



India's Concern About China's Rising Role

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Abstract

This research article examines the context of China's expanding global influence, characterized by its rising economic power, military modernization, and broader diplomatic engagements. In response, India's efforts to bolster her military presence along the border, enhance partnerships with nations such as the United States, Japan, and Australia, underscores her strategy to counter China's expanding military capabilities.

Aims of the Study:

1. Analyze China's expanding global influence, particularly her rising naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region with China's expanding and strategic investments in the region.
2. Examine the strategies adopted by India to counter China's growing economic and military presence in neighbouring countries, particularly Pakistan. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, a key project of China's Belt and Road Initiative, traverses territory in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, a region claimed by India. India is also worried about China's rising influence in Afghanistan, particularly after the Taliban takeover. China has been investing heavily in Afghanistan's infrastructure and natural resources, and has also been engaging with the Taliban leadership, raising India's concerns about China's growing influence in the region and its potential implications for India's national security.
3. Explore potential avenues for collaboration between India and China within the evolving international landscape

Keywords: *Indian Ocean Region; China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; Belt and Road Initiative; Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir; Taliban.*

INTRODUCTION

China's rapid economic expansion, military modernization and expanding diplomatic engagements have significantly altered the global geopolitical landscape. China's growing global presence is marked by her increased engagements in international institutions, regional forums, and bilateral relationships. As China expands its strategic footprint, India has grown increasingly wary of the implications of China's rising global role on her national security, economic interests, and regional influence.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative research design, focusing on in-depth analysis of India's response to China's rising global presence. The study primarily relies on secondary sources, including: academic journals and books, government reports and documents, news articles and media report, official documents and statements, data analysis, content analysis to examine India's response to China's rising global presence and discourse analysis to examine the power dynamics and ideological underpinnings of India's response to China's rising global presence.

China's Rising Global Role

China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road, is a global project involving 147 countries and two-thirds of the world's population and 40 per cent of its GDP. A significant element of this initiative is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is the largest project within the BRI, with an estimated investment of around \$62 billion aimed at linking China to Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Overall, China's investments in the BRI are estimated to be about \$1 trillion, with some projections indicating that total costs could soar to \$8 trillion in the long run, although estimates differ. Experts view the BRI as a fundamental aspect of Xi Jinping's assertive foreign policy, to create physical infrastructure connecting East Asia and Europe aligning with the Made in China 2025 economic development plan. Over the last decade, it has broadened its scope to include Africa, Oceania, and Latin America, significantly bolstering China's economic and political presence worldwide. For Xi, the BRI serves not only as a counter to the U.S. "Pivot to Asia," but also as a pathway for China to establish new trade links, expand its export markets, boost domestic incomes, and address its surplus production capacity. (McBride, Berman & Chatzky, 2023)

The United States has voiced concerns regarding China's intentions, particularly since the Obama administration's shift in focus towards Asia. In response, the US has made substantial investments in infrastructure and cooperation with low-income countries. During the Trump administration, the Development Finance Corporation was established by combining the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) with parts of USAID, resulting in a \$60 billion investment portfolio. The Build Back Better World Initiative (B3W) launched by President Biden in 2021 alongside the G7 was aimed to provide a competitive alternative to China's BRI. Nonetheless, B3W faced criticism due to its limited funding, with only \$6 billion allocated in its first year, prompting a rebranding to the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment. Critics argue that, rather than directly investing in infrastructure projects where China holds a strong presence, the US should focus on strengthening aid-based lending through multilateral organizations such as the World Bank and the IMF. (Dutta & Dutta Choudhury, 2024)

While India was initially a founding member of China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the two nations have since diverged in their trade policies. Consequently, the United States has begun to perceive India as a crucial counterweight to China's influence in Asia, pursuing the strengthening of strategic alliances in the region, underscored by the establishment of the IPEF in 2022.

