

China's Struggle for Hegemony in a Multiplex World Order : The Case of South Asia

A [Multiplex](#) world order, where multiple state and non-state actors shape the rules of governance in culturally diverse ways, differs significantly from a hegemonic world order, shaped by the uniform, single narrative emanating from one dominant power. Naina Singh traces recent Chinese ambitions to attain material and ideological hegemony in the geo-strategically important region of South Asia, but, she argues, that the emerging regional order bears signs of a multiplex condition.

Is this already China's Asia? Conjectures about China's hegemony in Asia have grown into assertions with its military and technological rise at home, and rising economic profile in world affairs. Beijing's rising global profile is no more a byproduct of a declining United States, it is an outcome of Xi Jinping's high ambitions and boldness with calculated risk. The combination of increasing material capability and a strong willingness to establish a 'new type of international relations' has made China an ideal contender for hegemonic ordering.

But, the limits and opportunities of Chinese hegemony in Asia lie in legitimately navigating the structurally, politically and culturally different sub-regions of Asia. Emphasising the existence of many 'Asias', this article focuses on South Asia to articulate that

China's increased economic and financial capacity in South Asia has not directly translated into creating a regional order suitable to its own security, economic and ideological interest – an essential characteristic of hegemonic ordering.

China's Bid in South Asia

[Analysed](#) as China's 'Regionalism Policy 2.0', arrangements such as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have put South Asian states at the centre with a different purpose. With its increased manufacturing capacity, China has increasingly fit the available role of development-finance provider in the region. Its [exports](#) have also seen a growth of 546 percent in the region since 2005 with a prominent trade imbalance in its favour. With 'imbalanced' trade deficits and outpouring of 'less-conditional' infrastructural funding, Beijing has increasingly challenged the 'openness' and 'diversity' maintained by South Asian states in their economic engagement. In case of [Pakistan](#), China's financial diplomacy is primarily directed towards securing shipping corridors and pipelines, ensuring Beijing's strategic and energy requirements under China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Pakistan has experienced [significant dependence](#) as a result. Even a major economy like India faces this challenge of avoiding [dependence](#).

Under Xi Jinping's 'Great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' rhetoric, neighbourhood 'connectivity' has become an [integral](#) part of re-envisioning the norms, rules and mutual understandings of global governance within South Asian regional order. China has extended its presence by '[brokering](#)' close relationships with the elite sympathisers based on development promises whereas people-to-people diplomacy still takes a back seat. South Asian political elite's strong desire to attract investment and Beijing's upper hand as a '[giver](#)' in negotiations have had a silencing effect on debates on transparency, accountability, human rights and environment impact under nascent and weak governance institutions in the region despite South Asian states' commitment to further promote and institutionalise democracy. China's attempts to instrumentalise public goods 'dominance' to influence the security dynamics of the region have also become bolder.

According to [Christian Wagner](#), India's self-restraint via bilateral security framework with its neighbours had helped develop a 'regional security architecture' in Post Cold-War South Asia. Both external powers, United States and China, till recently, have shown a rather limited interest in strategic ordering of states within the region. Their attention was either triggered by certain events or a particular state's degree of security-engagement with them. India, however, has risked its legitimacy to be a norm enforcer in issues such as Maldives' democratic and Nepal's constitutional crisis. China avoided any '[unnecessary friction](#)' in the region.

However, it has begun to focus on strengthening elite ties in the region and utilised anxieties towards India's norm-enforcing to make way for its strategic interests. In its drive to strengthen access to energy resources and enhance stability and development in its land-bound western provinces, South Asian littoral states have risen up in China's strategic priorities. Since New Delhi's firm opposition to Xi's dream initiative, India has become an 'adventurous' brother in need of disciplining, in other terms, strategic rival. The dynamics of the region have become more and more complex and vulnerable with 'renewed' focus on Indian Ocean's geo-strategic importance and the race to develop dual-use infrastructure in the region. In its 2019 [Defense White Paper](#), Chinese government reassured the world that unlike 'big power' China will never seek hegemony, spheres of influence or form alliances, yet it is actively seeking the same in South Asia.

A Yellow Brick Road?

How far has this worked? Popular scholarship on hegemony has long rallied behind materially dominant states' ability to craft their world orders but the road to hegemony has become increasingly cumbersome and trivial.

China's rise in South Asia has opened it up to politicisation and increased scrutiny at both elite and mass levels. Beijing's intention to multiply its political, security, economic, social and cultural interactions within the region with an 'all in one go' approach has had a startling effect, and not always in its favour.

China's flexing of its economic muscles to take over Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, in lieu of outstanding debts, has warned other states to be mindful of the strategic implications of China's presence. The approach of 'caution' and consideration of 'national interest' with net risk assessment has been the mantra in [Bangladesh](#), while Pakistan, despite the significant alignment of its interests with China, is facing a suppressed internal debate and disruption in project areas of CPEC, [calls](#) to engage locals rather than bring workers from China for Chinese projects, and demands for Baloch autonomy near the Chinese-aided projects in Gwadar port.

China has broken its 'golden' rule of not taking sides in India–Pakistan conflict over Kashmir and has enhanced its border incursions along India–China border to force India to adhere to China's interests. Recurring arm-twisting and skirmishes, with increased infrastructure capability, along the border has [reinvigorated](#) the trust issues Indian strategic and political community already had with China. The rising aggressiveness under Xi's China has pushed India to actively involve United States, Japan, European Union and Australia with the region's security and potential development.

United States and India have substantially increased soft loans and foreign aid to enhance capacity-building in the region and Japan has emerged as the most welcomed foreign-direct-investment partner. Such diversification, as highlighted by [Carla P Freeman](#) has also given the 'smaller states in their shared neighbourhood new opportunities to operate on the regional stage as foreign policy actors with the ability to act more independently' both from China and India. There is emerging multi-power activism in the maritime domain with positive backing for India as a more suitable partner than China. A simple point: Can states critical of India's economic dominance even under non-interference norms in the region be really appreciative of overbearing dominance of other regional powers?

South Asia has rarely been the centre of United States' hegemonic ambitions, but Xi's China has increasingly manipulated its 'giver' position in the region and has become eager to utilise force and take sides, especially in case of India's territorial disputes with its neighbours. Its engagement is to maintain its strategic superiority on sea lines of communications. China has pushed the region to walk a tight rope between economic cooperation and strategic implications but, even being materially less capable, the region has displayed its assertiveness on certain issues and chosen to co-opt each other's interests.

Thus, where China lacks cultural legitimacy as a power, preferring large-scale economic activism has harmed its win-win narrative for Asia as a region. Sectors driving its hegemonic aspirations are constantly contested, resisted, renegotiated and reproduced in interaction with the existing norms across state/societal levels and state/non-state units. China's material capability has not translated in South Asian states' allegiance to its world vision.

A multifaceted regional order arranged across different powers and their functional responsibilities is considered more stable.

It is preferred to the one China is currently attempting to rearrange and rework to establish its hierarchical prominence.

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