

India's Challenges in South Asia in the Third Decade of the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

With its achievements in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, India has demonstrated its significant role and influence in the South Asian region. At the same time, India is viewed as having a significant role in South Asia's regional cooperation initiatives. As a result, India is rapidly becoming a challenger to China's growing influence in the region. The article will analyse the characteristics and make judgments about the problems that India will confront in the third decade of the twenty-first century using a qualitative methodology based on secondary data research. Based on the research findings, the author argues that the most difficult issue that India faces is limiting China's diplomatic and economic 'penetration' in countries located in India's traditional zone of influence. India requires time to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, build its economy and national power and enhance its influence in South Asia.

Keywords: India, China, Challenges, South Asia, third decade of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

China's primary objectives in South Asia include maintaining stability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan to limit the impact of Islamist radicals and to promote economic and energy corridors throughout the area that China can exploit (Lisa Curtis, 2016). China is also working to strengthen its ties with other South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, in order to obtain more energy and commerce flows from the Middle East and Europe, as part of a worldwide drive to expand its political and economic clout. Furthermore, China aims to limit Indian influence by strengthening ties with Pakistan and strengthening Islamabad's strategic and military capabilities. China most certainly believes that by tilting toward Pakistan, it can keep India anchored in South Asia and deflect its military and strategic assets away from China.

Besides, South Asia is quickly becoming one of India and China's most highly contested battlegrounds. With

its enormous geographical area, population, and economic heft, as well as greater military comparable to other nations in the region, India has traditionally been the most influential force in the region. However, China's increased collaboration with minor South Asian nations has put India's number one status in the area in jeopardy during the last decade. The problems created by China in South Asia, for example, have compelled India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi to make several significant foreign policy reforms.

In shaping the regional architecture of the Indo-Pacific, India's importance derives primarily from its national status and the fact that India's economic and military potential has grown. India's role and position in international relations have expanded significantly in recent years (Giridharadas, 2020). Overall, India's role is expanding not only in South Asia but also in the Indo-Pacific region.

Due to India's rising influence in the region, the world witnessed significant developments in major power struggle

in South Asia, as India–China rivalry remains the primary force (Paul, 2018). As China continues to threaten India's position in South Asia by increasing its influence in the area and supporting China-led projects, India has been harsh and more active in developing responses. This will have significant ramifications for India's growth and influence in the area, particularly as the globe enters the third decade of the twenty-first century with the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. To retain its historical position, India must implement strategy policies that reduce Chinese pressure on South Asia.

Methods

The author compiles, compares, cross-references and analyses based on secondary documents from the Government of India, United States Institute of Peace, Asian Development Bank reports and experts' opinions published in leading newspapers of Vietnam and the world, and published articles in reputable journals. The aim is to certify the challenges of India in South Asia in the third decade of the twenty-first century

After that, the views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy of India or China. The article is made based on a personal point of view when analysing the actions of the related parties such as China's strategy, the collapse of the Afghan government and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on India's challenge in South Asia.

My research question in this research paper is: 'Is India truly experiencing numerous challenges as a result of China's encirclement campaign in South Asia in the third decade of the twenty-first century?'

Results

The Geopolitics and Important Role of South Asia

The number of publications related to the concept of South Asia is quite limited. This absence of critical academic research on South Asia as a classification may be related to the fact that the majority of researchers operate in a particular nation in the area. However, in recent years, a number of initiatives have developed practically simultaneously, as if the moment had come to focus on South Asia in all of its facets, including the term itself, the ideas behind it, the issue of regionalism and so forth. Among these initiatives is the book *South Asia 2060* (Ahmed, 2013), a project that aimed to facilitate a

dialogue among researchers from different disciplines in South Asia and around the world on the likely longer-term trajectories of the region's future. A book published by David N. Gellner (2013) does utilize South Asia as an analytical category, but it is limited to the concept of 'northern South Asia' and concentrates on 'borderland lives'.

