

The Politics of Soft Power

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as Charm Influence in South Asia



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China and the World: Ancient and Modern Silk Road, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1–29

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DOI: 10.1142/S2591729319500020



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Abstract: Over the last three and half decades, China's rapid advancement in development efforts has been accompanied by a conscious effort in projecting itself as a major frontrunner in the economy. Despite being a developing country (Huang, 2015), Chinese President Xi Jinping's announcement in World Economic Forum (WEF) (Bruce-Lockhart, 2017) had hinted China's growing interest in the development of trade and network among countries. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is also one such development put forward to institutionalize China's soft power presence in the world and create harmony with rest of the world. The Initiative has been placed as synonymous to a way of friendly cooperation signaling the project as "Road for Peace" (Kasturi, 2017). China has placed a tremendous amount of effort for its "charm offensive" approach with an estimated US\$10 billion spending every year on its global soft power presence (Kurlantzick, 2017). Under the project, China has placed initiatives in approaching for regional connectivity in the South Asia region with China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) being regarded as its flagship program. As it goes, of all the projects China has undertaken in the BRI, its ventures in South Asia are considered challenging and need strong cooperation (Stratfor Enterprises, 2017). The unstable geo-politics and security threats in the region pose Beijing with a lot to consider before it can preach about the peaceful connectivity. Most significant of all, the problems in the region will be with India as it has openly expressed its dissatisfaction towards BRI. India not only observes the initiative as a security threat with CPEC corridor passing through the controversial Kashmir area, but also sees it as an initiative to undermine its traditional influence in the region. As such, this paper tries to provide an analytical view of BRI with China's soft power presence in the South Asia region.

Keywords: BRI; connectivity; soft power; China; charm; South Asia; CPEC.

Introduction

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is considered to be President Xi Jinping's most important foreign policy agenda, which aims to strengthen Beijing's connectivity with the parts of Central, South and South-East Asia, Africa, Middle East and Europe (Cai, 2017).

Belt and Road Initiative was initially proposed by President Xi Jinping at Astana, Kazakhstan, during 2013, and aims to include 4 billion strong populations and over 1/3 of world's wealth. One of the overriding objectives of BRI is to address China's deepening regional disparity



as the country's economy modernizes. Beijing hopes its transnational infrastructure-building program will spur growth in China's underdeveloped hinterland and rust belt and also improve connectivity from China to South-East Asian, South Asian, European and African nations, altogether considered as part of China's Greater Neighborhood Policy (GNP). Through BRI, China wants to spearhead investment in infrastructures involving railway, airway and roadway development projects and this has led to the establishment of Silk Road Fund, New Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) which fits perfectly well with President Xi's initiative. These cooperations alongside the One Belt One Road (OBOR) provide a platform for developing countries to exploit their existing resources through the massive infrastructure

funding they receive from such sources. Foreign Minister Wang Yi highlighted that BRI would be the important aspect of Chinese diplomacy and would lead to the rejuvenation of European continent. Its focus on leading globalization is more clear through the document of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) released on March 2015, where more focus is placed on words like “Global” and “World” while describing the Belt and Road Initiative. China plans to promote mutual inclusiveness by bringing in the concept of “Silk Road Spirit” elaborating it as historic and cultural heritage shared by countries all around the world.

However, President Xi has launched the project at such a global circumstance where the protectionism has been taking strong stand particularly in the West, so the initiative is mostly perceived in the media as a geo-political strategy of China to reshape globalization. Even in South Asia, India has been the biggest critic of the initiative due to the uncertainty of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through the controversial border of Jammu and Kashmir.

However, China has placed considerable interest on its neighborhood policy and particularly with South Asia. South Asia is comprised of eight nations: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Former Chinese Premier Li Peng had declared, “along with South Asia, China is ready to write new chapter of friendly relations and cooperations” (Palit, 2010). China’s important foreign policy towards the neighbors came in 2014 as a new strategic policy towards its neighbors, labeled by Chinese analysts as “Peripheral Diplomacy” (*zhoubian*), that heralds a significant shift in the manner in which Beijing will henceforth conduct relations with its neighbors. Chinese leaders, including Xi Jinping and other senior leaders over the past three years, were putting elements of the policy focusing on South Asia in place (Ranade, 2014).

