



CONNECTIVITY AND COMMUNICATION IN SOUTH ASIA: A CASE STUDY OF BRI

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Abstract

The word 'connectivity' refers to fill the 'gaps' and connect the South Asian region, and the rest of the world to eliminate geographical and physical distances. China's BRI is all about cooperation, collaboration, communication structural uplift within South Asian States and beyond. The Belt and Road Initiative is a great initiative towards the growth and development of the economies and promotes global and regional trade and the supply of oil, gas, minerals, and other resources. The article critically analyzes its role and impact on the less developed countries in the Chinese neighborhood i.e., the SAARC. The below mentioned literature is a qualitative exploration of the biggest project of China, a game changer: 'Belt and Road Initiative.' It also sheds light on a concern of the member states and western analysts the 'Chinese debt trap' policy.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Regional Connectivity, Communication Structure, South Asia, Chinese Depth Trap.



Introduction

South Asia is perceived as a region with similar characteristics like culture, politics, linguistics, economy, legality, and geography that are being very helpful for the purpose of connectivity and communication among the regional members, who consist of heterogenous states. (Ghiasy, R. 2021) To understand the relationships of South Asia, or to be more precise South Asian countries with China, we need to go back to the post-colonial times which indicates that all south Asian countries' dynamics were different from China and evolved distinctly. This occurred because of the geographical positions of every state, the political situation at that time; like the impact of Pakistan-India dispute and the distinct Belt and Silk Road positions and requirements.

China's borders coincide with many South Asian countries including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan; while Maldives and Sri Lanka are islands located right in the middle of the Indian Ocean and easy to influence (Chakma, 2019). China's Belt and Road Initiative is to connect the whole region and making the communication process easier through its (BRI) rail and road links. South Asian countries like Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan have appreciated the project, whereas India and Bhutan resisted because of the contrasting and disputed relation with China and did not cooperate. This project is a big economic development project, and it is considered a game changer in South Asia including politics, economics, use of technology and infrastructure development. However, the financing gap in BRI has different aspects. Its investment could be 240bn US\$ in the current era and may be more than estimated in the coming years. Thus, this requires public, private, international, and domestic financing sources to get such a big amount for the developments (Peter Wolff, 2016).

The very famous and thriving project of BRI i.e., CPEC; China Pakistan Economic Corridor goes through most of South Asia involving Pakistan. China's AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) has been lending the heaviest of loans to its opposition India ,even though totally against BRI and its related projects. (Baruah, 2018) Beijing's growing collaboration with India's neighbors has created a sense of unease in New Delhi. Like any rising power with global ambitions, China is looking to expand its presence and increase its profile beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The South Asian Region contained one fourth of the entire globe's population exists in South Asia, majorly youth and has witnessed an annual rate of growth of 6 percent in the last twenty years. South Asia has a big room for improvement as it has fertile lands, population full of youth between the ages of 14-25, a thriving economic market with approximate 2.5 billion users, and lucrative land for the venture investors (Khan, Z.,



Changgang, G., Ahmad, R., 2018). Please note the fact that the people of South Asian countries hold a very special and above all place for religions, spiritualism and beliefs due to which this region is considered a bit riskier for investors, at times (Ranjan, 2019). The South Asian peoples are very sensitive in this regard, even the history is evident that the formation of Pakistan was also on religious grounds.

BRI is criticized for damaging the infrastructure for development as casting devastating effects on biodiversity , especially on the routes of the projects. It could damage natural habitat badly also it may affect the environment of other parts of the region due to mass infrastructure development and extraction of raw materials. All these plans for construction and development represent mass devastation of the natural environment, habitat and different species of land and marine animals or birds. China's maritime trade route seems to be harmful and dangerous for fish and animals in regions including the Yellow Sea. Hence on collecting and analyzing high-resolution GIS data of trade routes, it will become more understandable how BRI is affecting natural habitat and how we can make changes at different intersections to avoid such devastating effects to some extent (Alice C. Hughes, 2019).

But such damage mentioned above is not only related to “foreign investment”. Any sort of construction and development does impact the existing infrastructure on the cost of natural reservoir or environmental change. It is not specific with Chinese projects, but it is a global phenomenon.

Methodology

The cited research is a qualitative exploration and document analysis of the theme, ‘Connectivity and Communication in South Asia: A Case Study of BRI.’ Different previous relevant materials were under review in this piece of writing. Some statistics were also utilized in analyzing the concept in fruitful manner.

