

CHINA'S POLICIES AND STRATEGIC RELATIONS IN SOUTH ASIA: FROM MAO ZEDONG TO XI JINPING

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses how geostrategic factors and major power competition influence China's policy and its relations with South Asia. The study reviews era-specific policy variables to understand policy evolution and the nature of the forthcoming Sino-South Asian relations. The findings reveal that national security is the constant core aspect of every policy, and geopolitical interests influence policies. Each era's policy revision is conditioned by national capacity and the pattern of great-power competition. However, regime ideas and leadership have also impacted policy and policy-making. The Mao-era, or simply the first era, policies predominantly focused on security imperatives. The policies of the second era, here, refer to those of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao, which are concentrated on boosting economic engagement. The new era under Xi Jinping combined elements of both eras, with a compact set of strategic interests, to strengthen its global position. This study argues that new-era policies are more robust and strategic than earlier ones. These policies increase China's influence in South Asia and beyond. The BRI and economic diplomacy are important tools in this process. Yet, the China-US rivalry in the Indo-Pacific and the growing India-US ties will impact future Sino-South Asia relations. The study concludes by briefly summarising the factors and motivations influencing Chinese policy towards South Asia, as well as the dynamics of their relations over the years. This comprehensive analysis may assist international relations researchers and policymakers in understanding China's policy orientations towards the region more broadly.

Keywords: China-South Asia relation, Chinese policy, major power competition, geostrategic interests

INTRODUCTION

South Asia is a critical geopolitical subregion of Asia, comprising India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan, and Afghanistan, and hosts nearly one-fourth of the global population (1.64 billion) (Bloom & Rosenberg, 2011). Broader definitions sometimes include Iran and Myanmar due to historical and geopolitical linkages (Ghosh, 1989; McLeod, 2002, as cited in Barai, 2015). Located south of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush and bordered by the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea, the region occupies a central position in global maritime trade. Over two-thirds of global oil shipments, including 80% of China's and Japan's imports, pass through these waters, alongside nearly 50% of global container traffic (Arjun, 2020).

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This geography, combined with proximity to the Middle East and broader Asia, underpins South Asia's geo-economic importance (Barai, 2015).

In recent decades, South Asia has emerged as a focal point of major power competition, particularly involving China and the United States (Javed et al., 2025). While both powers have expanded their regional engagement, South Asia is of greater importance to China due to its market potential and its shared borders with five regional states, which generate both economic opportunities and security challenges. China's engagement—especially with smaller South Asian states—has intensified through infrastructure investments in ports, transport, and energy networks. Some scholars interpret this through the “String of Pearls” (SoP) framework, suggesting a long-term maritime strategy in the Indian Ocean Region (Khurana, 2008; Goud, 2023). In contrast, Chinese narratives frame this engagement as a “new springtime” and a rediscovery of South Asia's strategic significance (Kumar, 2019).

China's economic rise and expanding regional and global influence have reshaped the balance of power, prompting other major powers to reassess their strategic positions (Lind, 2024). The United States has shifted its strategic attention from the Asia-Pacific toward the Indo-Pacific through initiatives such as the “Pivot to Asia” and the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” (Heiduk & Wacker, 2020). Similarly, India perceives China's growing presence in South Asia as a strategic challenge, prompting countermeasures and diplomatic efforts (Thapa, 2025). However, Chinese official discourse maintain that Beijing's approach is based on “win-win” cooperation and constructive engagement (Ishaque et al., 2020).

From an international relations perspective, interstate relations are dynamic and evolve in response to changing national priorities, structural conditions, and external pressures (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). China's policy toward South Asia reflects such adaptability, shifting across different leadership eras and geopolitical contexts. This study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical approach to examine the evolution of China's South Asia policy, drawing on secondary sources. It is structured across distinct historical phases to identify patterns, drivers, and strategic shifts. The article is organised into three sections: the first examines South Asia's contemporary significance for China; the second analyses China's policy evolution across different eras; and the third synthesises the key drivers shaping its regional engagement. By offering a historically grounded and country-specific analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of China's South Asia strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The expanding body of scholarship on China's engagement with South Asia underscores the region's growing strategic salience in global politics. Early literature situates China's policy within the Maoist era, where foreign policy was primarily shaped by security imperatives, territorial integrity, and strategic balancing (Malik, 2001; Chi, 2013). Foundational works, such as Choudhury (1990), trace the transition from ideologically rigid postures to more pragmatic engagement, particularly with India and Pakistan. Similarly, Dutt (1980) highlights China's evolving response to developments in Afghanistan, especially following Soviet involvement, while Ahmed (1996) and Mansingh (1994) analyse post-Cold War India–China relations, emphasising confidence-building measures, border negotiations, and gradual economic engagement despite persistent mistrust.