Indian Ocean Region, IOR, traditionally considered India's sphere of influence, is gaining importance due to expansion of Chinese infrastructure and military presence in this region. Stretching from the Strait of Malacca to the Mozambique Channel and encompassing vital maritime routes along with 33 countries that collectively have a population of about 2.9 billion, the IOR is fundamental for the vast majority of international commercial activities. These sea lines of communication (SLOCs) connect critical regions, making them indispensable for

international economic stability. India's reliance on maritime transport for nearly 80% of its crude oil and 95% of its trade (by volume) makes the IOR especially vital (Dutta & Dutta Choudhury, 2024)

India has sought to position the BRI as a strategy for Chinese dominance in Asia. Analysts have described this as a "String of Pearls" geo-economic approach, wherein China allegedly creates unsustainable debt for its Indian Ocean neighbours with the intent of controlling key regional trade routes. New Delhi has been particularly worried about China's long-standing partnership with its historical rival, Pakistan. In response, India has actively engaged in providing development aid to its neighbours, notably investing \$3 billion in infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.

China is ramping up its economic and political involvement in Afghanistan, motivated by security concerns centred on countering terrorism and advancing its BRI. This strategy marks a notable departure from China's earlier hands-off stance, as it increasingly prioritizes Afghanistan and its connectivity with regional partners, including Iran. Additionally, China is striving to build a more constructive relationship with Afghanistan independently of Pakistan, particularly in relation to the Wakhan Corridor project and efforts toward wider regional integration. By capitalizing on the current lawlessness in Afghanistan and the Taliban's strong connections with Pakistan, China aims to extract significant economic, strategic, and security advantages. (Askari & Khalid, 2023)

Meanwhile, China's development of the Kyaukpyu Port in Myanmar is part of its larger strategy to undermine India's naval influence in the Bay of Bengal. India remains cautious about the militarization of Gwadar Port in Pakistan and China's military base in Djibouti, which was established in 2017. Additionally, China has strengthened its diplomatic foothold in Indian Ocean nations, being the only major power with official representation in all six island countries: Comoros, Madagascar, the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka.

China's 2017 lease of Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, a move made after the country defaulted on its debts to Beijing, has been labelled as "debt trap diplomacy," a characterization that China disputes. Newly elected President Mohamed Muizzu is reorienting the Maldives' foreign policy, prioritizing closer ties with China at the expense of its relationship with India.

India's response:

China's rising global role has significant implications for India's national security, economic interests, and foreign policy. India needs to adopt a comprehensive approach to address these challenges, including strengthening her multilateral engagement, bilateral relationships, and economic diplomacy.

India's Security Concerns

China's rising global role has significant implications for India's border security, particularly in the Himalayas. China's expanding naval presence in the IOR has raised concerns about India's maritime security, particularly in the context of China's "String of Pearls" strategy. China's growing cyber capabilities have raised concerns about India's cyber security, particularly in the context of China's alleged cyber attacks on Indian critical infrastructure. A shift towards a more aggressive foreign policy by China, especially targeting India, has been observed since Xi Jinping assumed leadership. A US Congress report indicates that Xi's government has deliberately not clarified the Line of Actual Control (LAC), hindering lasting peace and worsening border disputes between the two nations. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission noted that Beijing's assertiveness towards India has increased, particularly in

light of strengthening India-US relations, which alarmed Beijing. Since 2013, there have been at least five notable border confrontations between India and China, a significant rise from the previous instance in 1987. China's assertiveness also encompasses broader territorial disputes, including its extensive claims over the South China Sea, despite opposition from several Southeast Asian nations. (Helpful Foundation Study Report, 2024)

India's Economic Concerns

China's growing economic presence in India's neighbourhood has raised concerns about India's trade competitiveness, particularly in the context of China's BRI. China's increasing energy footprint in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is sparking worries about India's energy security, especially considering China's rising reliance on imported energy.

