

CHINA'S REGIME INFLUENCE ON SILIGURI CORRIDOR STATES: THE CASES OF BANGLADESH, BHUTAN, AND NEPAL

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China's growing influence in South Asia extends beyond its global maritime ambitions to the political, economic, and strategic dynamics of its immediate neighborhood. This paper examines how Beijing shapes policy choices and political outcomes in Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, three countries whose geopolitical significance is heightened by their proximity to the strategically vital Siliguri Corridor. It develops an analytical framework encompassing three dimensions of Chinese influence: geopolitical pressure, investment and trade, and cultural and narrative influence. The analysis explores how territorial disputes, gray-zone tactics, military activities, infrastructure development, and upstream water management serve as instruments of strategic leverage. It also assesses the implications of Chinese investment, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative, for economic dependence and political autonomy. At the ideational level, the paper investigates Beijing's efforts to promote the term "Xizang" instead of "Tibet" in international discourse, highlighting the relationship between linguistic conventions, sovereignty claims, and asymmetric power relations. Drawing primarily on governmental documents, official statements, media sources, and think tank research, the study focuses on post-COVID developments and situates China's engagement within the historical context of these countries' relations with India.

Introduction

The rise of China has long captivated scholars, think tank analysts, and policy experts. In recent years, significant attention has been directed toward China's global maritime strategy—from the construction of artificial islands in the South China Sea¹ to the expansion of Antarctic research stations.² However, developments in China's immediate territorial boundaries—and the ways in which Beijing exerts influence

over neighboring states—are equally critical for understanding the goals and *modus operandi* of China's foreign policy.

This Focus Asia paper examines how China shapes behavior, decision-making processes, and political outcomes in three countries of the Indian subcontinent: Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal. These states are geographically linked

by the Siliguri Corridor: often referred to as a “Chicken’s Neck,” it is a narrow strip of land in West Bengal that connects India’s northeastern states with the rest of the country, making it a critical geopolitical chokepoint.

China’s regime influence in these three countries manifests through multiple channels. To systematize the analysis, this paper adopts a framework encompassing three primary dimensions:

- **Geopolitical pressure:** Representing the domain of hard power, this category includes the use of unresolved border disputes as leverage and pressure points on neighboring countries through making territorial demands, the employment of gray-zone tactics, and the deployment of military assets under the guise of civilian activities. It also extends to control over critical infrastructure, including both transportation and digital systems.³ Finally, it encompasses water-related issues stemming from China’s upstream position and its development of water infrastructure.
- **Investment and trade:** It is a hybrid form of influence combining incentives and coercion against other states. While China provides development opportunities through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a massive infrastructure and investment strategy launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, known previously as One Belt One Road (OBOR)—such engagement is often accompanied by accusations of fostering debt dependency and creating so-called “debt traps.”
- **Cultural and narrative influence:** Situated at the soft power end of the spectrum, this sphere involves subtler forms of pressure, such as cultural events as well as expectations to adopt specific terminology in diplomatic

discourse. As the main case study, this paper explores the increasing use of the term “Xizang” in place of “Tibet.” Promoted by Chinese officials since 2023 as a standardized Romanized form in international discourse,⁴ this term is framed by Beijing as both an expression of sovereignty and a linguistically justified designation.⁵ Critics, however, draw parallels with the colonial practice of renaming territories to assert dominance; moreover, they argue that pressure to adopt such terminology is especially pronounced in countries that are economically dependent on Chinese assistance.⁶

The analysis is based primarily on governmental documents—including agreements, memoranda, and official statements—as well as speeches and articles published in both state and independent media in Bhutan, Bangladesh, China, and Nepal. These sources are complemented by reports and analyses from think tanks and research institutes. As for the timeframe, the analysis focuses on post-COVID developments, which have introduced significant changes in certain aspects of these states’ relations with China.

Furthermore, the paper situates Beijing’s influence within the broader regional context by examining how these three countries’ relationships with China interact with their historically significant ties to India. Finally, it assesses China’s involvement in the 2026 elections in Bangladesh and Nepal as well as their long-term consequences for Beijing’s South Asian outreach.

