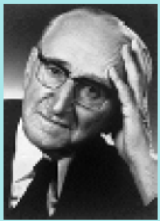




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Jagannath Panda

**China's BRI Diplomacy: What It Means to
India and India's Rise**

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Abstract

Despite the political differences, China and India are in an interdependent trade relationship. Both major powers are each other's largest trading partner. Nevertheless, there is competition between the two countries for supremacy in the Indo-Pacific. India's democratic system and rules-based regulatory policies promote India's rise while standing in the way of China's rise and destabilizing the trade partnership. In addition, the Indian government strongly opposes the BRI. Although competition from the U.S. and India is increasingly pressuring the Chinese government, KpCh is simultaneously responding to the recent Covid-19 pandemic with sovereignty and offering assistance to many countries. That follows Xi's goal to build a strong, sovereign Chinese state that is a global leader and no longer relies on bilateral agreements (such as with India).

Key Words

BRI Diplomacy, India, Foreign Policy

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Introduction

India and China share a complex, if not tumultuous, relationship that has regularly been depicted in repudiating terms ranging from conflict and containment to competition and cooperation. The Doklam standoff in 2017 and the Galwan Valley clash of 2020 only underscored the continued saliency and centrality of their boundary dispute in tensed bilateral ties. At the same time, factors like China's 'iron brotherhood' with Pakistan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021), the rapid development of China's maritime force in the Indian Ocean (Becker 2020), and China's 'charm offensive' and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy (Kurlantzick 2007; Zhu 2020) are seeking to tilt the power balance of the region in Beijing's favor. In face of such imperatives, India has initiated its own efforts to adjust its competition-cooperation complex with China in the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi has not only sought to improve bilateral ties via its Act East Policy (AEP) and multilateral collaborations, like with Japan, the United States and Australia via the Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad), but also made attempts to enhance its domestic infrastructure along the border and build its global presence as a leader.

Prior to their current tensions, the India-China developmental partnership endured through informal summits like the 'Wuhan Spirit', 'Astana Consensus' and 'Chennai Connect' between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Boundary talk mechanisms —like the special representatives dialogue, confidence building treaty of 1996 and Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination (WMCC) —were put in place to ensure open dialogue and prevent their border dispute from becoming the defining factor of their bilateral relationship. On a practical side, China is India's biggest trade partner. Strategically, the two nations are members of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Yet, both sides are on a quest for great power identity and are therefore highly concerned with protecting their national interest, national security and national sovereignty. It is in this context that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 during his visits to Southeast Asia and Central Asia, has been opposed and rejected by India.

Regarded as Xi's flagship project, the BRI consists of two parts: the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Maritime Silk Road (MSR), with the former associated with land routes and the latter with sea route. As per the Chinese government, the BRI "promote[s] orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets by enhancing [the] connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas" (*The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2020*). Essentially, as the Chinese claims, the BRI is built upon the notions introduced by China's ancient silk trade route of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) that connected China to Europe through India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Under this initiative, Beijing plans to build connectivity infrastructures such as massive highways, rail and telecommunication networks, ports, pipelines and shipping routes, among others; these projects boast of estimated costs as high as hundreds of billions of dollars, and pass through several strategically and economically key nations so as to gain access to critical and emerging markets, and establish a wide supply chain network with China at its centre.

In the post-COVID-19 world order, amidst intensifying great power competition and changing regional and global power dynamics, infrastructural advancement has taken on new and expanded significance. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2018 assessed Asian infrastructural deficiency to rest at US\$459 billion (Ra and Li 2018). Further, a Moody's report predicted that investments in the Asia Pacific infrastructural domain will be "increasingly diversified" post-COVID-19 (Moody's 2020). These will include an expansion in investments by developing economies in public health infrastructure with a unique focus on Asia's demographic patterns; China's BRI will therefore need to evolve in line with such new imperatives to expand its focus from traditional connectivity infrastructure to new avenues such as public health projects. Whether it can successfully incorporate this element within its purview will dictate the success or failure of the initiative in the coming time.