When it comes to South Asia, we immediately think of a southern region of Asia, bordering Central Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia (Berglee, 2017). But we must recognize that the concepts or definitions of the area are only relative. There is no right or wrong here, but the determination depends on each point of view and the basis of each researcher, scholar, diplomat, international organization, etc. Therefore, the limitation of South Asia in other words is that the determination of which country belongs to South Asia is also heterogeneous and many views coexist to this day.

To clearly explain the phrase 'South Asia', Aminah Mohammad-Arif (2014) analysed that, first, it refers to a region¹ in which multiple faiths, which are connected with distinct 'civilizations', have interacted, possibly undermining the notion that a region comprises a cultural sphere. Second, there is the ambivalent role of British colonization, which on the one hand laid the groundwork (partly started by the Mughals) for a mental representation of the region through its unification policies, while on the other hand contributed to the creation of divisions between distinct states and across common cultures at the time of independence. It is also worth noting that the term 'Asia' in 'South Asia' broadens the horizon when compared to the 'Indian Subcontinent', since it theoretically places the region inside a wider continent. In exchange, it may help to 'fluidize' frontiers by creating links with Southeast Asia, West Asia or Central Asia, making it easier to accept 'margin areas' like the Northeast or Afghanistan.

It is critical to provide some context for the meaning of the phrase 'South Asia', since this will frame the ensuing study. The most fundamental understanding of 'South Asia' is as a geographical area, with geopolitics as the underlying rationale. The term's relative neutrality has gained its precedence over the colonial era in the 'Indian subcontinent'. In practice, one must define which nation-states are included under this designation, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the region's sole important organization, specifies one current operational border, which includes eight countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

According to the definition of Britannica (Yefremov, 2020), South Asia, subregion of Asia, consists of the

Indo-Gangetic Plain and peninsular India. It includes the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka; Afghanistan and the Maldives are often considered part of South Asia as well.

From a geographical perspective, South Asia includes the countries of Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Maldives. The Himalayas, which separate South Asia from East Asia along the boundary of China's autonomous province of Tibet, are the world's tallest mountains and the dominating physical feature of South Asia's northern rim. Nepal, Bhutan, India and Pakistan are among the nations that share the Himalayas. Kashmir is split between India and Pakistan, and China claims the largely uninhabited regions of Aksai Chin and the Shaxsgam Valley (ceded by Pakistan to China under their so-called border agreement of March 02, 1963). Two island nations off the coast of southern India are located on the other side of the

Himalayas. The first is Sri Lanka, a huge tropical island off the southeast coast of India, and the second is the Republic of Maldives, an archipelago off India's southwest coast. The Maldives is notable for three reasons: its location, real estate and ideological orientation. It really stands above the maritime lanes of communication that radiate from the Suez Canal and the Persian Gulf and proceed towards the Straits of Malacca from a strategic security perspective. More important, South Asia has either 7 or 8 countries, depending on whether Afghanistan is considered a country in South Asia. Afghanistan, a landlocked mountainous country at the crossroads of Central and South Asia, is not regarded a part of South Asia from a geographical standpoint. Nonetheless, Afghanistan is bordered to the east and south by Pakistan; however, Afghanistan has been a member of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation since 2007. As a result, Afghanistan is considered a part of this South Asian region (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Map of South Asia.
 Source: Map No. 4140 Rev. 3 United Nations, Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

Besides, South Asia is a resource-rich area that is home to around one-fourth of the world's population and is the world's most populous and densely inhabited geographical region (South Asia Regional Overview, 2008). It is strategically important for trade and water resources. Its strategic importance stems from its proximity to China and access to West Asia. The Asia-Pacific region, including the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea, is critical to global peace, necessitating a more in-depth examination. South Asia is a large market for industrialized countries and trade rivals. South Asia is like an intermediate station or gateway for China to reach the great sea in the south. Just passing through this area, China will have easy access to the most important shipping lanes in the world. From the Indian Ocean region, China will quickly and easily reach places where it is looking for strategic interests such as Africa and the Middle East; to dominate important international traffic routes in the region and the world; and create a 'relief' position for China's rising power. South Asia's geographic position is also highly significant in India's regional policies, particularly India's Look East Policy and subsequently Act East Policy to increase India's influence in Southeast Asia and create a balance with China in the region.