Geopolitical Pressure: Border and Water Issues

a) Bangladesh: The Jamuna Concern

Unlike Bhutan and Nepal, Bangladesh does not share a direct border with China—the country is almost entirely surrounded by India, with only a small southeastern strip of border with Myanmar. However, developments in China’s upstream

activities have increasingly affected Dhaka's strategic calculations in recent years.

One of the most pressing concerns is China's plan to construct a massive hydropower dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo River—a transboundary river which is known as the Brahmaputra in India and Jamuna in Bangladesh. Described by Chinese Premier Li Qiang as a “Project of the Century,”⁷ the dam is expected to surpass the Three Gorges Dam—the largest hydropower dam in the world—in scale and energy output. Its sheer size and location on a transboundary river have raised concerns among both downstream countries: India and Bangladesh.⁸

Despite its generally positive relations with Beijing, Dhaka has expressed concern about the project. Reportedly, it has inquired about four key documents from China: an environmental impact assessment, feasibility study, climate impact assessment, and disaster impact assessment.⁹

In spite of these concerns, water cooperation between China and Bangladesh seems to have been more successful than China's water relations with India. For instance, during the 2017 Doklam standoff, China withheld Brahmaputra flood data from India—despite an existing agreement. Reportedly, however, China continued to share hydrological data with Bangladesh¹⁰—a country perceived as more politically aligned with China.

Moreover, recent political developments suggest a renewed effort by Dhaka to deepen cooperation with Beijing in water governance. Following political changes after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to India under political unrest, Bangladesh has shown increased openness to Chinese involvement in water-related infrastructure. A joint press release from March 2025 highlights the will to enhance cooperation in hydrological forecasting, flood control, river management, and climate adaptation.¹¹ It also includes provisions for data-sharing on the

Yarlung Tsangpo–Jamuna River and welcomes Chinese participation in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project (TRCMRP). This marks a notable shift from 2024, when the Hasina government favored closer coordination with India on this project.¹²

b) Bhutan: From Skirmishes to Artificial Villages

Bhutan is the only surviving monarchy in the Himalayan region after the emergence of the Republic of Nepal, following a dramatic political revolution in 2008. Isolated for much of its history, Bhutan has pursued a cautious path of modernization while seeking to preserve its cultural identity and sovereignty.

Among China's fourteen land neighbors, Bhutan remains the only direct land neighbor of China (and the only country in South Asia) that does not maintain formal diplomatic relations with Beijing. Consequently, China and Bhutan have never reached a formal agreement regarding their shared border, despite conducting direct boundary negotiations since 1984.

China continues to pressure Bhutanese authorities by claiming portions of Bhutanese territory, particularly in the northern and western sectors. One of the most sensitive areas is the Doklam Plateau, situated near the trijunction of Chinese, Indian, and Bhutanese borders, in close proximity to the Siliguri Corridor.

The dispute gained international attention during the 2017 Doklam crisis—a two-month military standoff between Chinese and Indian troops. Indian forces intervened in support of Bhutan after Bhutanese authorities discovered that China was constructing a road in the disputed territory. The confrontation ended after approximately two months—notably just before a high-profile BRICS summit hosted by China.

In addition to road construction, China has also

been building villages in disputed territories. As of 2024, there were reportedly 22 such villages and settlements.¹³ The expansion appears to serve a broader strategic purpose: creating leverage for future territorial exchanges. The northeastern areas of Bhutan claimed by China possess little value for Beijing; rather, analysts argue that China's objective is to exchange these territories for strategically important areas in western Bhutan. China made this intention explicit in 1990 through what became known as the "package deal."¹⁴ Under this proposal, China offered to renounce its claims to Bhutan's northeastern territories and return them to Bhutan in exchange for Thimphu ceding territory in the western sector, including the Doklam Plateau.

However, Bhutan's ability to negotiate such concessions is constrained by its close relationship with India. The India–Bhutan Friendship Treaty of 2007 states that "Neither Government shall allow the use of its territory for activities harmful to the national security and interest of the other."¹⁵ In this context, any territorial concessions made by Bhutan could theoretically be perceived by New Delhi as detrimental to India's security.