With the onset of the reform era under Deng Xiaoping, China's South Asia policy increasingly reflected economic pragmatism. Scholars note a shift toward prioritising trade, investment, and regional cooperation (Kumar, 2019; Bhatti et al., 2023). This transformation is

particularly evident in China's expanding economic footprint across South Asia through foreign direct investment (FDI) and infrastructure development (Barai, 2017; Kafle, 2022). Country-level analyses demonstrate how Beijing has strengthened bilateral ties, especially with Bangladesh and Pakistan, through development financing and economic diplomacy (Baghernia & Meraji, 2020; Hussain, 2019).

More recent scholarship situates China's regional strategy within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has significantly intensified engagement in South Asia. Researchers argue that BRI not only enhances economic connectivity but also advances broader geostrategic objectives in the Indian Ocean Region (Anwar, 2020; Ghiasy, 2021). Jacob (2020) conceptualises BRI-driven infrastructure diplomacy—including ports, digital connectivity, and tourism—as instruments of political influence, while Parepa (2020) emphasises continuity in Chinese foreign policy, noting how connectivity strengthens asymmetric interdependence and strategic autonomy. At the same time, perspectives differ: Zulfqar (2025) portrays BRI as a stabilising force for most South Asian states, whereas Anjum and Afridi (2025) highlight its developmental benefits alongside resistance from India and the United States.

Conceptual frameworks such as the “String of Pearls” further interpret China's maritime strategy as an effort to secure critical sea lanes and expand its strategic footprint (Barton, 2021), although such interpretations remain contested. While some studies raise concerns about regional security implications (EFSAS, 2022), others argue that China's engagement has largely avoided interference in domestic political processes (Ahmed & Sheikh, 2021). Rashid et al. (2023) similarly characterise BRI as a central driver of China's foreign policy pivot, anchored in infrastructure development and strategic partnerships in countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Another major strand of the literature focuses on intensifying competition among major powers. China's regional approach is increasingly analysed within the broader Indo-Pacific context, where rivalry with the United States and India shapes strategic calculations (Ishaque et al., 2020; Gokhale, 2022; Yang, 2018). The deepening India–U.S. partnership adds complexity to this dynamic (Mohan, 2021). Scholars argue that China's engagement with smaller South Asian states reflects a balancing strategy to offset India's traditional regional dominance (Samaranayake, 2019; Ranjan & Haiqi, 2022). Freeman (2018) highlights how China-led regionalism expands cooperation while provoking competitive responses from India, whereas Galistcheva and Reshchikova (2023) point to China's growing financial and infrastructural influence in securing access to strategic resources.

Despite these insights, the literature remains fragmented, often focusing on individual countries or specific initiatives such as the BRI. Consequently, there is a limited comprehensive understanding of the long-term evolution of China's South Asia policy. This study addresses this gap by offering a historically grounded and integrated analysis of China's regional strategy and its key drivers.

WHY IS SOUTH ASIA IMPORTANT TO CHINA?

South Asia has several of the world's largest economies by GDP. While India is ranked fifth, Bangladesh and Pakistan are ranked 35th and 44th, respectively (Worldometer, n.d.). It emerged as one of the fastest-growing areas despite persistent poverty challenges (Sahoo & Dash, 2012). Economic reforms in the 1990s and late-start regional and global trade integration contributed to South Asian economic growth. In 2024, South Asia had a GDP of approximately US\$ 4,515 billion (Trading Economics, n.d.). Its growing economy, large population, and expanding trade

integration have strengthened South Asia’s importance as a market for trade and investment (Devarajan & Nabi, 2006; Ratna & Sharma, 2016; Barai, 2015). The following datasets exemplify the economic performance of South Asia:

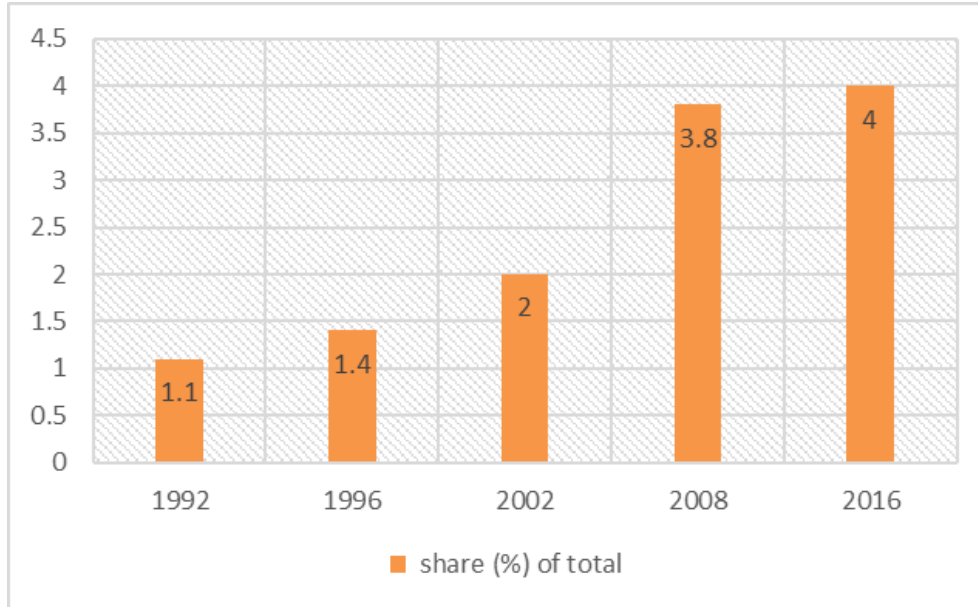
Table 1: GDP and Per Capita Comparison between South Asia and World

