

**CHINESE BELT AND ROAD
INVESTMENTS IN SOUTH ASIA UNDER
THE INFLUENCE OF MULTIPLE
SOCIAL CRISES AND NATURAL
DISASTERS**

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Abstract

One Belt One Road initiative is one of the mammoth infrastructure development projects that the world has seen in the recent past. With the visionary thinking of President Xi Jinping, the One Belt One Road significantly contributes to the economic infrastructure development of many continents including Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America. Although the recipient countries are significantly benefitted by receiving the financial aid under the One Belt One Road initiatives, economic and political activists raise grave concerns over the true intention of China. The present perspective analyzes both merits and demerits of implementing the One Belt One Road initiative in South Asia which is frequented by multiple social crises and natural disasters.

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BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND SOUTH ASIA

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is one of the key development projects that the world has seen in recent decades. Under the visionary leadership of President Xi Jinping, the One Belt One Road (OBOR) was first proposed in 2013 to demarcate the one hundred year's celebrations of the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The BRI project follows the ancient silk route, both land and maritime, that brought East and West together many centuries ago. Following the guiding starts set by their ancestors, most of the OBOR projects are now taking place along the ancient silk route, which is aimed at accelerating the development of China by promoting Chinese investments in countries that fall under the purview of the BRI project. Morgan Stanley, a renowned global investment bank estimates that by 2027 China's overall expenses over the life of the BRI could reach \$1.2–1.3 trillion with sixty countries partnering with the project (Morgan Stanley, 2018). Although there are many benefits of BRI projects to the host country, many scholars have pointed out the demerit of it. Ownership of economically valuable assets in other countries, spying over countries, influence over political matters and sovereignty, strict credit terms and conditions, expanding Chinese military power are few of them (Alguacil, Cuadros and Orts, 2011; Fasslabend, 2015; Kleven, 2015; Aoyama, 2016; Ferdinand, 2016; Liu et al., 2017; Var and Po, 2017; Jetin, 2018).

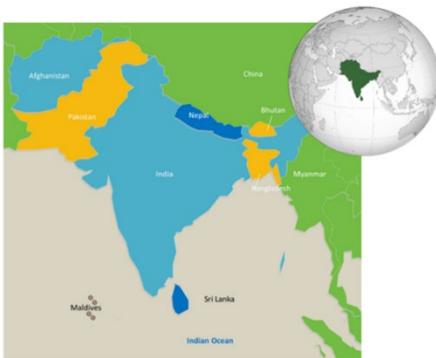
Since the medieval era, South Asia remains a powerful and strategically located region with an abundance of natural and cultural attractions. As a result, many early days explorers visited South Asia in search of green pastures and the Portuguese, Dutch, and British rulers colonialized most of the countries in South Asia. After the destructive invasions and earning self-sovereignty from colonial rulers, the region is still on its way to reaching the heights of development. With its thousands of years old history, most of the South Asian countries are stagnated in between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. The two dichotomies affect both negatively and positively in national and regional policy-making, development and decline of the socio-cultures, electing and dismissing of the rulers, and even during managing the foreign affairs. Thus, political stability is deemed to be a hard goal to achieve within the countries in South Asia. These unstable socio-political environments in most of the South Asian countries have opened up battlegrounds for global superpowers to take their wars to South Asia (Johnson, 2005). Afghanistan, Pakistan are two suffering countries within which continuous war situations and social crises are still palpable. Further, the wars between countries, wars between neighbouring states and regions continue to contribute to the political instability of South Asian counties (Cady and Simon, 2006). The importance of South Asia on geopolitical grounds, unsolved internal matters, and many political and socio-cultural issues are favouring conditions for international mediations.

When discussing matters that are yet to be solved, India and Pakistan stand tall. Having started their disputes in the mid-twentieth century, both India and Pakistan engaged in three wars over the ownership of beautiful and resourceful Kashmir.

Countless peace efforts were washed to the sea since both countries failed to conclude peacefully. To become stronger, these countries tie up with superpowers. For instance, India and USA relationships and Pakistan and China relationships. Further to that, Soviet mediation in Afghanistan in the 1980s imposed a great threat to the regional peace and political balance. Apart from this international propaganda, most countries in the South Asian region are suffering from internal matters. They include the Kashmir issue and nuclear race in both India and Pakistan, ethnic issues in Sri Lanka, political issues in Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, terrorist issues in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, are weakening the integrity of the Asian region, thus halting the overall development of the region. Consequently, regional conflicts and dilemmas on regional harmony have positioned South Asia in an unsecured state in the eye of international political analysts (Ahmar, 1982).

Having been inspired by the ancient ‘Silk Route’ China initiated the OBOR concept in 2013. The main purpose of the OBOR project is to increase the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents. It is further expected to articulate this massive project by combining the seas, establishing and strengthening the relationships along the BRI with multi-facets networks of infrastructure development projects, communication networks, and other soft developments which are of economic infrastructure (Manzoor et al., 2017; Rahman and Ahamed, 2020). As of now, the BRI is implemented throughout Asia, and particularly in South Asia. The Countries involved in BRI in South Asia include Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India, Maldives, and Bangladesh. Nepal (depicted in figure 01), however, still has not accepted any major investment from BRI due to the influence of India but will reconsider its stance in near future (Pandit, 2019). According to many scholars, two key goals China intends to achieve through BRI are to contribute to regional development through increased connectivity and to maintain peace and security in South Asia (Winter, 2016; Yu, 2017; Chen, Hou and Xiao, 2018). However, as mentioned, South Asia is a region of much political turmoil, natural disasters, terrorist and threats. Therefore, it is important to keep a close eye on the geopolitical and economic behaviour of the South Asian countries to reach the objectives of the Belt and Road Initiatives.