The 2007 treaty replaced the earlier provision from 1949 that explicitly required Bhutan to follow India's guidance in foreign policy;¹⁶ thereby granting Bhutan greater formal sovereignty in its external relations. Nonetheless, Bhutan's security partnership with India limits its maneuverability against China.¹⁷

c) Nepal: The Ongoing Border Issue Despite the Boundary Treaty

Unlike Bhutan and India, Nepal signed a formal boundary treaty with China in October 1961—followed by an additional protocol in 1963. The agreement emphasized that "in accordance with the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence and in a spirit of fairness, reasonableness, mutual

understanding and mutual accommodation," China and Nepal "smoothly achieved an overall settlement of the boundary question."¹⁸

In addition to the formal settlement of the border, both countries have sought to facilitate cross-border interaction at the local level. Since 2002, residents classified as "border inhabitants," i.e., those living within 30 kilometers of the frontier on either side, have been issued "border citizen cards," which allow them to cross the border without passports or visas and travel up to 30 kilometers into the neighboring country.¹⁹

Over the past decade, China–Nepal relations have entered a new phase. Both governments agreed to elevate the bilateral relationship from a "Comprehensive Partnership of Cooperation Featuring Ever-lasting Friendship" to a "Strategic Partnership of Cooperation Featuring Ever-lasting Friendship for Development and Prosperity."²⁰ During his 2019 visit to Nepal, President Xi Jinping further emphasized the symbolic importance of the bilateral boundary settlement, stating: "Following the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, we have successfully demarcated our boundaries, turning the great Himalayas into a real bond between our two countries."²¹

Nonetheless, the existence of a formal boundary treaty has not eliminated tensions along the China–Nepal border. In fact, a Nepalese government report leaked to the BBC in 2021 accused China of encroaching upon Nepalese territory along several points of the shared frontier.²² These allegations suggest that border-related disputes may continue to function as a pressure point in China–Nepal relations, despite the existence of a demarcated and legally recognized boundary.

Moreover, the broader India–China–Nepal dispute further complicates the geopolitical landscape. Nepal maintains that neither India nor China has the authority to conduct trade or transit activities through Lipulekh without Kathmandu's

consent.²³ Despite these objections, however, India and China agreed in 2026 to resume border trade through the Lipulekh Pass without consulting Nepal.²⁴ Shortly thereafter, India announced the restoration of the Kailash Manasarovar Yatra via the same route.²⁵ The pilgrimage may be regarded as both a symbol of goodwill in China–India relations and an accurate “litmus test” of the broader political climate between New Delhi and Beijing, as religious endeavors are frequently suspended during periods of heightened bilateral tensions. Consequently, the reopening of the route through Lipulekh—which may be interpreted as a positive sign in China–India relations—intensified concerns in Kathmandu regarding its own territorial claims against New Delhi.

Investments and Trade: The BRI and “Debt Traps”

a) Bangladesh: Unfulfilled Promises?

China is Bangladesh’s top trading partner, while Bangladesh ranks as China’s second-largest trading partner in South Asia.²⁶ Their bilateral relations entered a new phase in October 2016 during the landmark visit of President Xi Jinping, when Dhaka and Beijing formally elevated their ties to a “Strategic Partnership of Cooperation.” At the same time, Bangladesh officially joined the BRI, further deepening economic and infrastructural cooperation between the two countries.²⁷ Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, mutual respect for each country’s chosen path of development, and support for each other’s “core interests and major concerns.”²⁸

Notably, subsequent political upheavals in Bangladesh that included removal of the Hasina government, the establishment of an interim administration, and the victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in the 2026 general elections—did not significantly alter Bangladesh’s continued participation in the BRI framework.²⁹ Dhaka’s commitment was confirmed during

interim leader Muhammad Yunus’s visit to the Boao Forum for Asia in March 2025, which resulted in a new agreement on economic and technical cooperation with China. Both sides pledged to advance “high-quality” BRI projects, while also expanding cooperation in media, cultural heritage, sports, and public health.³⁰ During the visit, Yunus additionally secured approximately US\$2.1 billion in investment, loan, and grant commitments from Chinese entities.