From a geopolitical perspective, Southern Asia's geopolitics, like that of the rest of the globe, is shaped by its terrain and history, as well as its international environment and internal politics. As a result of this topography, southern Asia has historically been an independent strategic entity that was simultaneously part of a wider multiverse—linked but distinct from the universes of the Levant and Persian Gulf, Central Asia and Persia, Southeast Asian maritime kingdoms and East Asia. And, throughout history, when southern Asia's external links to these places grew with its internal strength, it was most wealthy and stable. This is in stark contrast to North-East

Asia, northern Europe, and North America, which were historically largely secluded and disconnected to other areas for the most of their history in order to ensure their security and prosperity. Due to this topography, southern Asia's security should be viewed as a series of concentric yet overlapping rings. What occurs in Southeast Asia, East Asia or West Asia has a direct impact on the security of South Asia. Because of the open nature of the Indian Ocean maritime domain, what happens in southern Asia has an impact on the rest of Asia as well.

The Challenge's for India in South Asia in the Third Decade of the Twenty-First Century

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A little more than a year after India initially began fighting the COVID-19 epidemic, it is clear to any observer that India is once again on the losing side. The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that had 'swallowed' India recently has had an impact on the country's socio-economic condition (Figure 2). The economic impact of this pandemic is likely to be the main reason for raising socio-political issues in India.

The regional elections in the state of West Bengal, eastern India, were still held at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was getting increasingly dangerous, beyond the control of the medical community and the government. West Bengal, with a population of 90 million people, is viewed as a vital state that Prime Minister Modi's nationalist BJP party is determined to conquer at any cost. The Prime Minister of India personally launched a ferocious campaign. Typically, as:

...Most states where cases are increasing had not paid much heed in the early phase when situations were going

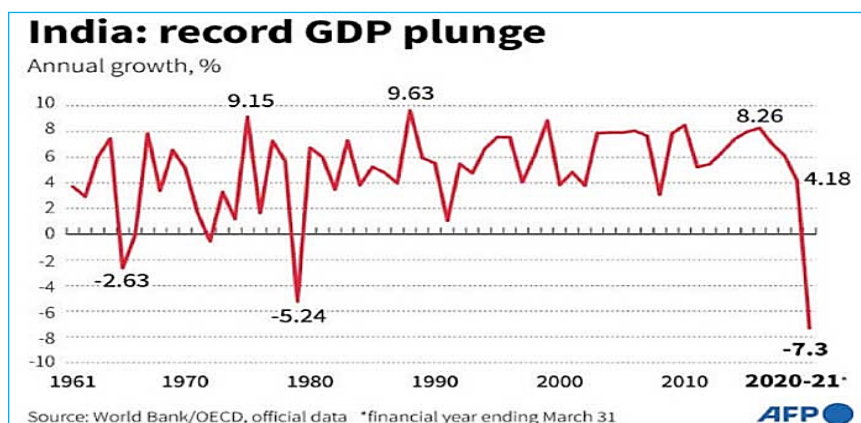


Figure 2: India: record GDP plunge.

Source: World Bank/ OECD, official data *financial year ending March 31

out of hand. States like Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Punjab are not taking adequate steps. Instead of fighting a battle against the Covid-19, these states are fighting with the central government on another turf. Maharashtra is one example that has overlooked the severity of the Covid-19 and started doing politics when it is getting uncontrolled.... (Dhanisha, 2021)

Therefore, on 7 July 2021 (Chatterji, 2021), 12 members of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Cabinet resigned in the backdrop of the country’s administration receiving harsh criticism for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic issue. In addition, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reshuffled his Cabinet, removing 12 ministers, including those in charge of health and education.

In India, the COVID-19 pandemic had been complicated and out of control. Although the Indian government had taken extreme steps to avoid illness transmission in the community, India’s political, economic, social and religious elements all have their unique peculiarities, making disease prevention and control challenges. Nearly all economic activity in India has come to a standstill because of the nationwide lockdown. Despite this, the Indian government has guaranteed that individuals have access to necessities. It would take a long time for the Indian economy to recover. Consumer demand in India is unlikely to improve in the next months, particularly for non-essential products and services.