Year	GDP Per Capita US\$ (at 2010 constant)		GDP US\$ in Billions (at 2010 constant)		Growth of GDP and Per Capita (%)	Per capita growth is shown in brackets		
	South Asia	World	South Asia	World		Year	South Asia	World
1990	584.08	7178.94	662.06	37905.34		1960-1980	3.64 (1.32)	4.59 (2.62)
2010	1257.50	9551.34	2060.78	66113.12		1960-2019	5.10 (3.94)	3.47 (1.46)
2019	1945.37	11069.79	3571.27	84944.41		1980-2019	5.85 (2.06)	2.90 (0.74)

Source: *Compiled from (Vakulabharanam, 2020)*

China–South Asia ties, historically rooted in cultural exchange, transitioned into more visible political engagement after the founding of the PR China (Batti et al., 2023), accelerating sharply under Deng Xiaoping through trade-led integration. China–South Asia bilateral trade nearly doubled between 2013 and 2021, increasing from about \$96 billion to \$187 billion (Zhou et al., 2023), positioning China as a dominant trading partner across the region—including being India’s top import source—signalling deepening structural economic interdependence. China’s stake in South Asia goes well beyond commercial ties. The region offers Beijing access to markets, resources, transport links, and the Indian Ocean. It also matters for energy security, especially as China seeks to reduce its vulnerability around the Malacca Strait. At the same time, the region remains important for Beijing’s wider regional engagement and for addressing security concerns linked to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Xinjiang, and terrorism (Javaid, 2016; Rahman, 2014.; Choudhary, 2023.; Chowdhury, 2013; Mahmood et al., 2023).

Figure 1: China’s Trade with South Asia: Exports and Imports as a Share of Total Trade, 1992–2016



Source: (Dunford & Liu, 2024)

The Indian Ocean, central to China’s Maritime Silk Road, links three continents and is, according to Robert D. Kaplan and Alfred Thayer Mahan, the decisive arena of 21st-century power, where control shapes Asian dominance. Through port networks from Gwadar to Kyaukphyu to Hambantota, China is expanding access to the IOR, reducing reliance on the Malacca chokepoint and offsetting its eastern maritime constraints. MSR connectivity through IOR can potentially link the landlocked southwestern territories of China to the coastal regions (Anwar, 2020). In addition, building the ‘Economic Belt and Road’ as a national “bridgehead” strategy to improve logistics and supply chain structure will assist China in regulating resource flows along international trade routes (Liu, 2013, 2013, as cited in Anwar, 2020).

South Asia is also strategically significant for China's security interests. Unsettled border issues with its South Asian neighbours, particularly the India-China border conflicts, have significant implications for both security and ties (Kaura, 2018). China is also concerned that instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan could allow militant networks to support separatist activities linked to Xinjiang (Tiezzi, 2013; Anwar, 2020). Furthermore, religious and political tensions in South Asia may contribute to wider regional instability. Such unrest and instability could undermine BRI goals in the region and exacerbate domestic ethnic tensions (Anwar, 2020). Recent Chinese interactions with Bhutan and Nepal have also focused on Tibetan and border security issues. In Nepal, China has encouraged stronger security cooperation, including efforts to control Tibetan cross-border activities, while in Bhutan, China’s engagement remains closely linked to unresolved boundary issues (Mohan, 2021; Grossman, 2020). Thus, China's South Asia strategy is guided by security-related considerations, especially regarding India and territorial issues. It is projected that China's national security considerations regarding South Asia will become more significant in the 21st century (Malik, 2001).

CHINA'S POLICY TOWARDS SOUTH ASIA: FROM MAO TO XI

A nation's foreign policy and interstate relations are influenced by both internal and external factors. States adjust their policies and relations based on their short- and long-term interests. China's South Asia policy has evolved to balance internal and external factors and advance its national and strategic interests. The following structure is used for analysing China's policy towards the sub-Asian region and its associated factors and characteristics.