Figure 1: Map of South Asia



RECENT SOCIAL CRISES AND NATURAL DISASTERS IN SOUTH ASIA AND ITS IMPACT ON BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Out of eight countries in South Asia, India could be identified as the dominant player leaving Pakistan in second place. Bangladesh is weak and has middle powers. Sri Lanka and Nepal are viewed as small countries with weak and little power and Bhutan is considered a mini-state. Afghanistan, on the other hand, is a country with many internal and external issues of its own. As a region, South Asia is confronted with many crises that include: ethnoreligious incidents and violence, terrorism, coups, insurgencies, wars, nuclear tension, separatism, imprisonment and assassination of former Heads of state, bribery and corruption, human rights violations, floods, cyclones, earthquakes, Tsunamis etc. (Richter, 1999; Bhattarai, Conway and Shrestha, 2005; Johnson, 2005; Samarathunga, Cheng and Weerathunga, 2020). The subsequent sections will briefly elaborate on the issues in every South Asian country with their respective timelines.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a beautiful country with an abundance of natural and cultural resources. However, the country is still on a verge of collapse due to many internal political issues, and too many external influences. The appearance of Muslim extremists and their influence on the government of Afghanistan is very high. Further, the availability of many powerful and ruthless terrorist organizations cripples the maintenance of law and order in Afghanistan. The impact of the former Soviet Union also made a huge impact on the present political instability of Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a very important country to China since Afghanistan is also a border country to China. In addition, via Afghanistan, China could easily reach West Asia and gain access to the Middle East and Europe. When the Taliban was in power, China, however, did not recognize the Taliban Government considering the extreme nature of its founders and philosophers. China is very concerned about Afghanistan since Afghanistan is a decisive factor in regional stability and security. Further, Chinese economic interests lie with the rich mineral resources in Afghanistan and as a result, Beijing and Afghanistan signed few bilateral agreements. Through Chinese intervention, it is expected to control religious extremism, avoid civil conflicts and stable the country by reducing the poverty. Further, China did not want to have American soldiers in one of their bordering countries. Table 01 summarizes key events and incidents that affect the development of Afghanistan.

Despite internal political instability and challenges, BRI has selected Afghanistan as an important country to deal with. Accordingly, many BRI projects have been implemented in Afghanistan creating many employment opportunities for the people in Afghanistan. However, given the sensitivity of the issues faced by Afghanistan Chinese Government has to pay extra attention to securing their investments and making sure the Afghan people are getting their intended benefits of them. Table 2 summarizes key investment projects and donations granted to Afghanistan.

The BRI investments are crucial to contribute to the development of Afghanistan. Thus, many studies are needed to assess the potential outbreaks in Afghanistan from the Chinese viewpoint.

Table 1: Key geopolitical events and natural disasters in Afghanistan

Year	Key events and incidents
1953	General Mohammed Daud becomes prime minister. Turns to Soviet Union for economic and military assistance. Introduces social reforms such as abolition of <i>pardah</i>
1964	Constitutional monarchy introduced - but leads to political polarisation and power struggles
1979	Soviet Army invades and props up communist government
1988	Afghanistan, USSR, the US and Pakistan sign peace accords and Soviet Union begins pulling out troops
1996	Taliban seize control of Kabul and introduce a hard-line version of Islam banning women from work and introduces Islamic punishments which include stoning to death and amputation
1997	Taliban recognised as legitimate rulers by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia
1998	US launches missile strikes at suspected bases of militant Osama bin Laden, accused of bombing US embassies in Africa
2003	NATO takes control of security in Kabul, its first-ever operational commitment outside Europe
2005	Afghans vote in first parliamentary elections in more than 30 years
2008	US President George Bush sends an extra 4,500 US troops to Afghanistan, in a move he described as a "quiet surge"
2009	NATO countries pledge to increase military and other commitments in Afghanistan after US announces dispatch of 17,000 extra troops.
2011	Burning of Koran by a US pastor prompts country-wide protests in which foreign UN workers and several Afghans are killed.
2012	Taliban agree to open office in Dubai as a move towards peace talks with the US and the Afghan government
2013	Afghan army takes command of all military and security operations from NATO forces
2014	Opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan reaches an all-time high
2015	Taliban representatives and Afghan officials hold informal peace talks in Qatar
2015	Powerful earthquake kills more than 80 people in northeast of country
2016	The Afghan government signs a peace agreement with the militant group Hezb-e-Islami and grants immunity to the group's leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.
2019	Protracted peace talks between the Taliban and the United States break down
2021	Complete withdrawal of the US Army and other allied forces and Taliban seized the full control

Source: Ramachandran (2018), Safi and Alizada (2018), BBC (2020a)

Table 2: Key investment projects and donations by BRI to Afghanistan

Year / period	Loan / Investments / donations	Estimated cost
2010	Aynak Copper mines project	US \$ 5 billion
2012 – 2013	Donation	US \$ 240 million
2015 – 2019	Railway track from Hairatan, Afghanistan to China	US \$ 100 million
2014	Donation	US \$ 80 million
2017	Development projects in Badakhshan province	US \$ 90 million
Proposed	- CASA-1000 power project	US \$ 1.2 billion
	- TAPI-500 natural gas pipeline project	US \$ 7.7 billion
	- Digital Silk Road fibre optic cable network	

Source: Safi and Alizada (2018), Stone (2019), BBC (2020a)

Bangladesh

Table 3 summarizes key incidents/events faced by Bangladesh in the recent past.