Regional connectivity versus stability

China's interest in South Asia is based on her own motives and national interests; similarly, the regional countries are associated with China for their benefits by getting connected through its structures and using the communication medium. Besides India, all the South Asian regions perceive China as a benefiter to their national interest (Freeman, C. P. 2018).



South Asian states are making an alliance with China through Belt and Silk Road initiative, but they are very much aware of their wary relationship with the US and India as well (Bahal, A. S. 2021). On one hand, they desire to avail the economic, social and political, communication and connectivity benefits from China's alliance and on the other hand they fear to disturb their relationships with America and India. Thus, they avoid getting too close with China and try to balance their equations with everyone (Khan, Z., Changgang, G., & Afzaal, M. 2020). China's economic policies during the last few years have imposed a huge financial risk in Pakistan and Sri Lanka resulting in weakening the enthusiasm of other interested countries in Chinese assistance (Ahamed, A., & Rahman, M. S. 2020). It is propagated as debt trap by anti-China western media and analysts.

Connectivity is a key to development in this globalized world. It is about connecting gaps within and beyond the borders by building linkage through developing infrastructure in the regions, but also in foreign policy making and people-to-people communication. There will always be some gaps at many levels of all social and political areas. China had already fashioned various connectivity collaboration with Asia (Kuik, C. 2020). The construction activities for developmental purposes could cause the decrease in air quality which can be harmful for people living in that region. Moreover, biodiversity will also be affected due to development. It can limit the movement of animals and restrict them a particular area that could be harmful for them. Overexploitation of various resources is also a major challenge in the BRI project (Ascensão, 2018).

BRI and Economic Growth

China's BRI has the largest infrastructure development initiative in the world; it consists of six overland and one maritime corridor to connect almost half of the world's population. It has several positive aspects for the partner countries, but on the other side it infrastructure can affect the world's environment in a disastrous way (Hoong Chen Teo, Alex Mark Lechner, 2019).

BRI is the project of new developments in terms of economic, social, and political perspective. The construction of trade routes connecting the regions like Asia, Africa and Europe will greatly influence economic development and global trade (Ascensão, 2018).

The BRI initiative could boost the local currency markets in relation to the BRI routes. However, countries where financial and local bond markets are not well developed and may face difficulties regarding functions and maturity of financial instruments. Here the bonds issued in development banks help to tap the local markets and attract global investment as well. On the other hand, commercial finance and investment in the industrial



sector will play a limited role if it is not recognized by public institutions. Therefore, public institutions are very important here and act positively towards the development, sustainability, and growth of the economy of a nation. Here, The Asian Development Bank and the World Bank Group play significant roles for infrastructure development (Peter Wolff, 2016).

China's economic initiative Belt and Road (BRI) ensures to contribute towards sustainability. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasis on different social and economic issues across the world. According to SDGs social justice and good working conditions are also related to Human Rights so China must include all the aspects that affect working conditions of labor and Human Rights in BRI. This is possible through the participation and respect of opinion of different member states to achieve these goals (Seele, 2018).

BRI (belt and road initiative) with South Asia can improve the relationships with Trade Union, United Nations and Foreign Affairs that will reduce the risk of issues and problems where they can run their economic system smoothly (Wuthnow, 2017). Moreover, Veto Power countries such as China and America will never confront each other beyond certain limits, as in South Asia there are countries that matter a lot to both of them, strategically in the region; and in such case both big powers will preserve their relationship. We have the example of Afghanistan where despite of clash of interest both powers remained at a distance and used other methods to subdue the issue and after US the departure, China quietly filled the power vacuum. Afghanistan will sooner or later become a part of the project too and be interlinked with the rest of the world. This route is meant to facilitate international trade to increase the supply and generates double amount of revenue with trade surplus. There will be an increment in resources where no country will suffer due to the lack of resources and raw material. (Yin, 2019).

Regional Connectivity or Chinese Debt Trap

China's BRI is often called 'debt trap diplomacy' as China is investing heavily in infrastructure of other countries and offering the loans as well, this can impact the economies of developing nations that are going to become a part of BRI. (Balding, 2018) The word debt trap diplomacy has become so common that it is labelled with BRI by those against the project. Sri Lanka's case is often cited as part of China's dangerous debt trap game. But a closer look at the case tells another story and it is cited as insufficient evidence for allegations against China. (Alex He, 2020).



The BRI project has an initiative to connect three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. China's state-owned Banks are providing loans to underdeveloped countries to invest in the developments to become part of the BRI project. Different countries in Asia and Africa like Pakistan, Kenya were provided loans by Chinese Banks and there the Chinese firms are working on infrastructure development, side by side the IBR project, to enable these states to become able to have a stable economy to pay back their debt to China. If not, then these states could face a debt crisis (Saima Gul, et. al, 2018).