China's Policy towards South Asia under the Mao Zedong era

China's first era policy toward South Asia under Mao Zedong (1949–1976) was ideologically driven and evolved through phases. China's early diplomacy first followed the Soviet-aligned "Leaning to One Side" policy. The Five Principles soon became a framework for relations with neighbouring states (Niu, 2012). Amid Sino-Soviet tensions, China adopted the "Two Fists" policy to oppose both the U.S. and the USSR, while Mao's "Intermediate Zone" thinking later developed into the "Three Worlds" framework (Chi, 2013; Jiang, 2013). The final "One Line" strategy sought broad anti-Soviet alignments, improving ties even with the US (Chi, 2013). Diplomatic outreach expanded significantly, from 23 countries in 1955 to 50 by 1969. China's South Asia strategy prioritised neutralising India, shaping ties with India through conflict and rivalry, including the 1962 war. Viewing India as aligned with adversaries, Beijing leveraged Pakistan as a counterbalance against US–India and Indo-Soviet proximity (Gokhale, 2022).

PRC engagement with other South Asian states remained limited, primarily centred on trade and border management. China-Sri Lanka ties were marked by the Rubber-Rice Agreement, Sri Lanka's UN support for the PRC in 1971, and 1970s arms-related cooperation (Kumar, 2017). Relations with Nepal evolved through 1956 agreements, aid exchanges, and a 1960 border settlement. Bhutan's 470-km border with China, including Doklam, shaped its ties with Beijing (Jha, 2013; Talukdar, 2013). Tensions later grew after Tibet-related developments, the 1960 trade break, and the 1962 Sino-Indian war (Mathou, 2004). Meanwhile, the Maldives (1972) and Bangladesh (1976) established ties, though engagement remained minimal until the 2000s.

Bhutan shares a 470 km border with China, including the strategically important Doklam and Chumbi Valley tri-junction. In the first era, China-Bhutan relations were influenced by Mao's "Palm and Five Fingers" doctrine, which stated Tibet is a palm with five fingers—Bhutan, Nepal, Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Sikkim. In addition, the Bhutan-India Friendship Treaty of 1949 has raised Chinese concerns about Indian influence in the region near Tibet and has affected China-Bhutan relations. This agreement enabled India to deploy troops on Bhutanese territory as their main security guarantor. Border and security issues stimulated Beijing's resentful tone towards Bhutan until the 1960s. By 1960, relations had reached an impasse, and border trade and official contacts with China were suspended (Jha, 2013). The inclusion of Tibet into the PRC, the Tibet turmoil of 1954-1955, and the 1962 Sino-Indian border war mainly contributed to the suspicious relations between China and Bhutan. In 1955, despite being aware of the 1949 pact, Beijing offered visas directly to Bhutanese citizens to expand relations with Bhutan. However, the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB) did not take concrete steps, so interaction with China remained minimal (Mathou, 2004). The Maldives and Bangladesh have had diplomatic ties with China since 1972 and 1976, respectively, but relations were insignificant until the 2000s.

China's South Asia policy under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao

China began to transition from a centrally planned economy to a globally engaged socialist market economy under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. This period is characterised as the second era, which was commonly known as the age of reforms and opening up. This era was continued under the leadership of Deng's next two successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Deng shifted China away from highly centralised economic planning in favour of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics", which prioritised economic development by engaging with the market economy. He campaigned for modernisation in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence to build a modern China (Mason, 1984; Keo, 2020). Deng is widely regarded as the architect of the "China miracle", and his liberal economic policies were instrumental in developing present-day China.

Deng's "hide and bide"/ "keep a low profile, do something" policy was the signature foreign-policy approach of the era. The policy emphasised enhancing domestic capabilities while avoiding a confrontational role abroad. This approach was formulated to maintain a healthy environment conducive to national economic development (Xia, 2001; Esteve, 2019). The fundamental tenets of the policy were (Chi, 2013):

- a) Observe and assess calmly.
- b) Respond patiently and confidently.
- c) Safeguard China's position.
- d) Conceal strengths and avoid attention.
- e) Maintain a low profile.
- f) Avoid seeking leadership.
- g) Pursue achievable goals.

China's post-Cold War strategy recalibrated its external engagement, combining regional security cooperation with global economic expansion. This approach deepened China's engagement with ASEAN and supported its role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization alongside Russia and Central Asian states, providing a pragmatic basis for broader international engagement (Medeiros & Fravel, 2003). Under Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, China transitioned from "safe escape" (anquan tuwei) to "expansion of interest" (liyi tuozhan), institutionalised as "neighbourhood diplomacy" (zhoubian), aimed at consolidating regional partnerships through shared economic growth (Wang, 2007, as cited in Chi, 2013). Complementary doctrines such as "peaceful rise" and "going global" further reinforced this outward orientation.