Table 3: Key geopolitical events and natural disasters in Bangladesh

Year	Key events and incidents
1970	Cyclone hits East Pakistan (present Bangladesh) - up to 500,000 people are killed
1971	Awami League proclaims the independence of the province as Bangladesh
1974	Severe floods devastate much of the grain crop, leading to an estimated 28,000 deaths
1975	Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is assassinated in a military coup in August. Martial law is imposed
1981	President Ziaur Rahman is assassinated in abortive coup
1986	President Ershad lifts martial law and reinstates the constitution
1988	Islam becomes state religion. Floods leave tens of millions homeless
1990	President Ershad steps down following mass protests
1988	Two-thirds of the country devastated by the worst floods ever
2009	Around 74 people, mainly army officers, are killed in a mutiny in Dhaka by border guards unhappy with pay and conditions. Police arrest some 700 guards. A further 1,000 guards are detained
2013	European retailers promise to sign an accord to improve safety conditions in factories after a garment factory building collapsed in April, killing more than 1,100 people
2015	Bangladesh bans Islamist militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team, which claims responsibility for killing and assaulting several pro-secular public figures
2017	The number of Rohingya Muslims who fled military action in Myanmar's Rakhine state and sought refuge in Bangladesh is estimated at one million
2018	Opposition leader Khaleda Zia is sentenced to five years in prison for corruption, disqualifying her from contesting the elections later in the year

Source: BBC (2020b)

Although Bangladesh is not one of the bordering countries to China, China treats political and economic relationships with Bangladesh very seriously. Both countries are members of the BCIM Forum (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation). Bangladesh and China's relationship goes back to the Qin dynasty period (221 – 226 BC) and did not continue after Bangladesh declares Islam as their official religion. Similar to other countries in the region, Bangladesh is also suffering from many unfortunate incidents associated with natural disasters, wars, coupes, family politics, and other tragedies. Further, Bangladesh is one of the main countries in the South Asian region that face frequent natural disasters which cost thousands of lives and billion-dollar worth of economic losses. The geo-politics and cold wars with the former Soviet Union and Pakistan equally contribute to the present state of instability in Bangladesh (Johnson, 2005).

Despite the aforementioned political turmoil and natural disasters, China continues to implement the BRI projects in Bangladesh honouring their first agreements made in 1976. Bangladesh gladly welcomed the Chinese investments and loans which are much needed in the present phase of development. However, the political instability and natural disasters impose a significant threat to investment security in Bangladesh. To promote the Bangladesh economy, China has applied zero-tariff conditions to 8,256 products originating from Bangladesh among the total 8,549 products recognized in the Chinese tariff line (Latifee and Uddin, 2020). A few key projects that were initiated during the recent past are presented in Table 04.

Table 4: Key investment projects and donations by BRI to Bangladesh

Year / period	Loan / Investments / donations	Estimated cost
2018	Technology	US \$1 billion
2019	Power and infrastructure projects	US \$ 21.5 billion
2019	Loan	US \$ 1.7 billion
Proposed	100 special economic zones	US \$ 5 billion (phase I)

Source: Ahmed (2019), Titumir and Rahman (2019)

Bhutan

Unlike other countries in the region, China and Bhutan are having a distinct and distant relationship although both parties are working towards making their relationships clear. The relationships between China and Bhutan were affected in the 1950s when China attached Tibet to China. Whilst disapproving of Chinese actions with their long-standing friend Tibet, Bhutan grew strong ties with India. To date, Bhutan does not recognize China and Bhutan border. Further, both Bhutan and China do not maintain official diplomatic relations (Parashar, 2019; Ramachandran, 2020). As a result, the economic and trade relationships between the two countries remain low.

Despite the poor relationship, Bhutan remains an important neighbour to China. Sandwiched in between India and China, Bhutan maintains a 600 km long border with China, that remained closed due to the influx of Tibetan refugees to Bhutan (Ramachandran, 2020). The political stability of Bhutan also affects Chinese Belt and Road Initiatives since there are no BRI investments or donations made by China in Bhutan. Globally, this is a humiliation to the BRI project since China's aim is to develop the entire region. Bhutan is also suffering from political coups, assassinations of key political leaders, very poor infrastructure and superstructure facilities etc. A list of recent incidents reported in Bhutan is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Key geopolitical events and natural disasters in Bhutan