All these facts are obviously discussed with the members before signing the agreement, like all other financial deals ie with IMF, World Bank or international Loaning Agencies. They also trap the poor countries by putting different restrictions and penalties in case of default, so that they never get out of this vicious cercle. Normally, this problem is with underdeveloped states who can not manage their resources due to corruption and instability in governing or due to law and order situation. To link it with Chinese investment is unrealistic and biasness mainly by the western camp. Besides it is the responsibility of government to make sure that they preserve their national interests while signing any investment deal.

The critics forget that these investments, if carefully dealt, provide deployment of local human resources and job opportunities in the region the projects' venues, and bring prosperity and human development of all kinds.

BRI has some legal challenges also as China signed agreements and treaties with almost 40 countries of the world to be part of BRI. They are bilateral agreements, and it has various impacts on economic conditions of different countries. These agreements affect the relationships of countries that are indirectly connected and receiving benefits from that trade routes. Such as, the CPEC is a direct trade route between Pakistan and China, but it also affects the relationship between Pakistan-India, China-India, Pakistan-China, and China-Russia (Anh, 2020). Furthermore, it can raise political conflicts as it's a prerequisite for a country to be a sovereign State to become a member of this project. Here the political issue of Taiwan (since China considers it as her province) can create a challenge. It is also a part of Asian Development Bank and WTO, but China is not considering it as a separate entity, thus there is no question of including or excluding her in this project.

Moreover, South Asian countries have different political and economic ties with China. Despite the political and economic opportunities countries take BRI as a threat and as an opportunity at the same time; both depending on various circumstances. India, a country in South Asia, has political issues, border clashes and different disputes with China but they both are trade partners (Khurana, 2019). Many Indian markets and consumers are



dependent on Chinese goods. Besides this the developments in the Indian Ocean region through BRI are closely associated with the Indian national interest and a cause of concern.

China as Global Economic Leader

China's role in global politics and world trade is very significant in all terms. Emerging as a major world economic power with high influence in world trade and politics. The CCP leadership is responsible for the completion and success of BRI. Thus, they must look after different challenges and issues and resolve them diplomatically for its smooth completion. The Chinese government needs to sort out all the issues that create social unrest among people like bad working conditions, lack of facilities for labor, security and risk issues, health care and property rights of people (Tekdal, 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative has different trans-border agreements. This requires trans-border cooperation to encounter any threats and risks for BRI. China has focused on border security issues considering the development of BRI, China has several concerns regarding terrorism, illegal border activities and national security concerns. Therefore, China established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 to settle border disputes and stop illegal cross border activities (Haiquan, 2017). These activities may include smuggling of illegal goods to other countries that can harm the national interest of China but also not acceptable at international platforms.

China is now considered as a most important part of world politics and economics; it has huge investment in infrastructure at different levels. China has become so important for the international politics that no one can imagine regional stability without it. However, media representation of the Belt and Road Initiative has reflections on comparison between Western, Eastern and Chinese media. China's state media reflects China as a peace-loving country and a victim of foreign invasion and century of humiliation on the hands of the west etc. While the US perception of China is different; they see China as socialist country, a big power and a great challenge. (Zhang, 2017) The Western and Chinese media have numerous discussions over politics, economics thus it affects the image they portray about each other. This includes political conflicts, weak ties, and huge competition apart from world affairs.

Although China is taking advantage of different challenges the west is facing in recent years. The EU's Brexit crisis could affect the economic relations and trade with major firms. The mutual concerns like border security, economy, and terrorism needs to be solved through corporation among different nations. Thus, the relationship between China



and Europe is uncertain as China uses the normative influence to become a world power and strong economy. (Callahan, 2016)

Build Back Better World (B3W) a big challenge for China, the G7 countries launched B3W in June 2021 in competition with China's economic project Belt and Road Initiative is referred to as a strategic attempt by the US and its allies to counter China's influence on the world economy through making a tough competition by providing an alternative to developing countries. It aims on infrastructure development, healthcare, gender equality, climate change and technological development. In the beginning when China launched BRI, the US did not respond strongly but with the passage of time its impact was realized. Although many US politicians and military commanders criticized BRI and called it a threat for the US and the whole world. They highlighted the corruption, legal, security issues and debt trap diplomacy (Zhao, 2021).