China's engagement in South Asia aligned with these economic and strategic priorities. Deng Xiaoping sought to improve ties with India, proposing a "package deal" in the early 1980s to resolve the border dispute and reduce India's strategic closeness with the Soviet Union. However, continuity with Mao-era strategic rivalry remained visible in China's sustained support for Pakistan and in its responses to events such as Sumborong Chu in 1986 and Arunachal Pradesh's statehood in 1987 (Gokhale, 2022). Rajiv Gandhi's 1988 visit marked a turning point in India-China relations, initiating normalisation and leading to later confidence-building measures along the Line of Actual Control (Gokhale, 2021). The 1990s and 2000s marked a period of expanding India-China economic engagement, shaped by economic reform, globalisation, and growing development priorities, which contributed to the rapid growth of bilateral trade (Yuan, 2016).

China-Pakistan relations remained consistently strong, evolving in terminology from "friendly relations" (1950s-1970s) to "traditional friendship" (1980s), "comprehensive friendship" (1990s), "all-weather friendship" (2003), and later a "bilateral strategic partnership of good-neighbourly friendship" (2005), reflecting deepening strategic alignment (Khalid, 2021).

Civilian nuclear cooperation marked a major milestone, strengthening Pakistan's strategic capabilities. Simultaneously, China expanded engagement with smaller South Asian states through economic diplomacy. In Sri Lanka, China-Sri Lanka economic relations gained momentum after the trade agreements of 1982 and 1984. Trade grew steadily. It rose from US\$125.6 million in 1990 to US\$256 million in 2000, before reaching US\$1.1 billion by 2008. Chinese financial involvement also expanded sharply between 1971 and 2012, reaching US\$5.05 billion. Much of this increase occurred during Mahinda Rajapaksa's rule, especially through infrastructure-related projects (Campbell et al., 2012; Kelegama, 2014; Kumar, 2017).

In Nepal, ties remained limited until the mid-1990s due to infrastructure constraints and India-centric policies, though security concerns later increased Chinese engagement; trade rose from a little over \$70 million (1995) to below \$175 million (2003) (Sharma, 2019). Economic relations with the Maldives expanded gradually, with trade growing from US\$2.977 million (2002) to US\$64 million (2010), US\$98 million (2013), and US\$104 million (2014) (Kumar, 2016). Afghanistan's prolonged conflict and reconciliation challenges shaped the wider setting for external engagement (Waldman, 2014). In Afghanistan, China maintained limited engagement during conflict periods, resuming closer ties in 2002 and expanding its presence after 2014 (Huasheng, 2016).

Bhutan-China contacts developed gradually through border talks, culminating in the 1998 agreement on peace and tranquillity (Mathou, 2004). Meanwhile, Bangladesh deepened ties via its "Look East" policy and defence cooperation, with China supplying 78% and 82% of arms imports in key periods. Trade rose from \$1 billion (2002) to \$10 billion (2013), reinforced by Bangladesh's role in the China-South Asia Expo (Shikha, 2014; Foysal, 2014; Embassy of Bangladesh, 2017). Overall, China's South Asia policy emphasised economic engagement and strategic partnerships while avoiding direct confrontation.

China's South Asian Strategy under Xi Jinping's leadership

Since Xi Jinping assumed office in 2013, China's global engagement—particularly with developing countries—has expanded significantly, with 148 states participating in the BRI (Nedopil, 2023). While some scholars view this phase as a continuation and expansion of earlier policies, others interpret it as a distinct strategic shift aimed at enhancing China's global influence. Xi's emphasis on "striving for achievement" (*fenfa youwei*) marked a departure from Deng Xiaoping's earlier doctrine of "keeping a low profile," reflecting a more active international posture (Mardell, 2017). This shift was further reinforced by official calls for China to "grasp historic opportunity" and play a greater role in global affairs (Xinhua, 2018).

Concepts such as "shared destiny for mankind" and China's "historic opportunity" for national rejuvenation signal a broader vision of global leadership. This orientation is reinforced by the establishment of multiple multilateral platforms under Chinese leadership, challenging US-dominated institutional frameworks. Economically, China has invested over US\$1 trillion in BRI projects and extended approximately US\$240 billion in bailout loans to 22 developing countries, with nearly 80 per cent of these loans disbursed between 2016 and 2021 (Savage, 2023; Gerstel, 2018).

Xi's BRI and Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiatives are widely debated in academic literature, reflecting competing interpretations of China's expanding global and regional role from two scholarly perspectives.