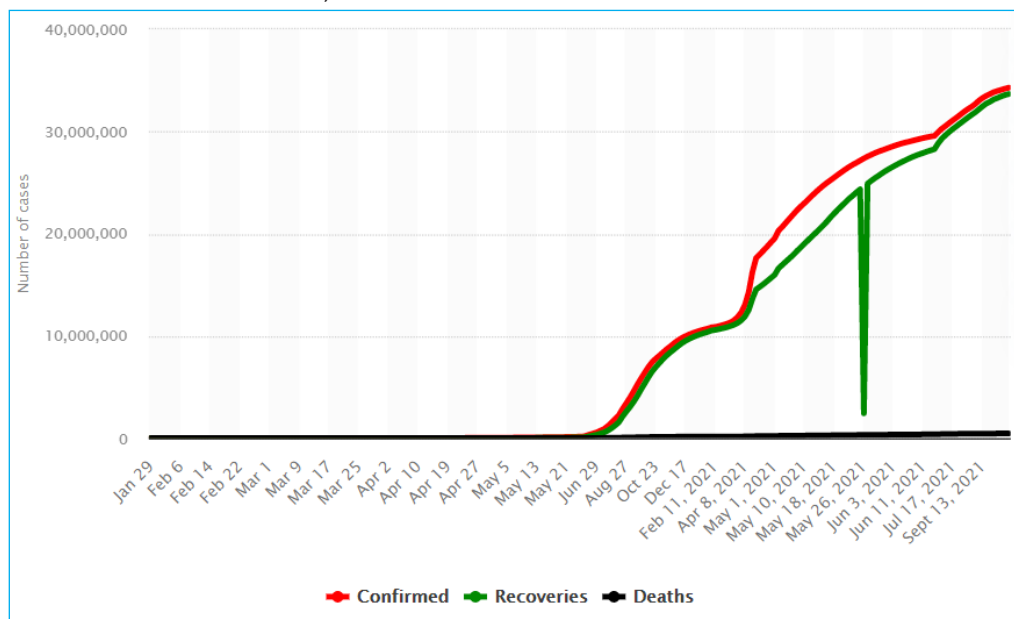
The risk is especially high in India, which saw an exponential increase in new cases during the second wave

of COVID-19 in April and May 2021, overwhelming the country’s healthcare system, resulting in yet another series of lockdowns from Delhi to Karnataka, and inflicting unimaginable socioeconomic trauma on millions of citizens. As a result, India’s economic outlook has deteriorated significantly, posing major difficulties to the Delhi administration. While Prime Minister Modi’s administration has exploited the epidemic to push through some critical measures to address the economy’s structural challenges, it now faces the nation’s most catastrophic crisis since partition in 1947 (Younus, 2021).

Perhaps no other catastrophe in modern Indian history has put the country’s federal structure to test more than the COVID-19 outbreak. The second wave has highlighted some critical issues regarding the architecture and capabilities of India’s federal structures to deal with global health crises that necessitate a coordinated national response while avoiding disrupting the local political environment.

Many countries across the world are significantly impacted by the economy and commerce, and India is no exception when supply is limited, the system is disjointed, and the supply chain and shipping operations are complicated by orders enforced in each country and the South Asia region. The longer the crisis lasts, the more difficult it is for businesses to survive, which will have a negative impact on most domestic manufacturing industries, investment activity, employment, income and consumption, reducing the economy’s growth rate. total expansion of the Indian

Table 2: COVID-19 confirmed, recovered and deceased cumulative cases in India 2020-21.



Source: © Statista Research Department

economy aside from internal issues, the Indian economy will be impacted by the global recession, which will have a direct influence on financial and trade ties between India and the region, as well as the rest of the world.

The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed millions of households into poverty and substantially increased income and wealth inequality in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. This situation poses a serious near-term challenge for policymakers, especially since rising food and commodity prices compound economic insecurities (Younus, 2021). The growing pandemic crisis in India will deliver a major blow to the country's economy, dragging it back to the size it was 20 years ago and potentially threatening South Asia's stability.