Bangladesh’s participation in the BRI has been pivotal in transforming its infrastructural landscape with projects such as the Padma Bridge and the Payra Port.³¹ At the same time, many Chinese-backed investments and infrastructure projects are yet to fully materialize. Several proposals were delayed, scaled down, or abandoned altogether due to financial constraints or pressure from other regional and global actors—particularly India and the United States.³²

The most prominent example was the cancellation of the deep-sea port project at Sonadia Island—which would likely have strengthened China’s economic presence in the Indian Ocean. Officially, the Bangladeshi government justified the decision on environmental grounds, arguing that the port would threaten the biodiversity of the Sonadia area. However, some observers interpreted the move as the result of successful pressure from the Indian government, stemming from New Delhi’s concerns over an expanding Chinese maritime footprint in the region.³³

Despite these dynamics, Beijing remains Bangladesh’s fourth-largest creditor, following Japan, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank.³⁴ More broadly, Bangladesh’s external debt has risen sharply, increasing by 42 percent over the past five years to reach US\$104.48 billion. As a consequence, debt servicing had become the country’s second-largest budgetary expenditure by

2026, surpassed only by salaries and pensions.³⁵ At the same time, a number of economists argue that Bangladesh's debt-to-GDP ratio remains within a manageable range for the national economy.³⁶

b) Bhutan: A "No" to the BRI

Historically, Bhutan has maintained a limited engagement with China, with bilateral interactions confined to official discussions on the border issue. In recent years, however, trade and tourism have emerged as potential areas for expanding Bhutan–China cooperation. Despite this gradual opening, Bhutan has continued to adopt a cautious approach toward China. Notably, Bhutan remains—alongside India—the only South Asian country that has abstained from participating in China's BRI forums.³⁷

Consequently, China's economic presence in Bhutan remains relatively modest compared to its engagement in countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Nevertheless, bilateral trade between Bhutan and China has steadily increased over the past decade.³⁸ According to official Bhutanese trade statistics, China ranks as Bhutan's third-largest source of imports after India and Singapore.³⁹

China has also expressed interest in investing in Bhutan's hydropower sector, given the kingdom's abundant water resources and significant potential for hydropower generation arising from its mountainous terrain.⁴⁰ However, Bhutan's hydropower infrastructure has remained overwhelmingly tied to India—several major hydropower plants in Bhutan have been developed with substantial financial and technical assistance from the Government of India, including grant support. Future hydropower cooperation is also expected to involve major Indian private-sector entities, further reinforcing India's dominant role in Bhutan's energy sector.⁴¹

c) Nepal: The "Glacial Progress" of the BRI

Nepal formally joined China's BRI in 2017.

Under the framework of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding, both sides agreed to intensify connectivity and infrastructure development across a broad range of sectors, including ports, roads, railways, aviation, and communications.⁴² These initiatives were incorporated into the broader vision of a "Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network," intended to contribute to Nepal's long-term development agenda: graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status, becoming a middle-income country by 2030, and realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Infrastructure connectivity soon became the centerpiece of bilateral cooperation. In 2019, both governments agreed to conduct a feasibility study for the proposed cross-border railway linking China and Nepal.⁴³ The two countries also reiterated their commitment to cooperation on the Kathmandu–Pokhara–Lumbini railway corridor, envisioned as a major component of Nepal's future transportation infrastructure.

Hydropower has emerged as another particularly attractive sector for Chinese investment. Nepal's mountainous geography and abundant river systems provide substantial hydropower potential, making the sector strategically important for both domestic development and regional energy trade. Chinese investors have shown strong interest in Nepal's hydropower industry, partly because surplus electricity generated in Nepal could potentially be exported to India.

Chinese companies already account for more than a quarter of Nepal's hydropower projects, making China the largest foreign participant in the sector, while India remains the second-largest investor.⁴⁴ Both Nepali officials⁴⁵ and Chinese media⁴⁶ have emphasized that Nepal's comparatively low-cost hydropower—among the cheapest in Asia—could also support the future development of green hydrogen production.