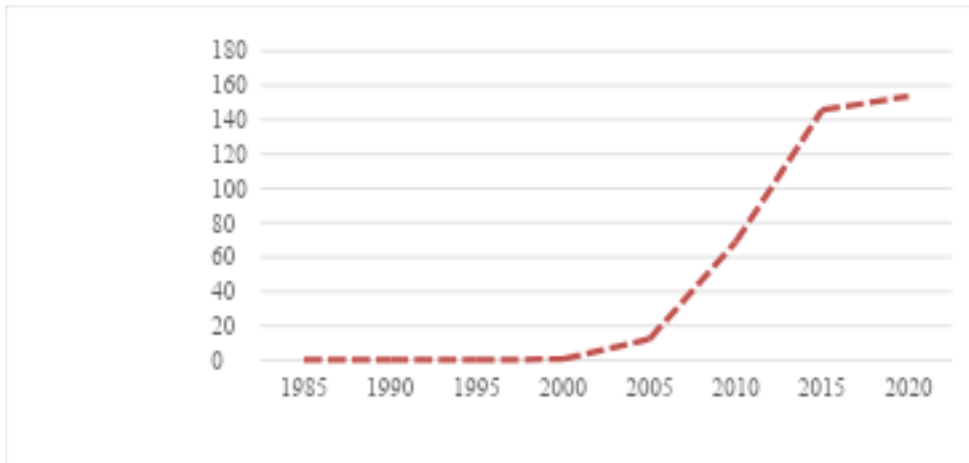
- I. An economy-driven approach focused on connectivity, trade, infrastructure, and regional growth, though with uneven benefits and risks (Xiaolu, 2015; Shahzad, 2021; Rehman et al., 2019).
- II. A strategic view linking China's IOR expansion with maritime security, port development, energy-route protection, the Malacca dilemma and strategic influence (Barton, 2021; Li, 2017; Choudhary, 2023).

Though the Chinese leadership asserts that their recent extensive global interactions align with their commitment to maintaining interstate relations based on the following principles:

- a) The great powers are (vital).
- b) Neighbours are (primary).
- c) Developing nations are (foundation).
- d) Multilateral cooperation (focus)

Xi's 'Chinese Dream' (or Zhongguo Meng) and the attainment of two 'centennial goals' are underpinned by three fundamental strategies: first and foremost, equality in dealings with the West; second, fulfilling interests while avoiding confrontation and conflict; and third, 'win-win cooperation' for the mutual benefit of friends, allies, and partners (Kaur, 2016). Partnership diplomacy, Silk Road economic diplomacy, and new financial diplomacy have been adopted to carry out these strategies (Zhang, 2016). Xi's strategy aims to increase Chinese engagement in global affairs through economic diplomacy to safeguard national interests. The following figures on outward FDI from 1985 to 2020 reflect China's growing economic diplomacy:

Figure 2: Chinese OFDI worldwide: 1982-2020



Source: (Le & Cheok, 2020; Cai et al., 2025)

Chinese overseas investment has grown since 1990. The tendency proves economic diplomacy revolves around traditional economic factors. BRI is just a contributing factor to recent expansion. However, it is claimed that Xi's diplomatic strategies are classified. China is applying status quo diplomacy with major powers for a stable relationship. Practising status quo and revisionist diplomacy with peripheral countries to ensure rise and secure core interests. A revisionist form of diplomacy has been adopted for developing nations, arguing for reform in the

existing politico-economic order (Lee, 2014). China's “new neighbourhood policy” works under periphery diplomacy to advance its geopolitical and economic objectives. President Xi stated that China must strengthen relations with neighbouring nations through political and economic interactions, security cooperation, and people-to-people contacts (Xinhua, 2013). Xi’s South Asia strategy also relied on economic diplomacy to expand China’s regional influence, strengthen its strategic position, and secure wider economic benefits through FDI and infrastructure cooperation (Kafle, 2022). The following statistics illustrate the extent of Chinese engagement in South Asia under Xi's leadership.

Table 2: Chinese investment to four big South Asian economies (2005-2020) and China's top four arm export destination (2000-2020)

Chinese Investment	2005-2013	2013-2020	Growth (%)	China’s Top Arm Export Destination (2000-2020)
	In Billion US\$			In Million US\$
Bangladesh	3.77	26.14	593.37%	Pakistan (8777)
India	16.17	21.09	30.43%	Bangladesh (2886)
Pakistan	10.94	49.68	354.11%	Myanmar (1699)
Sri Lanka	7.33	9.93	35.47%	Algeria (1024)

Source: *Compiled from (EFSAS, 2022)*

Infrastructural development is a highly prioritised domain for smaller South Asian states and has emerged as a crucial area of collaboration with China. China was able to attach six of the eight nations in the region to the BRI - Sri Lanka (2014), Bangladesh (2016), Afghanistan (2016), Pakistan (2017), Nepal (2017), and the Maldives (2017) - and secure its growing influence (Ranjan & Haiqi, 2022).