The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the BRI projects around the world halted, leading to major setbacks in timeline. The Payra power plant in southern Bangladesh (Hossain 2020), the Port City venture in western Sri Lanka (CHEC Port City Colombo 2020), and different undertakings along the CPEC were deferred citing disturbances caused due to the movement of Chinese labor and gear (Ali 2020). Moreover, in the post-pandemic period, China's budgetary needs (and those of BRI participant nations) are likely going to change fundamentally. For the first time since Deng Xiaoping opened the nation to economic reform in 1978, China's GDP shrunk by 6.8 percent in the primary quarter of 2020 (Li, Detrixhe, Li 2020). Although the Chinese economy has recovered since then (it grew by a record 18.3 percent in Q1 of 2021) (BBC 2021), the dip did unveil social unrest in China and a need to ensure domestic growth; Beijing

will thus likely be exceedingly cautious about new fiscal ventures and unwilling to spend unrestrainedly in the future. Rather, China's focus will be to attain massive growth that gives it an edge over the US as it prepares for increased and stiffer competition. Likewise, the pandemic will leave its imprint on South Asian economies which will be forced to reevaluate their priorities and reallocate funds to more urgent matters —like public health. Notably, China is already confronting demands for debt alleviation (Aamir 2020). In South Asia, the Maldives has tried to renegotiate its obligation to China while Bangladesh has asked China to consider conceding instalments over 'debt-trap' fears (The Eurasian Times 2020).

Amidst delays to the BRI, India's take on the venture and its response to the same can be moulded strategically to shape the emerging post-pandemic architecture. This paper/chapter seeks to look at how China's BRI is shaping post-COVID-19; it assesses how India's response to the same has emerged over the years and how it may shift in the coming times. Further, the chapter analyses how India's own infrastructure projects can manage the post-pandemic containment of the BRI corridors.

India's BRI chip

The BRI aims to interface China with Central Asia, Russia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Europe via territorial connections and Oceania, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East African coastal districts through maritime routes. Beijing had introduced long-time back six explicit economic corridors (see, table 1) that form networks constituting the BRI and developed supporting worldwide monetary foundations, for example the AIIB and the Silk Road Fund (SRF), to back planned projects. The sheer massive scale of the BRI has naturally brought about critical geo-financial and geo-political reactions from the international community. On the off chance that Beijing can effectively execute its arrangement, the BRI holds the guarantee of completely changing its position in the region and globally and introducing entirely new power dynamics. Despite the fact that there is a profound geo-political nuance attached to this contention, its primary key characteristic is geo-economical. Via BRI, which many countries view with caution, President Xi aims to create a "community of common destiny", which has become a pillar of Chinese foreign policy in recent years (Xinhuanet 2017). In this context, the BRI is a centralized project that is governed by top Chinese political leadership with Xi Jinping at its helm which aims to further the CCP's grand strategy for the nation (Rolland 2019). The BRI seeks to create a Sino-centric world order with a consistently growing geographic scope that combines economic and strategic policy goals. At the onset, BRI focused on connectivity with Eurasia; now, it incorporates Oceania, Latin America, Africa and the Arctic (Ibid.). BRI's five key focuses are (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development n.d.) trade, coordinat-

ing policy, building infrastructure connectivity, finance integration and people-to-people connectivity focused on culture. The “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” has led to the venture’s convergence with the foreign policies of China, making it one with Beijing’s international treaties. This has prompted concerns over BRI’s “debt trap” (Hornby and Zhang 2019) policies, adverse environmental impact fallouts, non-transparent transactions and the unilateral trade dominance in favor of China.

Table 1: Six Major Economic Corridors of Belt and Road Initiative

1	The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor (NELB)	It is an international rail-passageway, alternatively referred to as ‘Second Eurasia Land Bridge’ Links the Pacific and the Atlantic by connecting Chinese coastal cities Lianyungang and Rizhao to Netherland’s Rotterdam and Belgium’s Antwerp
2	The China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (CMREC)	Idea proposed in 2014; in 2016, it became the first multilateral cooperation project to become part of BRI It has two distinct pathways: One running from China’s Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei to Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, further extending to Mongolia and Russia while the other runs from China’s Dalian, Shenyang, Changchun, Harbin and Manzhouli to Russia’s Chita
3	China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CCWAEC)	Follows the general trajectory of ancient Silk Road for majority of its modern tracks Links China to the Arabian Peninsula Runs from China’s Xinjiang via Alashankou and joins railway networks of Central Asia and West Asia
4	China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor (CICPEC)	Covering mainly the Greater Mekong-sub region, its aim is to boost China-ASEAN connectivity Runs west from China’s Pearl River Delta along Nanchong-Guang’an Expressway and the Nanning-Guangzhou High-speed Railway via Nanning and Pingxiang to Hanoi and Singapore Guangxi has opened international rail line from Nanning to Hanoi; this corridor connects China to Indochina Peninsula via Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos
5	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	BRI’s flagship project; comprises highways, pipelines, optic cables and highways and has highest level of BRI investment Main goal is to build economic connect running from Kashgar in Xinjiang, China to Gwadar port in Pakistan Connects SREB and MSR
6	Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIMEC)	Proposed jointly in 2013 by India and China to link the huge markets of both countries and enhance regional inter-connectivity Conspicuously dropped from the list released by China post 2 nd BRI Forum in 2019