Year / period	Key events and incidents
1959	Several thousand refugees given asylum after Chinese annex Tibet
1964	Prime minister killed in dispute among competing political factions
1988	Census leads to branding of many ethnic Nepalis as illegal immigrants. New measures adopted to enforce citizenship law.
1990	Violent ethnic unrest and anti-government protests in southern Bhutan pressing for greater democracy and respect for Nepali rights. Bhutan People's Party begins campaign of violence. Thousands of ethnic Nepalis flee to Nepal.
1993	Bhutan and Nepal try to resolve refugee problem
1997	Amnesty International raises serious concerns over human rights situation in southern Bhutan
1999	Limited television and internet services allowed; several dozen political prisoners released
2000	Bhutan hit by landslides following severe flooding in region, causing at least 200 deaths
2001	Bhutanese and Nepalese ministers meet to discuss the repatriation of Bhutanese refugees living in Nepal. Some 100,000 ethnic Nepalese say they were forced out of Bhutan in the 1980s and 1990s, alleging ethnic and political repression
2007	Bhutan signs a landmark agreement with India which revises ties with its neighbour, giving Bhutan more say over its foreign and defence policies
2008	A string of bomb blasts hit the country ahead of elections set for March 24. The attacks are blamed on groups fighting for the rights of ethnic Nepalis exiled in 1991
2013	Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay says Bhutan's much lauded concept of Gross National Happiness is overused and masks the real problems facing the country like increasing debt, chronic unemployment, poverty and corruption
2017	Bhutan protests to China over its building of a road in disputed territory

Source: Parashar (2019), BBC (2020c)

India

China and India have a long woven history. Both countries try to be the superpower in the region in terms of economic development, military development and international relations.

Table 6: Key geopolitical events and natural disasters in India

Year / period	Key events and incidents
1948	War with Pakistan over disputed territory of Kashmir
1965	Second war with Pakistan over Kashmir
1971	Third war with Pakistan over creation of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan
1974	India explodes first nuclear device in underground test
1975 - 1977	Nearly 1,000 political opponents imprisoned and programme of compulsory birth control introduced
1984	Troops storm Golden Temple - Sikhs' most holy shrine - to flush out militants pressing for self-rule
1984	Indira Gandhi assassinated by Sikh bodyguards. Her son Rajiv takes over as prime minister
1984	Gas leak at Union Carbide pesticides plant in Bhopal (8000 are killed within two weeks and 700,000 were affected)
1987	India deploys troops for three years peacekeeping operation in Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict
1990	Muslim separatist groups begin campaign of violence in Kashmir
1991	Rajiv Gandhi assassinated by suicide bomber sympathetic to Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers
1992	Hindu extremists demolish mosque in Ayodhya, triggering widespread Hindu-Muslim violence
1998	India carries out nuclear tests, leading to widespread international condemnation
1999	Tension in Kashmir leads to brief war with Pakistan-backed forces in the icy heights around Kargil in Indian-held Kashmir
2002	India successfully test-fires a nuclear-capable ballistic missile - the Agni - off its eastern coast
2002	Inter-religious bloodshed breaks out after 59 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya are killed in a train fire in Godhra, Gujarat
2008	Nearly 200 people are killed in a series of co-ordinated attacks by the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e Taiba jihadist group on the main tourist and business area of India's financial capital Mumbai
2010	Allahabad High Court rules that the disputed holy site of Ayodhya should be divided between Hindus and Muslims
2014	Visiting Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Modi unveil landmark economic deals

Source: Parashar (2019), BBC (2020d)

Both countries are sharing a huge border of 3,488 kilometres and due to the same reason, many border disputes occurred between the countries including military wars. China and India were at each other's throats many times in their recent history including the military engagements in 1962 and clashes in 1967, 1975, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2020. India engaged in wars with Pakistan as well. This led both Pakistan and China to become even closer (Johnson, 2005; Castellejo, 2013). However, China is India's number one importer and third exporting country. The trade deficit between these importations and exportations are around US \$ 50 billion (Rahman and Ahamed, 2020). The trade value both countries are sharing is too big to put at a risk because of geopolitical differences. Therefore, both countries continue to maintain their relationships in their way.

However, India is often disturbed due to its political, religious and ethnic complexities that include nuclear tension, terrorist events, chemical disasters, assassination of heads of the state, religious and ethnic extremism and natural disasters. These incidents negatively affect Chinese investments in fast-developing India. Few significant events reported during their recent past are exhibited in Table 6 above.

During the recent past, China has made sizable investments in India for digital infrastructure. In 2019 alone, Chinese Foreign Direct Investment to India is around the US \$ 4.4 billion (Kapoor, 2020). China has invested over 75 manufacturing plants for a wide range of consumable goods all over India that include construction equipment, consumer appliances, smartphones, automobiles, chemicals and optical fibre (Rahman and Ahamed, 2020). Considering the trade value between both countries, and many more opportunities that are awaiting, it is important that India also remain stable in their internal matters (Khera and Bhasker, 2017; BBC, 2020d; Bhandari, Fernandis and Agrawal, 2020).

Maldives

The Maldives is another country in South Asia blessed with many islands which is a prefecture for fisheries and tourism. Although the country is small in terms of population and economy, it claims a significant sea border that are crucial for international trade. The island nation has a small GDP compared to other countries in South Asia and is still struggling to reach the heights of development. China and Maldives relationships are getting stronger since the signing of bilateral agreements between two countries in 2014, followed by signing the free trade agreements in 2017 (Kumar and Stanzel, 2018). The Maldives is another country in South Asia that has fallen into the depriving status of political instability. In recent years, the country has reported arresting and detaining more political prisoners than they ever had before (Mallempati, 2017). This is a growing concern among the world leaders including America, European Union, China, neighbouring Sri Lanka, and India. The rising seawater level is also an issue that the Maldives has to face in the mid-term. Table 07 explains the socio-political issues in the Maldives, which are more frequent during the recent past.