The notion of soft power, a term coined by Joseph Nye, is the ability to get “others to want the outcomes that you want” and more particularly “the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion” (Gomichon, 2013). In a nutshell, soft power is anything but the use of military or coercion to attract or influence others in order to gain certain outcomes that a country wants from another country. For China, there are many sources of soft power; for example, Confucius Institutes,

persona of Kung Fu and martial arts, chopsticks and varieties of foods, big landmass and rich culture–history and many others. Chopsticks have a long history and are linked with Chinese culture and traditions. For a very long time, Chinese diaspora particularly extended these practices to the rest of the world. But recently, China has been relying more on its economy as a soft power mechanism through its much-anticipated OBOR Initiative. Through concentrating on infrastructure development across developing countries, China aims to conceptualize the significance of cooperation among the member states. However, South Asia is a different challenge for China. The region is characterized by large geo-political tensions between the member states. Even though India is the key influencer in this region, its neighborhood policy has been characterized by uncertainty and lack of focus, that has, for some reason, created a shift in momentum among its neighboring countries to approach towards China.

As China accelerated the BRI, majority members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) accepted the proposal to participate and harness multiple cooperations based on mutual understanding and win-win situation. South Asia is indeed a huge market for China and vice versa. As China continues to rise, how will the Middle Kingdom influence its soft power approaches through the BRI framework? This paper seeks to provide an analytical description of China's Belt and Road Approach as a tool for soft power in South Asian region. Though the full acceleration for the Initiative was given on May 2017, many projects actually have already begun their construction phase. The CPEC, for example, has been placed with much optimization and at the same time, larger criticisms and uncertainty from its immediate neighbors. This paper explores some issues on how can such projects provide opportunity and challenges in terms of providing a growing influence in the region.

Methodology

For the research, the fixed evidence reports were vital in the process of writing. Policy documents, media reports, interviews, magazines, social media feeds, conversations of heads of states, party official documents and the like were used extensively. The research has been divided into

three sections and in all of them, there is one distinct feature that solely tries to posturize BRI as a soft power prospect in South Asia. So, detailed attention has been given with the fixed evidence data on the BRI as a charm influence. According to China's formal documents on BRI, it is a platform for broadening cooperation in multiple layers. Both hard and soft powers will be projected and enhanced through it. China itself has a long history and culture. So it has opened hands to enhance cooperation between various civilizations within the global community. China has a long history of cooperation with South Asia. This paper tries hard to analyze and make conclusion on China's soft power influence and presence in South Asia.

Belt and Road Initiative as a Soft Power

Out of the five main principles of BRI, gestating the cycle and pace of globalization. Its last principle of mutual benefit and peaceful co-existence (NDRC China, 2015) is considered to be a soft power mechanism to portray China as a lover of peace and gesture its friendliness. The initiative can also be described as a transitional change in its foreign policy directive from "keeping a low profile, and never claim leadership"¹ to becoming a frontrunner in the new pace of globalization. Even though China is placing huge importance on the launching of BRI as a "peaceful rise", the other parts of the world still are signifying very little importance to it. Most of the Western media, in particular, are skeptical about China's new initiative parroting the propaganda as the ultimate aim is to make Eurasia (dominated by China) an economic and trading area to rival the transatlantic one (dominated by America) (The Economist, 2015). By comparison, major regions covered by the BRI including those of South-East Asia and the Middle East have also received far less attention in academia (News China, 2015). One of the cited reasons includes the slow process of Beijing to induce its soft power policy in these regions while promoting BRI at the same time. Beijing has, in recent times, recognized the problems of soft power and public image towards the wider audience. Liu Yanhua, a Counselor of the State Council, acknowledges China's faded public image in the world due to its lack of concerns over the public diplomacy and the environmental issues (Crabtree and Ming,