To address this, India should collaborate with Japan and the United States to strengthen support for nations in the IOR. Japan has emerged as the primary provider of long-term infrastructure loans in Asia, exceeding the scale of China's BRI. India would benefit from identifying areas of shared interest with Japan to augment development assistance to countries in the Indian Ocean Region. To counter China's debt trap strategy, India should prioritize sustainable infrastructure that supports local economies and communicate this strategy effectively to countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Comoros, and Madagascar.

India's Foreign Policy Concerns

In the backdrop of China's rising global role, India needs to strengthen her multilateral engagement, particularly in regional forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), her bilateral relationships, particularly with her neighbours, to counterbalance China's growing influence and her economic diplomacy, particularly in the context of China's BRI, to promote her economic interests and influence. The changing global landscape has necessitated several adjustments in India's foreign policy, including the introduction of the Look East Policy (LEP), which has been redefined by the current administration as the Act East Policy (AEP). (Barua, 2020).

India's strategic moves:

Diplomatic strategies

Accepting Mearsheimer's argument that regional hegemony is the best outcome for a great power, New Delhi must pursue a multi-faceted strategy to rebuild partnerships with coastal nations and enhance ties with island neighbors. India should leverage her historical and cultural connections with the Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka while strengthening traditional social links. Additionally, Male's increasing skepticism towards Chinese investments due to rising debt, offers India a chance to reconnect with these nations. (Moorthy, 2021).

The adoption of the 'Indo-Pacific' geostrategic framework by India in 2015 signaled a shift in its perception of the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific as an integrated strategic region. The SAGAR doctrine, a vision by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for a free, open, inclusive, peaceful, and prosperous region, centers on security and growth for all. This vision aligns with the Indo-Pacific strategies of both Canada and the United States.

India has bolstered her involvement in multilateral platforms such as BRICS, SCO, and ASEAN to counter China's expanding influence. She has also prioritized her ties with neighboring nations, including Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, in an effort to curb China's increasing presence in the region. Additionally, through

her "Act East Policy," India has sought to enhance her engagement with Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam to advance her economic and strategic interests in the area.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi invitation to all heads of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to the inauguration ceremony in 2014, signaled a dedicated move to strengthen relationships with India's immediate neighbours. During his visits to Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, he has intentionally focused on building enduring partnerships, rather than merely using these trips for publicity during SAARC meetings or other summits. Notably, his first foreign trip as Prime Minister was to Bhutan, where he highlighted the "unique and special bond" that exists between the two nations, referred to as the "Bharat to Bhutan" (B2B) relationship. (Srivastava, 2015)

Recent years have witnessed heightened nuclear interactions among China, India, and Pakistan, highlighting the complex interplay of geopolitical competition and nuclear issues. The 2019 cross-border airstrikes and the 2020 Galwan clash were key incidents that brought India and Pakistan dangerously close to military confrontation. India's security concerns are compounded by worries about China-Pakistan nuclear cooperation. Recognizing China as the most critical challenge to her external security strategies in the decade ahead, India must urgently re-examine her China policy to confront the reality of hostile political relations (Aiyar and Khilnani et al., 2021). The trajectory of China-India tensions will be a key factor in determining the future nuclear dynamics among China, India, and Pakistan.

Other Strategies

India has promoted its soft power, as a critical tool for regional engagement including its cultural, educational, and tourism diplomacy, to promote her influence and counterbalance China's growing presence. Indian agencies like the ICCR should study the model of Hanban, a Chinese Ministry of Education-affiliated institution focused on cultural diplomacy through education.

China is considered to have advanced cyber capabilities, with concerns about potential cyber espionage and China has been accused of conducting cyber-attacks aimed at Indian critical infrastructure, including sectors like energy, telecommunications, and transportation. These attacks are believed to involve espionage and disruptions, raising concerns over national security and the potential for geopolitical tensions between the two countries. India has established a dedicated national cyber security agency to coordinate cyber defense strategies and respond to threats effectively. The Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) acts as a nodal agency for managing cyber incidents and providing security advisories. National Cyber Security Policy, 2013, outlines the framework for enhancing India's cyber security posture, including measures to protect critical infrastructure and build cyber resilience.