Table 7: Key geo-political events and natural disasters in Maldives

Year	Key events and incidents
1965	Full independence as a sultanate outside Commonwealth
1988	1988 - Coup attempt involving Sri Lankan mercenaries foiled with the help of Indian commandos
2002	President Gayoom warns low-lying islands at greater risk than ever before and calls on the international community to take urgent action to prevent global environmental catastrophe
2003	Unprecedented anti-government riots break out in Male, sparked by deaths of four prison inmates
2004	State of emergency imposed after a pro-democracy demonstration turns violent. Almost 100 people are jailed.
2004	2004 December - Scores of people are killed and many islands suffer severe damage when a tsunami generated by a powerful undersea earthquake off the Indonesian coast hits the Maldives. The government says the disaster set development work back by 20 years.
2005	Opposition party leader Mohamed Nasheed is charged with terrorism and sedition
2008	President Gayoom survives an assassination attempt after 15-year-old boy scout Mohamed Jaisham wrestled a kitchen knife from the would-be killer's hands
2011	Police clash with opposition-led protesters complaining about food prices
2012	President Nasheed announces his resignation after a mutiny by the police and weeks of demonstrations over the arrest of the chief justice. Later, he says he was forced out in a coup
2015	Former president Mohammed Nasheed is jailed for 13 years after being found guilty on terrorism charges
2015	Government declares state of emergency for 30 days ahead of a mass rally in support of jailed former president Nasheed, allowing security forces to detain suspects without charge, and shutting down major online news sites
2016	Former vice-president Ahmed Adeb is convicted of plotting to assassinate President Abdulla Yameen and jailed for 15 years
2016	The Maldives announces it is leaving the Commonwealth. The international organisation had earlier warned the country that it risked suspension if it failed to show progress in promoting democracy
2018	Political turmoil as government defies Supreme Court order to free prisoners whose convictions it had quashed

Source: (BBC, 2018; Mundy and Hille, 2019)

As explained in Table 8, China has made some significant investments in the Maldives during the last few years under Belt and Road Initiative. One of the major infrastructure projects is China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, which was opened in 2018. This project made a significant impact on the Maldivian economy since it could combine two major islands (including the capital Male) which was earlier accessible only through boats.

Further to that, Maldives also leased out an uninhabited island to China for 50 years to develop tourism infrastructure. Since the Maldives has a small economy, many outside parties are concerned about the volume of Maldivian debt to China (Mundy and Hille, 2019), a matter to further investigate. However, the contribution made by BRI to the Maldives is significant since they are not capable of attending to their infrastructure-related issues. Some key BRI investments in the Maldives are presented in Table 8.

Table 8: Key investment projects and donations by BRI to Maldives

Year	Loan / Investments / donations	Estimated cost
2018	China-Maldives Friendship Bridge	US \$ 200 million
2019	High-rise blocks apartments	US \$ 547.9 million
2019	Electricity project	US \$ 180.9 million
2019	Expanding the airport	US \$ 421 million

Source: Mundy and Hille (2019) Ethirajan (2020)

Nepal

The bordering Nepal is strategically important not only to China but also to India. Nepal is maintaining centuries-old close ties with India due to similar cultural, and religious affiliations. In the meantime, Nepal also had healthy relationships with China during the recent past. China is much concerned about maintaining good relationships with Nepal mainly due to the Tibetan refugees issues since the 1950s. The relationships between Nepal and China grew stronger since the abolition of the Nepal monarchy in 2008. Both China and India volunteer to support Nepal due to its strategic location and so far, Nepal managed to strategically handle both superpowers in Asia. When talking about politics, scholars cite that China supports the Nepal Maoists who are pro-Chinese and anti-Indian (Johnson, 2005; Gould, 2011; Rahman and Ahamed, 2020). China is also interested in establishing a safe and secure economic corridor with Nepal to benefit both countries despite the geopolitical challenges. Similar to other countries in the region, Nepal is suffering from different political movements, terrorist problems, natural disasters including avalanches and earthquakes. Some of the key such events are depicted in Table 9.

Despite the aforementioned challenges, China is keen on establishing new trade routes through Nepal. The proposed Kerung to Kathmandu railway project under BRI is one of the key initiatives. The main goal of the said project is to open up a new trade route linking China and South Asia. Although it is hard to find the exact amounts, China is one of the main military equipment suppliers to Nepal. In the recent past, China has become Nepal's main donor and significantly invested in them. The loans and donations are targeting the improvement of infrastructure and hydropower projects.