2017). If considering the conventional approaches to soft power as coined by (Nye, 2006), then we understand that the BRI framework itself is a soft approach to many developing countries as they are lured by China's potential investment and its promises of mutual co-existence. But Nye, in the same article, argues that it is merely the resources rather than the behavior which hype a country's soft power potential. This is true for BRI as it is a test for China to surge and push around the countries like India, Indonesia and Vietnam where the governance is pretty strong and not readily accepting Chinese workers alongside the security issues that persist in the regions (Dollar, 2015). There is a conflicting opinion about the framework, which is what confuses the people of its actual intent. The Western media probates the initiative as "Sino-centric" with the objective of "built it and they will come" (Eisenman and Stewart, 2017). The Chinese media and scholars, however, view this as a joint and collaborative effort in coalition with other developing countries and not just "Chinese own scheme" (Wang, 2017). Some have even gone as far to address the initiative's principles as a framework against the US counterparts where China is gaining the lost sphere of influence of what was previously belonging to the United States (Chublic Opinion, 2015). These widespread different public opinions fit to when Joseph Nye states, "Soft power can be promoted but cannot control popular culture."² The notion of counter-intuition against the United States is shared among the African scholars and communities as well, where the Beijing Consensus in relation to BRI framework is perceived as opposed to Washington Consensus (ZiroMwatela and Changfeng, 2016).

Despite realizing the trust imbalance in promoting BRI, while we could argue that the skepticism propounded by the international media towards the initiative might be their own propaganda, much has not been sterilized from the Chinese side either to ensure its strict commitment towards the five principles that it entails. Perceptions are growing in the South Asian region, particularly to India, over its increasing presence by reducing the traditional sphere of influence it had. China has been trying hard to make BRI sound as inclusive as possible. A focal point is in the name itself. China calls the policy Belt and Road as an Initiative. Oxford Dictionary defines "initiative" as a proposal made by one nation to another in an attempt to improve relations.³ Beijing claims

it as an open, participatory approach where any nation is free to join the initiative therefore they are careful not to use the words: strategy, project, program or agenda (Tao, 2015). So, while the issue of inclusiveness stands out on the paper, the mutuality of trust in reality is yet to be cherished among the member states. As Joseph Nye states: "You could also get soft power from policies, if that is seen legitimate in the eyes of others" (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2.28–2.37).

Into South Asia: BRI and Its Soft Power Prospects

"There is a way to gain the whole world. It is to gain the people and having gained them, and having gained them one gains the whole world. There is a way to gain people. Gain their hearts and minds, and then you gain them."⁴

From the geo-political standpoint, South Asian region is considered an important and complex region. Its importance is what caused the colonial mindset of Alexander the Great or the British regime for advancing the empire towards the region (Bhatt, 2017). After the Post-World War II period, much of the significance of this region has been shaped by the political turmoil, from frequent wars⁵ and blockades⁶ to cooperative crisis with SAARC failure (Sharma, 2017). However, more than the political factors, the economic rise of the regions is of considerable interest. At present, four out of top 10 fastest growing economies⁷ in the world come from South Asian region: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and India. Out of these four countries, Bangladesh and Nepal have China as their strong trade partner (Chowdhury, 2017) and the biggest contributor in FDI (Krishnan, 2014) recently. With CPEC being already institutionalized, as a flagship program of BRI, there has been a speculation of trying to denounce the traditional sphere of India's "Big Brother" (Surie, 2015) influence. Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal have all supported for China's entrance to the SAARC membership: playing one off against the other for eliciting maximum benefits (Brookings, 2014). When Nepal signed the framework of BRI, some newspapers ran the headlines as "will rejecting India help China gain its influence in the world?" (Biswakarma, 2017). The way India perceives BRI is different than those of other South Asian nations. Along with BRI, the intensity of soft power is more in other