Despite these ambitious plans, the implementation of BRI projects in Nepal has progressed slowly and unevenly. During former Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's four-day visit to China in December 2024, the two countries signed the "Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation"⁴⁷—more than seven and a half years after Nepal first joined the initiative. In the meantime, criticism within Nepal has grown regarding the limited tangible progress: the *Kathmandu Post* notably described the pace of implementation as "glacial progress," ironically comparing it to the slow movement of Himalayan glaciers.⁴⁸

Under Nepal's proposals, ten major projects were identified for implementation under the BRI framework, including roads, a tunnel, a bridge, a cross-border railway, a city hall, transmission lines, a university, a scientific center and science museum, an industrial park, and a sports and athletics complex.⁴⁹ However, even the pre-feasibility studies for many of these projects remain incomplete, highlighting the gap between official announcements and actual implementation.⁵⁰

At the same time, Nepal has appeared increasingly cautious regarding BRI-related financing arrangements. Nepali leadership seems worried that many BRI projects are structured primarily through loans rather than grants, raising fears of long-term debt dependency. In addition, India's strategic concerns regarding expanding Chinese influence in Nepal have contributed to political resistance against deeper engagement with Chinese-funded infrastructure initiatives.⁵¹

Soft Power and Narrative Influence: "Xizang," Not "Tibet"

a) Bangladesh: Not in China's Linguistic Orbit?

Unlike in the cases of Bhutan and Nepal, there seems to be no evidence that Bangladeshi officials have formally adopted the Chinese designation "Xizang" in place of "Tibet." This may be explained by the fact that Bangladesh lacks

direct access to the Himalayas, does not share a border with Tibet, and hosts no significant Tibetan refugee population. Consequently, Tibet occupies a far less prominent place in Bangladesh's domestic political and strategic discourse than in the Himalayan states.

Nevertheless, occasional use of the term "Xizang" can be observed in Bangladeshi media and journalistic commentary. One notable example is Salah Uddin Shoaib Choudhury—a Dhaka-based journalist and editor of *Weekly Blitz*—who employed the term in his article, "For Ensuring Border Defense, Bangladesh Can Replicate China's Xizang Model," published on the international platform *Pressenza*.⁵² Such instances suggest that Chinese official terminology has, at least to a limited extent, entered Bangladeshi public discourse.

China has also appeared capable of exerting pressure regarding the representation of Tibet in Bangladesh's cultural sphere. The most prominent example occurred in 2016, when the Chinese ambassador reportedly pressured the Dhaka Art Summit to censor artwork related to Tibetan self-immolations. The work, "Last Words," was created by India-based filmmakers Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, featuring photographs of farewell letters written by five Tibetans who self-immolated between 2009 and 2016 in protest against China's control over Tibet.⁵³

b) Bhutan: A Language Shift

A groundbreaking moment occurred in March 2025, when the Chinese embassy in India, in cooperation with the government of Bhutan, organized Chinese New Year celebrations at the Royal Institute of Management in Thimphu. Following the event, Bhutan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Trade issued a statement referring to Tibet as the "Xizang Autonomous Region."⁵⁴ While the statement described the performances as incorporating "Tibetan folk arts, including traditional Tibetan

opera, dance, and song featuring rich vocal traditions,” it simultaneously referred to the Tibetan performers as a “Chinese cultural troupe.” This wording has been widely criticized by pro-Tibetan commentators.⁵⁵

This statement is particularly significant because it appears to mark the first known instance in which Bhutanese authorities publicly adopted the Chinese state’s term “Xizang” instead of “Tibet.” Given Bhutan’s traditionally close relationship with India and its historically cautious approach toward China, the development carried substantial symbolic weight.

Equally notable was the role of the Chinese embassy in New Delhi in coordinating the event. In the broader geopolitical context of Sino-Indian rivalry, the organization of a Chinese state-sponsored cultural event in Bhutan—facilitated through Beijing’s diplomatic mission in New Delhi—can be interpreted as politically symbolic, if not provocative.

c) Nepal: Far-Reaching Influence

Nepal officially referred to Tibet as “Xizang” in a joint statement released after Prime Minister Oli completed a four-day visit to Beijing—his first foreign trip after returning to office in 2024. The visit itself carried symbolic significance, as Nepali leaders have traditionally chosen India for their first official foreign visit after assuming power.⁵⁶ Notably, it was Oli’s previous administration that brought Nepal into the BRI in 2017.

