

Report Part Title: INDIA AND THE BRI

Report Title: China and the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia

Report Author(s): Manjari Chatterjee Miller

Published by: Council on Foreign Relations (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep42124.6>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Council on Foreign Relations* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to this content.

# INDIA AND THE BRI

India sees China as its biggest geopolitical threat, and any possible benefit of the BRI is outweighed by the fact that it necessitates and contributes to a stronger Chinese presence in South Asia. China has been unable to persuade India to join any BRI project and has failed to change public perceptions in its favor. The expansion of the BRI in South Asia has even spurred India, typically a slow actor, to initiate its own connectivity projects in the region. In the long run, it is difficult to see how the BRI, at its core a connectivity project, could succeed in South Asia without drawing in India, not only the biggest actor in the region but also the only country in the region that is the most geographically connected to the other South Asian countries, as it shares a border with four of the continental countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Pakistan) and is the closest in distance to the two island countries (the Maldives and Sri Lanka). Fully developing alternative connectivity projects in the region that bypass the BRI would be a win for India in South Asia.

Despite high volumes of trade, the bilateral relationship between China and India is marred by a serious trust deficit. This can be traced to the unresolved border dispute between India and China, which was the consequence of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. Although for China the border dispute is not central to its foreign policy calculations or geopolitical outlook, India considers the dispute a central focal point and precondition for improving relations—in fact, India cited China, not Pakistan, as its reason for undertaking nuclear tests in 1998. The perception that China is India's most important threat regionally and globally is pervasive in Indian policy, academic, and media circles. Periodic border skirmishes—most recently in 2017 at the tri-junction India-China-Bhutan border on the Doklam Plateau and in 2020 in the

Galwan Valley, which resulted in the first Indian and Chinese troop casualties along the border since 1975—heighten India's security concerns even more. In addition to exacerbating bilateral India-China tensions, border clashes have accelerated India's strategic partnership with the United States, with India rushing to sign several security agreements with the country.

India also worries that with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States will no longer have a presence in South Asia and therefore little moderating influence on Pakistan. This is critical for India, which fears a resurgence of Pakistan-funded terrorism within its borders. Although India does not necessarily believe that China condones Pakistan-sponsored Islamist terrorism (given China's vulnerability in Xinjiang Province), neither does it feel China will publicly condemn Pakistan for it. Moreover, China has exhibited little concern for India's worries about sovereignty and territorial integrity in Kashmir.

India is the regional hegemon in South Asia. Geography makes it the only country in South Asia to border most of the other countries of the region. It is also demographically the largest country in South Asia, with the largest economy and the most powerful military. It has often taken a paternalistic attitude toward its smaller neighbors and prioritizes maintaining its diplomatic leverage over other South Asian countries. India fears that China will attempt to dominate the Indian Ocean region and transcontinental littorals by exerting pressure on the smaller countries with maritime borders in South Asia such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. Finally, India's domestic politics in its northeast are volatile. India's four northeastern states are connected to it through a narrow fourteen-mile corridor, and they also border China. Since 1958, when it imposed the Armed Forces Special Powers

Act in the region, India has been concerned about quelling insurgencies in the region and is deeply worried about Chinese meddling and aid to various insurgent groups.

India's geopolitical concerns and domestic interests make its attitude toward the BRI largely suspicious and hostile, even while it recognizes some of the initiative's benefits. CPEC encapsulates possibly one of the biggest objections that India has to the BRI. On the one hand, India recognizes that a political and financially stable Pakistan is in India's interest. Theoretically, CPEC promises to work toward this goal. On the other hand, CPEC runs through the disputed territory of Kashmir—the Karakoram Highway crosses Gilgit-Baltistan, which is a part of what India calls "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir" (PoK)—connecting it to Xinjiang Province in China.<sup>30</sup> This violates a core Indian claim of sovereignty and territorial integrity. In addition, Gwadar port is another thorn; if completed and operationalized, it will link China's landlocked western regions to a port closer than the Chinese eastern coast, offer China access to the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 40 percent of global daily oil trade transits, and also reduce the distance China's energy imports from the Middle East have to travel.<sup>31</sup> India is also worried about Pakistan's financial dependency on China and how it could translate into political concessions that China could extract from the Pakistani government.