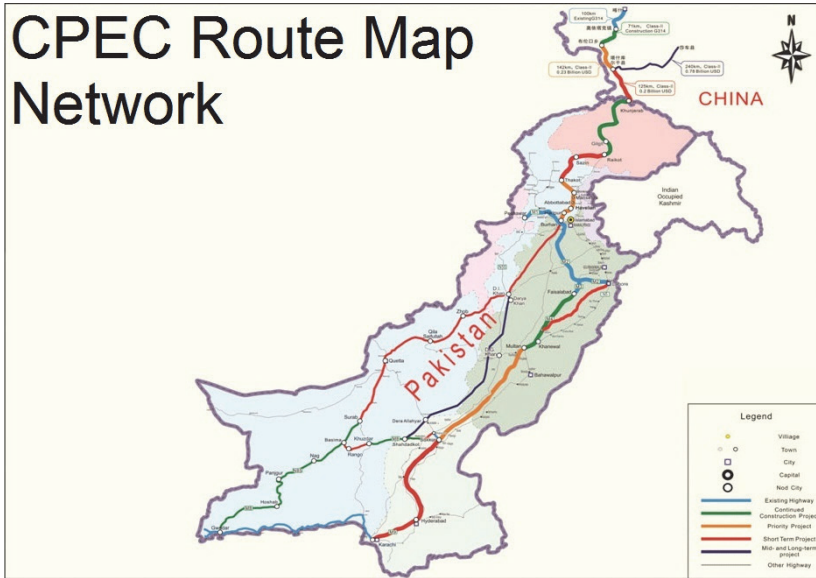
South Asian countries than in India. China's overall BRI initiative as soft power influence may well be categorized as: India and non-India (Palit, 2010). As China progresses ahead, its growing soft power presence in "non-India" region will intensify the competition for power between China and India.

*"The sleeping dragon has finally awoken."*⁸

The Belt and Road Summit 2017 considered as the "diplomatic highlight of the year" which has reshuffled China's three-decade foreign policy of domestic forging of development process to internationalizing its BRI framework as the "project of the century" (Phillips, 2017) and kick-start to a new era of globalization. The statement hints China's increasing economic engagement with developing countries. A restaurant in Pakistan called Khyber Sinwari gets its name changed to "CPEC restaurant" (Surie, 2015) due to the increasing Chinese consumers' presence in the region. After President Xi's speech in Kazakhstan about the new BRI framework, he stressed on increasing China's soft power, giving a good Chinese narrative, and better communicating China's message to the world (Xinhuanet, 2014). CPEC was just the start. Even before CPEC, China-Pakistan relationship was viewed favorably in terms of the two countries' mutual rivalry with India (Ritzinger, 2015). Both the countries are referred to as "Iron Brothers",⁹ so it is not surprising when Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, expressed the most resounding endorsements for BRI Summit by expressing his "deepest tributes" to Xi's "seminal initiatives".¹⁰ In his famous speech to Pakistan's Parliament, President Xi, on the other hand, has described the relationship between China and Pakistan as "Higher than the mountain, deeper than the sea, and sweeter than honey" (Hillman, 2017).

However, Beijing claims China's interest towards CPEC has little to do with India rather than the prime access it gets with the Arabian Sea port in Gwadar (WPR, 2017). It wants to establish a shorter, viable access route as a replacement from the South and East China Sea routes, which could speed up its development process.

CPEC, despite full of controversy in terms of financial gains for leverages, continues to maintain Pakistan's improved image in the world. With its potential benefits, even countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia are



Source: <http://webloglab.com/top-10-cpec-facts/>.

Figure 2. The CPEC Route Map Network.

full of interest in the region even labeling it as the “Greatest project in the region” (The Express Tribune, 2016). It has become a booster for Pakistan while shifting the traditional narrative of the country. Declared by *Newsweek* in 2007 as one of the “Dangerous country in the world” (Moreau, 2007), now interested parties are on discussion about its economic benefits and hinges with CPEC. With extensive roads, bridges, hydropower projects and infrastructures being laid down, the “lost businessmen” are finding their grounds again on new areas of investment and new opportunities (Rizvi, 2017).