The possibility of such an outcome has put states like India on alert to Beijing's underlying ambitions, as reflected in their responses to the BRI. India has long been severely critical of the BRI; its policy towards the initiative shifted from a non-endorsement in its early years (when the project was shrouded in uncertainty) to an outright opposition post the CPEC highlighted in its response to refuse an invitation to join the first forum for the project in 2017 (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). It is not a supporter of the project and probably never will be. In 2019, New Delhi refused to attend the BRI summit for the second time in a row —this led to Chinese reassurances at the forum that the BRI was “not an exclusive club” with Xi vowing to look into debt concerns, environmental policies and corruption dangers within the projects (Chaudhury 2019). India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar recently reiterated India's longstanding position on the BRI with a direct rejection, stating: “BRI rethink, the answer is no” (The Economic Times 2019).

Simply put, the Indian government does not endorse the BRI amidst speculation that the initiative is not what China claims it to be. New Delhi likely sees that the BRI (with CPEC as its flagship corridor) as an initiative to disregard India's sway and dismantle its regional power. India's tepid response to the BRI is based on multiple factors: threat to Indian sovereignty via CPEC which passes through the disputed Gilgit Baltistan region; absence of transparency; lack of open dialogue prior to its creation; the undue influence it gives to Beijing in terms of comprehensive national power (CNP) calculations; and threat of potential militarization of BRI projects to support China's developing military existence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) accentuating its ‘String of Pearls’¹ strategy. Moreover, New Delhi stresses that BRI undertakings may prompt debt-trap, corruption, political instability, ecological issues and instability in its immediate neighborhood. Although it remains too early to judge the impact and outcomes of BRI projects, early indications of its engagement laying a ‘debt trap’ in certain nations has prompted a discussion of emerging Chinese ‘neo-colonialism’ in the region.

Moreover, to New Delhi, BRI is a unilateral, state-centrist venture by China. BRI does not endorse a consultative approach that follows universal norms; hence, it expunges without discussion decisions on projects that stakeholders; for instance, China's unilateral approach to CPEC has adversely affected its ties with India and made the project come across as a threat to India's sovereignty (The Economic Times 2018). Nonetheless, China and India have relatively strong economic ties that both wish to further and benefit from. At the 2019 Shanghai Cooperation Summit (SCO), President Xi remarked that “India and China are opportunities, not a threat, to one another” (Lee 2019). Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue keynote address, spoke about how India is looking to create an “inclusive”

¹ The ‘String of Pearls’ refers to China's attempts to build bases in the Indian Ocean as a way of securing critical trade routes. These bases will encircle India along its coastal border, thereby posing a threat to India's own national security and economic stability.

Indo-Pacific that “includes all nations in this geography as also others beyond” (Ministry of External Affairs 2018). This idea does not entirely rule out engagement with China, but rather looks to build a power-parity relationship with the economic power while challenging its aggressive and belligerent tactics (Panda 2016). New Delhi has become a part of other more open and universalist China-centered projects like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); New Delhi’s engagement with such structures demonstrates its commitment to inclusivity in the Asian geopolitical landscape.