The statement declared that: “The Chinese side agreed to positively consider the request made by the Nepali side for supplying grid power to electrify northern remote villages of Nepal from Xizang Autonomous Region of China”⁵⁷ Reportedly, this marked the first time the term “Xizang” had appeared in an official Nepal–China document.⁵⁸

At the same time, the text stated that: “The

Nepali side reiterated that Tibet affairs are China’s internal affairs, that it will never allow any separatist activities against China on Nepal’s soil.”⁵⁹ The coexistence of these formulations may be interpreted as a balancing strategy: while Nepal adopted China’s preferred official designation “Xizang Autonomous Region of China” with regard to administrative divisions, it simultaneously retained the phrase “Tibet affairs” in political, social, and security-related contexts.

The use of “Xizang” appears to have continued beyond official diplomacy and increasingly entered the sphere of cultural and artistic cooperation in Nepal. Most recently, in April 2026, the Nepal International Film Festival faced criticism over the inclusion of a Chinese promotional segment titled “Xizang Panorama,” which provoked backlash from Tibetan activists.⁶⁰ A year earlier, the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF) was similarly accused of “contributing to the erasure of the Tibetan identity,” as described by the *Tibetan Review*, after the festival’s organizers chose to refer to Tibet as “Xizang.”⁶¹ These developments suggest that Chinese linguistic preferences regarding Tibet are gradually gaining visibility within Nepal’s official and cultural discourse.

China’s Regime Influence vs. India’s Traditional Impact

An analysis of China’s regime influence in the Siliguri Corridor states cannot be complete without examining how these dynamics intersect with the role of the dominant regional power in South Asia: India.

In the case of Bangladesh, China’s attractiveness has often stemmed from its contrast with what many in Dhaka have perceived as India’s hegemonic posture, coercive diplomacy, and asymmetrical influence. Against this backdrop, Beijing has benefited from presenting itself as

a partner committed to non-interference in Bangladesh's domestic affairs.⁶² This combination of economic opportunity and political pragmatism has strengthened China's appeal among the Bangladeshi elite. Nonetheless, Bangladesh faces the persistent risk of becoming entangled in a broader Sino-Indian competition for regional influence. So far, however, Dhaka has been trying to avoid falling into this geopolitical trap by pursuing a balancing strategy: maintaining political, historical, and cultural closeness with India while simultaneously deepening economic cooperation with China.

For Bhutan, the situation is even more delicate. India's role in Bhutanese affairs has historically been significant, leading some local observers to argue that the kingdom has been overly dependent on, or even constrained by, Indian influence—with Chinese narratives strongly supporting such views.⁶³ At the same time, Bhutan seems fully aware of the dangers of becoming drawn into a larger geopolitical confrontation between China and India, given the kingdom's small size and strategic vulnerability. Finally, recent developments in Sino-Bhutanese relations must also be understood within the context the Dalai Lama's future succession and Beijing's intensifying strategic competition with both the United States and India. In all this, Bhutan appears to be cautious and pragmatic—focused on preserving sovereignty and independence.

The other landlocked country in the Himalayas—Nepal—remains heavily dependent on India for trade, transit, and access to global markets. From Kathmandu's perspective, participation in the BRI offered an opportunity to diversify connectivity options through new roads, railways, and infrastructure links with China, thereby reducing Nepal's strategic and economic dependence on India. This desire for diversification intensified following the deterioration of India–Nepal relations in 2015: just months after Nepal's devastating earthquake, India imposed an

unofficial trade blockade in response to Nepal's newly adopted constitution.⁶⁴ At the same time, however, India's enduring political and economic influence in the region continues to act as a limiting factor on Nepal's full-scale alignment with China. Consequently, Kathmandu has generally sought to balance relations between its two powerful neighbors rather than move decisively into China's sphere of influence.

Post Scriptum: China Amid the 2026 Elections in Nepal and Bangladesh

The long-term impact of the recent elections in Bangladesh and Nepal—both preceded by periods of significant political turbulence—remains uncertain. Nevertheless, the early developments following these political transitions already provide important insights into China's regional strategy and its ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

For India, the political changes in Bangladesh represented a major geopolitical shock: the departure of Prime Minister Hasina, perceived as one of the most pro-Indian leaders in the region, created considerable uncertainty for New Delhi regarding the future trajectory of India–Bangladesh relations. For China, however, the transition appears to have been far less disruptive⁶⁵—Beijing moved quickly to establish working relations with the new Bangladeshi leadership following the February 2026 general elections. Most recently, Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman conducted a three-day visit to China in early May 2026, marking his first official trip to Beijing since the formation of the new government.⁶⁶