China's Strategy to Encircle India in South Asia

The first and most urgent challenge for China is now in South Asia. That has been India's steady and relatively sustainable progress in recent years. Overall, China's degree of development has distanced itself from India in many aspects. However, India's potential to catch up with China is not impossible. China's development speed is seen as rapid and robust, yet the country's economy remains largely reliant on foreign investment. That is, when there is a crisis, even if it is little, it is impossible to ensure developmental stability. In comparison, while India's development is slower than that of China, it is regarded as very sustainable. India selected the route of focusing on core economic areas, creating optimal technology and rising via indigenous resources and brainpower. One thing is clear for the Indian economy: It will not be susceptible to market economic swings. As a result, in the twenty-first century, China sees India as more of a rival than a friend.

Besides, South Asia is directly related to Beijing's stability, security and development. So, it is looking to expand its strategic space, competing for influence with India and other countries in the region; at the same time it seeks to establish a perimeter to encircle and contain India. The 'Maritime Silk Route' and the 'Belt and Road Initiative' both envision a network of interconnected ports and nodes stretching across the Indian Ocean. To reinforce its marine commercial and trade interests, the Chinese have committed additional naval muscle to safeguard key domestic infrastructure and critical locations. This strategy has allowed China's naval presence to expand into the Indian Ocean, which is regarded as India's backwaters. China's network of marine activity and infrastructural development in several nations surrounding

the subcontinent has geopolitically and physically ringed India, leading to the formulation of the 'String of Pearls'² concept. This strategy aims to limit India's influence and maritime leverage in the Indian Ocean.

Along with economic growth, the desire for a political position commensurate with national capacity is a natural occurrence in international relations. China and India are the nations that are most clearly demonstrating this tendency, not just in the region but also globally. But the two countries still have many disagreements over economic and territorial borders. So, China has also established a 'special relationship' with Pakistan in all fields of politics, economy, defence and security, while maintaining close relations with other countries namely Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Bangladesh to contain India in South Asia. China has also built oil and gas pipelines off the coast of Myanmar to Yunnan, and a transportation system connecting the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan province, creating a network linking the Gulf countries of Bengal with China. As a result, confrontations between the two countries are unavoidable. It is necessary for China to protect its position, strengthen its ascent and limit the danger from India, and it is an act of intimidation towards India. For China, India is the source of the risks and challenges it will confront as it expands its regional dominance. India's development in South Asia, of course, poses a danger to China's existing standing; India's development invites many major countries to collaborate with India to counterbalance the power of China.

Immediately, China's unwavering backing for Pakistan may be seen as part of a bigger Chinese plan to counter India's ascent. China saw itself as one of the primary superpowers of the second half of the twentieth century, second only to the United States. Fulfilling this lofty ambition means that it cannot accept the establishment of a competitor power, particularly one in Asia. According to Iskander Rehman (2009), China continues to reap the benefits of its economic head start over India, has a more sophisticated nuclear and missile arsenal, stronger conventional armed forces and, last but not least, enjoys the immense privilege of being the only Asian country to have a seat on the UN Security Council.

Persisting in its aim, China has adopted a strategy of containment through improving contacts, recruiting neighbours and fully utilizing existing tensions and disagreements. continued in recent decades to create an unstable climate that has hampered India's progress as the country focuses on economic development and change. Fully exploiting the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan, relying on the Tibet issue to entice

Nepal, maintaining a state of non-combat war in disputed areas with India; strengthening relations with neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan and Myanmar to form a tight grip on India; and a move to almost encircle India in South Asia completely is the formation of an arc around India on land.

Furthermore, China has implemented a policy of both relations and containment of India. In accordance with regional reality and situation, as well as contemporary development trends, the two countries advocate promoting friendly and harmonious relations with each other; however, China's intentions are too clear when it fully exploits existing problems and conflicts in the region to enlist small countries such as Nepal, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, particularly to strengthen ties with ally Pakistan. A full maritime encirclement plan was also implemented in the Indian Ocean with the 'string of pearls' strategy, and China completed its encirclement arc in the Indian Ocean, trapping India between the barriers that stopped Indian strength from spreading. All of this complicates India's road to becoming a major power, particularly in the South Asia region.