On the people-to-people level, opening of Pakistan–China Institute encourages the people to get used to learning Chinese language for the future benefits. One scholar even goes far in saying: “It is important to train our business graduates to qualify for companies operating in China.” (Rafi, 2015). In Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Wuhan, there is a huge influx of Pakistani scholars and academicians coming to study different levels of programs. It has become the ninth largest student body in China with some 19,000 students and speculated to be more

in the upcoming years (Dawn, 2017). However, the civilian democratic institution strengthening as both BRI and CPEC project about, much work needs to be done on clearing the clouds of doubts and suspense among the local communities over the projects sweeping away their local “established order” (Xiang, 2017). As it is said that rural community is Pakistan’s actual soft power resource (Shah *et al.*, 2016), who help upon to retain peaceful state of the country, CPEC will bring back such working class people pushing for higher reform. While for others, riddled by suspicions, there are ongoing squabbles over the exact route, the mounting debt and whether Punjab — the most affluent province of Pakistan — will reap all the benefits or whether China will take away the share (Ebrahim, 2016). Soft power is something which takes a considerably long time to develop as compared to hard power constraints (Wagner, 2014), for long-term engagement both nations could work more on local engagement and harnessing cooperation which can give benefits to local people in Pakistan and also can get benefits for Chinese companies funneling huge investments.

The good neighborhood policy: Race for the most helpful neighbor

China’s “peaceful rise” (Bhagawati, 2016) is the inherent principle from Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* which states “to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting”.¹¹ Though, China does not consider BRI as a strategy, as China wants to explain it as a platform of cooperation, the guidance explains China’s quest to global influence. However, the conquest will be just an imagination without the good relationship with its neighbors and China’s relationship in South Asia particularly since the dispute with India is much more complicated than with anyone else (Liu and Liu, 2016). As one of the complex regions, China needs to maintain “the Good Neighbor” image if the BRI is to succeed.

As Bangladesh and Nepal enjoy the high economic growth rate increase, they also hold key importance in the BRI. Deng Xiaoping’s “bide our time” (Palit, 2010) might have had worked well for China after the April 25th, 2015, earthquake in Nepal. The response of the Indian

media (Ohri, 2015)¹² and the government for the “unofficial economic blockade” (Plesch, 2015) was the tipping point for China to express its empathy towards the Himalayan nation. In a plenary session at the General Assembly of UN, Chinese delegation expressed their brotherhood feeling towards Nepal stating both nations as “brothers and sisters”.¹³ Despite both the governments’ laudable efforts in the post-earthquake quick recovery phase, it was China who gained the upper hand after the upset caused by Indian media to the locals. It was one of the rare occasions where relationship between Nepal and China was much talked about from people to people. Previously, the relationship was confined to the government and elites only (Shakya and Gurung, 2015).

Also a key factor endures to be the foreign policy agenda. India’s policy entails an enormous importance towards its neighbors at first and then encompasses loss of focus in the later stages. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Nepal on two occasions (Sood, 2016). With his charm influence stating, “Nepal’s pain is India’s pain” (Mail Today Bureau, 2015), some level of positivity was seen among the public for a stable relationship, which was quite a rare occasion as well. In the later stage, however, the media protest and sanctions imposed were enough to distract the ongoing cultural, economic and political relationship between the two nations. So much that even Bangladesh’s Minister of Commerce (Bhattacharjee, 2015) had requested for end of blockade between Nepal and India. Another parliament member openly called for more increased relations with Pakistan and China for India’s minimized influence (Ganguly and Miliate, 2015).

China, on the other hand, shows commitment to non-interference in internal affairs, and avoids making comments on internal political systems of Nepal as well as the change in the political leadership (Poudel, 2015). President Xi, during his visit to Maldives in 2014, communicated only one thing, that without any ulterior motive, it was eager to make investment in Maldives (The Kathmandu Post, 2017). The result was that it signed contract with the Chinese company in upgrading its infrastructure while canceling India’s US\$511 million deal (Bosley, 2014). The policy of non-interference along with suspicion among the other South Asian nations towards India’s clueless policy of what is happening in

their neighborhood (Jacob, 2017) was a U-turn pathway for the region to push for agreement to BRI.