India has pursued space cooperation with other countries, including the United States, France, and Israel, to promote her space program and counterbalance China's growing space presence. The space strategies of India and China, significant actors in the contemporary space race, are demonstrably influenced by their ongoing terrestrial conflicts. While India does not have a dedicated space force like China, both nations possess anti-satellite capabilities and reject the UN resolution banning anti-satellite missile tests. (Sharmin, 2023).

Another point of contention between India and China is the management of the Brahmaputra River, which runs along their shared border. This issue encompasses critical strategic, economic, and environmental concerns. India has adopted several strategies to manage the Brahmaputra river in light of her relationship with China. These strategies include diplomatic engagement for cooperative trans-boundary water

management, infrastructure investment for flood control, collaboration with neighbouring countries on water management, increased monitoring and research, public awareness initiatives, participation in global advocacy for fair river usage, and capacity building in hydrology. Together, these approaches seek to safeguard India's interests while promoting cooperation and sustainable river management.

Opportunities for Cooperation between India and China

- India and China can cooperate on trade, investment, and infrastructure development, manufacturing, and technology. Both countries are members of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), providing platforms for economic cooperation.
- Establishing dialogue mechanisms, such as regular summits, ministerial meetings, and official visits, can help manage competition and cooperation
- Collaboration between them in multilateral forums like the World Trade Organization (WTO), G20 and developing institutional frameworks, such as free trade agreements, investment agreements, and cultural exchange programs, can facilitate cooperation and reduce competition.
- Both countries can work together to address climate change, including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, promoting renewable energy, and adapting to climate-related disasters and cooperate in areas like renewable energy.
- India and China can cooperate on global governance issues, such as reforming the United Nations, promoting multilateralism, and addressing global challenges like pandemics and terrorism.
- Both countries can collaborate on science and technology, including joint research and development projects, technology transfer, and innovation.
- India and China can enhance cultural exchange through initiatives such as people-to-people interactions, educational collaborations, and cultural events. By focusing on their historical and cultural connections, including Buddhism and ancient trade routes, both countries can also boost tourism.
- There exists an opportunity for collaboration on infrastructure projects, including those under the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). However, sensitivities arise from India's apprehensions regarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
- Both countries face challenges from terrorism and have expressed commitment to combating it.

Justification of the study:

The Indo-Chinese relationship is an intricate balance of cooperative and competitive forces. While there are significant areas of mutual interest, the relationship is also marked by tensions and challenges, which require careful management through dialogue, diplomacy, and focus on shared goals. Undoubtedly, the future of this relationship will significantly shape the Asian continent and the global order.

Conclusion:

The study suggests a growing strategic rivalry between India and China, with both nations competing for influence in the region. The ongoing territorial disputes along the LAC highlight the complex and contentious nature of the India-China relationship. China's growing military strength, confidence, and assertive approach towards its neighbours are driving India to enhance her military presence along the border, showcasing China's rising global presence. China's confidence in her military capabilities and her increasingly assertive approach towards her neighbours underscore her rising global presence. India and China both consider certain areas close to the LAC as highly important for military strategy, leading to tension and occasional conflict,

especially in regions like the Depsang Plains and Demchok, where both countries claim territory and could potentially launch offensive operations, if necessary.

Despite tensions, the study highlights opportunities for economic cooperation between India and China, which could help reduce tensions and promote mutual understanding. The easing of tensions along the LAC can be attributed to the agreement between India and China, which stipulates the restoration of patrolling rights and the reduction of military presence.

The economic interdependence between India and China creates a complex dynamics, where cooperation and competition coexist. The agreement to ease tensions along the LAC suggests that diplomatic efforts can help reduce tensions and promote stability in the region.

The study emphasizes the importance of effective communication and trust-building measures in managing the complex India-China relationship.

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