into political leverage. Meanwhile, in Central Asia, PRC influence has expanded greatly, but Beijing still must balance its interests with its critical strategic partnership with Russia, which has deep cultural and ethnic linkages with the region.

Four key factors explain why South Asia became an important jumping-off point for this transformation:

1. **The Indian Ocean region in China's strategic geography:** The importance of South Asia for China derives from its centrality within the Indian Ocean region. As discussed above, the development of alternative overland routes, as well as China's expanding military access to the region, are in part motivated by a desire to reduce the vulnerability of key maritime

chokepoints. Moreover, strengthening China's presence in the region, through military cooperation and access to host country military or dual-use facilities, aligns with the People's Liberation Army's longest-running overseas mission of undertaking counterpiracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden, as well as its only official overseas military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa.<sup>30</sup>

- 2. Complex regional dynamics:** Middle powers and smaller countries in South Asia are sometimes open to working with China to balance India as the dominant regional power. Equally crucially for China, while states in the region, including both India and Pakistan, have been willing to undertake extensive security cooperation with the U.S., they have hitherto shown little interest in working with Washington to forge a coalition aimed at counterbalancing China. Wang Jisi noted the limited prospects for U.S.-led security groupings emerging in West or South Asia focused on counterbalancing China as a major inducement for the PRC to "March West".<sup>31</sup>
- 3. Inert and fractured regional organizations:** Differences among South Asian states have precluded the formation of a cohesive and comprehensive intergovernmental regional body. Founded in 1985, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not met at the summit level since 2014 and appears to have limited convening power in the region.<sup>32</sup> This stands in contrast to China's engagement with other regions where stronger regional organization exist, such as the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which can coordinate member-state positions and potentially serve as a counterweight to China in negotiations.

The weakness of South Asian regionalism may create openings for Chinese-led institutions

aimed at addressing the international and transnational security challenges in the region. For example, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and the Maldives have all signed on to the Global Security Initiative (GSI).<sup>33</sup> And while India eschews the GSI itself, a PRC Foreign Ministry White Paper on the GSI concept discusses leveraging the roles of the SCO, BRICS, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, all of which include India as a member.<sup>34</sup>

Limited regional cohesion in South Asia has also contributed to China's ability to advance initiatives that incorporate selective groupings of countries in South Asia. For example, the GSI concept paper calls for leveraging the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Neighboring Countries of Afghanistan, which typically includes China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and focuses on promoting stability in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> While the effectiveness of such fora, as illustrated by the ongoing Afghanistan-Pakistan war, at solving regional conflicts is dubious, they nonetheless serve to advance Chinese influence in the region, especially at a moment when the U.S. is strategically preoccupied elsewhere.

- 4. Overlapping narratives centered on the Global South:** Shared post-colonial legacies between China and India date back to the 1955 Bandung Conference. While China and India have competed for leadership in the developing world since then, the mutual belief that each is destined to lead the Global South acts as a powerful normative constraint on either country aligning too closely with the West. For example, in a recent speech calling for reform of the United Nations, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi argued that "the old institutions are struggling to deliver peace and progress. At the same time the Global South is rising.... The voice of the developing world remains on

the margins; India has always tried to bridge this gap.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, in his September 2023 address to the UN General Assembly, PRC Vice President Han Zheng said that “China is a natural member of the Global South” and “as the largest developing country, it breathes the same breath with other developing countries and shares the same future with them.”<sup>37</sup>

### Conclusion: A Double-edged Sword?

The first steps in China’s 21st century quest for global leadership began along the new Silk Road. Whether they will lead further remains uncertain. As U.S. strategic attention remains consumed by the Middle East, China has sought to position itself as a mediator in South Asian regional conflicts, seeking to manage the war that broke out in February 2026 between Pakistan and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which poses challenges to the CPEC and the broader BRI. These overlapping conflicts underscore the fragility of South Asia as a key node in China’s grand strategy to reshape Eurasia and, ultimately, the global order. Nevertheless, more broadly, the PRC appears to be achieving strategic, if not always, economic benefits, from its strategy of enmeshing India and its South Asian neighbors in overlapping regional and global Sinocentric initiatives. In the case of Bangladesh, Beijing has been able to deepen its long-standing close economic and military ties with Dhaka following a change of government in 2024 and former leader Sheikh Hasina’s flight to India.<sup>38</sup>

The development of Chinese influence in South Asia during the Xi Jinping era has been an enabler of growing Chinese economic reach and an increasingly global military presence. At the same time, the inherent fragility of the region poses major challenges for China, with instability threatening vital trade and energy linkages on which its economy relies. Hence, the PRC’s success or failure in South Asia will be integral to its broader global

designs. Failure to achieve strategic objectives in the region would likely lead Beijing to devote its focus elsewhere, either shifting back to a more regional policy or to focusing on building influence in other parts of the developing world.

*This issue brief is a part of the ISDP SCSA-IPA research project, “The Silk Noose: China’s Power Architecture in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region.”*

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