China’s contemporary South Asia strategy under Xi Jinping reflects a calibrated blend of economic statecraft, geopolitical balancing, and selective security engagement, largely anchored in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Toward India, China has pursued a dual-track approach—encouraging participation in BRI while ensuring New Delhi does not actively obstruct its regional expansion. This has been operationalised through Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank financing, sustained diplomatic dialogue, and cultural exchanges. Despite these mechanisms, tensions persist, particularly after the Doklam standoff (2017) and the Tawang clash (2022). Chinese scholars often interpret the current tensions in Delhi–Beijing relations through the lens of India’s growing closeness with the United States. From their perspective, Washington increasingly sees New Delhi as a strategic counterbalance to China, while New Delhi appears to be moving away from its traditional non-alignment policy. They also suggest that Indian views of China are at times overstated or based on misperceptions. In contrast, Beijing portrays its own approach as one aimed at maintaining stability rather than provoking confrontation (Yang, 2017; Zhao, 2016; Shi, 2018, Ling, 2018, as cited in Gokhale, 2022). At a structural level, India appears to occupy a secondary position within China’s strategic calculus, although evolving border tensions reflect deeper

contradictions between China's Major Power Diplomacy and its Neighbourhood Strategy (Singh, 2022).

China's relationship with Pakistan remains central and largely consistent with earlier eras. The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), valued at approximately US\$60 billion, constitutes the flagship BRI project, accounting for about 7 per cent of Pakistan's external debt. Strategically, Pakistan provides China with critical access to the Indian Ocean, linking its western regions to maritime routes and offering an alternative to the US-influenced Strait of Malacca (Hillman, 2018; Hussain, 2019; Ghiasy, 2021). Additionally, the enduring India–Pakistan rivalry and fluctuating US–Pakistan relations further reinforce the China–Pakistan partnership, enabling Beijing to maintain regional leverage and balance against competing powers.

Beyond these major relationships, China has deepened engagement with smaller South Asian states through a differentiated, state-specific economic strategy. In Nepal, initiatives such as port access agreements and the Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor reflect Beijing's infrastructure-driven approach, with China contributing nearly 90 per cent of Nepal's FDI in 2020 (Mukhopadhyay, 2020). In Bangladesh, investments in power and infrastructure have reached approximately US\$30 billion (Baghernia & Meraji, 2020). Meanwhile, Sri Lanka and the Maldives have assumed heightened maritime significance, as evidenced by Xi's early visits in 2014. Infrastructure investments in Sri Lanka rose from US\$5.4 billion (2006–12) to US\$6.8 billion (2013–19), underscoring continuity in strategic prioritisation (Wignaraja et al., 2020). However, Chinese investments, including island leases in the Maldives, have raised Indian security concerns, particularly regarding potential dual-use infrastructure (Valiathan, 2020). Beijing has nevertheless pushed back against claims that it intends to militarise these assets. As Long Xingchun argued, if China wanted a military presence in the Indian Ocean, it would likely have other, more suitable options than the Maldives (Ethirajan, 2024).

China has also sustained diplomatic engagement with Bhutan, continuing border negotiations initiated in earlier periods. Beijing and Thimphu have sat for more than 20 rounds of boundary-resolution talks (Som, 2023). Recent statements by Bhutanese leaders suggest that one or two more rounds of talks may bring China and Bhutan closer to a possible boundary settlement. This continued engagement also reflects Beijing's preference for sustained, high-level diplomacy under Xi Jinping. Similarly, China's relations with Bangladesh emphasise long-term stability over domestic political considerations, demonstrating policy continuity irrespective of regime changes. In Afghanistan, China's approach integrates security and connectivity imperatives. Afghanistan is increasingly viewed as a potential link between Central Asia, South Asia, and wider regional trade routes (Tahiri, 2017). Beijing has prioritised counter-terrorism cooperation to prevent instability from spilling into Xinjiang, including trilateral intelligence-sharing mechanisms with Pakistan and Afghanistan (Grossman, 2020). This reflects an evolution from earlier "hexiao, gongda" strategy (Malik, 2009) toward a more proactive regional security role (Grossman, 2020).

India and the United States have frequently framed China's regional strategy as an "encirclement" effort, particularly through BRI-linked investments in neighbouring states. However, Yang (2018) contests this interpretation, arguing that although China's growing presence may heighten Indian threat perceptions, it is not intended to contain India. Similarly, allegations of "debt-trap diplomacy" have been challenged by empirical studies, which suggest that such claims are unfounded (Himmer & Rod, 2022). China's mediation role in the Iran–Saudi rapprochement (2023) and its non-expansionist military record since 1962 are cited by Beijing as evidence of responsible global conduct.