Bangladesh points out the initiative as a matter of “extreme importance” (Newage Bangladesh, 2017) and China has continued to push forward the agenda of friendship and belongingness with Bangladesh and has celebrated the “Year of Friendship and Exchanges” (Bdnews24.com, 2016). The importance was realized by President Xi’s first visit to the Tiger nation in 2016, the first by any Chinese president in 30 years. The level of cooperation among both nations has increased tremendously, thus being labeled as “trustworthy partners” (People’s Daily, 2016). Some scholars have argued that India’s low development assistance towards the South Asian region was a crucial factor for the increased Chinese presence. Jayanta Ray, author of *India–Bangladesh Relations: Current Perspectives*, states that China’s comparative advantage in South Asia in relation to funding and that neighbors like Bangladesh cannot be prevented from getting development funds from China, as they want to grow fast (Bhaumik, 2016). This is true for Nepal as well, with China pledging a massive US\$8.3 billion over India’s US\$317 million (The Kathmandu Post, 2017) during the Investment Summit 2017. In Maldives, Chinese tourists encompass the largest tourist arrivals than anybody else (Jain, 2017). In the meantime, Sichuan University of Southwestern China has begun the BRI scholarship (Chand, 2016). China has also emphasized the importance of Afghanistan in its BRI framework. The public perception of Afghanistan towards BRI has been positive contemplating nation’s participation as the last piece of puzzle in the chessboard of “New Great Game” (Stanzel, 2016). At the Confucius Institute inaugurating ceremony in Afghanistan, Chinese Ambassador Yang Houlan had said, “It will not only satisfy the growing need of Afghan young people in learning Chinese, but also make contribution to Sino-Afghan social and culture exchanges, and further help to enhance economic cooperation between the two friendly neighbors.” (China.org.cn, 2008). While officials argue for non-competitive relations between India and China, China’s heavy rise in investment in these nations is clear to promote more economic soft power as the BRI initiative progresses in the future.

Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges for Soft Power Influence in South Asia

"If the people of Yan are pleased with your annexation, then annex it... If the people of Yan are not pleased with your annexation, then don't annex it." (Fan, 2007)

(Mencius 2.4, transl. Zhao *et al.*)

One of the biggest vocal critics of BRI is India (Phillips, 2017), because it disagrees with what the former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, He Yafei, calls: "Not a solo song but a chorus" (He, 2017) while India's former Secretary of Foreign Affairs Dr. S. Jaishankar had stated the initiative as "National Chinese initiative".¹⁴ Even as when the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif tells the Gwadar Port as "dawn of the era" (see footnote 9), the Indian side speculates it as "China's String of Pearls" (Shah, 2017). One of the key reasons is because of China's history of subsequent bad foreign policy image. Soft power is something which takes in a lot of years to develop as opposed to hard power which takes less time. George Gao of Foreign Policy magazine states: "Today, if people in Eurasia were all fans of Chinese pop music or television dramas, or had a more positive image of China, it might be easier for their governments to partner with Beijing on "win-win" initiatives like BRI" (Gao, 2017).

China faces a daunting challenge in maintaining the economic soft power that it has: World's second largest economy, US\$4 trillion dollars in reserves (World Economic Forum, 2015), massive infrastructure opportunities and its BRI. China believes that BRI will bring countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria but these countries are not champions in the World Bank's ease of doing business league (The Economist, 2017a). There is much speculation about the financial returns for both the host country and China. CPEC, for example, would require building power plant with tariffs that are considered unsuitable for most Pakistanis (Malik, 2016). BRI should not be an initiative where it becomes China's initiative, with Chinese investment, using Chinese labor and finally the returns going to China. Beijing realizes this and thus calls for mutual inclusiveness. However, along with the possibilities that it entails, there are some serious challenges to the initiative, which China has to address at its earliest.