Afghanistan: New Security Threats to India in South Asia

India wants to use Afghanistan to expand its strategic reach as it surrounds Pakistan to the north and west. India also needs to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a breeding ground for anti-Indian forces. Over the past 20 years, New Delhi's aid to Afghanistan reached \$3 billion and it has maintained a good relationship with Kabul government, regional leaders and civil forces (Global Times, 2021).

India wants to strengthen ties with Afghanistan because it is concerned about increasing relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan. India is concerned that the Pakistani army-backed Taliban will pose a threat to its security. Pakistan has long been regarded as India's 'eternal enemy'. When the Taliban fell before, India supported the Kabul government on many fronts. Now that the Taliban are back, it will be hard for them to welcome India's influence over Pakistan.

Despite years and hundreds of billions of dollars spent by the US to build up the Afghan government and military forces, the Taliban returned to power two decades after they were evicted (*New York Times*, 2021). The fall of the Afghan government marked the end of the fledgling democracy that the United States and its allies had built in the country. The economic, diplomatic, sociopolitical

and human rights achievements that Afghanistan made in the past can be erased by the Taliban. The manipulation of the Taliban not only causes insecurity but also leads to unresolvable conflicts about religion and ethnicity. In the immediate future, Afghanistan is in the midst of a humanitarian crisis as people find ways to seek refuge in other countries to escape the dictatorship of the Taliban. Aside from security issues, one of the most pressing worries right now is finding a home for the influx of migrants from Afghanistan. In view of the current circumstances, India has created a new visa for Afghans seeking asylum in India (Tiwary, 2021). This also causes a fresh refugee problem in South Asia during the COVID epidemic, threatening regional security.

For India, Afghanistan not only faces the same security risks as Russia and Pakistan, it is also under great pressure as its three neighbours China, Pakistan and Afghanistan can form a military alliance, like a pincer gripping India from many sides. Moreover, this will be a difficult period for India–Afghanistan ties. It is uncertain how India can balance its ties with the Taliban and salvage current projects, such as the already postponed Chabahar port building. The US exit also confronts India with a difficult regional environment, with increased India–Pakistan tensions and, of course, India–China enmity. India and the international community must remain cognizant of the Afghan people's humanitarian concerns, particularly those who are likely to be attacked by the Taliban.

India is now involved in a border conflict with China, while Pakistan is viewed as an arch-rival.³ The bilateral collaboration through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, according to New Delhi, is a danger to India's trade and security. In addition, a counter-terrorism alliance will be formed between China and three Central South Asian nations: Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, to combat the rising terrorist threat from within the countries. When the Afghan government fell and the Taliban took power, the security of South Asia became more uncertain; if Pakistan accepts the Taliban administration, the likelihood of insecurity in the area will rise. The inherent instability of connection would pose risks not just to India, but also to other South Asian countries.

India, which is worried about the security situation in neighbouring Afghanistan, is now even more 'unsettled' by the cooperation plan of the two rivals. Dr. Raja Mohan, director of the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore, said that closer cooperation between China and Pakistan would most likely become a 'big challenge for India'. According to the foreign policy expert, 'China's regional and global footprint is growing,

and it is now only a matter of time before it becomes visible in Afghanistan'. Meanwhile, relations between India and China continue to be strained, especially after the recent border clashes. India considers Pakistan as arch-rival. For India, the bilateral cooperation through the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor as part of the Belt and Road Initiative is a threat to India's trade and security (The World & Vietnam Report, 2021).

India's Traditional Influence in South Asia Starting to Fade

India is a founding member of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation, which was founded in 1985 with the goal of establishing a linked and integrated South Asia, with the wider goal of encouraging the growth and advancement of all nations in the area. India has consistently supported different initiatives within the South Asian framework to promote greater collaboration in a variety of sectors. Due to its size, comparative economic strength and historical and cultural importance to the area, India has had significant regional influence throughout South Asia.