Table 9: Key geo-political events and natural disasters in Nepal

Year	Key events and incidents
1959	Multi-party constitution adopted
1980	The constitutional referendum follows agitation for reform. The small majority favours keeping the existing panchayat system. King agrees to allow direct elections to national assembly - but on a non-party basis
1985	Nepali Congress Party begins civil disobedience campaign for the restoration of the multi-party system
1989	Trade and transit dispute with India leads to border blockade by Delhi resulting in worsening economic situation
1991	Nepali Congress Party wins first democratic elections. Girija Prasad Koirala becomes prime minister
1995	Start of Maoist revolt which drags on for more than a decade and kills thousands. The rebels want the monarchy to be abolished
2001	Crown Prince Dipendra kills King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya and several members of the royal family, before shooting himself. The king's brother, Gyanendra is crowned king
2001	Maoist rebels step up a campaign of violence. Prime Minister GP Koirala quits over the violence; succeeded by Sher Bahadur Deuba
2001	Maoists end the four-month-old truce with the government, declare peace talks with the government failed. Launch coordinated attacks on army and police posts
2003	Rebels, government declare a ceasefire and later in 2003 the rebels pull out of peace talks with the government and end seven-month truce
2005	February - King Gyanendra dismisses the government, restores an absolute monarchy and declares a state of emergency, to defeat Maoist rebels. April - King Gyanendra bows to international pressure, lifts the state of emergency and reinstates parliament. November - Maoist rebels and main opposition parties agree on a programme intended to restore democracy
2006	May – Parliament votes unanimously to curb the king's political powers. The government holds peace talks with the Maoist rebels. November – The government signed a peace deal with the Maoists - the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) - formally ending the insurgency
2007	January – Maoist leaders enter parliament under the terms of a temporary constitution December – Parliament approves the abolition of monarchy as part of a peace deal with Maoists, who agree to rejoin the government
2008	Nepal becomes a republic & Ram Baran Yadav becomes Nepal's first president
2009	Prime Minister Prachanda resigns following a row with President Yadav over the integration of former rebel fighters into the military
2014	Sixteen Nepalese sherpa guides die in an avalanche on Mount Everest in the worst recorded accident in the mountain's history
2015	A 7.8 magnitude earthquake strikes Kathmandu and its surrounding areas killing more than 8,000 people, causing mass devastation and leaving millions homeless
2016	February – Government lifts fuel rationing after the ethnic minority Madhesi communities, partially backed by India, end a six-month border blockade in protest over the new constitution which they say is discriminatory. August – Parliament elects former communist rebel leader and Maoist party leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal aka Prachanda as prime minister for the second time

Source: Bhattarai, Conway and Shrestha (2005), Whelpton (2005), BBC (2020e)

However, India is deeply concerned about this project (Bhushal, 2019). Some of the key investments and grants to Nepal by China are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Key investment projects and donations by BRI to Nepal

Year / period	Loan / Investments / donations	Estimated cost
2017 onwards	Upper Trishuli Hydropower Project- Power station and Transmission Line Projects	
2017 onwards	Food/ Material Assistance in northern 15 bordering districts	
2017 onwards	Kathmandu Ring Road Improvement Project	
2017 onwards	Larcha (Tatopani) and Timure (Rasuwegadi) Frontier Inspection Station Project	US \$ 8.3 billion
2017 onwards	Pokhara International Regional Airport	
2017 onwards	Upgradation of Syaprubensi- Rasuwagadhi Road	
2017 onwards	Upgradation of Civil Service Hospital	
2017 onwards	Upgradation of Kodari Highway and restoration of bordering bridges at Kodari and Rasuwagadh	
Proposed	Kerung to Kathmandu railway project	US \$ 5.5 billion

Source: ADB (2019), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2019), Rahman and Ahamed (2020)

Pakistan

China and Pakistan remain close friends since the 1950s. Over the last period, China has extensively supported Pakistan diplomatically in international stages, financially, technologically, and even with nuclear reactors whenever the need arises. The disputes between India and Pakistan and India and China is another reason for China and Pakistan to hold their hand together (Johnson, 2005; Manzoor et al., 2017). The Chinese engagements with Pakistan are also backed by creating an economic and energy corridor to the African and Gulf regions. China pays deep attention to the emerging insurgency since political instability in Pakistan has direct detrimental effects on Chinese investments in Pakistan.

China also fears that growing political and economic issues might further weaken Pakistan that will deteriorate the political and economic relationships between China and Pakistan. Political disputes with India, availability of Muslim extremists, regional nuclear tension, political coups, assassinations, terrorist threats, floods, rising unemployment, and continued inflation are a few of the issues that Pakistan is facing right now. A detailed explanation of significant events that occurred in Pakistan during the last decades are listed below (see Table 11).