"When we are near, we must make him believe we are far away; when we are far, we must make him believe we are near." (Giles, 2017; translation on Sun Tzu's *"The Art of War"*)

One big problem for China in the process of informing the world about BRI has been its inability to transfer the "intended meaning" of its grand initiative towards the foreign public. Beijing presents the BRI as an opportunity to forward mutual beneficial cooperation between China, Asia and the world. Other countries will treat it more cautiously (Meidan and Patey, 2016), leery of bending to China's strategic goals (Perlez and Huang, 2017). From the initiation of its "Peripheral Diplomacy",¹⁵ a grand strategy dedicated towards its neighbors bringing in a significant take of Beijing towards the way it treats its neighbors, is seen as an alternative strategy in pumping up its soft power and reshaping its confidence with the neighbors. But, for that to happen, Beijing needs to improve communication mechanisms within its neighboring states. As it moves toward implementing BRI's multiple projects, major debate is about how to achieve "mutuality". Debates about the contours of the initiative have largely taken place within China — countries along the BRI have received only announcements about China's intentions (Hillman, 2015). If referring to the above famous military strategy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, then for Beijing to achieve maximum soft power presence in the South Asian region, it has to show that its presence is near rather than far. While six out of eight member states of SAARC have agreed to join the BRI framework, China has a challenge in clearing the cloud of doubts with India in particular that still maintains its traditional sphere of influence. In fact, Dr. S. Jaishankar in the Fullerton speech argues about China's national initiative, if it wants a larger "buyer", then there needs to be larger discussions, which have not happened yet.¹⁶ In fact, some scholars argue about China's difficulty in communicating its proper ideas toward its neighbors while having larger talks with US and Britain about joining the BRI (Nadim *et al.*, 2016). Until recently, China's relation with South Asia could have been interpreted as "so close yet so far". By contrast, these regions have two of the earliest civilizations of the world, yet there have been very little exchanges (Cheng, 2010). This is also due to the diverse political background and culture and the working system, that China is following an individual approach rather than

dealing with the entire community as a whole. As Paul Haenle, Director of Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, states: "It's important how China perceives its own initiative, is not necessarily the same way, the BRI will be perceived in the same way for other countries".

As Belt and Road is probably the signature and an "original" initiative of China, we consider that much of their soft power attractions resonate with borrowing from old cultures (The Economist, 2017b). The article also argues that money has not bought anything like love would; likewise for China, soft power is not something the government can manufacture, unlike hard power. It comes from the lowest level of the people's way of life, culture and behaviors that has distinct meaning and impact. China, through its BRI, has challenge and opportunities of building that element of trust among its South Asian neighbors.

BRI approach has provided mixed public-to-public response about China. Nepal signed the BRI framework in a wake of growing insecurity from its Southern neighbor stating that it does not want to dishearten India but cannot be indifferent to its northern economic powerhouse bringing in much positive outlook both from the government and the public (The Himalayan Times, 2017; Sharma and Khatri, 2017). In Bangladesh, people have very little idea about the BRI mostly due to poor publicity and little engagement by the print and electronic media (Ahamed, 2016) despite being the largest trade partner for the country.

Sri Lanka can provide a great example for Beijing to take control over its economic soft power and for other South Asian nations to understand how much they can consume. There is much speculation that BRI will drive countries like Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan towards debt crisis (Zee News Bureau, 2017), partly because of the enormous large-scale initiatives China is bringing in, while neglecting the local issues. In Sri Lanka, a local puts it simply: "We don't want to see it like Dubai, with big buildings everywhere and no trees. This is Sri Lanka, we like green." (Shepard, 2016). The increasing debt crisis and the government's decision to grant the ownership to Chinese company have been of massive controversy, some labeling the term BRI as "Colonialism" (Shepard, 2017). China's BRI lacks sensitivity when addressing some issues in host countries, particularly regarding culture, environment and ethnicity (Zhang, 2016). If China fails securing the local interests, it will

lose the confidence of local community towards the investment thereby decreasing the soft power influence.

Beijing mostly seems dependent heavily on the “power of money” (Troyjo, 2015) as its major soft power weapon. With huge investment in the field coped up with BRI framework, it also has a challenge on standing firm to the principle of non-interference and at the same time, securing investment in the conflicting societies of South Asia. In Pakistan, China’s closest ally in Asia, growing security concerns has made China to openly appeal to the ally to not resist the construction of the CPEC (The Economist, 2017a). It is obvious that risks are also huge with regard to this investment, in particular, those political risks of the developing or authoritarian countries. Even some Chinese scholars have warned that some investment may end up with nothing and this is an important reason why Western investors hold a very cautious position (Zhao, 2017). If going through the principle of mutuality, then China, from its part, will need to accumulate the local interest and provide loans or infrastructure projects accordingly in consultation with the member states. With such adherent principle continuation, the closer feeling of neighborhood the mutuality benefit will flourish bringing in larger public confidence about the BRI.