This approach can influence the economy of South Asia by sharing borders or being in the same region with different countries like Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, China etc. This process helps to boost the economy like: CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) where Pakistan's GDP was gradually rising from 2010 to 2018 and the country's provision regarding security and energy has been significantly improved (Javaid, 2016). South Asia is one-fourth part of the world's population with an annual increase in the growth rate of approximately 6% and it has 2.5 billion of market turnover that shows an effective place to invest with the support of BRI. (Rasul, 2014) However, long manageable development at last relies upon supply chain/side enhancements since equilibrium of installments and inflationary issues are uncertain when the efficiency of elements improves.

South Asia produces nearly 2 million of barrels each day where Saudi Arabia accounted for 11 million barrels each day in 2020. Saudi-Arab sets oil creation and supplies around the world. This caused the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to make commodities and other businesspeople to make an increase in the prices of crude oil to record the levels. A rise in the price of oil would increase the cost of production of the commodities, and would decrease their supply, thus inflation occurs which is cost pushing inflation. This approach can provide an explanatory permanent solution by joining both stations together where they can produce 50% more Oil than before. Along with this they can advantage the supply of oil and other commodities with reasonable prices where the shipment cost will not affect because of regional connectivity (Rodrigue, 2004). Not only this, but also the rate of currency exchange risk will be reduced by this strategy as compared to China and Pakistan where, one Chinese Yuan is equal to the 27.3 Pakistani Rupees that shows a sustained and maintained currency rate by both countries. If South



Asian countries start the BRI and regional connectivity, then the 40% exchange rate will be reduced by which this will increase tourism and investments in these countries. Furthermore, tourism will initiate the use of foreign currency in the home country that will raise/increase the reputation, reduce exchange rates, and strengthen the growth rate of GDP (Medeiros, 2003).

Conclusion

Throughout connectivity and faster communication structures are the need of the hour in this globalized world. China as a global economic leader is doing it for the three continents under its biggest dream of Belt and Road Initiative. Rather of having everything brought together in single spot, BRI's success will rely on all parties working, coordinating, and collaborating with one another, both regionally and globally. As the world experienced different economic and legal orders, it is also critical to comprehend and prepare for legal and other related problems. The project's economic strategy, which is built on a safety-oriented purpose, is unexpectedly expanding in the region, alarming the precautionary actions and governmental role. To ensure the long-term sustainable projects, solid guidance and being up to date on the latest legislative and regulatory developments are crucial.

China's investment in BRI projects gives South Asia and its global organizations a chance to address the issue of insufficient infrastructure, which is a major impediment to both short and long-term economic venture. This project, in combination with foreign finance including China, help to boost much-needed spending in ASEAN infrastructure projects. Projects under the BRI will also help South Asia region and its global organizations attract capital investments industries like manufacturing, petroleum, and services. BRI projects, on the other hand, may exacerbate trade deficits between ASEAN and China. China will continue to profit from South Asian nations by trading in commodities and services. Imports of items used in the BRI project's construction will affect China's deficit, at least till the project has completed. After that, the Asian countries should endeavor to boost trade with China to create more balance in trade and investment.

So far, ASEAN and other adjacent Asian Pacific countries will benefit from its connectivity to China. Future success, however, will be contingent on policy flexibility aimed at incorporating both the public and private sectors in all three main sectors of China's economic ties. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) must serve as a stimulus for regional and global progress, not as a justification for China to pursue further rewards. Malaysia is one of the latest and possibly most powerful examples of the power to govern in the pursuit of improvement and even the repeal of BRI-related accords. Just after May 9,



2018 national elections, a new government took office, accusing the previous government of attempting to establish customer ties with China during an advertisement. This posed serious challenges to the BRI Chinese propaganda as unquestionable. It's good, otherwise it would be a big embarrassment to China if project conditions, such as long-term payments that have nothing to do with project achievement, were publicly revealed. China has already had to deal with a money laundering scheme to relieve financial strain on a Malaysian state-owned enterprise based on problems involving the country's former Prime Minister.

China has already established itself as a powerful nation in the region in terms of trade over the last couple of years and the flow of investment over the last few years. While the US and Japan try to pursue in regional investment in the EU, rising Chinese investment in recent years, along with the BRI, has transformed the country into one of the world's biggest investors, allowing it to keep up with the region's already technically advanced position. In the South China Sea, ASEAN has already committed to true acknowledgment of China's territorial disputes as well as a timeframe for the resolution. As we all know, Pakistan's financial situation has been in question and has not been stable in recent years. However, this infrastructure is being overhauled and new doors of commercial opportunities for Pakistan and the rest of the South Asian states .



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