Table 11: Key geopolitical events and natural disasters in Pakistan

Year	Key events and incidents
1956	Constitution proclaims Pakistan an Islamic republic.
1965	Second war with India over Kashmir
1979	Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto hanged amid international protests.
1990	Benazir Bhutto dismissed as prime minister on charges of incompetence and corruption
1991	Conservative Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif begins economic liberalization programme Islamic Sharia law formally incorporated into legal code.
1993	Prime Minister Sharif resigns under pressure from military. General election brings Benazir Bhutto back to power
1996	President Leghari dismisses Bhutto government amid corruption allegations
1998	Pakistan conducts its own nuclear tests after India explodes several nuclear devices
1999	Kargil conflict: Pakistan-backed forces clash with the Indian military in the icy heights around Kargil in Indian-held Kashmir. More than 1,000 people are killed on both sides
1999	1999 General Pervez Musharraf seizes power in coup
2002	President Musharraf bans two militant groups - Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad - and takes steps to curb religious extremism
2003	Pakistan declares a Kashmir ceasefire; India follows suit
2005	Pakistan tests its first nuclear-capable cruise missile
2005	Earthquake kills tens of thousands of people in Pakistani-administered Kashmir
2007	Benazir Bhutto assassinated at political rally at election campaign rally in Rawalpindi
2010	Worst floods in 80 years kill at least 1,600 people and affect more than 20 million
2011	The founder of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, is killed by American special forces in Abbottabad
2012	Taliban gunmen seriously injure 14-year-old campaigner for girls' rights Malala Yousafzai, whom they accused of "promoting secularism"
2014	Taliban kills nearly 150 people - mostly children - in an attack on a school in Peshawar
2015	China and Pakistan sign agreements worth billions of dollars to boost infrastructure
2018	Former international cricket star Imran Khan becomes prime minister on a pledge to end corruption and dynastic politics.

Source: (Strohecker, 2016; Manzoor *et al.*, 2017; BBC, 2020f)

Out of all other countries in the South Asian region, Pakistan is listed as the number one country that received most of the Chinese investments, loans and donations. Through these investments, China expects Pakistan to combat rising terrorism, deal with the internal economic crisis, civil unrest, and maintain law and order within Pakistan (Castellejo, 2013). Further, through BRI China mainly focuses on big infrastructure investments in Pakistan that include port projects, energy projects, and technology projects. The securities of such projects, however, depend upon the economic stability, political stability and peace within Pakistan.

Thus, much attention needs to be paid to those dimensions to protect the BRI investments in Pakistan. Table 12 explains a few key BRI projects in Pakistan.

Table 12: Key investment projects and donations by BRI to Pakistan

Year / period	Loan / Investments / donations	Estimated cost
2015 onwards	Energy infrastructure projects	US \$ 33 billion
2015 onwards	Fast-tracked "Early Harvest" projects	US \$ 28 billion
2015	Information and technology park	US \$ 1.5 billion
2016	Infrastructure, solar power and logistics	US \$ 2 billion
2016	Pakistan's main railway line upgrading project	US \$ 8.5 billion
2017	Oil refinery, irrigation projects	US \$ 2 billion
2017	Motorway between Chitral and DI Khan	US \$ 2 billion
2017	Hydro-electric projects	US \$ 7 billion

Source: Strohecker (2016), Akbar (2017), The News (2017)

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is located in the heart of the ancient maritime silk route that has connections with the ancient silk route since the 13th century A.D. Sri Lanka started diplomatic relationships with China after Admiral Zheng-Ho (Zheng-he) visited Sri Lanka in the 13th and 14th centuries A.D. (Dewaraja, 2006). Although the war between the Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government ended in 2009, still there are some post-war empirical grouches in Sri Lanka. They include ethnic discrimination (Perera, 2016; Samarathunga, Cheng and Weerathunga, 2020), human rights violations (Stewart, 2014; Sarjoon, Yusoff and Hussin, 2016), land issues (Ratnayake and Hapugoda, 2016, 2017), infrastructure issues (Ranasinghe, 2018; Dissanayake and Samarathunga, 2020), fewer development projects (Mathivathany and Sasitharan, 2012; Samarathunga, 2019).

Additionally, the political fluctuations in Sri Lanka including the 2018 constitutional crisis and a coup to grab the power by the opposition (Chaudhury, 2018) can be listed as the most recent political calamities in Sri Lanka. Availability of such empirical issues is not healthy for the investors at all when it comes to the security of the investment (list of incidents are listed in Table 13). Despite these tensions (which are listed in Table 13), China continued to play a friendly investor's role in Sri Lanka and was supported with many investments, loans and donations.

Table 13: Key geopolitical events and natural disasters in Sri Lanka

Year / period	Key events and incidents
1959	Assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike by a Buddhist monk.
1971	Marxist insurrection of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) against the Government of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)
1983 - 1985	Assassination of 13 soldiers and the birth of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and “First Eelam war”. Attack over many Buddhist religious places including the ‘ <i>Sri Maha Bodhi</i> ’.
1990 - 1993	Assassination of Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi and assassination of Sri Lankan President Premadasa by the LTTE and the break out of “ <i>Second Eelam war</i> ”
1995 - 2002	“Third Eelam war” and attack over the “Temple of tooth” the holiest Buddhist destination in Sri Lanka. Attempt of murder of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumarathunga by the LTTE.
2003	Country's worst-ever floods with more than 200 deaths
2004	Formation of a Buddhist political party, <i>Jathika Hela Urumaya</i> with a large number of <i>Bhikkus</i>
2004	Indian Ocean Tsunami and loss of 30,000 deaths (many more disappeared)
2008 - 2009	Final battle between Sri Lankan government forces and LTTE and death of LTTE leader Vellupillai Prabhakaran
2010	Change of Sri Lankan constitution that allowed President Rajapakse to stay in power unlimited number of times
2010	Establishing Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission
2013	Tamil National Alliance opposition party wins first elections to the Northern Provincial council, with 78% of the vote
2016	Government acknowledges that some 65,000 people are missing from its 26-year war with the Tamil Tiger rebels and a Marxist insurrection in 1971.
2017	Protest against Chinese OBOR project in Hambantota
2018	Constitutional crisis and a coupe to overthrow the Government with the mediation of President Sirisena and few opposition parties
2019	Jihadist suicide bombers attack churches and hotels on Easter Sunday, killing more than 350 people.