Conclusion

BRI is a major stimuli or driver that could possibly reignite global growth (Liew, 2017). With South Asia, China has a very deep and historical relationship spreading all the way from the early stages of Buddhism, which after being founded in present day Nepal, also flourished in India in a large scale. It was mainly through trade that Buddhism spread like a wildfire and became one of the dominant religions in Asia for centuries (Nolan, 2016). South Asia remains the fastest growing region in the world today, if anything but the gap with other regions like East Asia and Pacific is widening in terms of growth (World Bank, 2017). With increasing speculation about ongoing protectionism, South Asia remains a key market for potential benefits from globalization. China’s Belt and Road could particularly benefit the region massively in terms of infrastructure and trade development between countries if it moves ahead

with the concept of mutuality. China is not just trying to export higher-end goods through BRI but also encourages the acceptance of Chinese standards (Cai, 2017) in the South Asian region, especially when its famous “Made in China” trademark is associated with cheap and non-durable items (Midler, 2010). The relationship of China with SAARC nations is fairly positive mainly due to two important reasons: First being the principle of non-interference and mutuality that it entails and second, the turnaround of India’s neighborhood policy which causes its neighbors to look towards North. If we consider both the aspects, then China has not influenced much in promoting its soft power capabilities in the region. The region is still heavily influenced by India’s overwhelming soft power capabilities, and China is yet to say *nihao* to the region (Viswanath, 2017). This sheds light to the notion of why India is skeptical of the BRI initiative, and also voices in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan where growing worries are prevailing over the investment’s return viability; Beijing will have a mountain of challenge in maintaining its status quo of non-interference and gaining trust and positive soft power at the people-to-people level.

As stated previously, soft power is best worked out when it is practiced from the local level and Beijing faces a deficit of such. Joseph Nye argues: “China does not yet have global cultural industries on the scale of Hollywood, and its universities are not yet the equal of America’s, but more importantly, it lacks the many non-governmental organizations that generate much of soft power in countries like America.” (Nye, 2014). Some aspects like long history, strong culture, traditional wisdom and modern knowledge create great potential for harnessing the understanding of political experiences and perceptions about developmental path. Over the years, Chinese and South Asian educational institutions have been engaging in sharing of ideas that could be pivotal for cooperation in policies, programs and planning in the future. In the South Asian region, the embodied soft power practices at the people-to-people level are in enormous quantity from ethnic diversity, diverse festivals and traditions, and the growing soft power presence from India in terms of Bollywood, software, education destination, yoga and Ayurveda will be something of a challenge for China. Actually, BRI has opened the floor for discussion and comprehensive dialog among the South Asian countries.

The study aims to connect China-led BRI to the public diplomacy level at the South Asian nations. It comes to a conclusion that while Belt and Road may provide an epitome of the soft power prospects for China, it is still far from gaining effectiveness. The biggest challenge for Beijing will be to communicate its intentions and its vision for the Belt and Road as they represent China's views of its rise at the global level (Meidan and Patey, 2016). India might take this as a geo-political risk infringing on its sphere of influence; coped up with political instability that exists in other parts of the region, the gains from economic aspect of BRI will be a daunting challenge to Beijing. China's soft power presence is positively increasing in Nepal mostly after both countries signed agreements on the BRI (Sharma, 2018). It has been gaining momentum in other nations like Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh as its prime partners in trade, and whether China will be able to secure the ties for long-term relationship, the BRI will prove to be of significant importance to this query.

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Notes

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- ² Ibid.

- ³ Definition of “initiative”, retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/initiative>.
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- ⁵ Frequent war obstructions include Indo-Pakistani wars: 1947, 1965, 1999, Bangladesh liberation war 1971, civil wars in Sri Lanka during 1987 and Maoist civil war from 1996; retrieved from <https://www.Wikipedia.org>.
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- ¹⁶ See Note 14.