Of the six BRI corridors, BCIM-EC and CPEC directly impact India. While CPEC is discussed in detail in this chapter, as it is voiced as one of India’s biggest concerns over BRI, BCIM-EC has become a victim, so to say, of BRI geopolitics. India’s refusal to attend the first and second BRI Forums led to the BCIM-EC’s visible removal as a BRI corridor in the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders’ Roundtable of the BRF held in 2019 (Xinhuanet 2019). Despite this omission, there is little official clarity on whether or not it is still a part –or key corridor –of BRI; the BCIM-EC was subsequently included in the “The Belt and Road Initiative Progress, Contributions and Prospects” released by the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative of the Communist Party of China (CPC) (Belt and Road News 2019). The BCIMEC connects Kunming in China’s Yunnan province with the Indian city of Kolkata, passing through cities like Mandalay in Myanmar and Dhaka in Bangladesh. Although it can be a critical advantage in enhancing India’s connectivity aspirations, the same does not supersede national security. While it is framed as a benign infrastructure project, New Delhi is deeply concerned that the BRI outreach in South Asia and amongst the Indian Ocean littoral states could prove to be a security threat for India. New Delhi has so far maintained considerable influence over this region as a ‘security provider’, and is therefore generally perceived as its backyard. India is uneasy that the BRI will advance Beijing’s presence and sabotage India’s impact over the region.

New Delhi’s explicit criticism of the CPEC is drawn primarily on national security concerns. Being old diplomatic, political and strategic partners, China and Pakistan share what is often referred to as an ‘iron brotherhood’(Du 2014). CPEC has resulted in strong sovereignty and security concerns for India as it seeks to link Pakistan to Xinjiang in China by road. To achieve this goal, CPEC passes through Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-administered Kashmir which India holds an historical claim. New Delhi therefore argues that the undertaking abuses Indian sovereignty by building infrastructure through the (Pakistan-controlled) Kashmir. Speaking at the second Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi in 2017, Prime Minister Modi said that “connectivity in itself cannot undermine or override the sovereignty of other nations”, highlighting the key disfranchisement India holds in respect to the BRI (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). While the issue of sovereignty is referred to as the main justification for not supporting the BRI, another key factor is India’s stress over the international ramifications of the initiative. In this context,

China's push to promote the BRI within India's neighbourhood and India's staunch opposition to the same, have only escalated Sino-Indian rivalry in South Asia and the Indian Ocean locale.

The CPEC angle

Chinese media has described the CPEC as “a 3,000-kilometer network of roads, railways and pipelines to transport oil and gas from southern Pakistan's Gwadar Port to Kashgar city, north-western China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region” (National Health and Family Planning Commission 2015). Proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in May 2013 during his visit to Pakistan and touted as the flagship corridor under the BRI, MoUs for the CPEC's long-term plan were signed the same year (Global Times 2020). The initial low scale of the corridor got a huge boost during the Xi Jinping's visit to Pakistan in 2015. It was during the same visit that both nations agreed on a '1+4' structure of the corridor, where CPEC would form the core with Gwadar Port, energy, transport infrastructure and industrial cooperation forming its four surrounding key areas. Implementation of CPEC is guided by the 2017-2030 Long-Term Plan, unveiled in 2016 (The News 2017). China-Pakistan ties have evolved into an “all-weather strategic cooperative partnership”; CPEC is at its core (The State Council 2018).

CPEC is the only BRI corridor defined in strictly bilateral terms. Chinese investments along the CPEC have three major focus areas: to prove that its development model can be exported, to use Islamabad in strategic competition with Washington and New Delhi, and to showcase China's attractiveness as a cooperative partner to the world. Throughout China-Pakistan partnership, restraining India has been a focal point of convergence; with India and US drawing closer and China-Pakistan synergy only growing, the India-Pakistan conflict has the potential to become a proxy-war zone for US-China. The trade and connectivity boost expected through the CPEC will provide China room to economically develop its backward East, especially the Xinjiang province, which has not seen economic prosperity comparable to other Chinese regions. Beijing believes such growth is crucial to mitigate the militancy and separatism related to the East Turkestan independence movement by the Uighurs in the Xinjiang region. Furthermore, Chinese strategic community also believes that involving Pakistan in this corridor is advantageous because Islamabad can, in return for Chinese economic generosity, and through its influence in the Islamic Jihadi network, lobby against East Turkestan cause in the neighborhood.

The Gwadar Port is key to China's 'string of pearls' strategy across the Indian Ocean that involves crucial commercial ports with Chinese stakes as well as Beijing's military base in Djibouti. One of the key objectives of this strategy is to not just secure China's sea lines of communications but also suppress India's growing strategic heft in the Indian Ocean, which is key

to the future of the Asian order. Given China and Pakistan's all-weather strategic partnership, the Gwadar Port could very well be used as a Chinese naval base, which would put the PLA in the vicinity of strategically significant locations (like the Strait of Hormuz). This will also enable China to provide complementary assistance to its deployed missions in Djibouti base, which is located in close proximity to Gwadar. Such a prominent presence of the Chinese military in India's backyard is a major source of concern for India's territorial integrity and strategic autonomy; and presents a direct challenge to the Indian Navy in the region.