Finally, given India's big-brother attitude in the region, its reaction to BRI projects in its smaller neighboring countries—Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka—can be best described as nuanced suspicion. For example, India sees the BCIM economic corridor as possibly beneficial by opening India's northeast region through connectivity routes. Thus, in 2013, India welcomed Chinese premier Li Keqiang to launch the BCIM corridor. However, once the BCIM corridor was folded into the BRI in 2015, Indian attitudes toward it cooled. The Chinese port in Hambantota, Sri Lanka, which became the poster child of China's alleged "debt-trap diplomacy"—that is, extending credit to a vulnerable country for political purposes—presented a huge concern. Not only did it signify Colombo's indebtedness to Beijing, but the port was a red flag symbolizing how the BRI's Maritime Silk Road could also function as China's India-containment strategy. In 2014, a Chinese submarine and warship docked in Colombo Harbor (a mere 152 nautical miles separate Colombo from India's southernmost port, Thoothukudi), prompting the Indian government to register its concerns with the Sri Lankan government. In Nepal, India is worried about China's proposed

Trans-Himalayan Economic Corridor (THEC), which began as a bilateral connectivity corridor between Kathmandu and Beijing, but later transformed into a trilateral proposal when China, aware of the difficulties posed by the natural geographic barrier of the Himalayas, invited India. India has evaded the proposal because it would likely reduce Nepal's reliance on Indian ports for trade and the transit of goods.<sup>32</sup> BRI initiatives in the Maldives, such as the Sinamale Bridge or the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, could symbolize growing ties between Male and Beijing, and India frets that this tiny island nation could offer a maritime base for China in exchange for investment. Finally, in the northeast region, India perceives that China's connectivity initiatives could offer economic benefits through cross-border trading routes to a part of India that is not only geographically but politically distant and economically underdeveloped. However, China's alleged "meddling" in the various insurgencies, as Indian National Security Advisor Ajit Doval put it, means that even if local groups and interests would welcome an infusion of cash and infrastructure from the BRI, the Indian government would not.<sup>33</sup>

India's concerns have meant that the BRI has failed in India. China has repeatedly attempted to draw India into various connectivity projects, such as the BCIM corridor and the THEC, without much success. In 2017, not a single Indian delegate attended the first BRI forum in Beijing. Nor did India attend the second forum in 2019. India's refusal to buy into the BRI remains one of the biggest obstacles to China's and the BRI's success in South Asia. Simply put, India's geographic location is such that a region-wide initiative to build and boost connectivity in South Asia, placing China at the center, is not feasible in the long run without some Indian involvement. Moreover, India continues to maintain capital with its smaller neighbors, which are geographically much closer to India than China. For example, in 2017, in deference to Indian concerns, Sri Lanka refused to allow another Chinese submarine to dock at Colombo.<sup>34</sup> Paradoxically, in some ways, even though the BRI has not been a success *in* India, it has been a success *for* India. In response to the BRI, India, which is often slow to pivot on foreign policy issues, has ramped up its own connectivity initiatives: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has devoted considerable time and energy to a "Neighbourhood First" policy, including investing in India's neighbors, such as the Maldives, where it is funding a Greater Male Connectivity Project by providing a \$100 million grant and a \$400 million loan; rebooted the failed "Look East" policy of the 1990s to "Act East" to facilitate connectivity between India and Southeast Asian nations; launched

the Security and Growth for All in the Region initiative to boost maritime diplomacy and cooperation between Indian Ocean Region (IOR) states; and spearheaded the Mausam (monsoon) initiative to link historical trade partners and establish an “Indian ocean world.”<sup>35</sup> In a nutshell, India is the largest factor currently standing between China and the BRI’s domination in South Asia.