India naturally assumes a leadership position in the South Asian area due to its size, geography and economic potential. However, the overbearing presence of a neighbour for India's neighbour with global leadership aspirations has also been a source of concern for India's neighbours. *'Consequently, cooperative efforts of the South Asian countries are hijacked by the dilemma of comprehending India's perceived and actual role as a stepping-stone or a stumbling block for the regional efforts'* (Bhasin, 2008).

India has strong bilateral ties with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. As part of 'Neighbourhood First' strategy, India is an active development partner in these nations, participating in several initiatives. Indian involvement with these nations is consultative, non-reciprocal and outcome-oriented, with an emphasis on providing advantages such as increased connectivity, enhanced infrastructure, stronger development cooperation in different areas, security and expanded people-to-people interactions. Despite massive disputes between India and Pakistan, it is the religion component, the importance of India's influence throughout history that has contributed to India's position in South Asia.

However, India's influence is restricted due to its failure to assume leadership and custodianship duties. It does defend the region from foreign dangers, but it does it in

a unilateral, status quo and reactionary manner. Despite India's self-perception as the region's natural hegemon, the application of this paradigm indicates an absence of a hegemonic security system in South Asia. For India to be hegemonic, it must play all these roles simultaneously.

Domestic politics have long affected India's ties with its South Asian neighbours. Furthermore, there has been a persistent fear psychosis among the region's smaller states, which saw India as a regional hegemon. India, on the other hand, needs to take the role of an 'older brother' rather than a hegemon. This article analyses the similarities of South Asian nations, discusses the region's various security challenges and how they impact interstate relations between India and its neighbours, and concludes by arguing that South Asia has to move toward a cooperative security framework. It also underlines that, given its dominant size, human resources and aspirations for a global position, India will bear a disproportionately bigger share of the responsibility for fostering South Asian regional cooperation. However, India's unilateral efforts will not result in regional unity. Neighbouring countries must favourably respond to Indian attempts for South Asian regional integration to be effective. This will not only revitalize South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation but would also foster trust and mutual confidence between India and its neighbours.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, the author concludes that in the third decade of the twenty-first century, India is encircled by a glowing ring of Chinese power and influence in the South Asian region, because the complexity of the geopolitical situation in South Asia is increasing as the major powers are making many important moves to assert a balanced strategy in this region to contain China, in addition to China's policy of containing India. Thus, as major nations make strategic changes in the direction of increased global rivalry, China's ascent in South Asia deepens, regional geopolitics in South Asia will become increasingly unpredictable, affecting India's development.

Therefore, the author strongly believes that the most difficult issue that India has is limiting China's diplomatic and economic 'penetration' in some countries located in India's traditional zone of influence. Besides, India must continue to increase its soft power influence with its neighbours in the region and consolidate its former influence, as well as take advantage of cooperation and limit South Asian countries from being attracted to or

becoming ‘cards’ of exchange between major countries, particularly China. If India is to accomplish its strategic objectives in South Asia, it must pay considerably more attention to soft power as a crucial weapon of foreign policy.

In fact, India will not be waiting for China to construct a barrier around the region. The confrontation in Doklam⁴ is the latest military conflict between the two countries in the last half-century, showing New Delhi’s stubborn refusal to yield. India requires time to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, build its economy and national power, and enhance its influence in South Asia in the third decade of the twenty-first century.

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Notes

1. The region primarily refers to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, as per the definition of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation, which has however included Afghanistan lately (2007) among its members.
2. The term 'String of Pearls' refers to the manifestation of China's growing geopolitical influence through efforts to increase access to ports and airfields, develop special diplomatic relationships and modernize military forces that extend from the South China Sea through the Malacca Strait, across the Indian Ocean and into the Arabian Gulf (Pehrson, 2006).
3. Because the Kashmir problem is regularly impacted by India and Pakistan's domestic situations, it remains the major danger that might trigger conflict between the two nations, upsetting the situation in the whole region.
4. The Doklam dispute is a conflict between India and China. It has been going on since 16 June 2017, when Indian forces prevented the Chinese army from constructing a road across the disputed region. Doklam is a border dispute between India and China. It is situated in the Himalayas, close to the borders of Bhutan, Tibet and Sikkim.

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