By letting the corridor pass through the contentious region of Gilgit-Baltistan, China is trying to not just satisfy its ally Pakistan but also challenge India's dominant role in the region, perhaps as a way to reassert its own superior position and re-enforce the lack of power parity between the two states. Also, as the CPEC passes through Karakoram ranges, China intends to upgrade the Karakoram highway as part of the project. Geopolitically, this region is important as it is geographically close to the Daulat Bel Oldie in Ladakh, India, and the Pangong Tso are region which formed site for India-China clash in 2020. Realising Pakistan's need for economic development and investments (CPEC n.d.) amidst the growing chasm between Washington and Islamabad, Beijing has seized a key opportunity and built upon its historic partnership with Pakistan via CPEC. Pakistan's economy has become inherently and unsustainably dependent on China. Given the nature of non-feasibility and unsustainability of BRI projects due to their debt-trap nature, Pakistan seems to be rapidly moving towards becoming a debt-laden vassal state of China, if it has not already (Business Standard 2021). This will allow Beijing to have even more influence over Pakistan, which is also a key nuclear power with intermediary military capabilities in the region.

Moving forward, talks are already on-going for translating China-Pakistan synergy into a regional partnership, primarily by expanding China's engagement with other South Asian nations and initiating joint projects between China, Pakistan and other partners. For instance, on July 27, 2020, China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal had a quadrilateral meeting where China has put forward two proposals under BRI: first, extending the CPEC to Afghanistan; second, working on an economic corridor with Nepal, called the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network (Krishnan 2020). Furthermore, China recently signed a 25 year-long economic deal with Iran — which some reports have valued at \$400 billion (Fassihi and Myers 2021) thus eclipsing the size of CPEC — with potential investments in port development at Strait of Hormuz, \$280 billion in Iranian oil and gas industry, and \$120 billion in developing production and transportation infrastructure (Aamir 2020). Although this \$400 billion figure has been strictly refuted (Scita 2019), the deal is nevertheless significant and can be seen as an attempt by China to bring both Iran and Pakistan close under its strategic umbrella. Additionally, China may also be attempting to form a strategic 'golden ring' involving Russia, Turkey,

Iran, and Pakistan, with the possibility of also linking “Gwadar and Chabahar to China by rail through Pakistan” (Said 2020; Shakeel 2020). The Iran deal thus comes as a blow to India as it has been working on the Chabahar project for a while as it was supposed to be its gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia with the assistance of Iran (Duggal 2021). These developments assume even more significance in the context of previous reports of problems in India-Iran Chabahar collaboration (Haidar 2020); although these issues were resolved, they demonstrate China’s growing presence in the region, and how it could impact India’s own strategic outreach. CPEC’s extension to Afghanistan and potential strategic proximity to Tehran would give China huge influence over Kabul — on both civilian government and Taliban — as American establishment looks to increasingly vacate the region.

China’s BRI posturing amidst COVID-19: Health Silk Road

At the sidelines of the thirteenth National People’s Congress (NPC), Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed that “impact of COVID-19 on the Belt and Road cooperation is temporary and limited”, further adding that the pandemic will just “re-energize Belt and Road cooperation and open up new possibilities” (CGTN 2020). The BRI has clearly noticed deferrals and delays in view of pandemic instigated guidelines. More obstacles are likely as countries grapple with outbreaks of the virus. The episode has shown BRI’s failure to act as a “global development strategy” (Chatzky and McBride 2020) that looked for advancement of maintainable development under commonly advantageous procedures. With public health and health infrastructure gaining prominence, the AIIB delivered in March 2020 an official document that anticipated that the key needs for the post-pandemic world will revolve on investments in public health infrastructure (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank 2020). In the midst of such aggravations, and trying to steer away from the anti-China outlook that has arisen around the world, Xi’s ‘mask diplomacy’ and ‘vaccine diplomacy’ has prompted the rejuvenation of a “Health Silk Road” (HSR).