Source: (Obeysekere, 2006; Deegalle, 2017; BBC, 2019)

Some of the key BRI projects in Sri Lanka are presented in Table 14. According to Table 14, the direct value of RBI loans and investments in Sri Lanka is well over US\$ 7.5 billion. Therefore, it is important to have stable socio-political and economic conditions in Sri Lanka to achieve the objectives of both Sri Lanka and China. Unlike other countries, in the recent past, Sri Lanka witnessed some protests and government decisions against BRI projects. They include a protest against allowing China to build a port and industrial zone in Hambantota in 2017 (BBC, 2017), and a temporary suspension of the China Port-city project by the Sri Lankan Cabinet in 2015 (The Economic Times, 2015).

On top of that, many political party leaders in the Government issue different statements against China and OBOR and it helps to generate a negative public attitude towards the development of OBOR projects in Sri Lanka. These alarming situations are complex and demand in-depth studies to secure Chinese investments in Sri Lanka while contributing to the development of the country.

Table 14: Key investment projects and donations by BRI to Sri Lanka

Year	Loan / Investments / donations	Estimated cost
2011	Southern Expressway	US \$ 1.5 billion
2011	Norochcholai Coal Power Plant	US \$ 1.3 billion
2010	Hambantota Port Development Project	US \$ 1.3 billion
2014	Colombo Port City	US \$ 1.3 billion
2013	CICT Colombo Terminal	US \$ 500 million
2015	Rehabilitation of Northern Roads	US \$ 302 million
2013	Colombo-Katunayake Expressway	US \$ 248 million
2013	Hambantotal Mattala International Airport (Phase I & II)	US \$ 292 million
2019	Moragahakanda Kalu Ganga Development Project	US \$ 214 million
2019	Extension of Southern Railway	US \$ 278 million
2019	Colombo Lotus Tower	US \$ 104 million

Source: Bhatia *et al.*, (2016), Wignaraja *et al.* (2020)

ECONOMIC IMPACTS AND GEOPOLITICS OF BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

China's dual ambitions are clearly driven by substantial economic and geopolitical forces as China intends to achieve many economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical goals by initiating the Belt and Road Initiative. To begin with, the BRI is intended to assist China in addressing a variety of domestic economic difficulties, the most pressing of which are slowing economic growth, massive industrial overcapacity, and underdevelopment in the country's southern and western provinces (Cai, 2018; Jetin, 2018). As China has reached the great heights of development, China has to find alternative external markets for Chinese goods and services overcoming the worsening problem of the nation's industrial overcapacity (Kenderdine and Ling, 2018).

The political instability and the economic insecurity in the South Asian region have provided a nourishing ground for China to gain easy access to South Asia, which in turn help them to meet up with their internal economic struggles.

As most of the South Asian countries are suffering from a dearth of foreign currency (Mohsin *et al.*, 2018) they have no hesitation to welcome BRI investment projects which are sometimes disguised with many unfavourable policies that have a direct impact on the sensitive elements including the national security, economic dependency and political sovereignty (Rolland, 2017). This situation is further escalating as China's foreign policy formulation lacks transparency and is hidden from the outside world (Yu, 2017). Many scholars warn about the demerits of the BRI highlighting the unprecedented events reported from many South Asian countries including Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Maldives, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal where the ownership of public resources turns into the hands of China thereby China gains the economic control of those countries (Rolland, 2017; Yu, 2017; Cai, 2018; Kenderdine and Ling, 2018).

However, according to the Beijing government, BRI is presented as a plan for the creation of a network of infrastructure projects, including roads, trains, oil and natural gas pipelines, telecommunications, electricity projects, ports, and other coastal infrastructure projects, for the wide areas of the BRI through Chinese investments (Cai, 2018). Despite the merits and demerits, the developing countries in South Asia have no better and convenient option than getting Chinese aid to overawe the issues associated with lack of foreign currency, technology, power, expertise etc.

CONCLUSION

This perspective analyses the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia under the Influence of Multiple Social Crises and Natural Disasters. The article shed light on the supply and demand factors associated with the BRI and their merits and demerits alike. South Asia's unstable political and economic grounds are widening its doors to China to gain easy access to the region which is subject to great debates. Although the world is driven by sustainable development indices, inherent and mounting issues with the South Asian countries have made the social, political and economic stability of the region at a stake.

The BRI has significant political and geopolitical roots that go far beyond investor cooperation and commercial goals and some countries in South Asia are shattered with unanticipated outcomes. There have been few insurgencies against the Chinese BRI in many countries against the resource ownership, labour issues, and undue political interferences which cannot have a sizable potential to convert into a mass movement against the BRI and the governments involved with it. Further, both the Western and Eastern superpowers are keeping a close eye on these developments with different intentions. Therefore, stakeholders have to make correct forecasts, review their foreign policies and development plans once again and take vice decisions on rectifying the issues associated with key social, political and economic segments affected by the BRI to overcome the vulnerabilities while harvesting the best out of the BRI aimed at sustainable development.

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