Importantly, China had already been cultivating relations with multiple political actors in Bangladesh prior to the elections. Beijing maintained outreach not only to the ruling establishment but also to opposition forces at that time, such as the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami.⁶⁷ This reflects a broader characteristic of China's regional

diplomacy: rather than investing exclusively in a single political faction, Beijing seeks to maintain functional and pragmatic relations with all major political actors, thereby laying a solid foundation for cooperation with whoever comes to power next.⁶⁸

The situation in Nepal presents a somewhat different dynamic. China had developed particularly strong ties with former Prime Minister Oli and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist). However, his party suffered a severe defeat in the March 2026 elections. In addition, new Prime Minister Balen Shah—Kathmandu's former mayor—has been believed to present a more critical stance toward China. A notable example is his 2023 cancellation of a planned visit to China in protest against an official map published by Beijing,⁶⁹ which failed to recognize Nepal's territorial claims that had earlier been reflected in its official map issued in 2020.⁷⁰

Despite these political shifts, Nepal's broader strategic orientation is still expected to follow its traditional balancing policy between China and India. Nevertheless, the new Nepalese government appears increasingly exposed to Chinese pressure in several sensitive areas: these include concerns over Chinese activities in border regions—such as the ongoing construction of a safety wall to strengthen the riverbank along the Bhotekoshi River on the Chinese side of the border⁷¹—as well as Beijing's continued pressure regarding Nepal's policies toward the Tibetan diaspora community.⁷²

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that although the Siliguri Corridor states—Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal—are all targets of Beijing's multidimensional regime influence strategy, China's approach is not uniform; rather, it is carefully adapted to political, economic, and

geographic conditions in each country.

Bangladesh represents primarily a case of economic engagement through investment, trade, and soft power. Geopolitical pressure is visible mainly in the sphere of China's upstream water management that may potentially have far-reaching implications for Bangladesh. Interestingly, there have been relatively limited discernable effects of China's international campaign to promote the use of the term “Xizang” instead of “Tibet.”

Bhutan is an example of a predominantly geopolitical and soft-power-oriented relationship. Unlike most of China's regional partners, Bhutan has not joined the BRI, reflecting its cautious approach toward Chinese economic engagement. Nevertheless, border tensions remain a major concern: China's construction of villages and infrastructure in disputed border areas constitutes one of the most significant pressure mechanisms employed against Bhutan despite the relatively limited scale of bilateral economic cooperation.

Nepal seems to illustrate the most multidimensional case, combining geopolitical influence, infrastructure investment, and soft power. Chinese engagement encompasses hydropower, transportation infrastructure, connectivity projects, and discursive influence. Although Nepal and China share a formally settled border, reports of tensions and alleged encroachments suggest that border-related issues may still function as instruments of political pressure. At the same time, the BRI framework has increasingly been criticized in Nepal due to project delays and financial concerns.

While China clearly tailors its regime influence activities to local circumstances, several broader conclusions can nevertheless be drawn from this comparative analysis:

- China has not pressured the Siliguri Corridor countries to form a formal military alliance—

Beijing's influence in South Asia is exercised primarily through political, economic, and soft power mechanisms rather than through traditional alliance structures.

- Border issue may serve as a potential instrument of pressure regardless of whether a formal border agreement exists. This appears particularly relevant in cases where China's economic leverage alone seems insufficient to secure political influence.
- Economic engagement remains China's primary strategy. Through trade, investment, infrastructure development, and connectivity projects, Beijing expands its presence, builds positive public relations narratives, and creates long-term leverage over partner governments.
- China's economic approach provides Beijing with significant political flexibility—it generally seeks to maintain working relations with whichever government is in power. This pragmatic approach allows Beijing to pursue long-term strategic objectives despite domestic political changes within partner countries while gradually deepening economic dependency as a source of leverage.
- The broader pattern across all the cases suggests that economic ties create the foundation for political influence, which can later extend into the cultural and narrative sphere. This may include pressure regarding terminology, censorship of cultural or political events deemed incompatible with Chinese interests, and the promotion of discourses aligned with Beijing's ideological preferences.

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Endnotes

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