Xi uncovered the plan of making a HSR in a telephonic conversation call with the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in March (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2020). The HSR comes as Xi’s attempt to re-build the quickly dissipating global trust in China by situating the state as an innovator in worldwide public health. The medical aid sent by China to countries demonstrates this account of China’s good samaritan act. Such posturing endeavors to show that the BRI’s part in building a worldwide medical services framework is essential, and that China is prepared to lead the pack based on its success in navigating the pandemic by controlling the outbreak within months. Numerous times, this rhetoric has been espoused (almost as a clinical guide) by Chinese government officials and organizations that are a part of BRI globally —like the China Communications Construction Company ([CCCC](#))

and Huawei; private endeavors like Alibaba Foundation have likewise taken an interest in large-scale COVID-19 clinical aid adventures.

The idea of a HSR is not new; since 2015, China has shown energetic interest in moulding general wellbeing administration universally under the BRI's ambit. The objective has been to "establish health cooperation networks among neighbouring countries and those on the Road and Belt" (National Health and Family Planning Commission 2015). In 2017, Xi used the term HSR in Switzerland while signing an MOU with the World Health Organization (WHO) on the development of such a Road (Baijie 2017). The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic has allowed China the chance to bring this vision to the forefront.

In the post-pandemic era, the HSR can be critically beneficial in realising the BRI goals and giving the initiative new life for the new, and dramatically changed, times (Lancaster, Rubin and Rapp-Hooper 2020). It can have a significant impact in reviving homegrown political help for the CCP, legitimizing its standard globally. Beijing's clear outreach of help (with mask and vaccine diplomacy for instance) to various countries signals to the Chinese people that the state is responding to the pandemic in a trustworthy way. Besides, the HSR presents a framework through which Beijing may choose to rebrand BRI, which Xi will most likely do in view of COVID-activated monetary mishaps. As China restarts its economy, which was giving indications of slowdown pre-COVID, it will likely be unable to muster similar levels of resources for new BRI corridors or projects. Also, BRI countries are already facing financial crises of their own, casting doubts on whether they will be prepared to undertake massive infrastructure projects or bear the heavy debt that follows. In this context, so as to remain relevant in the post-pandemic world, the BRI must be updated and rebranded; HSR could offer a useful banner in this regard.

Moreover, the HSR could find significant commonalities with China's Digital Silk Road (DSR). As US-China tech competition intensifies, digital innovation and outreach are likely to form central objectives in China's strategic ambit. Further, the tech domain has received a veritable boost in the post-pandemic period amidst a search for alternatives to physical connectivity. Beijing's focus on the DSR as a connectivity ambit will be drawn on such factors. The HSR and DSR could be combined in areas such as development and exchanging of new tech in tackling the pandemic; as developing nations look to invest in upgrading their public health infrastructure, a focus on such areas could help revitalise the BRI. Notably, this shift would also help the BRI stand out from its competing ventures that have recently gained traction in the region —such as the US-Japan-Australia led Blue Dot Network (BDN) (Basu 2020).

India's rise and BRI

In Beijing's perception, an 'India challenge' is not synonymous with an 'American challenge'. Nonetheless, India's rise is arguably Beijing's biggest concern in Asia. Xi views the American presence on the global stage as a deterrent and a test for China's own power —that is, one focused on countering China's influence operations and negating successful promotion of its thoughts. Concurrently, India's rise, based on its democratic thoughts and commitment to upholding a rules-based order, comes as a phenomenon contradicting and hindering China's ascension to great power status in Asia and in the Indo-Pacific. In other words, Chinese perception on American presence in the Indo-Pacific is more a contest of authority to shape the global order while India's rise is seen as more of a challenge to obstruct China's Asian unipolarism. The difference can be drawn along the lines of status dilemmas (Xiaoyu 2019); the US-China great power rivalry shapes a global status dilemma for Beijing while the India-China balance of power shapes a regional status security outlook. Status politics directly shapes Beijing's quest for a 'great power identity' (Rozman 1999); parallel to the same, status recognition also holds a central position in national identity aspirations of China as a state (Lao 2019). Furthermore, this status manoeuvring both domestically and internationally boosts the security dilemma (Tang 2009) conundrum leading to a Cold War like situation —not just between US and China, but also between China and India on a regional platform.