At the regional level, China's expanding presence has provided smaller South Asian states with opportunities to diversify partnerships, attract infrastructure financing, and enhance bargaining power vis-à-vis India and the United States. For instance, China's US\$38 billion offer to Bangladesh in 2016 prompted India to extend a US\$5 billion credit line, while similar competitive dynamics were evident in the Maldives in 2018 (Ghiasi, 2021). However, this triangular competition has also intensified political pressures within these states, with regime changes often reshaping foreign policy orientations, as seen in the Maldives' shift from a pro-China stance under Abdulla Yameen to an "India First" policy under Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

Overall, China's South Asia policy under Xi Jinping is characterised by dual imperatives: expanding economic influence through BRI-driven engagement with smaller states, and managing a complex, competitive relationship with India shaped by broader Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamics. These parallel strategies define China's contemporary regional approach.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of this study suggests that Chinese policy towards South Asia in each era has been guided by national interests and the nature of prevailing global political order. However, China's strategies for achieving its foreign-policy goals have evolved over time (Demir, 2019). During the Mao era, China's relations with South Asia were influenced by communist revolutionary ideas and the wider Cold War dynamics among China, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Muzaffar & Khan, 2021). Defending national security and territorial integrity, and maintaining China's regional position, were the primary goals. During this era, India and Pakistan occupied the major spaces in China's South Asia policy. Ensuring greater economic engagement through neighbourhood policy was the key feature of the second-era policy toward South Asia. A non-aligned policy of 'keeping a low profile' was adopted to avoid direct confrontation. China's interactions with smaller South Asian states began and found a place within its strategies. Xi's South Asia policy aligns with his "strive for achievement" strategy and adopts an approach of extensive politico-economic engagement through the BRI. His diplomacy and vision, however, are more robust and strategic than those of the previous eras. BRI and economic engagements have enabled China to extend its regional influence.

China-India tensions are deepening India-USA relations. The US's thirst to utilise India as a counterweight to China is triggering a power struggle in the region. The USA-China-India competition poses a challenge for small states in maintaining balance among the three. India's 'neither accepted nor rejected' strategy remains a major barrier to BRI success in South Asia. This dilemma resulted from India's misinterpretation of China's international ambition and regional engagements. China's negation of India's strength and disregard for its potential as a regional ally are also undermining mutual trust and, in turn, promoting strong US-India ties. China's longstanding and continuous engagement with Pakistan has been closely intertwined with the complex dynamics between China-India and India-Pakistan relationships. India's closer alignment with the United States can fuel a regional power struggle by strengthening Pakistan-China ties. Small South Asian nations perceive China's engagement in the region as advantageous to their economic interests and a natural stabiliser to the US and India. However, USA-India propaganda and India's recent investment orientation to counter the Chinese influence can affect China-South Asia relations.

Soft diplomacy and diplomatic coercion from India and the US on smaller South Asian states could rupture China and South Asia's growing ties. For instance, Bangladesh has been persistently pressed to join the US-led Indo-Pacific alliance. On the other hand, these

circumstances (India-US quest for influence) could lead to interference in domestic politics. The Indian policy regarding Solih regime in the Maldives could spread to other states. Unresolved border issues with Bhutan, Nepal, and India may lead to more border conflicts. The US involvement in the region through the “Indo-Pacific Strategy” and “QUAD” (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) could complicate China-South Asia relations. The Sri Lankan sovereign default in 2022 and its suspicious correlation to Chinese loans may impair Sino-South Asian economic relations in the coming years.

Finally, China's policy towards South Asia across different eras has been guided by its global-relations perspective and shaped by a combination of national interests and international political dynamics. The era-based policy analysis suggests that border issues, security concerns, India-China relations, and trade are the most consistent determinants shaping Sino-South Asia relations. Certain policies are consistently maintained across eras with specific goals, while others are adjusted to cope with changing conditions and priorities. The analysis also indicates that China's geostrategic considerations have led to the inclusion of smaller South Asian nations in its current orbit and priorities. Undeniably, the BRI plays a significant role in exerting Chinese influence in the region. Smaller South Asian states perceive the BRI and the increasing Chinese presence in the area as opportunities to address the infrastructure financing gap and counterbalance the influence of other powers. On the other hand, tensions between China and India significantly impact Sino-South Asia relations. However, by employing customised strategies for each smaller South Asian state, China has managed to mitigate the impact of the India factor in its relations with these countries. Although smaller South Asian states do not have significant issues with China, the complex dynamics of regional relations and competition between major powers over IOR, characterised by alliance and anti-alliance mechanisms, pose challenges to Sino-South Asia relations.

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