In essence, China is increasingly perceiving India through a more competing and contesting frame that disturbs its own ascendance to power. China's unilateral actions —be it along the India-China border or via the establishment of Xi's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — have received sharp rebuke from New Delhi. India's commitment to the creation and sustainability of a multipolar Asia further highlights a key perceptual gap that exists between the two Asian giants, which is only further compounded by their increasing gap in power. With both India and China being led by excessively nationalist and populist leaders since 2014, the erstwhile equation of continuity in ties despite changes has shifted. While Prime Minister Modi has imbibed a pragmatic power-partner parity with China that looks to balance engagement with equilibrium by focusing on economics (Panda, n.d.), the security threats Beijing poses to New Delhi have received strong militarist replies. Examples of this were seen during the 2017 Doklam standoff and the 2020 Galwan clash. Despite Xi's initial emphasis that India and China, in their mutual direction towards multipolarity, must emerge as "global partners having strategic coordination" and working towards "an Asian century of prosperity" (Xi 2014), India-China relations have transitioned into a period of uncertainty, from decoupling and disengagement being common narratives shaping ties.

At the same time, Xi's outlook towards India takes into account, beyond the challenges India brings to China, the mutual dependency of both states on each other. A successful second

informal summit between the two leaders in 2019 highlighted their “common objective of working for a peaceful, secure and prosperous world” in a “rules-based international order” that is also “inclusive” (Ministry of External Affairs 2019). However, such a statement has been relegated as mere rhetoric rather than a substantial and realistic commitment based on shared values. With heightening tensions and stressed flashpoints between both states over the past year, India’s evolutionary revisionism has come to stand in stark contrast to China’s revolutionary revisionism—a difference that has also helped greatly in shaping US outlooks towards both states. Rather than a multipolar order, what China has sought to promote with its frequently belligerent actions is a regional order driven by unilateral Chinese interests and the ‘Xi Jinping Thought’(Xiang 2018). India’s construct of a multipolar Asia, underpinned by liberal democratic values, therefore threatens China’s unipolar regional worldview. India has largely balanced this outlook by acknowledging the importance China holds in the globalized world order (Sujan, Chinoy and Panda 2020); participation in the AIIB and SCO while rejecting BRI are examples of such strategic balancing.

In the post-Galwan and the emerging post-pandemic order, India’s strategic balancing outlook will undergo a visible change, especially in the Indo-Pacific region. India’s ‘inclusive’ approach is likely to imbibe an increased national security and ‘pointed alignment’ paradigm (Panda 2020)—already observable in New Delhi’s active participation in the Quad, Quad Plus and the Quad Leadership Summit. For instance, Prime Minister Modi has echoed India’s vision of creating a ‘free’, ‘open’ and ‘inclusive’ Indo-Pacific by ideating the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) (The Economic Times 2019). The Initiative marks a focus on securing strategic maritime boundaries while highlighting India’s willingness in dealing with Chinese aggression in the region. The proposal seeks to “create partnerships” that will bind together interested nations in areas such as maritime security, trade, sustainable use of marine resources, and disaster prevention measures (Time Times of India 2019). IPOI builds on Security and Growth for All (SAGAR) and by creating a cooperative platform that actualizes Indo-Pacific principles into action furthers India’s Indo-Pacific vision in a direct extension of its AEP. Moving forward, the IPOI will gain critical importance in India’s foreign policy and act as a central platform for practical action with India’s Indo-Pacific partners (especially Japan and Australia) for the security of the region.

It is important to note that for Xi, the penultimate goal—made increasingly clear as CCP’s centennial celebrations approach—is to build a China that stands foremost amongst the world powers. This is highlighted under Xi’s concept of ‘national rejuvenation’ and the creation of a ‘moderately prosperous society’ within the prism of his ‘Chinese Dream’. In other words, Xi envisions a China that is no longer constrained by bilateral pacts or international norms that it

signed onto at a time when it had a diminished voice on the global stage; rather, Xi wants to bolster China's economic, militarist and even territorial expansion —as seen along the India-China border as well as in 'unification' goals vis-à-vis Hong Kong and Taiwan —in order to build a powerful Chinese state that can dictate the international order. The BRI is centrifugal to these ambitions; however, post-Galwan, India's appeasement of China is no longer a preferred policy option in New Delhi. Hence, India's vocal if not action-driven potential responses to BRI's growth could greatly shape the region's push towards containing China. India's inclusion in initiatives like the BDN or opening of negotiations vis-à-vis the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) to fulfil New Delhi's demands must be accentuated.

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